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Please cite the final published version:

Jensen, C., & Wenzelburger, G. (2021). Welfare State Reforms and Mass Media Attention: Evidence from three European democracies. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(4), 914-933.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12435>

Publication metadata

Title: Welfare State Reforms and Mass Media Attention: Evidence from three European democracies
Author(s): Carsten Jensen, Georg Wenzelburger
Journal: *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(4), 914-933
DOI/Link: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12435>
Document version: Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Welfare State Reforms and Mass Media Attention: Evidence from Three European Democracies

Carsten Jensen & Georg Wenzelburger

ABSTRACT

The mass media is conventionally assumed to play an important role in welfare state politics. So far, however, we have very little systematic theorizing or empirical evidence of when and how the mass media reports on welfare state reforms. Building on news value theory and the welfare state reform literature, we develop a set of hypotheses about mass media reporting on welfare state reforms. We argue that mass media attention is conditioned not only by the direction of reforms, with cuts getting more attention than expansions, but also by the election platform that the incumbent party ran on in the last election as well as by the policy reputation of the government. Drawing on a new dataset including about 4,800 news articles in British, Danish, and German quality newspapers from 1995–2014, we find supporting empirical evidence of our expectations.

INTRODUCTION

The welfare state is widely popular among the public in European democracies (Svallfors 2012), making reforms dangerous for re-election-motivated politicians (Pierson 1994). In most European countries, however, the growing burden of an aging population, augmenting public debt, and recurring fiscal crises have forced governments to introduce reforms in spite of such public sentiments. A large body of literature has studied the conditions under which such welfare state reforms take place (e.g., Green-Petersen 2002; Lindbom 2007; Vis 2009; Horn 2017) as well as the effect they have on governments' public support (e.g., Armingeon & Giger 2008; Arndt 2013; Schumacher et al. 2013; Hübscher & Sattler 2017; Schwander & Manow 2017). The mass media is typically assumed to play an intermediary role between the policy decisions of governments and the vote choices of citizens. Without mass media attention, citizens are unable to punish governments for enacting unpopular policies.

Yet while it appears intuitively plausible that mass media attention is important to informing citizens, we lack systematic insights into when and to what extent the mass media actually reports on welfare state reforms. Given the importance of the welfare state for both the livelihoods of citizens and the electoral fortunes of governments, this is a substantial lacuna for political science on public policy. Moreover, according to a large literature in communication science, such neglect is a serious analytical problem because it is naive to suppose that the mass media is a simple transmitter of news about political decisions. Instead, this literature has documented that the mass media uses certain rather stable selection criteria in its reporting that correspond to a set of news values (Galtung & Ruge 1965; Eilders 2006; Shoemaker & Cohen 2012; Soroka 2014; Maier et al. 2018). Hence, it seems heroic to assume that the mass media reports on welfare reforms without such underlying news values,

too—values that may also generate bias in reporting patterns. To move the literature forward, we therefore develop an argument about mass media reporting on welfare state reforms that takes the specifics of welfare state politics into account.

Three news values are particularly germane to our argument: relevance, negativity, and conflict. First, and most basically, the high salience of the welfare state in many citizens' lives—as a source of cash benefits, service delivery, or employment—means that welfare state reforms are typically highly relevant to a significant proportion of the public (Svallfors 2012). This implies that welfare state reforms are inherently interesting for the mass media to report on, although substantial variation may exist depending on whether the reform cuts or expands citizens' social rights and whether the potential for political conflict is high or low. Second, the direction of a reform matters because of the mass media's negativity bias, meaning there is likely to be more attention to cutbacks than to expansions of the welfare state (Pierson 1994). And third, the mass media should likely also report more extensively when the potential for political conflict is higher. In the context of the welfare state, this is particularly likely under two circumstances: if the incumbent adopted a pro-welfare position in the last election (in which case the mass media will be on the lookout for broken pledges; cf. Duval 2019; Müller 2020), or if a right-of-center government enacts the reform (because a leftist opposition has strong incentives to politicize such reforms; cf. Ross 2000; Green-Pedersen 2002). Importantly, these factors interact. Mass media attention should be higher if the incumbent campaigned on a pro-welfare position but then introduces cutbacks, thus betraying voters' trust.

We study these expectations across three European democracies that represent three types of welfare state regimes, namely Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom. We have

collected data on all reforms of citizens' social rights in the domains of old age pensions and unemployment protection from 1995 to 2014. Across these 20 years, we first coded the population of 452 reform events and then created an additional dataset containing all news articles that reported on the reform events from the biggest quality newspapers in each country. Based on these 4,801 news articles, we constructed a measure of the volume of attention to each reform event. Combining these two new datasets, we are able to show that the mass media reacts strongly to so-called betrayal—i.e., if a government advocates a pro-welfare position before the election and then retrenches social policies when in office—and especially so if committed by a right-of-center government.

As we discuss further in the conclusion, this result has consequences for our understanding of welfare reforms and the political dynamics surrounding them. In much of the existing research on welfare state reforms, the mass media's role is underspecified theoretically, maybe because it is assumed to be of relatively minor importance or maybe because it is seen as being a simple transmitter without a life of its own. The political dynamics of welfare state reforms are reduced to the interaction between elite actors, notably political parties, labor unions, and other organized interests. Yet, as we show, the mass media is not a neutral transmission belt of information about reform activities. The mass media operates according to its own news values, meaning that some reforms and actors are much more in the spotlight than others are. This insight has not been taken systematically into account when exploring the knock-on effects of welfare state reforms on governments' popularity nor when investigating how strategic elite activities design reforms in the first place. As we argue in the conclusion, this is a crucial job for the welfare state research community. More broadly, our research contributes to studies of public policy-making, which—much like work on welfare state reforms—have failed to systematically integrate a mass media perspective. Here, too,

scholars have only rarely studied how the media reports about policy change and how selection choices and news coverage can be explained (but: Rose & Baumgartner 2013; Soroka 2006). As the welfare state is a core policy field, our results can therefore shed light on more general patterns of the relationship between public policy-making and the media.

MASS MEDIA ATTENTION AND WELFARE STATE REFORM

The modern welfare state is a core part of everyday life. It strongly affects individual lives, it is the biggest part of the nation state (in terms of fiscal outlays), and it is supported by a large majority of citizens (Castles 2004; Scruggs & Allan 2006; Brooks & Manza 2007; Svallfors 2012). This makes welfare state politics a potentially hot issue at election time, which is why governments react strategically when they have to cut welfare benefits. However, the extent to which welfare state politics is salient to voters varies over time. In fact, as citizens cannot process all information about politics at the same time, changes to social policies may fly under voters' radars, even if they involve material losses and gains (for examples of a large literature that makes these sorts of assumptions about voters, see Pierson 1994; Green-Pedersen 2002; Lindbom 2007; Vis 2009).

In such situations, it matters whether the mass media reports on policy changes (Lindbom 2010). Mass media reporting is crucial for both voters, who depend on the information to understand complex welfare reforms, and for elected politicians, who fear public outcry against unpopular welfare cutbacks. Indeed, Armingeon and Giger (2008) have shown that voters only appear to punish governments for cutbacks if social policy issues were important in the public debate at election time. This result corroborates the notion that the mass media plays a significant role in welfare state politics (and more broadly, as theories of "top-down

agenda setting” argue; see Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg 1995; Graber & Smith 2005).

Surprisingly, however, the empirical evidence on how the media reports about social policies is scarce, and it relies almost exclusively on anecdotal evidence about how certain big reforms have been mediatized. As Lindbom summarizes the state of affairs, “the role of the media in welfare retrenchment has not been sufficiently theorised or studied” (Lindbom 2010: 207–208).

A promising starting point for such theorizing is news values theory (Eilders 2006; Shoemaker & Cohen 2012; Maier et al. 2018). The basic idea of this approach is that journalists select the material on which they report based on an appreciation of the newsworthiness of the information. This newsworthiness depends on news values (or news factors) that are inherent to the information or perceived as such by the journalist. Empirical studies on news values have therefore examined the characteristics of mass media content and analyzed what kinds of events or pieces of information are most reported on. Based on such content analyses, scholars from Europe and the United States have come up with different and overlapping catalogues of news values that explain variation in reporting patterns (Staab 1990). In his pioneering work on news selection in Germany, Schulz (1976) finds a variety of news factors to affect selection—ranging from spatial aspects of an event, such as geographic or cultural proximity, to qualitative features of the information, such as personification, damage or conflict—and confirms some of the factors identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) in their early work on news reporting about foreign policy. Several scholars, such as Harcup and O’Neill (2017) or Eilders (2006), have tried to systematize and draw together the different news value catalogues. However, while some factors such as conflict and negativity (bad news) or proximity are found in almost every list, much seems to depend on the context and the newspaper type, with factors such as celebrity or entertainment being

much less important for quality newspapers than for the Yellow Press (Harcup & O'Neill 2001).

Based on these theoretical arguments and the case we study here—reporting of quality newspapers on welfare state reforms—we argue that in the context of welfare state politics, three news values appear particularly important: negativity, because cuts are perceived as more important than expansions; relevance, because many citizens depend on the welfare state for their livelihood and, hence, will be alert to information about changes that might hurt them; and conflict, because parties will engage in a blame game over who is responsible for unpopular reforms.

As for the media's negativity bias, it is well-documented that the mass media tends to focus on bad rather than good news, which has been shown empirically for both welfare state and economic policies (Fogarty 2005; Soroka 2006; Jensen & Lee 2019). In the realm of welfare state politics, cuts in benefits are a clear example of such “bad news” for citizens and mass media consumers. We take this observation about the mass media's inherent negativity bias as our starting point when considering how changes to the welfare state affect mass media reporting. More exactly, *we therefore expect that cuts to the welfare state will receive more attention in the mass media than expansions.*

Given the popularity of the welfare state, electoral politics often turns into a “beauty contest” between parties advocating expansionary policies to cater to their prospective voters. Though perhaps less enthusiastic than their left-of-center adversaries, even nominal fiscal conservatives such as the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom or the Liberal Party in Denmark often embrace the welfare state during elections to win over middle-class voters

(e.g., Pierson 1994). The result is that incoming governments are sometimes voted into office on a platform of strong welfare commitment, which can create a tension between the promises made on election day and the ability to deliver afterwards. Given voters' strong negative reactions to broken pledges (Naurin et al. 2019), it is not surprising that the mass media has been shown to pay more attention to pledges broken than pledges kept (Duval 2019; Müller 2020).

Following this argument, we expect several outcomes. First, because the welfare state is relevant to a large segment of citizens, both cutbacks and expansions will receive attention, though cutbacks more so than expansions (cf. the discussion on negativity bias). Second, assuming along the lines of mandate theory (Klingemann et al. 1994) that a pro-welfare position during an election campaign signals a commitment to welfare state expansion, we expect that the more pro-welfare the incumbent appeared to be to voters during the latest election campaign, the more likely it is that the mass media will focus on the reform activities of the government. Knowing about the fate of such promised expansion is highly relevant for both the future beneficiaries and the taxpayers having to foot the bill. This is especially the case in the event of cutbacks since campaigning on a pro-welfare platform and then introducing cutbacks when in office is easy to portray as a betrayal of the voters' trust. We therefore expect that such betrayal should lead to more attention to a reform by the mass media. In sum, *we expect that mass media reporting will be especially extensive in cases of "betrayal"; that is, when a government advocated a pro-welfare position in the election campaign that got them into office but then implements cutbacks.*

In the domain of the welfare state, right-of-center parties are normally disadvantaged compared to their leftist competitors. A majority of voters consider right-of-center parties less

competent and trustworthy than left-of-center parties (Petrocik 1996; Seeberg 2017). As several authors have observed (Ross 2000; Kitschelt 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Jensen 2010; Jensen and Seeberg 2015), right-of-center governments are more vulnerable to attacks from the parliamentary opposition than left-of-center governments are. With the public more trustful of the left-of-center opposition, opposition parties are particularly likely to use cutbacks as opportunities to attack right-of-center governments—something that a right-of-center opposition would neither want (because they tend to support a leaner welfare state) nor be able to do (because of their lack of issue ownership). This conflictual blame game between right-of-center governments and their parliamentary opposition is likely to attract considerable mass media attention. It may even be exacerbated if the organized interests of the working class join the movement and a united front of the left opposes the right-of-center government. Hence, we assume that *cutbacks by right-of-center governments should lead to more attention by the mass media.*

Finally, we expect that the discussed relationships will interact. In fact, the “betrayal effect” discussed above is likely to be moderated by the partisan complexion of the government, with right-of-center parties that cut the welfare state after having campaigned on a pro-welfare position being covered most extensively by the news media. Evidently, in such a scenario the public outcry as well as the opposition of the united left should lead to strong conflict, which will then be subject to extensive reporting. We therefore argue that *mass media coverage should be further amplified if a government that cuts the welfare state after having campaigned on a pro-welfare position consists of one or more right-of-center parties.* In the remainder of the paper, we will test these expectations.

The theoretical argument presented here adds considerably to extant research. Jensen and Lee (2019) highlight that the mass media may exhibit a negativity bias in the context of welfare state reforms, just as others have shown in other policy domains, notably the economy. However, drawing on insights from both news value theory and the welfare state literature, we deduce a further set of novel expectations. Most notably, by arguing for the importance of both the last election campaign and the ideology of the incumbent, our expectations are considerably more nuanced than previous research has allowed for.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to assess our expectations empirically, we need information about (1) the extent of mass media reporting and (2) welfare state reforms—our main independent variable. The data for *welfare state legislation* has been collected by manually coding welfare state legislation in the realm of unemployment and pensions in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom between 1995 and 2014. These two programs were selected for two main reasons. First, they constitute a core part of what is conventionally understood as “the welfare state” and, as a result, are prominently featured in a very long list of publications on the politics of the welfare state. Second, both programs are transfer schemes and therefore guided by rules for transferring cash benefits to recipients, which is why we can code them using the same coding scheme building on these rules.

The three countries were selected because they provide variation in terms of their respective welfare state models (Esping-Andersen 1990; Castles & Obinger 2008). The United Kingdom is a classic example of a residual welfare state where benefits are mostly means-tested and relatively low. In comparison, Denmark has substantially more generous benefits and less

frequently employs a (strict) means test. Finally, Germany is an archetypal insurance-based system where benefits are tied to earnings history and membership of occupational schemes. Moreover, across the three countries, support for the welfare state varies, with comparably low support in the United Kingdom and higher support in Germany and Denmark (Brooks & Manza 2007; Svallfors 2012: 14). By selecting three diverse welfare state models, we hope to establish that the argument can travel across different institutional settings. There is thus no particular reason why the findings we report below should not be applicable to a range of other European democracies with a free press.

Our basic coding unit is changes to policy instruments that affect the social rights of citizens (e.g., the nominal level of benefits, the duration of benefits, waiting periods) and comes from the newly collected Welfare State Reform Dataset (WSRD). Every instrument change has been coded as “expansion,” “cutback,” or “status quo.” To construct the measure, we first identified individual changes to welfare state legislations based on a fine-grained coding scheme of 13 policy instruments, where the basic promise is to code individual reform events (i.e. instrument changes) as “cutbacks” when they curtailed social rights and “expansions” when the reform event improved citizens’ social rights.¹ For instance, in December 1981 the German government implemented series of social policy savings measures in the “Arbeitsförderungskonsolidierungsgesetz.” Among other things, the maximum duration period of unemployment benefits was cut from 12 to 10 months and access to the benefits tightened (recipients had to contribute for one year, instead of six months, within a period of three years to be eligible). In this case, both changes were coded individually as they

¹ The individual events were identified by a team of trained research assistants and a senior researcher on the basis of as many secondary sources as possible and supplemented with searches in legislative databases when necessary. The coding of the instruments and the direction (cutback, no change, expansion) were done by the assistants and subsequently controlled by a senior researcher. In the event the senior researcher did not agree with the original coding, the relevant research assistant and senior researcher discussed the coding decision in detail to reach agreement; however, there were very few such instances.

concerned two different instruments, and both were coded as cutbacks. In total, the dataset includes 452 instances of such instrument changes: 230 in Germany, 127 in Denmark, and 89 in the United Kingdom.² While it is true that an even more fine-grained measure of the extent of changes would be desirable, this would introduce a high level of subjectivity to the coding. We therefore opted for a simpler but more reliable approach of only coding cutbacks vs. expansions, which is also the more conservative test.

For our dataset on *mass media reporting*, we wanted to know how quality newspapers in the three countries had reported on the instrument changes coded in the WSRD. In each country, we therefore started from the reform data, used keywords linked to the reform events, and searched the database of major newspapers in the three countries. For the United Kingdom, we looked at *The Times* and *The Guardian*. Both are high-quality papers that are widely read and politically center-right and center-left, respectively. Keyword searches were performed through Factiva, a search engine run by Dow Jones & Company. In Germany, we coded articles in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the two major high-quality newspapers that provided access to its archives electronically. Finally, the Danish coding was done on the basis of *Berlingske* and *Politiken*, which are two of the main newspapers in Denmark.³ Again, keyword searches in Denmark were done via Factiva.

By focusing on the major quality newspapers in each country we adhere to the standard in the agenda setting literature (cf. the Comparative Agendas Project). This implies that we cannot study whether different mass media types—e.g. quality versus tabloid newspapers—report differently on welfare state reforms. Theoretically, focusing on quality newspapers makes

² For details on coding decisions, data validation, etc., see Jensen & Wenzelburger 2019.

³ As we explain below, we include fixed effects (for countries or newspapers) in our empirical analyses to factor out country- and newspaper-specific variation.

sense as it enables us to exclude some news values, such as celebrity or entertainment, that have been found particularly important for the Yellow Press. Moreover, by zooming in on three news values that have been found to affect news selection rather independently of the type of outlet (negativity, conflict, and relevance), there is no reason to expect that our conclusions are only valid for quality newspapers. Since we include newspapers that nominally belong to both the center-right and the center-left, there ought not to be any particular partisan bias in the findings.

For each reform, we used several keywords to make sure to get all articles linked to that specific reform event and looked up the articles manually to make sure that they indeed concerned the respective reforms. We were only interested in journalistic articles; i.e. not opinion pieces etc. For some reforms, we did not find any articles. This occurred typically if instrument changes were very marginal and touched upon technical issues. In these cases, the reporting was coded 0. We searched for articles beginning a year before the reform event was passed in parliament and for a month afterwards. This means that our findings are not sensitive to when exactly the newspapers reported on the reform event; i.e. when it was first proposed, or rather when it was passed in parliament. No matter when the reporting took place, our keyword-based search strategy should locate the relevant articles.

This coding endeavor yielded 4801 coded articles: 1274 in the two Danish newspapers, 1859 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and 1668 in the two British newspapers. The instrument changes that the newspapers reported on most extensively occurred in Britain in 1997. They were part of the New Deal program—one of the major reforms of the welfare state implemented by the New Labour government. On two of the coded instrument changes, one to a program for young unemployed and another for long-term unemployed, we found 192 and 118 articles

dealing with the subject matter. The third most reported change in the entire dataset (118 articles) relates to a reform of the German pension system in 2014, which enabled workers with long career histories to take their pensions at 63 years old. Unsurprisingly, the big reform of social assistance (Hartz IV) was also widely reported on, with 104 articles. In Denmark, the most important event in terms of reporting was the 2013 reform of social assistance (*Kontanthjælpsreform*) with 82 articles, which is seen as a major event of welfare state cutback. These examples show the high face validity of our data as those reforms are also among the most well-known welfare reforms in the respective countries (Clasen & Clegg 2011; Schmidt 2012; Jensen & Wenzelburger 2019; Voigt 2019).

For our analysis of news attention, we coded the length (in words) of the articles on the respective legislative change. If an instrument change is only referred to in a subsection of an article, we counted the words in that subsection only. This indicator runs from 0 to 1896 words, with a mean length of 182 words. German articles (coded sections) are notably shorter (mean length of 126 words) than the articles in Danish (214) and British (219) newspapers. This raw length of reporting (words per article) is our main dependent variable. As a robustness check, we also use a second indicator, which standardizes this absolute length measure by the total length of all articles found in a country. This relative measure therefore indicates how many words an individual article contains in relation to the overall word count of all articles coded in the respective countries.

[Table 1 about here]

Concerning the main independent variables of our analysis, we calculate the government's welfare position in the last election using data from the Manifestos Project (Volkens et al. 2018). The measure subtracts the proportion of quasi-sentences in the incumbent parties'

election manifestos containing welfare-skeptic, anti-egalitarian, and meritocratic positions from the proportion with welfare state expansionist, egalitarian, state interventionist, or market-skeptical positions (Horn 2017). Employing this measure of a government's welfare position, we can capture the overall emphasis or signal in the campaign. In combination with the direction of subsequent reforms, it is possible to explore the effects when governments deviate from that signal. We cannot, of course, say anything about what concrete aspects of the welfare state the incoming government focused on or whether the subsequent reforms were specifically related to that focus. As a first empirical approximation of our argument, however, we believe our approach has considerable merit. On another note, it is worth highlighting that there is a far from perfect fit between a party's welfare positions and being either left- or right-of-center. While the former typically campaign on a more pro-welfare position, the latter frequently adopt a pro-welfare position, too. Indeed, on our scale of parties' welfare positions, which measures the "net welfare position of the government" (Horn & Jensen 2017: 386) and where zero reflects a neutral position, pure right-of-center governments on average score 2.7, i.e. a clear positive value. Government partisanship was coded as the cabinet share held by specific party families, differentiating between the right, center, and left. In the case of coalition governments, we weigh the respective values by the cabinet seat share of the individual parties in government.

For our purposes, we focus on right-of-center parties with the center and left-of-center parties constituting the residual. The categorization into party families was originally performed by Armingeon et al. (2015) but validated by us for the three countries studied here. For Germany, the CDU and CSU were coded as centrist parties given the important pro-welfare faction within the Christian Democrats, which results in a more welfare-friendly position than traditional secular conservatives (Van Kersbergen & Manow 2009; Zohlnhöfer 2003).

Aside from these variables, we also control for other factors that may simultaneously influence welfare state reforms and mass media reporting. One of these factors is the economic context, since economic downturns have been shown to affect both the likelihood of reforms (e.g., Huber & Stephens 2001) and mass media reporting (Fogarty 2005; Soroka 2006). We measure the economy with real GDP growth and the unemployment rate; two measures of the state of the economy that are particularly salient to both voters and the mass media. Descriptive statistics of all covariates are included in the Online Appendix (Table A1).

Jensen and Lee (2019) have previously shown that reforms of “hard-to-understand”—or so-called invisible—policy instruments receive less mass media attention than reforms of more visible policy instruments do. At the same time, visibility correlates with reform activity, suggesting that we ought to control for it in our regression models. The visibility of the policy instruments used is coded based on the information included in the WSRD. We follow these authors and use a five-scaled variable for visibility running from 1 (very invisible policy instrument, e.g., change to assessment base) to 5 (very visible policy instrument, e.g., change to nominal benefit level).

The likelihood of cutbacks has also been shown to depend on the time from the last election (Strobl et al. 2019), and we may suspect that the mass media will be more focused on the fit between campaign positions and policy-making immediately after the election. Therefore, we control for the number of months since the last election.

To account for heterogeneity, we run fixed-effects regressions using different dummy variables. In the baseline regressions reported below, we use country fixed effects factoring out country-specific variation, which might stem from the choice of newspapers or the wider institutional setup of the countries. This strategy allows us to zero in on within-country variation: whether and how a reform affects mass media reporting within a country. However, newspaper reporting style may also matter: It may be, for instance, that a newspaper generally has longer articles or that some newspapers are more partisan than others. Therefore, we also estimate models in which we include newspaper fixed effects—that is, a dummy for each newspaper to account for the specificities of a certain newspaper. Finally, we include year dummies to account for temporal effects, e.g. external shocks in certain years that affect reporting in general.⁴ In the Online Appendix (Table A.2), we also report additional regression equations using the relative length as dependent variable. However, all the results are robust to these various tests.

We test our expectations in a series of regression analyses. We use OLS regressions as we deal with metric data, but also estimate a negative binomial regression as word length could also be considered to be count data. Due to a certain skewness of the data (high kurtosis due to only a few or short articles on many legislative changes), we report robust standard errors

⁴⁴ In contrast, we did not opt to include fixed effects for newspaper-years in our main models reported here. The reason is that we are mainly interested in how newspapers change their reporting over time. Including a dummy for each newspaper-year (e.g. Guardian_2000) would suck up the major part of this variance by using fixed effects that we are chiefly interested in. In fact, if a newspaper reports more on the welfare state in general in a certain year, this variance should be explained by our legislation variable. Therefore, for theoretical reasons, we think that it hinders our ability to uncover the information we want if we introduce such fixed effects (on this discussion, see Plümper et al. 2005: 334). In sum, we think that using newspaper fixed effects to account for reporting styles within a newspaper and accounting for common shocks via year fixed effects is the most appropriate strategy. Nevertheless, for the sake of transparency, we have reported the results of regressions including fixed effects that net out the mean of a certain year for each newspaper in the Appendix (Table A.3) (in substance, that means that we now focus on the deviations from newspaper-specific yearly means). As can be gleaned from the table, the direct effects remain robust, whereas the significance of the three-way interaction drops (but the direction of the coefficient is similar to our main models).

(Huber-White sandwich estimators). In the Online Appendix, we additionally report a set of poisson regressions as an alternative to the negative binomial estimation (Table A.2). This ensures that the findings are not caused by our choice of estimation technique—and it is comforting to note that all results hold up using alternative methods.

ANALYSIS

Descriptive findings

We start our analysis by presenting some descriptive evidence on the overall pattern of media reporting about the welfare state. Figure 1 illustrates the ups and downs of media reporting about welfare reform events over time in the three countries under review here. The graphs reveal patterns of rather low media reporting and peaks at particular moments. The Danish data reveals particularly strong reporting in 2013, which is due to reforms of the unemployment benefit (*dagpenge*) and the reform of social assistance (*kontanthjælp*) that were widely discussed in these years. Other peaks are visible in relation to the early retirement reform in 1998 and the so-called welfare reform in 2006. In Germany, two peaks are clearly discernible: in 2003, when the big unemployment insurance reforms (Hartz reforms) were implemented, and in 2010/2011, when the government had to adjust initial Hartz laws due to a verdict of the federal constitutional court. Finally, the British data illustrates the extensive reporting about the New Deal reforms in 1997 and about the introduction of the Universal Credit in 2010. Overall, the peaks in reporting seem to be linked to major reforms of the respective welfare states. Interestingly, however, not all reforms are linked to peaks in reporting.

[Figure 1 about here]

However, the aggregate view of the yearly changes in media reporting does not differentiate between the direction of reforms and mass media reporting. Such a disaggregation is done in Table 2. It displays the average number of words per article reporting on cutbacks or

expansions, respectively, and the number of articles about cutbacks and expansions. Two observations stand out. First, articles on cutbacks (average length: 206 words) are on average 40% longer than articles on expansions (146 words). This is also true if we consider the relative length. Hence, the mass media reports more on the more unpopular reforms than on the popular ones.⁵ Interestingly, this pattern holds irrespective of the welfare domain affected. Cutbacks are always covered more extensively than expansions, be it for unemployment or for pensions. Second, if we count how many articles are published on a reform irrespective of the word length, we also find that the average number of articles per cutback (12.6) is substantially higher than the average number for expansions (8.9).

[Table 2 about here]

In sum, these initial descriptive findings lend face validity to our data because we clearly are able to reproduce some of the well-established results from the large literature on negativity bias in mass media reporting. In the following, we will test whether these first indications still hold if we control for possible confounding variables. Moreover, we inspect more closely how partisanship and negativity interact.

Regression analysis on media reporting

In the following, we report findings from OLS and count regressions with the number of words per article as dependent variable. In Table 3, we present several estimations to assure robustness of the results. The first four models use the absolute word length as dependent variable and control for country dummies. The models are built in an additive way. We start

⁵ Both differences are significant in a two-sided t-test on differences of means ($p < 0.001$).

with a baseline model (1) that only includes our main explanatory variables and add covariates (Model 2) as well as a two-way (3) and a three-way interaction (4) to test our theoretical expectations. These interaction models are then replicated in four additional estimations in which we include newspaper dummies instead of country dummies (Models 5 and 6) as well as newspaper and year dummies (Models 7 and 8). Finally, we test the full three-way interaction model using a negative binomial regression instead of OLS in order to see whether an alternative estimation for count models changes the results.⁶

We find several interesting patterns. Starting in Model 1, we see how a pro-welfare position of the incumbent in the last election increases the volume of coverage. If the incumbent had a welfare-neutral position (i.e., had a value of zero on this measure) compared to a very positive position (i.e., scoring the maximum value of 20), the average length of articles was around 94 words shorter. From Model 1 in Table 3, it is also evident that the mass media reports less on expansions than on cutbacks. The predicted difference is 39 words compared to 60 words in the descriptive table (Table 2, above). This suggests that the direction of reforms is partly confounded by other factors controlled for in the regression. Finally, reforms by right-of-center governments are reported on to a substantially higher degree than reforms by centrist or left-wing governments. The estimated difference of 95 words should be compared to the average length of all articles of 182 words, so this is a very substantial effect. It supports the notion that right-of-center governments' lack of issue ownership over the welfare state is reflected in more extensive media reporting. All these relationships still hold true if we use relative length instead of raw length or if we estimate binomial regressions (Models 1 and 4 in the Online Appendix, Table A.2).

⁶ Supplementary regression results using relative length as dependent variable as well as poisson estimation instead of negative binomial regression can be found in the Appendix.

[Table 3 about here]

Model 2 includes the four controls without altering the results from Model 1. The economic controls are not significant.⁷ The variable measuring months since last election is also not significant whereas visibility is, and strongly so. This suggests that reporting is lower if reforms are implemented using policy instruments that are very difficult to understand compared to when policymakers use visible instruments. This seems straightforward, is in line with earlier findings related to Britain (Jensen & Lee 2019), and shows that the media, too, tends to report more on reforms that are easy to understand. In sum, the regression analysis on the direct effects corroborates our hypotheses and suggests that the media reports more extensively on welfare reforms if they are cutback-oriented and if they are adopted by right-of-center governments.

The final step of the empirical analysis concerns the so-called betrayal, i.e., when a government promises to expand the welfare state before an election but instead cuts it once in office. In order to test the effect of such betrayals, Models 3, 5 and 7 interact the welfare position of the incumbent in the last election manifesto with the direction of reforms. This yields a first approximation of the betrayal effect. As visible from Table 3, there is a statistically significant interaction in all three models—and this is also true if we use relative length instead of absolute length (see Model 3 in the Appendix Table A.2).

[Figure 2 about here]

⁷ Besides unemployment, which reaches conventional levels in Model 2 (Appendix Table A.2) for relative length as dependent variable. The relationship is negative, which indicates that media reporting on welfare reforms is less intensive if unemployment is higher—perhaps because more space is taken up by covering unemployment issues.

Figure 2 illustrates the marginal effects for cutbacks (hollow circles) and expansions (black circles) across the welfare position variable. For both cutbacks and expansions, mass media coverage increases with a pro-welfare position, but the effect is considerably larger for the former. At the midpoint of the scale (10), the predicted difference is 38 words, increasing to around 80 words at the extreme end. In short, this is a strong indication that mass media considers the campaign context, especially when reporting on cutbacks, and it is plainly in line with our expectation.

In addition, we expected that such betrayal is associated with even more extensive news coverage if committed by right-of-center governments, not least because conflict with the opposition should be most intense in these cases. This comes down to estimating a three-way interaction, namely to test whether the betrayal effect is conditioned by the presence of right-of-center parties in government. Models 4, 8 and 9 include a three-way interaction between the direction of a reform, the welfare position of the incumbent in the last election, and whether that incumbent is right-of-center. The interaction is statistically significant irrespective of the estimation technique (OLS as well as negative binomial and poisson regression; see also Model 7 in Table A.2).

To ease interpretation, Figure 3 displays the marginal effects for Model 4 in two scenarios. On the left-hand side, the cabinet share of the right-of-center parties is zero (i.e., the government is run by center or left-of-center parties); on the right-hand side, the cabinet is made up entirely of right-of-center parties. The results are striking. The betrayal effect visible in Figure 2 is driven solely by the mass media's treatment of the reforms of right-of-center governments. A right-of-center incumbent that ran on a mildly pro-welfare platform (scoring

10 on the welfare position variable) but instead introduced cuts receives almost twice the amount of attention as its competitors (321 and 174 words per article, respectively; a highly statistically significant difference). This is, according to our theoretical argument, to be explained by the outrage of the united left opposition to such broken promises, spurring media reporting due to the news value of conflict.

We also see that if a right-of-center government expands social rights after having run on a welfare-skeptical platform, attention tends to be high, dropping as the actions of the government begin to align with the platform (note that extreme values for right-of-center expansion are an extrapolation symbolized by the dashed whiskers). In both instances, the right-of-center governments receive attention when they do something unexpected, i.e., introducing cutbacks after promising expansions or introducing expansions after promising cutbacks. However, the latter scenario does not follow from our argument, which emphasized how right-of-center governments' parliamentary opposition would attack them for retrenching the welfare state, thereby creating political conflict that the mass media would report on. This suggests that additional news values may be at play apart from the three on which we base our reasoning. In fact, the values "unexpectedness" and "surprise" are included as important news factors in almost every catalogue and are probably in play here. Speaking against this interpretation, however, is the fact that no similar effect is visible when the center-left pursues what might be considered surprising policies.

For other cabinets, the moderating effect of the campaign position is modest and only statistically significant when comparing the extreme ends of cutbacks, and not at all for expansions. This suggests that the mass media is much less alert to what these governments promised during the election campaign, regardless of whether the campaign aligns with the

policies adopted when in office or not. This observation fits well with the arguments of scholars like Ross (2000) and Kitschelt (2001). According to their work, left-wing governments may actually have a better chance of implementing cutbacks without strong opposition, which in this case is facilitated by relatively low media coverage.

[Figure 3 about here]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As we noted in the introduction, it is surprising how little we know about how the mass media reports on welfare state reforms. Given that much ink has been spilled on how citizens react to welfare state change (e.g., Armingeon & Giger 2008; Arndt 2013; Schumacher et al. 2013; Hübscher & Sattler 2017; Schwander & Manow 2017) and in turn which strategies of credit-claiming and blame avoidance this may provoke on the part of politicians (e.g., Pierson 1994; Lindbom 2007; Vis 2016), it is important to study empirically how the mass media fits into this context.

Our study has examined how major quality newspapers in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Germany have covered welfare state reforms since the mid-1990s. The key findings of our study are straightforward. First, we have found that news value theory can help us understand how extensively the mass media reports about welfare state change.

Corroborating the “negativity bias” in news reporting, we find that articles about welfare cutbacks are much longer than articles about expansions. Second, moving beyond the classic news value theory, we have shown that it makes a difference which party holds the government and what the government parties advocated in their manifestos before they were elected. For one, our results indicate that the mass media seems to put reforms implemented

by right-of-center parties under more intensive scrutiny, i.e., they report more extensively about these reforms. This is probably because the traditional issue owners of the left are in opposition and keen to criticize the incumbent. We also find that it matters what governments promise before their ascension to power. In fact, betrayal, i.e., running on a pro-welfare platform before an election and cutting welfare once in office, leads to substantially higher news reporting on average—but particularly so for right-of-center governments. Again, this can be explained by these governments' lack of issue ownership in the welfare state domain.

In our view, these results point to a very dynamic relationship between party competition, media reporting, and public opinion—a pattern that should be explored further in the literature. In recent years, the welfare literature has focused more on the micro level, and, in this process, it seems that the mass media has been overlooked as an important intermediate player that molds the relationships between public opinion and public policies. Importantly, the mass media is nowhere near a “neutral” transmission belt of information, but is instead biased in favor of certain pieces of information—and this has important downstream consequences for both the strategic behavior of political actors and for voter perceptions. Since it appears a plausible assumption that citizens obtain at least a substantial amount of information from the mass media, integrating the role of the media more directly into extant theories of welfare state reforms and government popularity appears to be called for. Moving this research agenda forward, it will only be natural to expand the empirical measures used currently to include measures of the “tone” of newspaper articles; there are certainly several of our expectations that could be re-formulated in terms of either a positive or negative tone of reporting.

One particularly interesting line of inquiry would be to better align our findings with those of, for instance, Arndt (2013) and Schumacher et al. (2013), who argue that left-of-center governments have been punished harder by voters than right-of-center governments. On the face of it, these two sets of results are at odds. Yet they are not necessarily so. The core electorate of the two party families are not the same, and Arndt (2013), who presents the most detailed analysis to date, shows that the traditional core left-wing voters are those who, during major reform events, either move to the populist right or refrain from voting altogether. In other words, the mass media may report more on center-right governments' reforms, but the electoral backlash might be biggest among those voters who back the welfare state the most. It is in this regard important to remember that many voters cherish a sound economy just as much as a large welfare state (Giger & Nelson 2013), so the "over-reporting" of rightist welfare state reform might be met with applause in some of these quarters.

The present insights pertain most directly to the welfare state, which clearly constitutes a major part of European politics today. Yet there are reasons to believe that what we have shown above is relevant for public policy-making more broadly. Several other policy areas are also highly salient to the electorate and hence relevant for the mass media to pay attention to. These areas include the environment, law and order, and immigration control, just to mention a few. All of these areas are also frequently part of election campaigns (Green-Pedersen 2019) and parties vary by their level of issue ownership on them (Seeberg 2017). This suggests that the basic components of our argument are present in these policy areas as well, and that we might expect similar dynamics to play out depending on their exact configuration. Moreover, our results may also advance research on the relationship between voter behavior and policy outputs more broadly. In the literature on the fulfillment of election pledges, for instances, researchers have struggled with the "pledge paradox"—that is, the

observation that voters feel that politicians do not live up to their promises but that empirically, we find pledges to be largely fulfilled. Selective media reporting on “betrayal,” or unfulfilled pledges, could actually account for this paradox. These considerations show that researchers interested in opinion-policy linkages should take intermediate organizations such as the media and their selective emphasis on issues more seriously.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Descriptives of dependent variables

	No. of articles	Word length		Relative word length	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
DEN	1,274	214	216	0.08	0.08
GER	1,859	126	159	0.05	0.07
UK	1,668	219	233	0.06	0.06

Figure 1. News reporting over time in Denmark, Germany, and the UK

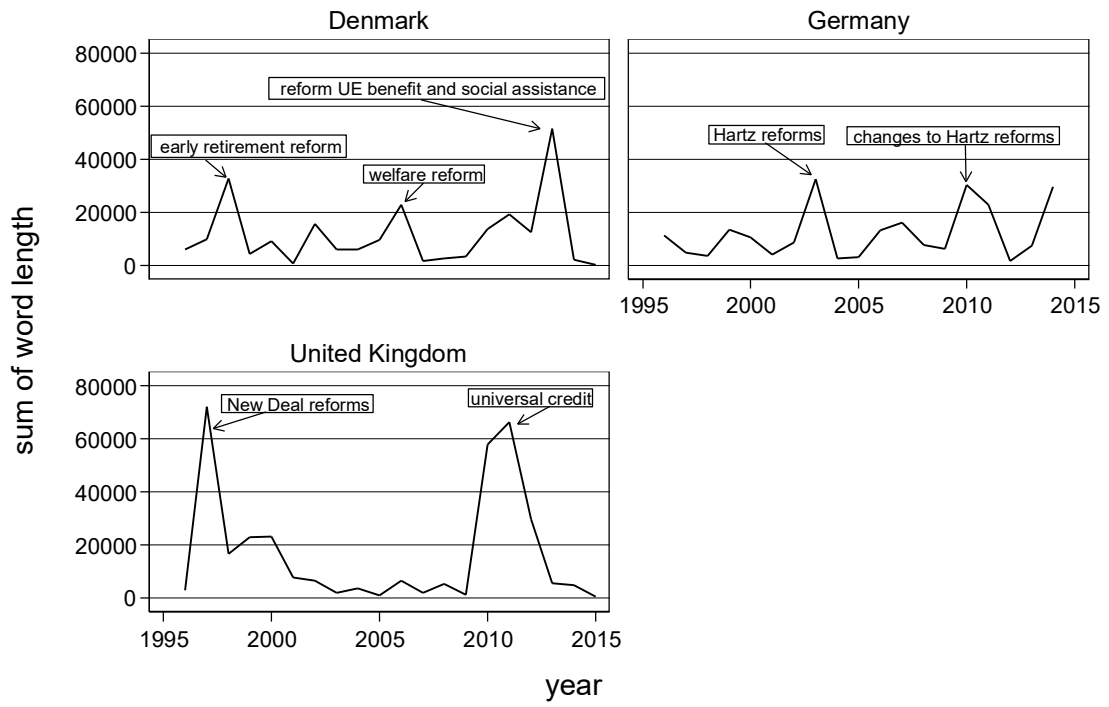


Table 2. Length of articles across cutbacks and expansions

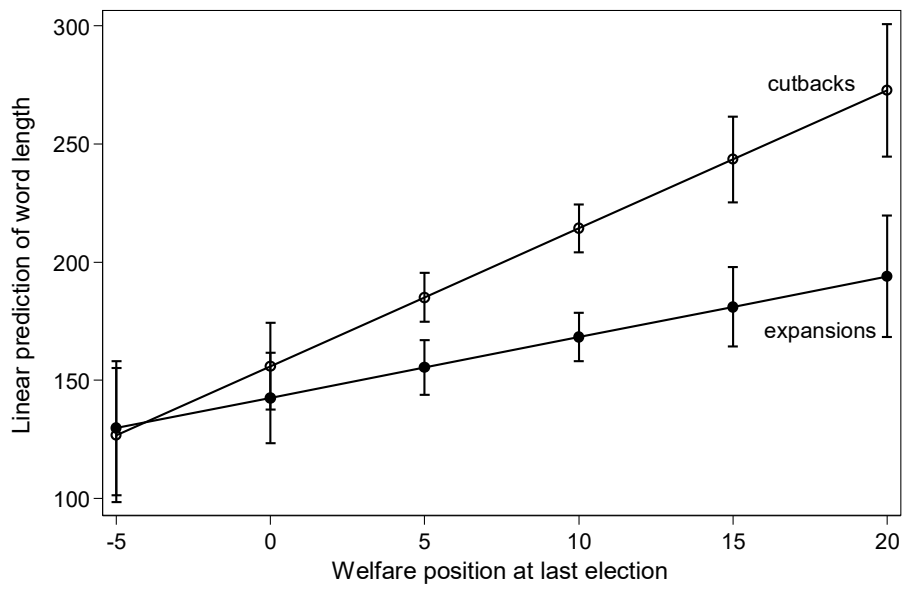
	Cutbacks		Expansions		<i>Ratio</i>
					<i>cutbacks/expansions</i>
No. of words	206.4		145.8		<i>1.4</i>
	UE: 224.4	Pen: 167.0	UE: 160.5	Pen: 136.4	
Relative no. of words	0.068		0.054		<i>1.3</i>
	UE: 0.073	Pen: 0.057	UE: 0.064	Pen: 0.048	
Total no. of articles	12.6		8.9		<i>1.4</i>

Table 3. Predicting average number of words

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	OLS, direct eff	OLS, direct eff	OLS, 2way interac	OLS, 3way interac	OLS, 2way interac	OLS, 3way interac	OLS, 2way interac	OLS, 3way interac	Neg bin, 3way interac
	<i>Country dummies</i>			<i>Newspaper dummies</i>			<i>Newspaper & year dummies</i>		
Position (pro-welfare)	4.21*** (5.46)	4.43*** (5.14)	5.83*** (5.33)	3.50** (2.13)	5.79*** (5.15)	3.59** (2.12)	-3.27** (-2.41)	-5.88*** (-2.92)	-0.042*** (-3.41)
Direction (expansion)	-33.9*** (-6.09)	-42.8*** (-6.02)	-13.4 (-1.04)	-23.5 (-1.13)	-12.8 (-0.98)	-25.1 (-1.18)	-28.8* (-1.84)	-66.6** (-2.43)	-0.50*** (-3.10)
Government (right-of-center)	95.0*** (7.94)	94.0*** (7.59)	100.1*** (7.93)	76.8*** (3.86)	100.0*** (7.80)	77.6*** (3.81)	-20.5 (-1.17)	-48.9* (-1.87)	-0.44*** (-2.73)
Visibility (5=visible)		8.74*** (3.75)	7.95*** (3.38)	8.29*** (3.46)	8.00*** (3.31)	8.37*** (3.39)	4.76* (1.91)	4.49* (1.74)	0.019 (1.22)
Real GDP growth		-1.38 (-0.81)	-1.37 (-0.81)	-1.93 (-1.13)	-1.20 (-0.70)	-1.73 (-1.00)	-2.92 (-0.98)	-1.96 (-0.64)	0.0069 (0.37)
Unemployment		-3.00 (-1.44)	-3.09 (-1.48)	-3.25 (-1.56)	-2.83 (-1.33)	-2.96 (-1.39)	-0.20 (-0.07)	-1.72 (-0.57)	-0.031* (-1.81)
Months since last election		-0.091 (-0.33)	-0.15 (-0.54)	-0.34 (-1.19)	-0.0058 (-0.02)	-0.17 (-0.59)	0.58 (1.11)	0.32 (0.59)	0.0018 (0.68)
Position x direction			-3.27** (-2.56)	-1.13 (-0.57)	-3.26** (-2.52)	-1.05 (-0.52)	-2.70* (-1.68)	1.27 (0.48)	0.017 (1.20)
Government x direction				8.79 (0.30)		13.6 (0.46)		52.6 (1.52)	0.44** (2.15)
Position x government				5.16** (2.04)		4.78* (1.86)		5.45 (1.64)	0.025 (1.38)

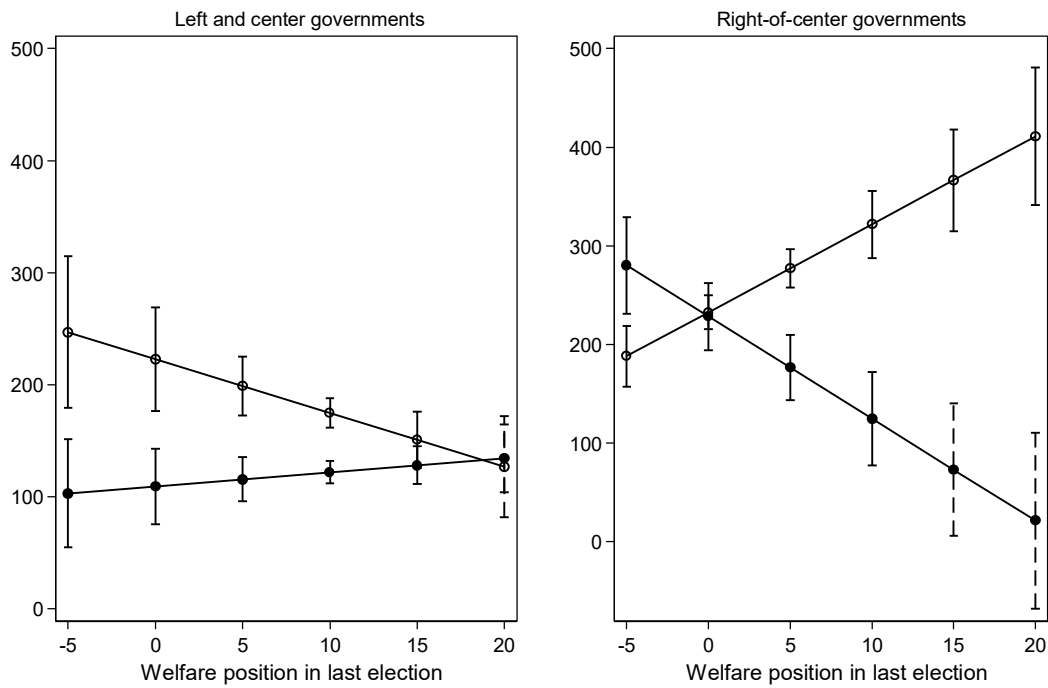
Position x direction x government				-8.96*** (-2.64)		-8.79** (-2.56)		-9.70** (-2.45)	-0.069*** (-2.72)
Constant	137.8*** (11.25)	125.7*** (4.68)	113.6*** (4.15)	137.7*** (4.57)	135.1*** (4.65)	158.3*** (4.74)	314.9*** (7.91)	340.5*** (7.98)	340.5*** (7.98)
N	4739	4430	4430	4430	4335	4335	4335	4335	4335
R^2	0.072	0.076	0.078	0.080	0.076	0.078	0.117	0.118	0.118

Figure 2. Predicted number of words per article for cutbacks (hollow circles) and expansions (black circles)



Note: Calculation of marginal effects based on Model 4 in Table 3.

Figure 3. Predicted number of words per article for cutbacks (hollow circles) and expansions (black circles)



Note: Marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals based on Model 4 in Table 3. Dashed whiskers represent extrapolation.