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Politics in the news: Do campaigns matter? A comparison of political news during election periods and routine periods in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

Can an election campaign be considered a normal time period, or is it a very exceptional episode in the way the media look at political actors and issues? This is the central question of this article. We claim that during campaigns (political) journalists work under different (legal) conditions and are confronted with politicians and parties that are more active than ever, and with a public that pays more attention to who and how politics is presented. This general claim is made concrete in several hypotheses that are tested on the basis of a large dataset of Flemish news broadcasts between 2003 and 2006. Our results confirm that campaign periods strongly influence the amount, style and actors of the (political) news in Belgium (Flanders).

Keywords: elections, television news, campaign coverage, Belgium

Introduction

The study of political news has traditionally focused on election campaign periods. This rather narrow center of attention was a direct consequence of the main research interest of the first scholars in political communication. They were attracted by the potential (large) impact of the news media on voters. The US campaign pioneers (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954) and their British colleagues (Trenaman and McQuail, 1961; Blumler and McQuail, 1968) studied the relation between the political news and voters' knowledge, attitudes and actual voting behavior. During the following decades election campaigns and the role of media in them has become a solid research tradition in almost all Western countries (Semetko, 1996). These studies not only have given diverse insights into the (lack of) media impact on voters, political agendas and the professionalization of politics, they have also enhanced our

knowledge of how politics is covered in the news. Many interesting findings such as the shrinking of political sound bites (Hallin, 1992) or the growth of 'bad' news (Patterson, 1993), are virtues of (longitudinal) election campaign research. These and other studies have become common observers of the way media represent politics. Or, as Holz Bacha (2004: 469) puts it more generally: "The study of election campaigns has caused many authors to surmise the existence of tendencies that may be generalized for political communication". As these studies are widely cited and seen as general trends in how the news media report on politicians and parties, the question of generalization comes to mind. Can an election campaign be considered a normal time period, or is it a very exceptional episode in the way the media look at political actors and issues? This is the central question of this paper. Several arguments can be made to illustrate that the weeks before an election day are everything but normal. During campaigns (political) journalists work under different (legal) conditions and are confronted with politicians and parties that are more active than ever, and with a public that pays more attention to who is presented and how politics is presented. Or, put differently: A campaign changes the behavior and the interactions of the three central campaign players (politicians, journalists, voters) significantly. This claim goes against the popular idea of the permanent campaign (Nimmo, 1999) that states that politicians have incorporated campaign politics into the daily governing process. If this were the case and the news media followed this logic, we would expect a uniform treatment of political news, whether in election periods or non-election periods. We will elaborate on both competing claims further in the article.

If campaign periods are indeed different in the way they represent politics, this can have two important consequences. First, as mentioned earlier, the generalization of campaign studies becomes somewhat problematic. Also, the use of the gathered campaign data for more general research on media is not without consequences. If campaign periods are indeed different from routine periods these studies give us crucial, but only partial information on how politics and politicians are represented in the news. Secondly, general studies on political news should take this 'special' period into account in their research design. In particular, this can cause misleading results in longitudinal research with repetitive sampling. In this type of study on evolutions in the political news, using a sample of a certain month for each year, were to include an election campaign, this could significantly influence the results. In larger and random samples this problem can be limited, but often news studies use a limited sample to cover longer periods. In these cases the risk of campaign periods influencing normal or routine time periods increases.

This study puts the exceptionality of campaign periods to the test by using the database of the Flemish Electronic News Archive (ENA), which contains all coded news items of the public (VRT) and the commercial (VTM) news broadcasts between January 2003 and December 2006. In this four year period the Flemish¹ voter was asked to go to the voting booth three times: In May 2003, to choose their representatives for the federal parliament, in June 2004, for the regional and European parliament, and in October 2006, for their local council. As Belgium is a federal country, with separate elections on different levels, this large number of campaign periods is not unusual. Also, in the near future there will be hardly a period exceeding two years without elections². We will systematically compare the three campaign periods, with more than 3,500 news items, with the routine non-campaign periods, and with the period after the elections when a new government is formed. The comparison will include the amount and style of the (political) news in these periods, as well as the actors featuring in them. For each of these three domains, we will formulate concrete expectations of the differences between routine and election periods. First, we will elaborate a bit more on the possible exceptional character of election campaign periods.

News in election times: An exceptional period?

In recent decennia in almost every western country it has become a tradition to study all different aspects of election campaigns. Questions on how parties campaigned, how the media reported, or how voters made up their minds are addressed separately or more comprehensively in several studies (e. g. Norris et al., 1999; Just et al., 1996). This focus on the campaign is mostly justified by its importance for democracy (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). During this period voters decide on who will have power and who will not. The fact that ever more voters postpone their final decision until the latest weeks or days before the election has increased the importance of the campaign period (McAllister, 2002). However, the efforts to study campaigns intensively have not led to a systematic discussion on how 'exceptional' this period actually is. If campaigns are indeed *special* periods in the life of democracies, we could question what they teach us about *normal* periods. Some authors that have analyzed the media coverage of campaigns seem aware of the fact that their findings do not automatically apply to routine periods. For instance, Gulati and colleagues (2004: 252) refer to the "specific historical, economic, and societal contexts of elections" that influence the construction of campaign news. Or, as Deacon and colleagues (2001: 677) stated: "Analytical focus on the campaign alone may not reveal all we

need to know about the potency of the media in defining the civic culture of politics”.

As a general theoretical framework that could explain the (different) behavior of politicians, journalists and voters during a campaign is absent, we are making a first attempt at developing such a framework. We see three main reasons why campaign periods are different from routine periods, and why this may affect the way the news media represent politics and politicians. First, we believe the behavior of the political actors changes in election times: Parties and candidates are more active than ever to get their share of media attention and thus to reach the voter. By organizing so called pseudo-events (e. g. daily press briefings, spreading press releases, campaign speeches), parties try to determine the media agenda with their preferred issue or story (Brandenburg, 2002; Butler, 1998). As a consequence, the news media are beleaguered with political information. One possibility is that this would enhance the media's selection power, with the journalist choosing the most newsworthy stories from a larger supply of political news and events. But it could also simply enlarge the total amount of (domestic) political news that is reported. In any case it becomes more difficult for journalists to cover issues that are not addressed by the parties. According to Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), this is an important explanation of why the independent agenda-setting power of the media is often smaller in election times than in routine times.

Second, the behavior of the news media is not only influenced by hyperactive parties (and their campaign teams), but also by certain rules and practices on fairness and balance (Semetko, 1996). Although media all over the world have obtained a more sovereign position towards political parties, the public broadcaster is expected especially to respect the distribution of power. Some countries such as Italy have clear regulations about the division of the (free) media attention on public broadcasts among the political parties/politicians involved in the campaign (Roncarolo, 2002). This can be a certain percentage for each party, mirroring its parliamentary or expected electoral strength, or equal representation. In most countries these rules are less stringent, but still an informal tradition of impartiality prevails. For instance, the British BBC seems to apply its 'stopwatch rules' more strictly in election times than in routine periods (Plamondon, 1998). Also, research on a recent Spanish campaign showed that the public broadcaster was more inclined to respect stopwatch rules more strictly during the campaign than in the weeks before (Semetko and Canel, 1997). As public broadcasters in many European countries still have a dominant position in the news market, we expect that commercial broadcasters also follow these informal rules, but to a lesser extent.

A third reason is related to the citizens, who can primarily be labeled as voters during campaign periods. We believe that in the weeks before an election day most ordinary citizens become somewhat more interested in politics. The larger number of viewers the main political debates attract on television demonstrate this (Faas and Maier, 2004; McKinney and Carlin, 2004). At least a segment of the electorate is more open to political information because it wants to determine which party or candidate is closest to its own preferences. The news media are perhaps not the only, but without a doubt the most important, channel whereby politicians and parties can reach the voter (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998; Schultz et al., 2005). Again, this strengthens the hypotheses that television news is inclined to devote more time to (domestic) politics during campaign periods. This richer information environment can have positive consequences for peoples' vision of politics, as Schultz and colleagues (2005) showed in Germany. Their longitudinal analyses showed that the voters' trust in politics has decreased over the years, but that this trend was temporally reversed in election times. "Election campaigns consistently seem to alter the population's negative image of politics. [...] After Election Day, the effect vanishes and the ensuing political malaise increases even more each time" (2005: 76–77). Besides being more interested and informed, we could also expect voters to be more sensitive to the impartiality of the news. Certainly in a European context where most broadcasters foster their neutral position towards politics, in contrast with some more partisan US broadcasters, for instance Fox News. This more attentive electorate could make the newsmakers even more cautious and balanced in their coverage.

To sum up, we believe that during campaigns journalists work under different (legal) conditions and are confronted with more active political actors and a more attentive public. These changes create a different news environment, and ultimately daily news broadcasts that differ significantly from the news broadcasts in non-campaign periods. Our main claim is that campaigns matter, but before we specify this in several concrete hypotheses on news content, we also have to consider a competing claim. A hypothesis which is related to the concept of the 'permanent campaign' (Nimmo, 1999), which states that parties not only campaign in the few weeks before an election, but that they are permanently campaigning, even when they are part of the government. According to Nimmo, the permanent campaign is the logical consequence of the entry of marketing principles and consultants into the political world. Also, Semetko has referred to the fact that in many democracies, the parties in government strategically begin at least a year in advance of the election to use the media to set the stage for the forthcoming campaign

(Semetko, 1996: 279). Translating this idea to the Belgian context, where there are elections almost every year, we could expect a permanent campaign influence on the news.

Research questions and hypotheses

Our main hypotheses state that campaigns influence the content of the political news. For analytical reasons, we will deconstruct this general hypothesis in several sub hypotheses concerning different characteristics of the political news. In this study we will focus on (1) the amount of political (hard) news, (2) the political balance, (3) the speaking time of political actors, (4) the degree of personalization, (5) the diversity of political representatives (gender, ethnicity), and (6) the presence of 'ordinary people' in the political news.

More hard news, less soft and foreign news?

Naturally, there is a difference in the thematic focus of the news media between election periods and non-election periods. The upcoming election generates election news, which in its turn will boost the amount of political news. As a result, there will be less space for soft news (culture, sports, celebrity news, faits divers) and sensational news (disasters, traffic accidents, crime, violence) (De Swert, 2007; Sinardet et al., 2005). Even if election news also opens up possibilities for covering soft news items (e.g. about the personal life of politicians), it is not very probable that this kind of news will account for the whole share of extra political news. Our hypothesis is therefore that the balance between hard, soft and sensational news will be structurally distorted in election times.

H1: There will be considerably more hard news in election times than in non-election times, less soft news, and especially less sensational news.

A second characteristic of the extra electoral news is that its focus will be largely domestic. Most campaign issues have a national focus, and only seldom an international issue becomes a hot topic in the campaign. Even during the Belgian election of May 2003, the Iraq War, which had started only weeks before, hardly became an issue of debate in the campaign (Van Aelst, 2007)³. National parties can only attract media attention if they have an outspoken view on European or international issues (Peter et al., 2004). An older study of Weaver and colleagues (1984) showed that in the period between 1972 and 1981 foreign news coverage on US television was significantly lower in election years. So, we expect

that the extra domestic news on the news media agenda will force news editors to cut down on the foreign news share.

H2. There will be considerably more domestic news in election times than in non-election times. The amount of foreign news will be lower in election times (and in government formation times).

More balance in the news?

As stated before, news broadcasters in several European countries have stricter rules on impartiality and neutrality during election times than in routine times. In Belgium, there is no formal regulation of this kind, but there has been a tradition of self-regulation. Newsroom observations at the Flemish public broadcaster during the Belgian election campaign of 2003 confirmed that journalists are more inclined to respect an equal distribution of attention given to the different parties than in regular periods (Van Aelst, 2007). This journalistic attitude is strengthened by political actors who are very alert to news media bias since they believe that the impact of such a possible misrepresentation increases with the ballot approaching (Hudson, 2004). Therefore we expect that during election times, opposition parties will get more attention and that there will be more balance between government and opposition parties in the news items.

H3. There will be more political balance in the news media coverage during election times than during non-election times.

More political actors, shorter sound bites?

Considering the speaking time that is granted to political actors, most research has focused on election times (Hallin, 1992; Lichter, 2001). The overall tendency is that political sound bites keep on shortening over time. But in addition to the shrinking sound bites, we expect the mean amount of speaking time for each political actor in a news item to be lower during election times. As more politicians find their way to the television screen in election periods, there will be more competition for each second of airplay. The above mentioned tendency towards more balance in the political news coverage should lead to more different news sources (speaking) in a news item, which is likely to have a negative effect on the total amount of speaking time for each news source. Furthermore, the comparative research of Esser and Spanier (2008) has shown that the sound bites are shorter in countries where politicians set

up more tightly scripted (pseudo) events. We can expect that these events are more common during election periods than in routine periods.

H4. During campaign periods the speaking time for politicians will be shorter than in non-campaign periods.

More politicians, fewer parties?

The scholarly attention on the personalization or 'presidentialization' of politics is not new, but has risen over time (Mughan, 2000). The media are often seen as the driving force behind this process. The central idea is that politicians more easily fit the format of the news than their parties do (Hart, 1992; Mazzoleni, 2000). Comparative campaign research by Dalton and colleagues (2000) has shown that the ratio of politicians versus parties mentioned in the press has grown during the last fifty years. However, the results varied strongly depending on the political system and institutional context (Dalton et al., 2000). The trend towards 'Candidate-centered politics' is much slower in parliamentary systems compared to presidential systems, but certainly not absent (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). As far as we know, no research has focused on the comparison of election versus non-election times. We expect that in campaign periods the personalization of the news will be more outspoken than in routine periods. Campaigns focus on the top candidates and less on parties.

H5. The level of personalization in election times will be higher than in non-election times.

A more diverse political representation?

In election times journalists are confronted with voting lists of candidates which are mostly carefully prepared by the parties' headquarters. As a consequence of legislation⁴ Belgian female politicians are guaranteed more and higher positions on the list compared to earlier elections (but still not equal to men). While earlier research has shown that the position on the list strongly influences the amount of attention a candidate gets in the media (Van Aelst et al., 2008), we expect that women will be more at the center of attention during campaigns. During non-election periods, probably already in the government formation periods, these groups will be pulled back to their original, marginal position, since they tend to be less (but not as significantly as media attention suggests) involved in the real power positions (Kahn, 1994; Eie, 1998).

H6a. The representation of politicians in the television news coverage in election times will be more gender equal than in non-election times.

We also expect politicians representing an ethnic minority to be more visible during campaign periods. Especially during the local elections of 2006 when non-EU citizens were granted voting rights for the first time.

H6b. During election times more politicians of ethnic minorities will be present in the news coverage.

More participation, more 'vox pop' in the news?

We stated earlier that one of the reasons why election periods are different is that citizens behave differently. As voters, they are more interested, and to some extent more involved, in the political process. In the end, ordinary citizens will decide on the electoral strength of each party and politician. We might expect journalists to honor this higher level of importance by offering regular people a voice in the political news. At least formally, we expect to see more of this, for example, media representations of statements by individual voters by means of so called vox-pop interviews (in the shopping mall, on the street, etc.) (Daschmann, 2000)

H7. In election times, more common people will find their way onto the television news screen, offering their views and beliefs on political subjects than in non-electoral times.

Data and methods

The data for these analyses come from the Electronical News Archive (www.ENA.be), and include content analysis findings of all daily flagship newscasts of the public channel VRT and the main (and where news is concerned, only) commercial competitor VTM over the 2003–2006 period. This offers a unique and complete dataset of news broadcasts to answer our research questions. Over four years, 63, 668 news items were encoded with a basic coding scheme including indicators of thematic content, domestic or foreign focus, and presence of news sources (mentioned or speaking). During this period, three elections took place in Flanders: national elections in May 2003, regional and European elections in June 2004 and communal elections in October 2006. In this way a full election cycle, with elections for all possible government levels, is included. We decided to compare the news content of both broadcasters⁵ in five periods: one month before each of these three elections, a 'government formation period', including the times between the elections and

the official start of the new government in 2003 and 2004⁶. Finally, we gather all the rest in the category ‘non-election period’. Some scholars work with election periods from up till six weeks. It is difficult to say when a campaign really starts (for the news media). Therefore, we do keep a buffer period of one month between the non-election period and the election period. These broadcasts are not used in our analysis. As a result, the non-election periods always end two months before the actual elections take place. After these deductions, 55, 984 news items remain in the data file, including 14, 260 instances of Belgian politicians being mentioned and/or interviewed on screen.

Results: Comparing campaign and routine periods

More hard news, less soft and foreign news?

Our first hypothesis states that the rise of election news will have an effect on the relative amount of soft news and sensational news. The

Table 1. *Comparison of election periods, non-election periods and government formation periods in relation to the attention given to different types of news in news broadcasts (2003–2006) (in %).*

	Non-election period (N = 47280)	Elections 2003 (N = 1419)	Elections 2004 (N = 1292)	Elections 2006 (N = 1193)	Government formation period (N = 4800)	Total (N = 55984)
Election news (N = 2131)	3.0	23.9*	29.8*	13.6*	4.8*	4.3
Hard news (N = 17 835)	31.3	43.8*	44.7*	39.1*	35.5*	32.4
Hard news (without election news) (N = 16018)	29.1	23.9*	28.5	26.6*	31.4*	29.1
Soft news (N = 6474)	26.0	20.2*	23.2	21.4*	29.8*	26.0
Sensational news (N = 16574)	27.6	16.6*	20.4*	23.1*	21.1*	26.5
Domestic news (N = 26426)	52.1	67.1*	65.1*	59.7*	62.0*	53.7
Foreign news (N = 14 399)	30.0	20.9*	24.3	23.8*	22.5*	28.9
Mixed news (N = 7463)	17.9	12.0*	10.6*	16.5	15.5*	17.4

*Values marked with an * differ significantly (< .01) from the non-election period (= reference period) using a T-test. N = Amount of news items in the analysis.*

Note: for the analysis on foreign news, we did not include the sports news at the end of the news broadcast.

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ENA-database contains up to three issue codes for each news item. Based on these issue codes, several non-mutually exclusive dichotomous variables were made: hard news (politics, economy, finances and international relations), soft news (culture, sports, celebrity and royalty), and sensational news (traffic accidents, disasters and crime). The results in table 1 clearly confirm this hypothesis. The presence of both types of news declines sharply during all three campaign periods to the benefit of more hard news. T-tests show that these differences are, except for the soft news during the 2004 campaign, significant. During the government formation period the amount of soft news rises again, while sensational news remains relatively low. Our second hypothesis states that attention on news outside Belgium has to pay a ‘campaign-price’ as well. The amount of foreign news is significantly lower in the weeks before an election. Also, the mixed news, coverage that refers to both Belgium and at least one other country, is lower in campaign periods. Even during the European election campaign of 2004, ‘Europe’ was hardly considered newsworthy. The overall pro-European consensus among Belgian elite politicians and the general public’s lack of interest can be considered as the main explanations for this (Peter et al., 2003).

More balance in the news?

In this study, we define balance as the situation in which a news item, featuring at least one government (party) actor, also gives coverage to

Table 2. *Comparison of election periods, non-election periods and government formation periods for the biance in the news (2003–2006) (in %).*

	Non-election period (N = 2880)	Elections 2003 (= federal) (N = 250)	Elections 2004 (= regional) (N = 165)	Elections 2006	Government formation period (N = 471)	Total (N = 3766)
Balance majority – opposition (Regional level 'Flanders')	7.2	13.9*	25.5*	–	11.8*	9.7
Balance majority – opposition (Federal level 'Belgium')	11.3	24.4*	20.6*	–	12.4	12.9
Balance (general) = either one of above balances or both in the same news item	10.9	24.8*	25.5*	–	15.1*	13.0

Values marked with an * differ significantly (< .01) from the normal period (= reference period) using a T-test. N = amount of news items containing at least one federal of regional government source.

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at least one opposition (party) actor. This can happen by way of granting a sound bite to those actors, as well as by referring to them by name⁷. While Belgium has a federal system with different coalitions on the regional and the federal level, we look at balance on both levels and on a combination of both (Table 2). We find that in a non-election period only a little over ten percent of the news items are balanced, leaving close to 90 percent of the news items containing a one-sided government (party) source. In election times, the situation is dramatically different. The number of balanced items is easily double those in the non-election period. Balancing in general is more present during campaign periods, but, as expected, news items are most balanced for the political actors on the level of the specific election (federal in 2003, regional in 2004).

More political actors, shorter sound bites?

We expected that as a consequence of more balanced news in election times, the sound bites of politicians would shorten (H4). We measured this by the total speaking time a politician received in a news item (i.e. the total time the politician was speaking on screen, excluding the reporters' interruptions). Our analysis does not confirm this hypothesis (Table 3). Overall, politicians only speak for 22 seconds (mostly divided over two sound bites), but this speaking time does not differ significantly over

Table 3. Comparison of election periods, non-election periods and government formation periods for speaking time and degree of personalization in the news broadcast (2003–2006).

	Non-election period (N = 10487)	Elections 2003 (N = 895)	Elections 2004 (N = 511)	Elections 2006 (N = 546)	Government formation period (N = 1821)	Total (N = 14260)
Number of seconds a politicians can speak in a news item (in sec.)	21.5	22.4	20.2	20.0	23.0	21.7
Ratio of politicians (speaking or mentioned) versus political parties in the news	6.9	2.5*	2.8*	3.3*	3.6*	5.2
Ratio of politicians (mentioned) versus political parties in the news	2.0	0.9	0.9	1.3	1.4	1.6

Values marked with an * differ significantly (< .01) from the normal period (= reference period) using a T-test. N = number of political actors.

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the different periods. The fact that in 2003 the speaking time was a bit longer seems to be more of a longitudinal trend: sound bites keep shrinking. Our data show a very small, but linear trend in the speaking time attributed to political actors from 22.3 seconds in 2003 over 21.7 in 2004, 21.3 in 2005 down to 20.7 in 2006.

More politicians, fewer parties?

The literature on the personalization of politics clearly refers to a tendency towards more ‘candidate-centered’ politics. Our analysis of Flemish news confirms that in general politicians are mentioned or shown speaking up to five times more than parties are. Even if we only take into account explicit mentions of names, individual politicians outnumber parties (1.6). However, contrary to our expectations, the ratio (number of politicians / number of political parties mentioned) sharply drops in election times. During campaigns political parties become more prominent players in the news. In election times politicians become spokespeople for their parties, while in routine periods the focus is on the government and individual ministers. Each minister is trying to get into the news with his/her policy proposals while party affiliation is hardly newsworthy. Furthermore, opinion polls, which are in the Belgian political context a contest between parties, may influence this ratio in favor of the parties.

A more diverse political representation?

Our hypothesis was that during election time, there would be a greater representation of female and ethnic minority politicians (encoded based

Table 4. *Comparison of election periods, non-election periods and government formation periods for the gender equality and ethnic diversity of politicians in the news broadcast (2003–2006) (in %).*

	Non-election period (N = 10487)	Elections 2003 (N = 895)	Elections 2004 (N = 511)	Elections 2006 (N = 546)	Government formation period (N = 1821)	Total (N = 14260)
Female politicians (N = 2394)	15.8	23.1*	16.4	23.8*	17.4	16.4
Politicians from ethnic minority background (N = 162)	1.1	1.5	0.3	1.7	1.4	1.2

Values marked with an * differ significantly (< .01) from the normal period (= reference period) using a T-test. N = total number of politicians in the news.

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on the politicians' visual characteristics and/or name). For the elections in 2003 and 2006, this is demonstrated to be accurate. There were considerably more female politicians in the news during these election periods, and as expected this effect disappeared in the post-election formation period. The 2004 election seems to be a special case. There is only a minor increase in the representation of female politicians and for ethnic minority politicians, there is even a (also insignificant) decrease of 0.3 percent. In general, there are so few politicians of ethnic minority background (encoded according to appearance and/or name) in the television news coverage that one specific minority (actively campaigning) candidate can easily make a large difference. In 2004, they all made a difference by not being there.

More participation, more 'vox pop' in the news?

In television news, the voice of the common people is often presented by means of a 'vox pop' interview. In this study, a news source is considered to be a 'vox-pop' or 'exemplar' if the news source is a common, non-representative person who is interviewed at a random place (e. g. on the street). We expected that as a consequence of the more central position of voters in election times, more vox pop interviews would be present in these periods. Strangely enough, the figures prove that the opposite is true: in election times, there are fewer common people among those speaking on the news. The percentage is significantly lower in all election periods. Since politicians get a lot more attention when the electoral media train is on the rails, this could have been a backlash to this surplus of media-attention, but this is not the case. Also, in absolute figures, there are fewer common people in the news during election times: about ten percent of all news items in an election period containing people

Table 5. Comparison of election periods, non-election periods and government formation periods for the presence of vox pops in the news (2003–2006) (in %).

	Non-election period (N = 62293)	Elections 2003 (N = 1804)	Elections 2004 (N = 1457)	Elections 2006 (N = 1830)	Government formation period (N = 5444)	Total (N = 72827)
Vox pops (% of all speaking actors)	7.4	4.8*	3.7*	4.4*	4.1*	6.9
Politicians (% of all speaking actors)	12.1	32.5*	24.3*	18.6*	20.6*	13.7

Values marked with an * differ significantly (< .01) from the normal period (= reference period) using a T-test. N = the amount of actors (= people + organisations) in the news.

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featured at least one common person, while in non-election time this was 17 percent (figures not in table).

So contrary to our expectations, journalists don't give a more central position to ordinary people in election time, but rather focus on the large number of political candidates fighting for attention. Possibly the larger number of vox pops outside campaign periods is related to the absence of domestic news events that have a similar news value as the upcoming elections. On those occasions vox pops offer an easy way to fill the news broadcast. However, further research is needed to sort this out.

Conclusion and discussion

This study has focused on the normality of campaign periods for the coverage of politics in the news. We expected that these periods would be 'exceptional' because the three central actors (parties, journalists, voters) behave differently, leading to different news coverage of politics. A systematic comparison of the television news in Belgium (Flanders) during election and non-election periods confirmed this expectation: campaigns matter. Although not all our hypotheses are confirmed, they mostly point towards significant differences in the political news coverage between campaign and non-campaign periods (see table 6).

First, the amount of domestic political news rises strongly, at the expense of both soft news and international news. This confirms our first two hypotheses (H1 and H2). The campaign leads to 'harder' political news, but, at the same time, to a narrower 'national' focus on politics. The fact that politics, certainly in a small country as Belgium, is highly influenced by European legislation hardly seems newsworthy in campaign periods. Secondly, the political news is more balanced (H3). In campaign times, in one out of four news items both government and opposition parties are present. In routine times this is only the case in one out of ten news items. This seems to confirm that informal rules of impartiality still determine the work of television journalists in the weeks before an election. Thirdly, campaigns lead to far less personalized news coverage (H5). Although we expected that individual politicians would be more central to the campaign coverage, campaigns are the heydays of political parties. More than in routine periods, in which individual ministers mostly figure centre stage, parties gain in importance as central actors in the news. These results, at least for Flanders, question the trend of candidate-centered politics. Fourth, we found that the news in (two out of three) campaign periods is more gender equal (H6a). However, we think this is more a consequence of political legislation (forcing parties to add more female politicians to their lists) than of a deliberate journalistic choice. Because of a lack of cases we could not prove whether

Table 6. Overview of hypotheses.

	Confirmed?	Difference routine period
<i>H1: There will be considerably more hard news in election times than in non-election times, less soft news, and especially less sensational news.</i>	++	++
<i>H2: There will be considerably more domestic news in election times than in non-election times. The amount of foreign news will be lower in election times.</i>	++	++
<i>H3: There will be more political balance in the news media coverage in election times than in non-election times.</i>	++	++
<i>H4: During campaign periods the speaking time for politicians will be shorter than in non-campaign periods.</i>	-	-
<i>H5: The level of personalization in election times will be higher than in non-election times.</i>	--	++
<i>H6a. The representation of politicians in the television news coverage in election times will be more gender equal than in non-election times</i>	+	+
<i>H6b. During election times more politicians of ethnic minorities will be present in the news coverage.</i>	0	0
<i>H7. In election times, more common people will find their way onto the television news screens, offering their views and beliefs on political subjects than in non-electoral times.</i>	--	++

the news is also more ethnically diverse. Perhaps this small number of non-Belgian politicians in both campaign and non-campaign periods is a relevant finding by itself. Finally, we found that ordinary citizens are significantly less represented in the news during election periods (H7). Contrary to our expectations the opinion of the ordinary voter did not become more prevalent, but rather politicians and parties themselves become the main actors much more frequently than in routine periods.

Both time periods seemed to differ little on only one news characteristic: the speaking time of politicians (H4). Politicians have to speak in a sound bite culture, with little room to make a complex argument. This iron law seems to hold equally in both campaign and non-campaign periods. Probably we are confronted here with a general news characteristic that implies that the statements of participants are only a part of a broader story that is interpreted by the journalists (Patterson, 1993).

Although our central hypothesis is clearly confirmed, this study has some limitations that should be addressed in further research. The main

constraint of this research is that it is a one nation study. Our claims are tested on a large dataset of more than 60,000 Flemish television news items, but a comparative perspective is certainly lacking. Therefore, we can only speculate about the generalization of these findings to other countries. While the results were influenced by both political rules (e.g. electoral legislation on gender equality) and journalistic routines (e.g. on impartiality), we expect that these results will hold best in countries with a similar political media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), like Germany, The Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries. However, it might be the case that because most of these countries have fewer elections and longer campaign free periods than in Belgium, the news differs even more between election and non-election periods. We hope that as a result of the emerging comparative perspective in political communication, the normality or better exceptionality of campaign periods can be tested in several countries.

A more comparative dataset would improve this research, but would not solve all of our shortcomings. Besides more data, more theory on the behavior of the main campaign players is needed. We support the idea that during campaigns journalists work under different circumstances and are confronted with more active political actors, and a more attentive public. However, it remains unclear which part of the explanation is most relevant for the exceptionality of the news coverage in campaign periods. Theoretically, the precise dynamic of the interactions between the main players is understudied. Perhaps more qualitative research, including in depth interviews with journalists, could improve our understanding of why and how the news changes during campaigns.

To conclude, this research has shown that campaign periods strongly influence the amount and style of political news and the actors shown in it in Belgium (Flanders). Both empirical and theoretical work needs to be done to confirm the campaign exceptionality thesis. While campaign studies are a vast and growing part of political communication research all over the world, this effort would be one worth taking.

Bionotes

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Notes

1. Flanders, in the north of Belgium, contains about 60% of the Belgian population. Dutch is spoken there.
2. The Belgian people voted again in June 2007 (Federal Elections) and will do so again in June 2009 (Regional and European Elections).
3. This was due to the broad consensus among parties on the Iraq policy. However, during the German election of 2003 Iraq was a central campaign issue because the two major parties had clearly opposite viewpoints on this matter (Faas and Maier, 2004).
4. Since the beginning of the nineties several laws (Smet-Tobback Act in 1994) have assured an equal distribution of men and women over the lists of candidates that are presented to the voters by each party.
5. The data of the public broadcaster (VRT) and the commercial broadcaster (VTM) were combined because they hardly differed.
6. This period is considered to be distinct from routine periods, mainly because it is unclear who will be in the government. In 2006, the communal formations were not thought to belong to this category; we did not include any data from after the communal elections of 2006.
7. This is, of course, a strong operational reduction of balance, since a journalist might decide to balance by using non-political participants or even give the opposite opinion in another news item. But since the goal of this study is not to check the objectivity of the news, but only to try to find if the level of balance is different because of upcoming elections, we chose to have a strict and workable definition.

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