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From Media-Party Linkages to Ownership Concentration
Causes of Cross-National Variation in Media Outlets' Economic Positioning

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Abstract

A sizable literature on media bias suggests that media coverage is frequently biased towards certain political and economic positions. However, we know little about what drives variation in political and ideological bias in news coverage across countries. In this paper, we argue that increasingly commercialized and concentrated media markets are likely to be associated with media coverage leaning more favorably towards economically more right-wing positions. Media bias should reflect the preferences of media owners and should be a result of a reduced diversity of news media content. In contrast, where media outlets continue to be oriented more closely along partisan lines, often referred to as political parallelism, bias on economic issues should be more likely to cancel out at the aggregate level. To test these claims, we combine expert survey data on partisan attachments of media outlets, party ideologies, and media ownership concentration for twenty-four European countries. Results from multilevel regression models support our theoretical expectations. With media framing potentially affecting individual-level preferences and perceptions, high and rising levels of media ownership concentration may help to explain why governments in the affluent Western democracies often do remarkably little to counter trends of rising income inequality.

Keywords: media bias, media framing, media ownership concentration, political parallelism

Zusammenfassung

Zahlreiche Untersuchungen zu Medienberichterstattung legen nahe, dass Medien in ihrer Berichterstattung oftmals bestimmte politische und wirtschaftliche Positionen unterstützen. Bislang gibt es allerdings kaum Befunde dazu, warum diese Positionierungen über Länder variieren können. In diesem Beitrag argumentieren wir, dass zunehmend konzentrierte Medienmärkten dazu beitragen, dass Medien stärker wirtschaftsliberale Positionen befürworten. Gründe hierfür können in den Positionen der Eigentümer in Kombination mit einer gesunkenen Vielfalt der Berichterstattung liegen. Richten sich Medien dagegen weiterhin enger an politischen Parteien aus, oftmals als politischer Parallelismus bezeichnet, sollten sich Verzerrungen in der Berichterstattung zu ökonomischen Themen in der Summe eher ausgleichen. Um unsere Erwartungen zu testen, analysieren wir Daten aus Expertenumfragen für vierundzwanzig europäische Länder zu parteipolitischer Ausrichtung von Medien, Parteipositionen und Eigentümerkonzentration. Die Ergebnisse von Mehrebenenregressionsmodellen stützen unsere theoretischen Erwartungen. Über die Medienberichterstattung vermittelte Framingeffekte haben ein großes Potenzial, individuelle Wahrnehmung und Präferenzen zu beeinflussen. Eine hohe und steigende Medieneigentümerkonzentration kann entsprechend helfen zu erklären, warum Regierungen in den wohlhabenden westlichen Demokratien oftmals nicht mehr tun, um einer steigenden Einkommensungleichheit zu begegnen.

Schlagwörter: Medienbias, Medieneigentümerkonzentration, Medienframing, politischer Parallelismus

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1   Introduction

The role of the media in the relationship between parties, governments, and voters is subject to continuous debate in the social and communication sciences. While some contributions argue that how media outlets report about political and economic issues merely reflects the preferences and priorities of citizens (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Vliegenthart et al. 2016), others claim that media outlets play an important gatekeeping role in shaping public discourse by choosing whether and how to report about certain issues (Puglisi and Snyder 2015; Lelkes 2020). To the extent that media coverage is biased towards certain political or economic standpoints, this may have important political consequences. Political media bias may contribute to incomplete or biased knowledge and perceptions, and it may affect individual political behavior, including voting (King, Schneer, and White 2017; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007), policymaking (Arceneaux et al. 2016), and individual political preferences (Barnes and Hicks 2018; Hopmann et al. 2017; Kneafsey and Regan 2022; Slothuus 2007).

A sizable literature on partisan and political media bias suggests that bias in news coverage is a frequent phenomenon in many countries (Puglisi and Snyder 2015; Lelkes 2020). Media outlets often report more positively and more frequently about political parties and issues that are more aligned with their own political orientation. Bias may also exist at the aggregate country level with media outlets interpreting the economic situation in a country in a way that is favorable to the country's dominant sectoral economic interests (Ferrara et al. 2021; Kneafsey and Regan 2022). Most of the existing evidence of media bias, however, is based on single-country, single-outlet, or experimental studies. This implies that our knowledge is highly limited when it comes to the question of what explains real-world variation in media frames and media bias across countries.

In this paper, we shed light on the causes of cross-national variation in media bias. For this purpose, we bring together research on political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and media ownership concentration (Anderson and McLaren 2012; Noam 2016). Political parallelism refers to the institutional embeddedness of linkages between media

outlets and political organizations or political ideologies.[1] In this approach, strong ties in the ideological beliefs of party politicians, journalists, and editors are considered as a primary source of media bias and bias is expected to decrease with growing levels of commercialization and journalistic professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In contrast, research on ownership concentration considers bias to arise primarily from the influence of powerful owner interests on news reporting in media markets characterized by highly incomplete competition (Anderson and McLaren 2012; Noam 2016). We argue that these different sources of media bias should be considered in conjunction. High levels of political advocacy and ideological alignment between media outlets and political parties imply that news coverage by media outlets is likely to be biased towards the left and the right along partisan lines. However, if party loyalties weaken increasingly, this implies that market forces in media markets that are often highly imperfect and highly concentrated play an increasing weight in shaping media outlets' political and economic orientation. In such contexts, we argue, media bias is unlikely to disappear. Instead, bias should be more likely to be tilted more exclusively towards right-wing economic positions.

Our results provide support for this line of reasoning. Based on multilevel regression analysis of media expert survey data from the Media Pluralism Monitor (2016) and the European Media Systems Survey (EMSS 2017; Popescu et al. 2018), for a sample of twenty-four European countries we show that where media ownership concentration is higher, media outlets report more favorably of parties leaning economically more to the right. At the same time, media ownership tends to be more concentrated when political parallelism is more negligible. For political parallelism, in contrast, we find that at the country level left-wing and right-wing bias tend to cancel each other out, or, depending on the exact manifestation of political parallelism, right-wing bias is less pronounced when political parallelism prevails.

Our results have important implications for the politics of inequality and redistribution. Trends of increasing media ownership concentration (Noam 2016) and associated right wing-bias in media coverage and public opinion (Neimanns 2021) may to some extent explain why governments do not do more to counter rising economic inequality (Bellani et al. 2021; Baccaro and Pontusson 2022). In addition, our results point towards the crucial role of media regulation that could be employed to intervene in the associations identified between political parallelism, ownership concentration, and media bias.

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1   In its historical form, the concept of political parallelism implied strong organizational ties between media outlets and political parties ("press-party parallelism"), reflecting the fact that many newspapers were owned and run by political parties (Seymour-Ure 1974). With the weakening of mass party organization in the advanced democracies, however, political parallelism now commonly refers to ideological links between parties and media outlets that are more informal (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

In the next sections we discuss how media systems in many of the affluent Western democracies over the past decades have changed from being dominated by tight linkages between parties and media outlets to developing more independent and professionalized media markets, which, however, have often been imperfect and characterized by high concentration of ownership. As a consequence, we argue, the influence of parties and party ideologies on news coverage should have declined while at the same time the influence of owners and prevailing economic ideas should have become increasingly relevant, contributing to more right-wing economic bias in media coverage. Following this theoretical section, we outline our empirical approach and present the results from our multilevel regression analysis. We end by highlighting some scope conditions and wider implications of our analysis.

2　Literature discussion and theory

Media bias as the result of the alignment of media outlets, parties, and voters

A sizable body of research has accumulated over time documenting a wide presence of bias in media coverage along partisan or ideological lines (Lelkes 2020; Puglisi and Snyder 2015). Most studies interpret media bias, first, as the choice of media outlets to highlight some issues while neglecting others. This kind of bias alludes to the power of media actors to act as agenda setters and gatekeepers in the informational environment (Grossman 2022). Second, studies also examine to what extent media outlets decide on the tone of news reporting, putting issues or actors either in a positive or negative light (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Groeling 2013). While there is disagreement about measurement and the exact extent of media bias, the baseline of much of the existing research is that media bias favoring specific political parties or ideological standpoints is a relevant and widespread phenomenon, even in the advanced democracies with highly professionalized media systems (Garz and Rickardsson 2022; Lelkes 2020; van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart 2017; Puglisi and Snyder 2015).

To understand the prevalence of media bias, research has referred to the notion of political or press-party parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Seymour-Ure 1974). Historically, media systems in many European countries were characterized by strong linkages between media outlets and political parties (Hallin and Mancini 2004; van Kempen 2007, 304–5). These linkages resembled deeply embedded social cleavages, represented by collective social organizations including political parties, unions, and churches (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 263; Lelkes 2020, 582; van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart 2017, 493). In the extreme cases, each party owned its own newspaper with its corresponding political slant, which implied a tight overlap between the constituency of a specific party and the readership of the corresponding newspaper (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Lelkes 2020, 202). High levels of political parallelism implied that

media markets were only poorly developed. With political parties owning media outlets for political purposes, e.g., to influence and mobilize their voters, the ideological alignment between parties, voters, and media consumers used to outweigh the role of price or quality as market signaling mechanisms.

How prevalent political parallelism was and how it changed over time has varied considerably across countries. In their highly influential study of media systems in North America and Western Europe, Hallin and Mancini (2004) identify three types of media systems varying along four dimensions *(development of media markets, degree and forms of political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state)*. For instance, media markets are found to be highly developed and parallelism to be relatively negligible in the North Atlantic/Liberal model. The reverse is found for the Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralism model, where political parallelism plays a larger role than market forces in structuring media systems. The North-Central European/Democratic Corporatist model represents an intermediate type combining well-developed media markets with legacies of high political parallelism. The different types of media systems are expected to differ systematically regarding how strongly news coverage is influenced by partisan considerations (ibid.; Brüggemann et al. 2014).

Over time, against the backdrop of a weakening of the traditional pillars of collective social organization in affluent Western democracies, secular forces of media commercialization and professionalization have profoundly reshaped media landscapes (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 263; Lelkes 2020, 582; van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart 2017, 493). Partisan ownership of media organizations, which used to be a dominant feature during the early post-war decades, gradually weakened. European media systems now increasingly follow the ideals of neutral and objective reporting paired with journalistic professionalism in diversified media markets, resembling the "American" model of media organization where such developments started already in the late nineteenth century (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Petrova 2011; Schudson 2001).

Nevertheless, cross-national differences in political parallelism and in the development of media markets have been found to be remarkably persistent over time (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin 2016). In some countries, political loyalties continue to play a role relative to commercial considerations and norms of journalistic professionalism (Brüggemann et al. 2014). This general type of political parallelism does not derive from immediate party ownership of media outlets but, for instance, from the influence of editors' or journalists' political opinion on news coverage, or from the alignment between individuals' political preferences and the news outlets they choose to consume (Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1040). Thus, discernible affinities between media outlets and political parties may persist, but they now derive more strongly from ideological proximity than from organizational or personal attachments.

Differences in political parallelism and the development of media markets can be expected to be associated with substantial cross-national variation in media bias. In line with

Hallin and Mancini (2004), most studies expect media bias to decline over time in line with a declining importance of political parallelism (Lelkes 2020, 582). Journalists' increasing independence from the direct influence of political parties should contribute to the establishment of norms of objectivity and journalistic professionalism (Lelkes 2020; Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1055; Schudson 2001). Expectations are more ambiguous when it comes to the role of economic competition induced by independent media markets (Puglisi and Snyder 2015, 661; Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1055). The shift from political parallelism to more independent media markets is expected to attenuate bias because it makes outlets financially more independent from political influence (Petrova 2011) and provides checks on inaccurate reporting (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006). However, and as we elaborate in the following sections, given that competition in media markets is often highly incomplete, it is less clear to what extent the shift from political parallelism to incomplete market mechanisms may introduce different sorts of bias in media coverage.

The associations between media bias and contextual-level factors have hardly been tested empirically, partly due to difficulties in measurement and data availability (Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, and Engesser 2016; Puglisi and Snyder 2015; Lelkes 2020; Hopmann et al. 2017). In a study of fifteen Western countries, Hopmann et al. (2017) identify parties' popularity and incumbency status as important determinants explaining why some parties receive more media attention than others. In addition, they find stronger competition in television markets to be linked to more balanced news coverage, but they do not find such an effect for competition in newspaper markets (Hopmann et al. 2017, 100–102). Comparing partisan media bias in Eastern and Western European countries, Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, and Engesser (2016) find the extent of bias to be similar in Eastern and Western European countries, despite the experience with independent media markets being much weaker in the East. Speaking to these different expectations and findings, we argue in the following that political parallelism and characteristics of media markets should be considered in conjunction in order to make sense of existing cross-national variation in media bias.

From party influence to owner influence

While media system change has weakened party influence on news coverage, it has generated new opportunities for other actors to introduce bias. When media systems are organized in accordance with the principles of market competition, they are increasingly exposed to risks of market imperfections and media power (Kennedy and Prat 2018). In this context, possibly the greatest market imperfection arises from high and increasing levels of concentration of media ownership (Noam 2016).

Increasing concentration of media ownership can enable individual owners to align news reporting with their ideological beliefs and material interests (Anderson and McLaren 2012; Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson 2014; Corneo 2006; Neimanns 2021).

Many media owners belong to the richest individuals in their country and frequently also pursue entrepreneurial activities in other economic sectors (Corneo 2006; Noam 2016, ch. 36; Theine and Grabner 2020). This implies that owners should have strong incentives to influence news coverage and public opinion by promoting pro-business, anti-redistributive policies that align with their economic interests (Neimanns 2021). While many of the hypotheses on the effects of media ownership come from media economics and rely on formal theoretical models, some empirical evidence exists for the US (Gilens and Hertzman 2000; Martin and McCrain 2019; Wagner and Collins 2014), Latin American countries (Hughes and Prado 2015), and Italy (Durante and Knight 2012) that owners indeed seem to effectively influence news coverage. With fewer alternatives being available under highly concentrated ownership structures, the risk of media owners losing market share because consumers may dislike biased coverage decreases (Puglisi and Snyder 2015).[2]

Economic right-wing bias in news coverage may also come as a by-product of ownership concentration. To realize economies of scale, media conglomerates may rely on fewer independent news sources and may recycle information for their different outlets, which reduces quality and diversity of news coverage (Beckers et al. 2019 for Belgium; Garz and Rickardsson 2022 for Sweden; Vogler, Udris, and Eisenegger 2020 for Switzerland). If independent media outlets that disappear with rising concentration dynamics, by either being bought, merged, or pushed out of the market, have had more left-wing positions compared to the outlets that remain in the market, the result will be a more right-leaning aggregate position of the remaining outlets in the media system. In a study of ownership concentration dynamics in local newspaper markets in Germany, Ellger et al. (2022) find that readers of dissolved, often relatively centrist local newspapers disproportionally tend to switch to the relatively right-leaning tabloid BILD. Thus, ownership concentration may contribute to an increase in the consumption of more right-leaning news coverage at the aggregate level.

Contrary to the promise of unbiased news coverage, the increasing importance of (incomplete) market competition – and the concomitant disembedding of party-press associations – may have merely shifted the organizational roots from which bias should be expected to emerge. While the political color of media-party parallelism is, by definition, conditional on the party's ideological stance, bias arising from ownership concentration is more likely to be more exclusively tilted to the economic right.

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2   Ownership concentration may also modify how reliance on revenues from advertising could lead to biased media coverage. Although revenues from advertising have been identified as an important factor freeing media outlets from political influence (Petrova 2011), excessive reliance on such income streams opens up blackmail potential for business to influence news coverage (Beattie et al. 2021; Puglisi and Snyder 2015, 649). Advertisers faced with adverse coverage for their business models may be capable of influencing news content by threatening to withdraw their engagement. With higher levels of ownership concentration, owners and editors may be more willing to satisfy advertisers at the cost of accepting biased news coverage. Outlets refraining from reporting critically about their clients' business activities should run a lower risk of losing market shares in contexts where competition is more limited (Beattie et al. 2021).

From party influence to the influence of economic ideas

The trend of declining political parallelism and rising ownership concentration can be expected to matter for the broader question of how economic ideas and policies are discussed in the media. Parallel to the change in media systems, a fundamental change since the 1980s has been the decline in Keynesian demand-side oriented ideas. Across the industrialized countries, the rise of neoclassical economics translated into reforms of economic liberalization (Blyth 2013; Hall 2020).[3] With Keynesian demand-side management becoming discredited and widely perceived as dysfunctional in light of high inflation and unemployment in the 1970s, governments successively turned towards industrial relations liberalization (Baccaro and Howell 2017), fiscal austerity (Blyth 2013), and welfare state retrenchment (Starke 2008). Such reforms increased income inequality and further undermined the potential of wages to act as a driver of aggregate demand (Baccaro and Pontusson 2016; 2022; Hassel and Palier 2020).

Various contributions suggest that the changing ideational context since the 1980s has also affected media reporting on the economy, contributing to a shift towards more business-friendly positions (Berry 2016; 2019; Fastenrath et al. 2022; Herman and Chomsky 2002; Jacobs et al. 2021; Maesse 2015; Madariaga 2020; Theine 2021). In this context, organized business has played an active role in the diffusion of neoclassical economic theory (Blyth 2002). Because business actors are often perceived as experts due to the experience in their field of economic activity, they are in an advantaged position for ensuring that their interpretations of economics are adopted by the media (Culpepper 2011; 2021).[4] Correspondingly, media coverage has been found to be broadly in line with the interests of the dominant economic sectors in a given country (Ferrara et al. 2021; Kneafsey and Regan 2022; Polyak 2022). This status quo bias implies that media discourse may downplay the adverse distributive and allocative side effects of the current growth models, as well as possible reform options.

The diffusion of neoclassical economics in media discourse can be expected to amplify the postulated effects of political parallelism and ownership concentration on media bias. Besides contributing to more business-friendly positions, the prevalence of supply-side interpretations of economics in media reporting should imply an inbuilt advantage for the programmatic positions of economically right-wing parties. As Garritzmann and Seng (2021) show, right-wing parties have been more likely to engage in

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3   To keep things simple, we do not engage here in a discussion of the differences between neo-classical and New-Keynesian economics. With these two traditions of macroeconomics sharing various fundamental assumptions (as well as their supply-side orientation), important dividing lines exist between New-Keynesian economics and classical demand-side oriented Keynesian or post-Keynesian theories (Bremer and McDaniel 2020; Baccaro and Pontusson 2018).

4   For instance, Jacobs et al. (2021) show for the US that phases of rising income inequality tend to coincide with a more positive assessment of economic performance in the media. Such interpretations stand in contrast to accounts that link income inequality to stagnant demand and demand-side secular stagnation (Mian, Straub, and Sufi 2021; Summers 2015).

economically liberalizing reforms. Although many social-democratic parties reacted to the changing ideational environment and adopted more centrist economic positions (Bremer and McDaniel 2020), the payoffs of such shifts may have been limited due to the absence of a supporting underlying economic paradigm (Bremer 2020b), and with center-right parties often being perceived as issue owners of economic issues and as the more competent managers of the economy (Bremer 2020a). Where left-wing parties had affiliated media outlets at their disposal, they may have found it easier to communicate demand-side oriented programmatic appeals to the general public, against dominant neoclassical interpretations (cf. Fastenrath et al. 2022). With declining ties between parties and media outlets, the potential for a counterweight to neoclassical economics in media discourse is also likely to have been on decline, even more so when coupled with rising ownership concentration.

How party and owner influence should matter for media bias

To summarize our argument, when political parallelism is prevalent, media bias should work in favor of both left- and right-wing parties. The development of professionalized and independent media markets tends to lower openly partisan media bias. However, most media markets are highly imperfect and are characterized by high ownership concentration. Thus, partisan influence on media outlets under political parallelism is likely to be replaced by owner influence under high levels of ownership concentration, with the latter being more likely to favor more exclusively business-friendly, economically right-wing parties and positions. In addition, in the absence of political parallelism, a dominant discourse centered on economic liberalism should be more compatible with the positions of parties leaning economically more to the right, implying that left-wing parties may receive lower or more unfavorable media coverage. As our central hypotheses, we thus expect:

Hypothesis 1: Higher media ownership concentration is associated with media outlets leaning more towards parties with economically more right-wing positions.

Secondly, on average, left-wing and right-wing media bias should cancel each other out under high political parallelism. However, the possibility of stronger right-wing bias in the absence of political parallelism implies that higher levels of parallelism could also be associated with reduced right-wing bias. This association between low parallelism and right-wing bias could also be more muted if, for instance, governments put regulation in place to avoid excessive concentration of media ownership.

Hypothesis 2a: Higher levels of political parallelism are associated with media outlets leaning less towards parties with economically more right-wing positions.

Hypothesis 2b: Political parallelism is unrelated to media outlets' economic positioning at the country-average level.

A few qualifying remarks are in order. First, much of the literature on media bias considers partisan bias to be problematic because it tends to come with biased information and inferior journalistic quality (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Brüggemann et al. 2014). We do not seek to challenge this evidence.[5] Instead, our goal is mainly to highlight that the waning entanglements between political parties and media outlets do not necessarily make media bias disappear but that they may open up ways for different sorts of media bias. Second, due to lack of data, we are unable to test empirically the role of the economic ideational environment. Economic paradigms should matter little for the associations between ownership concentration and media bias (Hypothesis 1). With regard to the effects of political parallelism, one could expect political parallelism to be less decisive if there was greater pluralism in economic ideas (cf. Hypothesis 2b). The reason would be that different partisan ideologies and their transmission via the media would be less important if media discourse already represents a wide array of perspectives on economic issues. In the next section, we elaborate how we empirically assess the associations between media ownership concentration, political parallelism, and media bias.

3   Empirical analysis

Data and methods

To assess the hypothesized associations between media ownership concentration, political parallelism, and media bias, we use data from the 2017 European Media Systems Survey (EMSS 2017; Popescu et al. 2018), which we combine with various other country-level data. The EMSS is an expert survey of national media systems.[6] Experts are selected from a variety of academic disciplines in the social sciences and non-academic specialist institutions in media monitoring, media economics analysis, and media consultancy (Popescu et al. 2018). The baseline condition for participation in the EMSS is that the profession requires "extensive knowledge of the media landscape" in the respective country (Popescu et al. 2018). Experts were asked to assess the national media landscape and media outlets along a range of criteria. The final data set contains 25 upper-level units (24 European countries, with Belgium being disaggregated into Flanders and Wallonia)[7],

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5   However, as Beckers et al. (2021) show, media bias may also be a *result* of journalistic professionalism, with journalists in attempting to cover all sides of a debate also giving weight to more marginalized political standpoints.

6   We are grateful to Marina Popescu for generously sharing the data with us.

7   The countries are: Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

255 experts, and 429 media outlets.[8] The EMSS encompasses print, television, and online media and covers the most widely known outlets, including per country between 12 (Wallonia) and 20 (Bulgaria, Germany, and Greece) outlets. Our sample thus accurately represents the major available media outlets in each country.

Partisan media bias constitutes our central dependent variable. Recent empirical contributions propose a variety of conceptualizations and operationalizations of media bias and its counterpart, political balance (Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, and Engesser 2016; Castro 2021; Hopmann et al. 2017; van Kempen 2007). Castro (2021) develops possibly the most comprehensive operationalization of partisan bias applicable to cross-national analyses. Castro's (2021, 418) measure of party favorability, which is most suited for our purpose, refers to the question of which parties are covered more favorably by media outlets.[9] This measure is constructed with data from the first wave of the EMSS from 2010. Castro (2021, 413) proposes two benchmarks – the neutrality and the objectivity benchmark – against which to assess bias. Bias in terms of neutrality indicates that a party receives more favorable media coverage than its electoral weight would suggest; bias in terms of objectivity means that certain outlets, relative to other outlets, treat certain parties more favorably (Castro 2021, 413).[10] In this study we build on this measure using the 2017 wave of the EMSS because it is temporally close to our measure of ownership concentration (as we explain below).

While the existing measures of media bias are helpful in capturing the general extent of political parallelism, our interest is less in the intensity of partisan bias as such. Instead, our main goal is, first, to assess to what extent partisan media bias systematically favors left- or right-wing positions. Second, our arguments about the effects of ownership concentration and political parallelism are specifically tied to positions on economic issues.[11] For these reasons, we use the same item from the EMSS as Castro (2021), which asks experts to assign to each outlet the political party which it agrees with most often (Table A.1 in the Appendix[12] lists the exact operationalization and question wording of the variables

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8   We dropped expert assessments of three foreign media outlets included in the EMSS (NYT, Daily Mail, and BBC), because we are interested in national media systems. BBC and Daily Mail remain in the dataset only for the UK.

9   The two other types of bias considered in Castro (2021) are, first, party visibility, which refers to the amount of coverage a party receives, and, second, partisan media use, which refers to how much the use of certain outlets is associated with individual party preferences.

10 Absence of bias in neutrality would imply that the share of experts considering a specific party to be favored by an outlet would be equal to the party's vote share. Absence of bias in objectivity would imply that the share of experts considering a specific outlet to favor a specific party is equal to the share of expert assessments for this party averaged across outlets.

11 Due to our interest in economic positions, we refrain from using expert assessments of parties and media outlets on a general left-right scale (cf. Ribeiro et al. 2018). Differences in the alignment between the economic and socio-cultural issue dimensions across Eastern and Western European countries (Marks et al. 2006) imply that uni-dimensional left-right scores may present an imprecise approximation to positions on the economic dimension.

12 See Online Appendix.

used in the analysis). We then match the assigned party with economic left-right scores *(lrecon)* from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES 2014; Polk et al. 2017). Thus, our measure of partisan media bias reflects, first, to what extent media outlets report more favorably about some parties than others, and, second, the economic positions of parties favored in news coverage. This implies that we proxy the economic ideology of media outlets with the position of the party they tend to align with. To correct for the possibility that our measure of bias could be influenced by the overall ideological positioning of the party system (which is a combination of parties' vote shares and their ideological positions) and following the idea underlying Castro's (2021) neutrality benchmark, we include the ideological center of gravity as a control variable in the analysis.[13]

Measuring outlets' economic left-right position with the economic left-right position of the party they are closest to requires that party assignments are in fact made in congruence with outlets' positions specifically on economic issues. While we cannot fully test this assumption, as a consistency check, we assess for the case of Germany to what extent the average party assignments of German media outlets in the EMSS (Figure A.1 in the Appendix) align with insights from previous research. Theine and Grisold (2020) present results from a content analysis of German newspaper articles between 2000 and 2018 on the debates on reintroducing wealth taxation and increasing inheritance tax. Four of the included newspapers (Die Welt, FAZ, SZ, and taz) are also included in the EMSS. Die Welt and FAZ oppose wealth and inheritance taxation in their news coverage, the taz supports it, and the SZ adopts a more ambiguous position (Theine and Grisold 2020, 61). Regarding the positioning of parties, the economically right-wing CDU/CSU and FDP have been opposed to wealth and inheritance taxation, the economically center-left Grüne and far left Die Linke have been supportive, with the social democratic SPD representing a more ambiguous position (Theine and Grisold 2020, 49). These patterns are broadly in line with expert statements in the EMSS that consider Die Welt and FAZ to be closest to the CDU/CSU, Süddeutsche as closest to the SPD, and the taz located between Die Linke and Grüne (see Figure A.1). The content analysis by Theine and Grisold furthermore reveals that Die Welt and FAZ make reference to employer associations, neoclassical and ordoliberal economists that have been more skeptical of wealth and inheritance taxation more frequently than SZ and taz. In sum, this consistency check suggests that expert assessments of the ideological positioning of media outlets are indeed reflected in actual news content.

For information on media ownership concentration, we use the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM 2016). Developed by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute, the MPM is a European expert survey that publishes indicators of media systems annually since 2014. National experts come from non-government research institutions, media regulators, and media sector orga-

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13   Taking into account party vote shares resembles the "neutrality benchmark" in Castro (2021). However, in contrast to our approach, the measures in Castro (2021) do not reflect whether bias is tilted towards left- or right-wing positions.

nizations. The MPM collects quantitative expert assessments of national media markets along various dimensions. Our analysis focuses on the measure of horizontal concentration of media ownership, a subcomponent of the composite indicator of risks to market pluralism. The index captures on a scale from 0 to 100 the degree to which one or a few owners may exercise control in a specific sector of the media system, including newspapers, radio, audiovisual, and online media. Expert assessments of market concentration are based on regulatory quality of ownership restriction on the one hand, and measures of actual market concentration on the other.

We use EMSS data to construct measures of political parallelism. In line with previous comparative studies of media bias (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, and Engesser 2016; Castro 2021; Lelkes 2016), we construct two measures of political parallelism that relate to the closeness between parties and media outlets (Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1047–48). First, we use a well-established item capturing press-party parallelism or *party influence*, which asks respondents to what extent coverage of each media outlet is "influenced by a party or parties to whom it is close." Second, we draw on a related question presented to each expert on whether "the political orientation of the most prominent journalists is well-known to the public," which we refer to as *partisan journalists*. In our baseline analyses, we use both variables on the expert-level, the lowest level on which the *partisan journalists* variable is available. Since we are interested in the cross-national variation of economic left-right positions in relation to political parallelism, we also calculate country-average values of our measures of political parallelism and provide the corresponding evidence in the robustness checks.[14]

We add a battery of control variables to rule out the influence of confounding factors. To avoid that our measure of partisan bias is merely driven by party systems leaning more towards left- or right-wing economic positions, following Castro's (2021) neutrality benchmark, we include a measure of the economic center of gravity of the party system. We use the CHES scores to measure the ideological economic center of gravity in the following form:

$$cog_c = \frac{\sum_p^n lrecon_{pc} \times vote\ share_{pc}}{\sum_p^n vote\ share_{pc}}$$

where c indexes countries and p parties. Data on vote shares comes from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2021) and the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2021) and is for the election closest to CHES fieldwork in 2014. For each country, this measure yields the average left-right economic position weighted by the electoral relevance

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14   See Table A.24 for the results. To avoid an excessive influence of small media outlets in the country-level indicators, we compute weighted means using the usage rates of media outlets (Reuters 2017). Because usage weights are only available for twenty countries, we include weighted and unweighted versions of the variables in the analysis.

of each party. Dividing by the aggregate vote share of all parties ensures that instances where the vote shares of the parties included in our sample do not sum up to one do not distort the measure. By controlling for the average ideological positioning of the party system, we can identify media bias that is independent of the country's general ideological leaning. Controlling for the center of gravity should also pick up endogenous preferences of the population that may cause a spurious association between high ownership concentration and right-leaning news coverage.

Public media may present a counterweight to the consequences of ownership concentration and, depending on the degree of its political independence, it may also entail distinct associations with partisan media bias (Hopmann et al. 2017). We compile data from Kennedy and Prat (2018), Reuters (2017), and the first wave of the EMSS (Popescu et al. 2012) to construct a public ownership dummy for the media outlets in our data set.

Our baseline models control for the partisan center of gravity and public media. In separate model steps, we subsequently add various country-level variables to control for additional potential social, political, and economic confounders. We include level of GDP in constant US dollars (logarithmized) to capture the important differences in economic development for the countries in our sample. We also control for unemployment rates because economic bias in news reporting may be influenced by the salience of macroeconomic distress (Barnes and Hicks 2018). Furthermore, we add market income inequality and social expenditure (in percent of GDP) to correct for potential associations between general levels of social stratification, welfare state development, and political balance. All indicators are taken from the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon, Engler, and Leemann 2021), except for income inequality (Solt 2008) and GDP (OECD 2021). We also add a dummy for Eastern Europe to account for the more recent democratic transition and establishment of media markets in these countries.

We perform a variety of additional robustness checks to substantiate the validity of our findings. The results of these additional models are presented in the appendix material and briefly discussed at the end of the empirical section. First, we include additional control variables related to the political and economic context. We control for population size, inflation, past government partisanship, and welfare regime dummies (based on Ferrera (1996), adding Eastern European countries as an additional category). Second, we re-estimate our models with weights for outlet usage intensity computed with data from Reuters (2017) to rule out that small but extreme outlets drive our results and with weights for the vote share of the assigned political party. Because data on media usage exists only for twenty countries, we do not include it in all model specifications. Finally, we run jackknife-tests, removing one country at a time to ensure that our results are not driven by a single outlier case.

Relying on expert assessments comes with a certain risk of bias arising from experts' own political beliefs or skewed perceptions of party or outlet stances. Unfortunately, the EMSS does not ask experts for an ideological self-placement and we have no direct

information on expert quality. We address the risk of response bias with two different measures that we add as control variables to the regression models (and that we explain in greater detail in Table A.1 in the Appendix): First, we construct a measure that captures to what extent experts systematically assess outlets as more left-wing or right-wing compared to their peer experts. This approach builds on the assumption that experts leaning heavily to the right (left) will overestimate the extent to which outlets endorse the political left (right). Second, with a similar reasoning, we use experts' left-right coding of the New York Times (NYT) to obtain scores for an international outlet that is not linked to any particular country in our survey. Controlling for these different measures leaves the effects of ownership concentration and political parallelism unaltered (Tables A.7–A.8 and A.20–A.23 in the Appendix).

We estimate multilevel models with crossed random effects (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2021, 483) to account for the partially nested structure of our data.[15] In our data set, each party assignment made for media outlet o by expert i in country c represents an individual observation. Since outlets and experts are nested within countries, we include a random intercept γc at the country-level. Within countries, multiple experts score multiple outlets. We therefore include crossed random effects, nested within countries, for outlets and experts in the form of two separate random intercept terms δ_{ic} and θ_{oc}. e_{ioc} captures the residual variance. Following Elff et al. (2021), we estimate all models with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) to rectify the downward bias of variance parameters in the presence of few higher-level units. Given our interest in the contextual effects of ownership concentration and political parallelism, we use the Satterthwaite method to approximate the degrees of freedom and p-values with the t-distribution (Elff et al. 2021, 417).[16] The full model can be written as follows:

$$lrecon_{oic} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 I_{(i)c} + \beta_2 P_{oc} + \beta_3 \boldsymbol{M}_c + \gamma_c + \delta_{ic} + \theta_{oc} + e_{ioc}$$

All models include our measures of media ownership concentration at the country-level or political parallelism at the country-expert-level denoted as $I_{(i)c}$. P_{oc} stands for the public ownership dummy for each media outlet in our data set. Vector $\boldsymbol{M}_c$ represents the battery of country-level economic and political control variables added in various model steps, including party systems' economic center of gravity.

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15   The results hold if we instead estimate linear models with clustered standard errors.

16   Computationally, we rely on the R package *iimm* developed by Elff (2018) in combination with the standard *lme4* package to estimate multilevel models (Bates et al. 2015).

Results

Media Ownership Concentration

To begin, we investigate the descriptive association between media ownership concentration and average media bias related to economic positions. The left-hand panel in Figure 1 reports left-right scores of economic positioning averaged across experts and outlets. The right-hand panel presents average differences between outlet-level means and the partisan center of gravity, illustrating the extent of media bias that is not attributable to the ideological positioning of the party system.

Figure 1   Media ownership concentration and economic left-right positions of media outlets
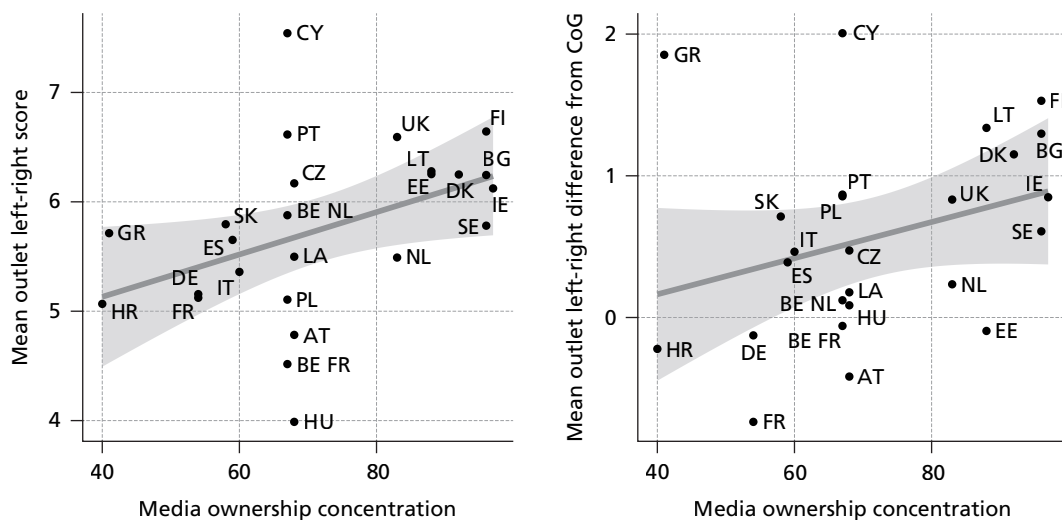
Note: Country-averages of outlets' economic left-right score on the vertical axis; media ownership concentration on the horizontal axis. Positive (negative) values in the right-hand panel indicate right-ward (left-ward) deviation from partisan center of gravity.

Both panels in Figure 1 show a positive correlation between ownership concentration and partisan media bias. The more concentrated media ownership concentration is, the more media outlets on average favor parties leaning more to the economic right. The bivariate correlations are $r = 0.42$ ($p = 0.035$) in the left and $r = 0.31$ ($p = 0.14$) in the right-hand panel. The right-hand panel in Figure 1 furthermore reveals important information on the general direction of media bias. In nineteen of the twenty-five upper-level units, the average positioning of the media system is located more to the right than the average positioning of the party system.

The distribution of countries is not easily attributable to existing typologies of media systems (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004; Brüggemann et al. 2014), indicating that media ownership concentration may capture a distinct aspect of the characteristics of national media markets. Right-wing bias is above average in various Southern and Eastern Euro-

pean countries, but also in the Nordic countries (right-hand plot in Figure 1). Greece is a clear outlier with low ownership concentration but very strong right-wing media bias. This constellation can partly be attributed to the exceptional circumstances of the eurozone crisis, where the partisan center of gravity in terms of economic policy was heavily skewed to the left and the far left, with non-mainstream Syriza being the main government party. Hungary appears as another outlier with the most left-wing media system according to the left-hand plot in Figure 1. The positioning of Hungary is the result of the positions of Fidesz as the main government party, which combines a relatively left-wing economic position with a right-wing position on socio-cultural issues, according to the CHES coding. Accordingly, Hungarian left-wing bias disappears when accounting for the positioning of the party system in the right-hand plot in Figure 1. Some country-clustering can be identified for the continental Western European and the Nordic countries. The continental Western European countries including Austria, France, Germany, and Belgium combine relatively low levels of ownership concentration with muted or left-wing bias in outlets' economic ideology. In contrast, the Nordic countries, in particular Finland and Denmark, display the converse patterns of high ownership concentration and clear bias to the right, despite high standards of journalistic professionalism and inclusive press markets in those countries (Brüggemann et al. 2014). Figure 1 hence reveals important variation within the historical cluster of the social democratic-corporatist media markets (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Variation in media ownership concentration potentially explains the differences in ideological affinities in the media sectors in these countries. We now turn to the multivariate analysis to examine more systematically to what extent differences in media ownership concentration are associated with differences in media coverage of parties of different ideological orientations.

Table 1 reports our regression results. Model 1 includes media ownership concentration as the only explanatory variable; Model 2 adds the partisan center of gravity and the outlet-level dummy of public ownership. In Models 3 to 6, we progressively expand our baseline specification with control variables potentially associated with the economic positioning of media outlets.

As Table 1 shows, across model specifications media ownership concentration is positively and significantly associated with the economic positioning of media outlets to the right, confirming the correlational evidence presented above. To interpret the effect of ownership concentration in more substantive ways, Figure 2 plots the predicted left-right score as a function of media ownership concentration (based on Table 1, Model 6). At the lowest observed level of ownership concentration (40), the estimated left-right score sits right at the center of the zero to ten scale. With close to maximum concentration (95), a country's media outlets are assigned a predicted score of 6.28, which exceeds the previous estimate by almost 1.25 scale points. This difference is roughly equivalent to moving from the British Labour Party's to the Liberal Democrats' stance on economic policy in the CHES 2014 data set. Thus, with highly concentrated media ownership structures, media outlets' economic positions tilt disproportionately to the right.

Table 1   Economic left-right media bias and media ownership concentration; multilevel random intercept regression coefficients

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Media outlet partisan favorability (0: economically left-wing; 10: economically right-wing)						
Media ownership concentration	0.020* (0.008)	0.017* (0.007)	0.027** (0.007)	0.027** (0.008)	0.027** (0.009)	0.022* (0.008)
Public ownership		−1.176*** (0.210)	−1.154*** (0.210)	−1.154*** (0.210)	−1.156*** (0.210)	−1.188*** (0.211)
Center of gravity		0.539** (0.205)	0.637** (0.175)	0.638** (0.182)	0.637** (0.187)	0.436* (0.200)
GDP (log.)			−0.040 (0.079)	−0.043 (0.099)	−0.053 (0.116)	−0.089 (0.109)
Unemployment			0.076** (0.025)	0.076* (0.028)	0.076* (0.029)	0.047 (0.030)
Income inequality				0.002 (0.041)	0.002 (0.042)	−0.058 (0.049)
Social expenditure					0.004 (0.024)	−0.040 (0.031)
Eastern Europe						−0.916 (0.459)
Constant	4.337*** (0.592)	1.885 (1.078)	0.518 (1.685)	0.478 (2.023)	0.521 (2.092)	6.915 (3.743)
Log Likelihood	-4878.499	−4835.896	−4835.541	−4837.830	−4840.651	−4838.634
Observations	2,884	2,871	2,871	2,871	2,871	2,871
Outlets	429	424	424	424	424	424
Experts	255	255	255	255	255	255
Upper-level units	25	25	25	25	25	25
Random intercept variance: Outlets	1.837	1.711	1.711	1.711	1.711	1.711
Random intercept variance: Experts	0.148	0.146	0.146	0.146	0.146	0.147
Random intercept variance: Upper-level units	0.304	0.192	0.096	0.108	0.122	0.083
Residual variance	1.141	1.138	1.138	1.138	1.138	1.138

Note:*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$; Restricted maximum likelihood regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; p-values approximated with the Satterthwaite method. Upper-level units include 23 countries, plus the two Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia.

While not substantially altering the effect of media ownership concentration, various contextual factors are also significantly associated with media bias. As expected, the partisan center of gravity positively predicts the economic positioning of media outlets. The stronger the electoral representation of political parties leaning more to economically right-wing positions, the more right-leaning is the positioning of the media system. While this finding does not allow any causal interpretation, it nevertheless suggests an overlap in the economic ideas and interpretations between party and media platforms (Kneafsey and Regan 2022).

Public ownership is negatively related to the economic left-right position of media outlets. While Hopmann et al. (2017) found lower levels of bias among public broadcasters compared to privately owned media outlets, our results add that, on average and compared to public broadcasters, private media outlets are more tilted towards the right. Computing the predicted left-right position of public and non-public media demonstrates that private outlets score a predicted value of 5.83 (with a 95 percent confidence

Figure 2   Predicted economic left-right position and media ownership concentration

Economic left-right

Media ownership concentration
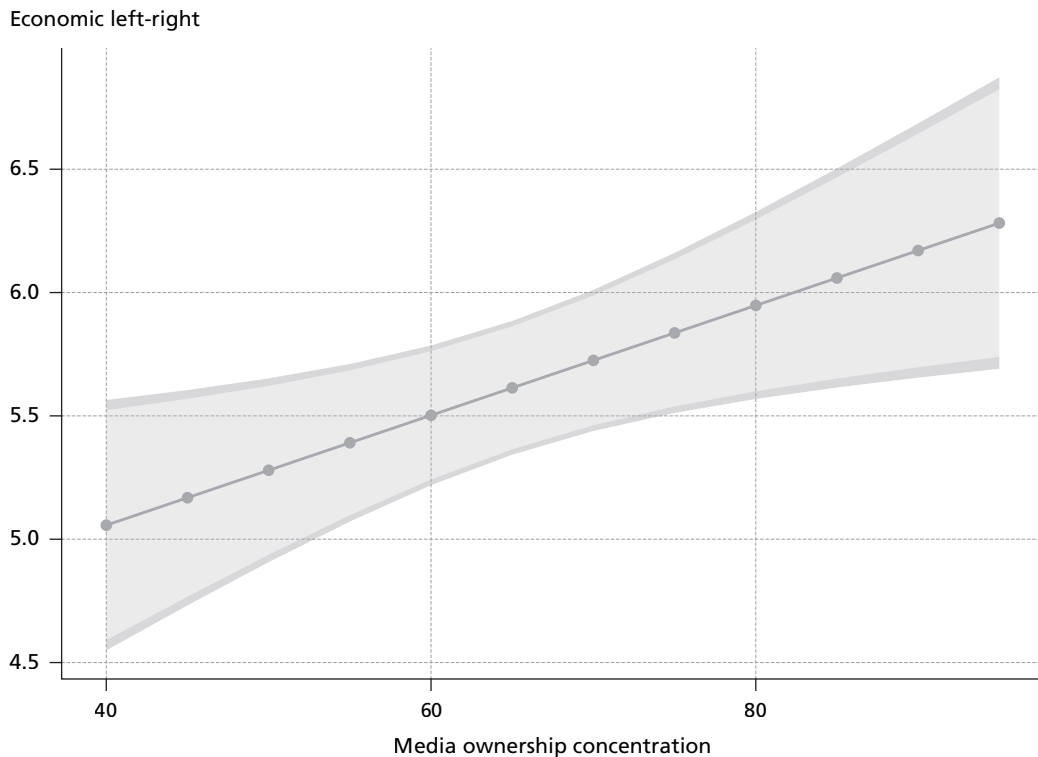
Note: Effect of media ownership concentration on economic left-right position of media outlets in 23 European countries plus the two Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia. Predictions and 95% confidence bands based on Model 6 in Table 1. Darker grey represents confidence bands adjusted with Satterthwaite correction.

interval (CI) ranging from 5.60 to 6.07), which is significantly above the mid-point of the zero to ten scale. In contrast, the predicted left-right score for public broadcasters is at 4.66 (95 percent CI: 4.23, 5.09). Thus, the economic position of public outlets appears to be more closely aligned to the center of the economic left-right scale.

Of the remaining control variables, only unemployment rates are significantly associated with media bias leaning more towards the right (Models 3 to 5). However, the effect of unemployment turns insignificant when adding the dummy for Eastern Europe in Model 6.

In additional models, we use a transformed operationalization of our dependent variable by computing the difference between the economic left-right score and the partisan center of gravity, similar to the right-hand plot in Figure 1. This operationalization explicitly corrects for the possibility that bias might merely reflect parties' positioning on economic issues. The effect of media ownership concentration remains robust and of similar magnitude with this alternative specification (Figure A.2 and Tables A.4 and A.5 in the Appendix).

Additional robustness checks further corroborate our finding of the importance of ownership concentration for media bias. To account for the possibility that small media outlets could drive the results, we include a measure of media usage rates as a weighting variable in the regression models (Table A.2 in the Appendix). We perform the identical procedure with weights for the vote share of the political party assigned to the respective media outlet (Table A.3). The results remain robust in these model specifications. As additional consistency checks, we add controls for the strength of right-wing parties in government, inflation, population size, and welfare state regime (Table A.6). Adding these control variables leaves our findings unchanged. Furthermore, the effect of media ownership concentration remains robust when controlling for our two measures of expert bias (Tables A.7–A.8).[17] Finally, we run jackknife-tests based on Model 6 in Table 1, which confirm that our results are not driven by any particular country-outlier.[18] We conclude that the effects of media concentration on partisan favorability of media outlets in terms of economic ideology are highly robust.

Political Parallelism

Next, we investigate our remaining Hypotheses 2a and 2b regarding the associations between political parallelism and economic left-right positioning of media outlets. In the theoretical section, we argued that media bias related to political parallelism may have been giving way for bias related to highly concentrated media markets. As shown in the previous section, market imperfections in the form of concentrated ownership structures are associated with more economically right-wing outlet positions. To evaluate the extent to which media ownership concentration and political parallelism in fact represent two distinct logics by which media systems operate, we now turn to an initial descriptive illustration of the correlation between the two dimensions.

The two plots in Figure 3 show a negative association between ownership concentration and political parallelism. Declining political parallelism is, to some extent, accompanied by rising ownership concentration. However, the plots also show that this relationship is far from perfect. For partisan journalism, the bivariate correlation with ownership concentration is statistically significant ($r = -0.50$; $p = 0.011$), but this is not the case for partisan influence ($r = -0.33$; $p = 0.10$). The substantial amount of country variation off the regression line suggests that variation in regulatory policies (Brüggemann et al. 2014) may explain why some countries are able to combine below-average political parallelism and below-average ownership concentration and, vice versa, above average levels on both dimensions.

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17 As expected, experts who systematically score their domestic outlets or the NYT as more right-wing (left-wing) than their peers are also more likely to report that outlets favor more economically right-wing (left-wing) parties.

18 Our coefficient estimates of media ownership concentration vary between 0.18 and 0.28 and are significant at least at the 95 percent level, except when excluding Finland, where significance drops slightly below the 95 percent level (Table A.9).

Figure 3   Media ownership concentration and political parallelism
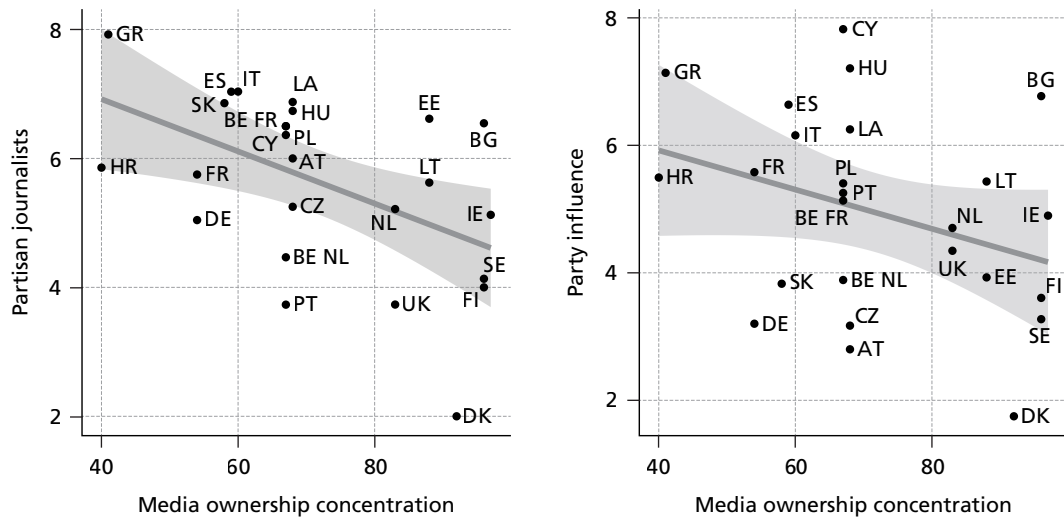
Note: Country-average values of two measures of political parallelism and media ownership concentration.

We now turn to the question of whether political parallelism is associated with muted or even reversed bias in economic positioning of media outlets. We re-run our models from Table 1, but replace media ownership concentration with our expert-level measures of political parallelism. Table 2 reports the replications of models M5 and M6 for each parallelism measure (see Tables A.10 and A.11 in the Appendix for the full results).

The results in Table 2 on the associations between political parallelism and partisan media bias differ between the two measures of political parallelism. In all models, the coefficient estimates are negatively signed, indicating that higher political parallelism could, if anything, coincide with weaker right-wing bias. However, the effects are statistically significant at the 95 percent level only for our first measure of *partisan journalists* (Models 1 and 2). The coefficients for *party influence* are close to zero and statistically insignificant (Models 3 and 4). Figure A.3 in the Appendix provides an illustration of the effect sizes. Moving from the lowest (0) to the highest (10) level of partisan journalism is associated with a shift in the predicted left-right position from 5.91 to 5.40, which is around half the size of the change in positions associated with the difference between the lowest and highest levels of ownership concentration in Figure 2. Thus, while media outlets' positioning appears to be more balanced between left-wing and right-wing parties when journalism is highly partisan, bias tilts towards right-wing parties when partisan affiliations are absent. This effect holds when additionally controlling for ownership concentration (Table A.25 in the Appendix). This implies that the effect of partisan journalism is not only the result of the negative association between partisan journalism and ownership concentration (cf. Figure 3) but that partisan journalism has an independent effect on media bias, being associated with outlets leaning less strongly towards economically right-wing positions. The coefficients for *partisan*

Table 2   Economic left-right media bias and political parallelism; multilevel random intercept regression coefficients

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Media outlet partisan favorability (0: economically left-wing; 10: economically right-wing)				
Partisan journalists (expert-level)	−0.050*** (0.014)	−0.050*** (0.014)		
Party influence (expert-level)			−0.004 (0.017)	−0.002 (0.017)
Public ownership	−1.133*** (0.211)	−1.167*** (0.211)	−1.215*** (0.214)	−1.244*** (0.214)
Center of gravity	0.660** (0.220)	0.378 (0.226)	0.679* (0.239)	0.402 (0.250)
GDP (log.)	−0.192 (0.124)	−0.207 (0.110)	−0.236 (0.134)	−0.250 (0.121)
Unemployment	0.028 (0.028)	0.002 (0.027)	0.022 (0.030)	−0.004 (0.030)
Income inequality	0.056 (0.043)	−0.038 (0.054)	0.059 (0.047)	−0.031 (0.060)
Social expenditure	−0.003 (0.028)	−0.061 (0.035)	0.009 (0.030)	−0.046 (0.038)
Eastern Europe		−1.219* (0.496)		−1.179* (0.547)
Constant	2.303 (2.465)	10.598* (4.012)	2.122 (2.665)	10.149* (4.421)
Log Likelihood	−4826.541	−4823.594	−4355.005	−4352.557
Observations	2,860	2,860	2,585	2,585
Outlets	424	424	423	423
Experts	253	253	224	224
Upper-level units	25	25	25	25
Random intercept variance: Outlets	1.710	1.710	1.719	1.719
Random intercept variance: Experts	0.136	0.137	0.125	0.126
Random intercept variance: Upper-level units	0.225	0.146	0.287	0.209
Residual variance	1.143	1.143	1.107	1.107

Note: *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$; Restricted maximum likelihood regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; p-values approximated with the Satterthwaite method; Upper-level units include 23 countries, plus the two Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia.

journalism remain negative and statistically significant (and the ones for *party influence* insignificant) in the battery of robustness checks that we already employed for media ownership concentration.[19]

In sum, for one of the two measures of political parallelism, partisan journalism, we observe an association with media bias tilting towards relatively more left-wing positions, which is in line with our Hypothesis 2a (rather than 2b). We observe a non-relationship for the measure of direct partisan influence, which supports our Hypothesis 2b (rather than 2a). Although news coverage should be heavily politicized under strong direct influence

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19   More specifically, we use the alternative operationalization of our dependent variable that subtracts the economic center of gravity of the party system from the media bias score (Tables A.12 and A.13), include regression weights for media usage rates (Tables A.14 and A.15), add additional control variables (Tables A.20–A.23), and test for the influence of country outliers (Table A.27).

of parties, left-wing and right-wing bias seem to cancel each other out at the national level. Thus, we find political parallelism to matter for media bias but the degree of influence depends on the concrete characteristics of the linkages between parties and media outlets.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, focusing on the role of political parallelism between parties and media outlets, and concentration of media ownership, we shed light on the contextual-level determinants of partisan media bias. Various contributions suggest, first, that the choice of media outlets of how to prime and frame certain issues can have relevant political consequences (Arceneaux et al. 2016; King, Schneer, and White 2017; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007), and, second, that political and ideological bias in news coverage is widespread (Puglisi and Snyder 2015; Lelkes 2020). However, due to limitations in measurement and data availability, cross-national evidence of what accounts for variation in real-world media bias has been highly limited.

Making use of expert survey data for twenty-four European countries, we examine partisan media bias as the extent to which media outlets report more favorably about political parties leaning more to the left or right on economic positions. In many of the advanced Western democracies, media systems have changed from being characterized by tight ties between political parties and media outlets (political parallelism) to becoming integrated into commercialized and professionalized but highly incomplete media markets. Focusing on media ownership concentration as possibly the clearest manifestation of market imperfections, we show that higher levels of ownership concentration are systematically associated with partisan media bias being tilted towards more right-leaning economic positions. In contrast, although at the outlet level media bias is likely to be more pronounced when political parallelism is predominant (Hallin and Mancini 2004), at the country-level, we find left- and right-wing bias to cancel each other out, or, depending on the concrete type of political parallelism, to be tilted less strongly towards right-wing economic positions. In sum, widespread trends of declining political parallelism and rising media ownership concentration help to explain why media coverage in some countries may be more favorable of economically right-leaning positions.

Some caveats are in order. First, our results inform us about the general direction of bias at the country level but not about its intensity. Partisan media bias is likely to be less intense in countries characterized by lower levels of political parallelism, even if this comes with higher levels of ownership concentration. The highly concentrated media markets in the Nordic countries are a case in point, as media coverage in those countries is usually found to build on strong norms of professionalization and objectivity (Brüggemann et al. 2014). Nevertheless, media bias does exist even in countries characterized by

relatively independent and professionalized media outlets (Garz and Rickardsson 2022; van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart 2017). Second, we should emphasize that more balanced news coverage at the country-average level, which may be more likely to be found in countries with less concentrated media markets with higher political parallelism, does not necessarily imply superior quality. In fact, political parallelism has been found to strongly coincide with less-developed norms of journalistic professionalism (Brüggemann et al. 2014). Irrespective of these considerations, however, media outlets in less pluralist media markets reporting less favorably on economically left-wing parties may imply real challenges for those parties to convey their programmatic ideas to voters.

Our findings address important gaps in the literature. Research on media bias and framing has documented that media coverage matters for individual political behavior (King, Schneer, and White 2017), including vote choice, policymaking (Arceneaux et al. 2016), and individual-level preferences (Barnes and Hicks 2018; Hopmann et al. 2017; Kneafsey and Regan 2022; Slothuus 2007). We speak to this literature by pointing out how and why media bias varies across countries, beyond the experimental setting employed in various of the existing studies. Our results also support our earlier work on the consequences of media ownership concentration. The results in Neimanns (2021) show that media ownership concentration is associated with lower individual-level support for redistribution. This association was expected to be mediated via bias in media coverage but this assumption could not be tested empirically. Our findings in this contribution lend further plausibility to the postulated causal mechanism.

Our results also speak to wider debates in political economy on how governments are able to maintain political-economic arrangements despite unfavorable social or economic outcomes (Bellani et al. 2021; Baccaro and Pontusson 2016; 2022). Across the advanced OECD countries, the capacity of wages to contribute to economic growth has come under pressure, with economically liberalizing reforms contributing to the emergence of alternative, post-Fordist growth models relying on exports or debt-induced privatized Keynesianism (Baccaro and Pontusson 2016; Stockhammer 2015). Irrespective of the concrete character of the alternative growth models, absolute growth performance has often been meager and distributive outcomes unfavorable for individuals in the lower income segments (Behringer and van Treeck 2019; Mian, Straub, and Sufi 2021; Summers 2015). Our results in this paper suggest that changing media systems in the form of declining levels of political parallelism and increasing ownership concentration may contribute to media bias being tilted towards economically right-leaning positions. Right-wing media bias may help in stabilizing post-Fordist growth models, despite unfavorable social and economic outcomes. Future research should examine in more fine-grained ways to what extent media bias specifically supports a country's growth model (Ferrara et al. 2021; Kneafsey and Regan 2022). In any case, dominant business interests should find it easier to build on a favorable public discourse when the number of dissenting voices is low, i.e. when ownership concentration is high and media bias is tilted towards parties leaning economically more to the right.

Our results also point towards the important role of media regulation. As we have shown, the association between ownership concentration and political parallelism has been incomplete, implying that governments may succeed in ensuring diversified ownership in independent media markets that may be capable of combining professional journalism with politically balanced news coverage. By providing inside expertise, business actors are often in an advantageous position to promote their particular interests in public discourse and in the policymaking process, in particular, if issues are of low salience (Culpepper 2011; 2021; Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020). As Culpepper (2011) has shown, resource constraints in journalism are a relevant factor determining to what extent journalists have the capacities to take into account additional perspectives on economic issues beyond the ones provided by business. Resource constraints have also been a driving force of concentration in media markets (Beckers et al. 2019; Vogler, Udris, and Eisenegger 2020). Governments should take into account such factors when designing regulation, and, possibly, public subsidies for the media sector (Brüggemann et al. 2014).

We see several avenues for future research. First, to further probe the validity of our findings, rather than relying on expert assessments, future research could be based on comparative analyses of actual media content for a smaller number of countries and media outlets. Second, future research should explore in more detail the consequences of digitalization for media bias (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov 2020; Grossman 2022). While online access to media content has clearly put pressure on the business models of many media outlets, it has to some extent also eroded the gatekeeping role of the traditional media, allowing, in principle, for more pluralism in public discourse. However, ironically, just as parallel publics under press-party parallelism may have been disappearing, discussion of the existence of filter bubbles in online (social) media (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016) may signal, once again, the emergence of parallel publics, but parallel publics in which the role of political parties, other collective organizations, and even norms of journalistic professionalism may potentially be more limited than it used to be the case under traditional forms of political parallelism.

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