

Attacking the Gatekeepers: A Survey Experiment on the Effects of Elite Criticism on the Media

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Using a survey experiment in Belgium, this study investigates to what extent media criticism voiced by political elites affects citizens' media perceptions. In the experiment, citizens are exposed to tweets in which political parties attack the public broadcast for (1) being ideologically slanted and (2) being inaccurate. The study shows that by attacking a news outlet elites are able to increase citizens' perceptions of partisan bias in that outlet. However, we also find that this does not spill over to their general perception of bias or trust in the traditional media. In addition, we demonstrate that not all types of elite attacks on the media have a similar effect, as we find no evidence of tweets where elites criticize the news for being inaccurate impact citizens' perceptions of the media.

Keywords: media perceptions, media bias, elite cues, survey experiment

Journalists are expected to keep a check on those in power by informing citizens about the state of current affairs as well as any potential wrongdoings. Today however, they are increasingly being challenged, operating in an environment where politicians are adopting a more hostile stance toward journalists and the press in general. The obvious example here is the former U.S. President Donald Trump, who systematically referred to the traditional press as an enemy to the people, and who used to challenge the news media's objectivity and credibility on his Twitter account almost on a daily basis. While the phenomenon of political elites being critical of the traditional press can hardly be described as new—already in 1969 Nixon and his vice president gave speeches all around their country attacking the traditional press (Coyne & Agnew, 1972)—the traditional news media are nowadays increasingly being contested by those in power, not only in the United States but also in European countries, for instance, Belgium (see De Mulder & Paulussen, 2021) to such an extent that elite criticism of the media—or as journalists often say: “media bashing”—is one of the main concerns journalists have for the future (Newman Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Kleis Nielsen, 2020). Also, and importantly, these days such hostile claims made by politicians reach a much wider audience because they are often voiced on social media, enabling politicians to bypass the same gatekeepers they attack (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). The fact that citizens today are increasingly exposed to media criticism voiced by political actors makes it crucial to examine what effects such claims have.

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Scientific literature is clear on the potential dangers of elite attacks on the media; were citizens to believe elites when they make claims about coverage bias and were they to adopt a similar hostile media stance when confronted with such criticism, these attacks pose a threat to democracy (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In particular, when these claims are unfounded and only serve political strategic purposes. After all, research that gauges citizens' perceptions of partisan bias in the news demonstrates that those who perceive a certain news item as biased, project this bias onto the overall news source, and consequentially, are more likely to reject the content it produces (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Baum and Gussin (2008), for example, show that citizens' beliefs about ideological biases in CNN and Fox news negatively impact the persuasiveness of those news sources. In addition, citizens who perceive traditional outlets to be ideologically slanted, tend to turn to alternative news outlets instead, to inform themselves about current affairs; outlets which are ironically often even more slanted (Ladd, 2010b). Also, and importantly, perceptions of partisan bias in one news outlet seem to affect citizens' trust in the news media in general, and those who believe a certain outlet is biased are more likely to refrain from consuming news altogether (e.g., Vallone et al., 1985). If citizens lose trust in the media and are less receptive to information disseminated through traditional channels, the media simply cannot fulfill their crucial informative role, nor their duty as watchdogs of democracy. Citizens who do not consume any political news are less likely to make an informed vote choice (based on current affairs knowledge) and to hold their leaders accountable on election day (Ladd, 2010b; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Thus, it is clear that the media's ability to perform their role as public informant and watchdog of democracy vitally hinges on citizens perceiving them as *credible* and *objective* (Smith, 2010; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). The aim of this study is therefore, *to investigate whether political actors who claim that a news outlet is biased or inaccurate enhance antipathy toward the press.*

While most scholarly work seems to assume that elites' frequent complaints about the press affect citizens, empirical evidence backing this assumption is still scant. The work that does tackle the relationship between elite critique and citizens' perceptions of the media seems to suggest that elite assertions of ideological bias in the news convince citizens about the existence of such a bias. Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999), for instance, argue that media bashing by conservative U.S. politicians has a substantial influence on citizens perceiving the media in general as having a liberal bias. Because they find that coverage favoring Clinton was less present than claims of media bias suggested, they argue that the claims of ideological bias should be the primary cause of increased perceptions of media slant among citizens. Of course, such a correlational approach cannot entirely rule out the possibility that citizens simply were aware of the actual ideological bias in the coverage of the Clinton-Bush campaign in the first place; content analyses have confirmed that Clinton did receive more favorable coverage (see Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). Therefore, to assess whether elite attacks on the press have an *independent* effect on citizens' perceptions, the isolated context of an experimental design is better suited. Still, so far only a few studies have applied this approach. Smith (2010) exposed citizens to a statement made by Obama or McCain claiming that the *Los Angeles Times* is ideologically slanted, and shows that such claims increase citizens' perceptions of bias of that outlet (see also Ladd, 2010a). In a similar vein, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) find that experimental exposure to elite discourse about fake news results in lower levels of general media trust among citizens.

This study builds on this existing empirical work by examining the effect of parties voicing media criticism on citizens' perceptions of the media, using a survey experiment in Belgium. Particularly, we add to the existing literature in three ways. First, studies so far have either focused on the elite critique of media

bias (e.g., see Watts et al., 1999) or, exceptionally, on being inaccurate or even spreading “fake news” (e.g., Farhall, Carson, Wright, Gibbins, & Lukamto, 2019). With this research, we aim to test whether these different types of critique impact citizens differently, and we are the first to systematically compare the two types of attacks. Concretely, we manipulate the nature of the attack by distinguishing between parties criticizing a news outlet (the public broadcast) for being biased or for producing false, inaccurate content. Second, we go beyond the existing experimental work by looking at different outcome variables—namely citizens’ perceptions of partisan bias (in the criticized outlet *and* in traditional media in general), perceptions of accuracy, and trust in the outlet and the media in general—*simultaneously*, instead of focusing on one outcome variable only (see Smith (2010) who measures perceptions of bias in a news outlet, whereas Ladd (2010a), and more recently Peifer (2020) and Van Duyn and Collier (2019), measure the effect of criticism on citizens’ trust in the media). Doing so allows for a more systematic insight into which attitudes toward the media may be affected by elite criticism. Third, we conduct our study in the context of Belgium; a country with a multiparty system and, comparatively speaking, high media trust (Newman et al., 2020). So far, the literature on elite attacks on the media, and especially on their effects, has predominantly focused on the United States. While recent studies show that these elite attacks are not just an American phenomenon but also occur in other countries (e.g., De Mulder & Paulussen, 2021), the effects of media criticism have hardly been studied outside of the United States. Therefore, the final aim of this article is to investigate to what extent the findings from this predominantly American literature can be generalized to other countries, by focusing on the case of Belgium. Ultimately, conducting this experiment will give us a better idea of how damaging elite attacks on the press are for the watchdog function of the traditional press.

Elite Criticism: Inaccuracy and Bias

A certain amount of distrust between politicians and the traditional press is a natural part of their particular relationship (Van Aelst & Aalberg, 2011). After all, politicians are well aware that journalists are powerful agenda-setters, and that they, as gatekeepers, have important leverage on which politicians, parties, and ideas gain widespread visibility (Brants, De Vreese, Möller, & Van Praag, 2010). In that sense, it is only natural that there is an ongoing debate among politicians, the press, and its audience over the role and performance of the press in democratic societies (Wyatt, 2007). Within this relationship of mutual dependency and distrust, politicians can voice their concerns in an attempt to correct erroneous or slanted news coverage, which could be considered as constructive feedback. That politicians may occasionally want to voice their genuine concerns about media coverage being biased or incorrect, however, should not necessarily imply that these claims are always *valid*. A recent study conducted in Belgium shows that some politicians feel strongly disadvantaged by the traditional news media while there is objectively no reason to perceive this bias (Soontjens, Van Remoortere, & Walgrave, 2020). In a similar fashion, politicians’ perceptions of what is “wrong” or “incorrect” coverage might sometimes be distorted.

More commonly, though, scholars have argued that politicians are strategic actors who criticize or even outright attack the media in an effort to undermine their credibility (Smith, 2010). Media criticism, assuming that it influences citizens’ trust in the news, might help political actors to shield themselves against future critical, or potentially harmful, news coverage (Domke et al., 1999). For one, by claiming that a news item, a particular outlet, or even the media in general are unfair or *biased*, politicians try to promote their own frames, and counter-frame coverage that might not be beneficial for them (Domke et al., 1999). Also,

by repeatedly stressing that media are disadvantaging them, politicians hope for some kind of overcompensation on the side of journalists, scholars argue (e.g., Niven, 2001). The idea is straightforward; if a certain outlet or journalist is constantly attacked by a particular political party or a particular politician from that party, they might be more careful *not* to disadvantage them in their reporting, and as a result be less critical (Niven, 2001). Second, politicians can criticize an outlet, journalist, or the media in general for being incorrect or *inaccurate*. Whereas bias suggests some kind of partiality in a news outlet's reporting, which can both refer to a lack of qualitative (framing and tone) and quantitative (amount of coverage) balance in the news (Lee, 2005), inaccuracy rather refers to a misrepresentation of facts or an incorrect depiction of reality. In a moderate form, this kind of critique can call out journalists for not accurately depicting certain facts. In a more extreme version, it can take the form of politicians calling out the media for spreading disinformation and fake news (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). De Mulder and Paulussen (2021) and Farhall et al. (2019) indeed show that elites not only attack news outlets or "the media" for being biased but frequently also address the misrepresentation of facts by journalists. In a similar vein to calling out bias, politicians may think such complaints about news coverage being wrong may decrease citizens' trust in the news media and as such help them promote their own truth (Domke et al., 1999).

All in all, politicians might have different incentives to criticize the media, and there are different kinds of critiques they can voice; politicians can attack an outlet, or even the media in general, for being incorrect and misrepresenting facts or they can claim that it is biased and that they are (structurally) being disadvantaged. The crucial question is, do these critiques affect citizens' perceptions of the media? And if so, are the effects similar for all types of critiques?

Antipathy Toward the Press and the Role of Elite Criticism

There are good reasons to expect that elite attacks on the media affect how citizens conceive of news media. After all, scholarship on the formation of mass opinion quite convincingly shows that how citizens perceive reality is influenced by elite rhetoric (Lenz, 2009; Zaller, 1992). Elite rhetoric can influence citizens' opinions because these cues are simple pieces of information that allow people to make political decisions without having to invest a lot of time and energy. In that sense, claims made by politicians form efficient shortcuts, also called *heuristics*, for citizens to make a decision and form their opinions. This phenomenon of cue-taking, or opinion leadership, suggests that citizens are guided in their political choices and opinions by the opinions of like-minded political actors (e.g., Clifford, Jerit, Rainey, & Motyl, 2015). In the context of party systems, scholars have in particular tackled partisan cue-taking. A classic example is the finding that citizens tend to adapt their own opinion toward the position of their political party on policy issues (Brader, Tucker, & Duell, 2013; Cohen, 2003; Zaller, 1992). We can expect a similar mechanism to be at play with regard to critique on the media voiced by elites because assessing media bias or media (in)accuracy is hard for citizens, as they often lack the information to do so. In that sense, political parties making claims about it might serve as an efficient shortcut for citizens to evaluate media content. Provided that political parties have the capacity to shape the policy views of their supporters (e.g., Brader et al., 2013), it is reasonable to expect the effects of their criticizing the traditional media on citizens' attitudes toward the press as well (see Watts et al., 1999 for a similar argument).

Scant empirical research on elite cues in the context of media criticism indeed suggests that when politicians—U.S. presidential candidates in this case—claim they are disadvantaged in the press, their supporters tend to adopt this view. In Ladd's (2010a) experimental study, American citizens were, for instance, confronted with one of the following two claims: "*Recently, Democratic politicians have criticized the media for being too friendly with President Bush*" or "*Recently, Republican politicians have criticized the media for being overly critical of President Bush*" (Ladd, 2010a, p. 36; emphasis added). Partisans on each side of the U.S. political spectrum, were indeed more likely to believe the media was, generally, either too friendly or too critical in their coverage on the sitting president, after exposure. Adhering to a slightly different approach, Smith (2010), in a survey experiment, manipulated whether U.S. citizens were confronted with a quote from presidential candidate McCain or Obama, saying that the *Los Angeles Times* has a consistent and blatant liberal/conservative bias in its reporting. Different in this approach is that citizens actually got to read the news story that was criticized in the experiment. Afterward, citizens were asked to assess whether the article and the outlet overall, were ideologically slanted. Smith's (2010) experiment shows that the attacks had an effect on citizens, regardless of the content of the news item; when the liberal bias claim was made by McCain, participants perceived the source as more liberal indeed, with the opposite being true when Obama made the claim. Focusing on claims about the media's inaccuracy instead, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) recently showed that U.S. citizens who were primed with elite claims on fake news, report lower levels of general media trust than citizens who were not cued with such elite discourse.

Interestingly, and in line with the literature on opinion leadership and elite cues, elite claims only seem to affect citizens that held similar predispositions as the attacker (Smith, 2010). Ladd (2010a) shows that Republican criticism had a significant effect among highly educated conservative Republicans and the same holds true for the critique of the Democratic Party. Of course, this is not to say that citizens are in reality a blank page. Commonly described as the *hostile media phenomenon*, research has shown that even without political actors voicing critique on the ideological slant in news outlets, citizens often perceive news coverage to be biased against their own side (e.g., Vallone et al., 1985). Nevertheless, while the finding that citizens' viewpoints affect the way they interpret news content is robust, this does not rule out the possibility that by criticizing a news outlet or the media, political actors still have the power to increase citizens' perceptions of partisan bias and reinforce this hostile media phenomenon even further.

In sum, based on the mechanism of opinion leadership and the scant existing findings, we expect that elite messages attacking a news outlet for being biased or inaccurate can be powerful tools in shaping citizens' perceptions of that outlet. This results in the first two hypotheses:

- H1: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being ideologically biased will perceive this outlet to be more biased against the political party than those who were not confronted with such criticism.*
- H2: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for spreading false information, will perceive this outlet to be less accurate than those who were not confronted with such criticism.*

Even though empirical evidence is scant, we would expect that perceptions of partisan bias in one particular news outlet spill over to citizens' conception of the traditional press *in general* (Vallone et al., 1985; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). If citizens are frustrated with one particular outlet, certainly in the context of a rather nonpartisan media landscape such as the Belgian one where media channels are very similar in their reporting (see Stroud & Lee, 2013, who find that U.S. citizens do conceive of CNN and Fox news differently), it makes sense to expect citizens to lump together all traditional outlets. Therefore, when political elites criticize a news outlet for being slanted, we expect that this will not only make them see that particular outlet as biased but also the media landscape in general. We formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being ideologically biased will perceive the media in general, to be more biased against the political party than those who were not confronted with such criticism.

We expect that elites criticizing partisan bias and inaccuracy in news coverage will cause like-minded citizens to adopt a similar stance and perceive the criticized outlet, and to an extent the traditional media in general, to be biased against the political party voicing the critique, or to be inaccurate. But do these perceptions also spill over to citizens' overall *trust* in the outlet, or even to their trust in the traditional press in general? We expect it does. In general, trust is described as a relationship between a trustor, the one placing trust, and the trustee, the object which is being trusted (Tsfati & Capella, 2005). In the case of media trust, the trustor is the citizen and the trustee can be either a news outlet or the traditional media in general. An inherent element of a trust relationship is that it always contains a degree of uncertainty from the trustor's side (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In the case of media trust, this uncertainty comes from the fact that citizens generally lack the skills and resources to assess each news fact and whether the coverage is accurate and unbiased. They thus need to trust that this is the case. Since uncertainty is such an inherent element of the trust relationship between citizens and the media, the relationship needs to be constantly reevaluated and citizens have to rely on clues and outside information to assess whether their trust is (still) well-placed (Kohring, 2019). Media criticism by the political actors one supports can be such a (negative) clue and may thus cast doubt on the trust relationship. This is especially the case since perceived *objectivity* and perceived *credibility* constitute two crucial evaluative aspects of the trustworthiness of media outlets (see Gunther, 1992). Therefore, when political elites undermine either of the two by criticizing a news outlet for being biased or inaccurate, we would expect that this also hurts the trust relationship and that trust in this outlet drops. Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H4a: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being ideologically biased will have lower trust in this outlet than citizens who were not confronted with such criticism.

H4b: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being inaccurate will have lower trust in this outlet than citizens who were not confronted with such criticism.

Similar to what has been argued earlier, we also expect that in the case of a politician or political party criticizing a news outlet, this will not only reduce citizens' trust in that specific outlet but will spill over to reduced trust in the traditional media in general as well (see Van Duyn & Collier, 2019 who find

that elites' fake news claims affect citizens' general media trust). We therefore formulate the following hypotheses:

H5a: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being biased will have lower trust in the traditional media in general than citizens who were not confronted with such criticism.

H5b: Citizens who are confronted with a political party criticizing a news outlet for being inaccurate will have lower trust in the traditional media in general than citizens who were not confronted with such criticism.

Finally, as we have mentioned before, and based on the idea that ideological predispositions toward actors play a crucial role in moderating persuasive elite communication (Zaller, 1992), we expect elite criticism to be particularly influential for those who hold the same ideological position as the political actor expressing the critique (see also Watts et al., 1999). This results in the final, overarching, hypothesis:

H6: Media critique will have a stronger effect when it is voiced by the party citizens like.

Data and Methods

To study the effects of elite attacks on citizens' evaluation of the traditional news media, we conducted a survey experiment in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Belgium is a multiparty political system with relatively nonpartisan news outlets. In that sense, it is a very different case compared with the United States, where most previous experiments on the effects of media criticism were conducted (e.g., Smith, 2010; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Similar to many other Northern European countries (e.g., Germany, Sweden, The Netherlands), the Belgian media system has been classified as Democratic-Corporatist; it is known for its history of political parallelism—the written press until around the 1960s served primarily as a spokesperson for a particular political party but now the relationship between newspapers and parties has disappeared—strong journalistic professionalization, a relatively high trust in the news, and a strong, state-funded public-service broadcaster (VRT) that is commissioned by the Flemish government to fulfill several requirements with regard to the balanced representation of actors and voices in the news (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). Because the Belgian press is today relatively nonpartisan, and because citizens have quite some trust in its traditional media compared with other countries (see Newman et al., 2020), we consider the Belgian context a rather conservative case for testing the impact of elite claims on citizen perceptions of the media.

The survey-embedded experiment was fielded in August 2020 via the online University of Antwerp citizens' panel. A total of 377 respondents were willing to participate (51.4% response rate). The panel is diverse, although not fully representative of the Flemish population; older male, and higher educated people are overrepresented in our sample. However, since we ensure random assignment to the experimental/control groups, any differences among the groups should be a result of the treatment condition instead of being affected by the characteristics of the group members. Given that some respondents only partly completed the survey, we rely on the answers of 344 citizens in the analysis. This is sufficient for an

experiment, which we believe is the desirable method to formulate an answer to our research question since it allows us to make strong causal inferences. Online Appendix A provides an overview of the descriptives for the sociodemographics as well as all main variables of interest.¹

Concretely, our experiment consisted of four treatment conditions and one control group (see Table 1). The experimental stimuli are artificial tweets coming from a political party (see Online Appendix B for the actual stimuli). We chose a tweet sent by a political party rather than a party leader or member of parliament, because citizens do not always know which party a politician belongs to. This may have been especially true during the time of our experiment, as some parties had just changed political leadership. To be certain that citizens would be aware that the tweet came from their (dis)liked political party—otherwise we cannot properly test the effect of party cues in the context of media criticism—we made it look as if they came from the official party Twitter account. The tweets looked very realistic and had the exact same layout as actual tweets. The two main treatment conditions were (1) parties criticizing ideological bias in a particular news item from the Flemish public-service broadcaster (VRT) and (2) parties criticizing a particular news item from the Flemish public-service broadcaster for being incorrect and inaccurate. Furthermore, the treatment conditions were manipulated so that the attacking political party was either a respondent's preferred party or their most disliked party (which we asked them to indicate at the beginning of the survey and could be any of the seven Flemish political parties). Thus, this resulted in four (2*2) experimental conditions, along with a control group of respondents who were *not* exposed to a tweet. Ultimately, in each condition, there were 68 to 70 respondents, which provided us with enough statistical power to detect moderate and strong effect sizes. A balance test also shows that the randomization across these groups worked well (see Online Appendix C).²

The criticism parties voiced in the (fake) tweets was targeted at the public broadcast (VRT). We deliberately chose this outlet since it is a "neutral" outlet, and it is perceived by citizens as quite neutral as well. Also, it is by far the most important and most used information channel for Flemish citizens to follow the news (see Newman et al., 2020).

Table 1. Overview Treatment Conditions (N = 344).

Experimental Group	Party Voicing Critique	Type of Critique	N
1	Liked party	Ideological bias news article public broadcast	70
2	Liked party	Incorrect article public broadcast	69
3	Disliked party	Ideological bias news article public broadcast	69
4	Disliked party	Incorrect article public broadcast	68
5 (Control group)	X	X	68

¹ All online appendices can be found at: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/m3vvec0m00d7t1zrh8ds0/online-supplements.docx?dl=0&rlkey=vcjz4udo3w4mzv78a6e8g7hn9>

² We did test to what extent our models are different when we include the control variables, but this does not change any of the findings.

After reading the tweet (or not, if the respondent was in the control group), we asked four different questions that would serve as dependent variables in this study. First, we asked: “*News media may (implicitly) disadvantage or favor certain parties in their reporting. Can you indicate to what extent you have the impression that the following parties are disadvantaged or privileged by VRT [public-service broadcaster]?*” which respondents answered for each of the seven Flemish parties present in parliament on a scale ranging from 0 (very disadvantaged) to 10 (very advantaged). The same question was asked about the bias of the *Flemish media landscape as a whole*. Subsequently, we asked respondents to score the public broadcast on five different factors—incorrectness, trustworthiness, accuracy, objectivity, and relevance—on an 11-point scale ranging from not at all (0) to totally (10). Finally, we asked: “*To what extent do you trust or distrust the Flemish media in general?*” (0 = strong distrust; 10 = strong trust).

Before the actual experiment, respondents were asked to provide some information on their socioeconomic background (gender, age, educational level), and their news consumption habits—the extent to which they make use of different channels (Twitter, Facebook, radio, newspapers, television) to follow current political affairs, ranging from “never” (0) to “multiple times a day” (5). In addition, we asked an elaborate set of questions on citizens’ political preferences; we asked about their political interests, their preferred political party (the Flemish party they are most likely to vote for if it were elections), their least preferred political party and their propensity to vote for each of the seven parties currently holding seats in parliament.³ Finally, at the end of the survey, all respondents were debriefed about the fact that the tweet they read was made-up in the context of the experiment, and the actual goal of our research was explained.

To check whether respondents in the experimental conditions actually read the stimuli (the tweets containing media criticism), we included two manipulation checks in the survey that were put all the way at the end. We asked citizens to indicate which political party sent the tweet they read, and to identify the type of critique that was voiced (both were multiple-choice questions). Online Appendix D1 shows that almost all respondents were correctly able to identify the *political party* voicing the critique in the tweet they read. Respondents had a bit more difficulty with identifying the type of the critique (Online Appendix D2). Nevertheless, given that this is not an easy question, the numbers are still good as 63% were correctly able to identify that the tweet they saw criticized the VRT for being ideologically slanted and 80% could correctly tell that the party in the tweet criticized the VRT for being inaccurate.

Results

In the analyses below, we examine the effects elite criticism on the press has on citizens’ perceptions of the media. First, we look at the effects of media criticism on *citizens’ perceptions of partisan bias in the public broadcast*. In model 1 (Table 2) we investigate whether exposure to a tweet in which a person’s liked or disliked party attacks the public broadcast increases the perception that the public broadcast is biased toward the liked party, whereas in model 2 we look at bias toward the disliked party. Model 1 shows that respondents who are exposed to media criticism voiced by their liked party indeed perceive the public broadcast as more biased against this party than respondents who are not exposed to media criticism or who are exposed to critique

³ Note that the questions about the liked and disliked party were put at the start of the survey to minimize priming effects.

voiced by the disliked party. However, there is a difference depending on what kind of media criticism it is the liked party voices. In support of hypothesis 1, we find a significant effect for a tweet from the liked party that explicitly calls the public broadcast biased; compared with the control group who were not exposed to any criticism, citizens exposed to this treatment score almost half a point lower ($-.408$) on the bias-scale and thus perceive their liked party to be more disadvantaged. Figure 1 plots the average per condition and shows that while citizens in the control group do perceive the public broadcast as slightly disfavoring their liked party (4.51), the group that is exposed to a tweet from the liked party that calls the public broadcast biased, perceive it as much more disadvantaging their party (4.07).

When we look at tweets that criticize the public broadcast for being *inaccurate*, however, we do not find evidence that these affect citizens' perceptions of bias toward the liked party. This is not that surprising as this type of critique targets the accuracy of news reporting rather than its impartiality. In sum, these findings demonstrate that party critique from the liked party that explicitly calls out a partisan bias in the coverage of the public broadcast reinforces the hostile media phenomenon toward that party with regard to that outlet.

What about the disliked party then? Do people also react to tweets that call out a bias if this criticism comes from a political party one *dislikes*? Model 1 and model 2 show that they do not. We find no evidence that after being exposed to an attack by a disliked party, respondents perceive the public broadcast as disadvantaging that party more, compared with the control group.⁴ This is in line with the expectation that citizens only react to cues of elites that they support (hypothesis 6). We also find no crossover effects: Critique coming from the liked party does not impact perceived bias toward the disliked party or vice versa.

Table 2. Predicting Perceptions of Partisan Bias in the Public Broadcast Against the (Dis)liked Party.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Perceived bias liked party</i>		<i>Perceived bias disliked party</i>	
	b(SE)	p-value	b(SE)	p-value
<i>Ref = Control</i>				
Bias article liked party	-.470(.225)**	.038	-.322(.317)	.311
Incorrect article liked party	-.102(.226)	.650	-.383(.318)	.229
Bias article disliked party	-.267(.225)	.236	-.170(.317)	.592
Incorrect article disliked party	-.246(.226)	.278	-.511(.319)	.110
Party fixed effects	<i>Included</i>		<i>Included</i>	
Constant	2.579(.743)***	.001	6.470(1.047)***	.000
N	341		341	
R²	.418		.293	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

⁴ One could argue that critique from the disliked party could also backfire and actually results in citizens perceiving an outlet or the media as more favorable toward that disliked party. However, we find no evidence for this backfire effect. In that case, we should have found a significant positive effect of critique from the disliked party.

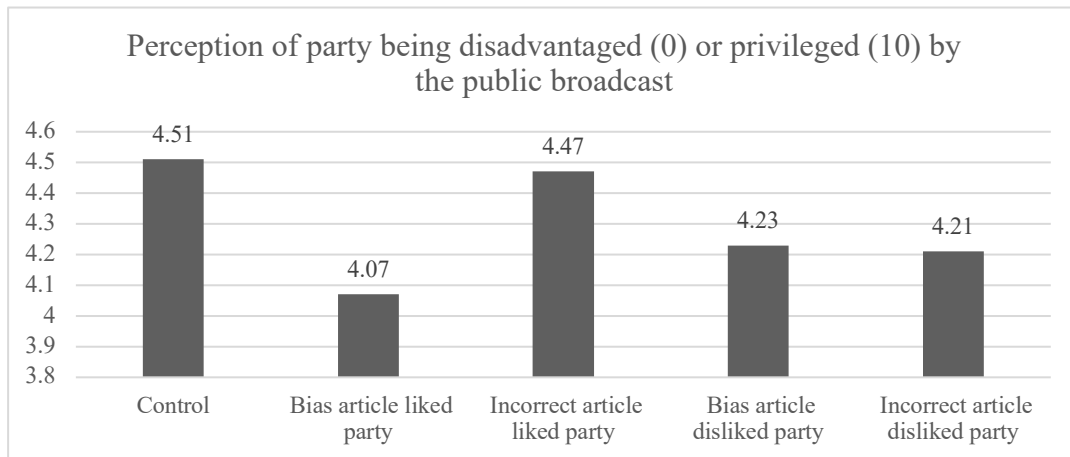


Figure 1. Average of perceptions of bias per condition.

Next, in Table 3 (model 3), we look at the effect of elite criticism on how citizens conceive of the accuracy of the public broadcast's reporting. It should perhaps not come as a surprise that we do not find effects of tweets that criticize the public broadcaster for being *biased*. However, in contrast to hypothesis 2, we find no evidence that parties criticizing the public broadcast for publishing *inaccurate* news items affects how citizens think of the accuracy of its news reporting either. Hence, this type of critique, even when it comes from the liked party, neither has an effect on perceptions of partisan bias, nor on perceptions of accuracy of the public broadcast.

Table 3. Predicting Perceptions of Accuracy Public Broadcaster.

Model 3		
Perceived accuracy of public broadcast		
	b(SE)	p-value
<i>Ref = Control group</i>		
Bias article liked party	-.273(.459)	.552
Bias article disliked party	-.132(.463)	.775
Incorrect article liked party	-.081(.461)	.861
Incorrect article disliked party	-.559(.466)	.231
Constant	3.559(.327)***	.000
N	340	
R²	.005	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

So far, we focused on the effects of elite criticism on how citizens conceive of one particular news outlet, in our case the public news broadcaster, but what about the effect on citizens' perception of partisan bias in the (traditional) media landscape *in general*? This is what we examine in the models depicted in Table 4. Again, we run separate models for bias toward the liked party (model 4) and the disliked party (model 5). The models show that none of the attacks have any effect. Whereas we found before that tweets

attacking the VRT for being biased do impact the bias citizens perceive in the coverage of the public broadcast—at least if the criticism was voiced by the liked party—we find no such effects for the perception of bias in the *media in general*. Thus, as far as we can tell, perceptions of partisan bias in one news outlet do not spill over to respondents' general evaluation of the objectivity of the traditional media. We do not find support for hypothesis 3.

Table 4. Predicting Perceptions of Partisan Bias in the Media in General Against the (Dis)liked Party.

	Model 4		Model 5	
	<i>Perceived bias liked party</i>		<i>Perceived bias disliked party</i>	
	b(SE)	p-value	b(SE)	p-value
<i>Ref = Control</i>				
Bias article liked party	-.240(.208)	.250	-.213(.312)	.495
Incorrect article liked party	.099(.209)	.635	-.482(.312)	.124
Bias article disliked party	-.148(.208)	.476	-.239(.311)	.442
Incorrect article disliked party	-.221(.209)	.292	-.313(.312)	.317
Party fixed effects	<i>Included</i>		<i>Included</i>	
Constant	3.050(.686)***	.000	7.088(1.028)***	.000
N	340		342	
R²	.427		.276	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

Next, we look at the effect of elite criticism of the media on citizens' trust in respectively the public broadcaster and the media in general. Table 5 (model 6) first of all depicts the effects of the different types of elite criticism on the trustworthiness of the public broadcaster. Against our expectations formulated in hypotheses 4a and 4b, we find no effect of any of the attacks, not even from the liked party. Neither tweets criticizing the public broadcast for being ideologically slanted, nor tweets calling the VRT inaccurate, have any effect on how much respondents *trust* this outlet. Thus, whereas tweets that call out a bias did affect citizens' *perception of bias* in the VRT, at least when coming from the liked party, they do not undermine their trust in this news outlet. Finally, in model 7 we look at our fourth and final dependent variable; *trust in the (traditional) media in general*. Again, we do not find any evidence that negative tweets by politicians attacking the VRT for being biased or inaccurate—neither from the liked party nor from the disliked party—have any impact on citizens' trust in the traditional media. Ultimately, we therefore also have to reject hypotheses 5a and 5b.

Table 5. Predicting Citizens' Trust in the Public Broadcast (Model 6) and in the News Media in General (Model 7).

	Model 6		Model 7	
	Trust in the public broadcast		Trust in the news media	
	b(SE)	p-value	b(SE)	p-value
<i>Ref = Control</i>				
Bias article liked party	.180(.346)	.602	-.338(.331)	.308
Incorrect article liked party	.353(.348)	.312	-.164(.332)	.622
Bias article disliked party	-.235(.347)	.499	-.353(.332)	.289
Incorrect article disliked party	-.070(.351)	.842	-.189(.335)	.572
Constant	7.191(.246)***	.000	6.324(.236)***	.000
N	340		343	
R²	.010		.004	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

We also conducted several robustness checks that can be found in Online Appendix E. First, we reran the models omitting all respondents that did not pass the manipulation checks (Online Appendix E1). Running the models only on these respondents leads to similar results. Second, we tested whether there are differences depending on the party to which people were exposed. From previous literature, we know that politicians from some parties are much more likely to attack the media than others. In the Belgian context, particularly politicians from the right-wing parties N-VA and Vlaams Belang criticize the media in their tweets (De Mulder & Paulussen, 2021). It is possible that respondents perceived tweets from these parties as more realistic and that these therefore have a stronger effect. However, analyses where we run interactions with the liked or disliked party voicing the critique being N-VA or Vlaams Belang, do not show any significant differences (Online Appendix E2). Third, we tested for spillover effects. Critique voiced by political parties may not only affect the perception citizens have of bias toward that particular party but may impact the perception of bias the media has toward politics in general. To test this, we created two general bias measures for respectively the public broadcast and the media in general, by folding the disadvantaged/privileged scales for each party in such a way that the public broadcast/media is seen as unbiased if it is not seen to favor or disfavor the party (score of 5 on the original scale), and as extremely biased when it is seen as fully favoring or disfavoring the party (score of 0 or 10 on the original scale). We then average this across the seven parties. This model (Online Appendix E3) however, shows no significant effects of the conditions on these general bias scales, implying that there are no spillover effects.

Conclusion and Discussion

The current study investigates the effect of political parties criticizing the traditional news media on citizens' perceptions of these media, using a survey experiment in Belgium. In particular, we examine whether parties criticizing the public broadcast for being inaccurate or biased in their reporting, affect citizens' perceptions of and trust in this outlet and the traditional media in general.

The findings are mixed. First, we find that even in a comparatively speaking, nonpartisan media context such as Belgium, political actors are able to increase citizens' perceptions of partisan bias in a certain news outlet, provided that citizens *favor* the party that voices the critique. This is in line with the classical theory of opinion leadership. Elite attacks thus serve as cues from political elites to the public. By accusing a news outlet of ideologically slanted reporting, elites reinforce the *hostile media effect*, fueling the already widely held perception that a news outlet is biased against the favored party. For political actors, this finding implies that they are able to soften the impact of unfavorable news coverage by attacking the media source for being biased. This is worrisome, particularly in contexts where these attacks are unjustified, as it challenges the notion of the news media as a watchdog of democracy. By increasing perceptions of bias, elites can decrease citizens' receptiveness to media coverage and information on current affairs, and in the end affect political accountability. Moreover, this finding is especially troublesome in the current context where citizens are all the more exposed to such elite critique and where elites themselves also unduly—and often incorrectly—*believe* there is such a partisan bias (Soontjens et al., 2020). Luckily, recent work has shown that journalists can turn the tide by publishing more fact-check stories: It increases citizens' media trust and their intent to consume news in the future (see Pingree et al., 2018).

However, there are also some silver linings. First of all, while we find strong effects of elite attacks on citizens' perception of bias, we do not find any evidence that they also directly impact the *trust* that citizens have in a news outlet. After being exposed to attacks on the public broadcaster, citizens found this outlet just as trustworthy as before. This suggests that trust is more stable than the evaluative dimension of perceived bias and that it is less easily affected, at least not by just a single tweet. Second, we find that elite critiques influence perceptions of bias in the specific outlet that is attacked, but that they have no effect on citizens' perceptions of bias or their trust in the *traditional media in general*. This seems to imply that the trust citizens place in the traditional media is perhaps more difficult to influence than pundits sometimes argue. Of course, this may be partly driven by the Belgian context where trust levels in the media are relatively high. Our findings thus suggest that at least in such systems where media trust is generally high, such as many other Democratic-Corporatist media systems in Northern Europe, media trust is a robust feature that may not be immediately impacted by attacks from politicians. However, this may be different in other contexts where media trust is lower, such as in the United States, where there is research suggesting that repeated exposure to media critique does result in lower levels of media trust among citizens (see Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Similarly, we do not find that tweets where elites criticize the news for being inaccurate, have any impact on citizens' evaluation of the press, at least in Belgium (see again Van Duyn & Collier, 2019 for opposing findings in the United States). This is good news as studies have shown that this is actually the most common critique politicians and parties voice on Twitter (De Mulder & Paulussen, 2021; Farhall et al., 2019).

There are some limitations to this study. First of all, we exposed citizens only to tweets where political parties attacked a news outlet. We found that this influenced their perceptions of bias in the public broadcast, but not in the media in general. We did not test, however, what would happen when citizens are exposed to tweets that attack traditional media *in general* for being biased. We cannot fully exclude the possibility that for such tweets we would have found an effect on perceptions of bias in the general media. Second, we used tweets by political parties. In practice, it may be more likely that it is individual politicians and not political parties who post such media criticism on their social media pages. Although we have no

reason to expect that we would find different results if we had used politicians rather than parties, further research should have a look at this. Related to this is that effects may be different depending on which party voices the critique, as attacks by certain parties may be perceived as more realistic by citizens. While we did explore this possibility with one of our robustness checks, giving no indication that such differences exist, these analyses were somewhat underpowered, thus leaving room for future studies to delve deeper into these party differences.

Third, we only exposed our respondents to one tweet criticizing the media. In real life, however, most citizens are exposed to politicians criticizing the media on a more regular basis. Next to the Belgian context, this may be an alternative explanation for why we find an effect on perceptions of bias, but not on trust in the public broadcast or media trust in general (unlike Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). The exposure to a single tweet may have affected only bias, as this is an outcome that is more proximate in the causal chain than media trust. We can thus not exclude the possibility that more frequent exposure to elite attacks on the media does actually impact the trust citizens have in the traditional media, even in a high media trust context such as Belgium. A further avenue for future research would therefore be to examine what more constant exposure to elite attacks does for people, their attitudes, and trust toward the traditional media in general, by means of a panel study.

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