

Alternative election news coverage?

Comparing election news in political alternative and mainstream media during the 2022 Swedish election campaign

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Abstract

In contemporary media environments, mainstream news media have become increasingly challenged by political alternative media. Even though research on how political alternative media cover politics and society has increased, there is still limited research comparing how political alternative media and mainstream news media cover key political events, such as election campaigns. To fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to compare election news coverage in political alternative and mainstream news media, drawing theoretically on theories related to mediatization and structural bias on the one hand, and politicization and political bias on the other. Empirically, the overarching research question is how election coverage in left- and right-wing political alternative and mainstream media differs. Findings suggest that political alternative media do function as an alternative to mainstream news media in that they offer more politicized coverage of election campaigns. However, left-wing, and right-wing political alternative media also constitute alternatives to each other in how the election campaigns are covered.

KEYWORDS

political alternative media, election news coverage, politicization, political bias, mediatization, structural bias

Introduction

During the last decade, mainstream news media have become increasingly challenged by what is variously referred to as political alternative media or (hyper)partisan media (Bauer et al., 2022; Brems, 2023; Newman et al., 2018; Rae, 2021). Although difficult to define precisely (Bauer et al., 2022; Rauch, 2016), in brief, political alternative media refer to media that have political agendas and that “represent a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). As such correctives, they may seek to complement and to challenge mainstream news media, in terms of what they cover and how they cover it (Holt et al., 2019). They are also often critical toward mainstream news media (Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). At the same time, research suggests that they may adapt to some conventions and forms of traditional news as means to gain journalistic legitimacy (Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Nygaard, 2019). Thus, an important aspect of political alternative media is that they challenge the boundaries separating political alternative media from mainstream media (Carlson, 2017; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Nygaard, 2020, 2021).

At the same time, neither mainstream news media nor political alternative media are monoliths. There may be important differences not only between mainstream news media and political alternative media, but also between different media within each type. For example, research has shown significant differences between tabloids and broadsheets and between public service and commercial news (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; de Vreese et al., 2017), and with respect to political alternative media, a key difference is between those leaning to the left and the right, as well as between those who are more or less opposed to the mainstream (Cushion, 2024; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Klawier et al., 2022; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023).

Due to the increasing prominence of political alternative media, in recent years, research on how political alternative media cover politics and society has increased significantly (e.g., Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; Klawier et al., 2022; Mayerhöffer, 2021; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). With some exceptions, there is however still limited knowledge about how mainstream news media and political alternative media cover the key political event that election campaigns constitute (but see e.g., McDowell-Naylor et al., 2022).

To help remedy this, the purpose of this exploratory study is to compare the election coverage in political alternative and

mainstream news media. Theoretically, we will draw on theories related to mediatization and structural bias on the one hand and politicization and political bias on the other. Empirically, the overarching research question we will investigate is how the election coverage in left- and right-wing political alternative and mainstream media differ, while analytically, we will analyze whether their election coverage is better explained by theories related to mediatization and structural bias or politicization and political bias. Empirically, we will focus on the media coverage of the 2022 Swedish election campaign in left-wing alternative media (*ETC*), right-wing alternative media (*Nyheter Idag*), national morning newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*), and national tabloids (*Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*).

Conceptualizing political alternative media: a relation approach

As noted above, a defining feature of alternative media in general is that they represent a “corrective” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862) of mainstream news media in a given context. Political alternative media, in turn, constitute a subset of alternative media, and can be defined by being driven by some kind of political or ideological values and agendas (Strömbäck, 2023). Sometimes these are also labeled (hyper)partisan media (e.g., Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Rae, 2021).

Political alternative media hence need to be understood *in relation to* mainstream news media (Brems, 2023; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Holt et al., 2019; Mayerhöffer, 2021; von Nordheim et al., 2019; Nygaard, 2021), where their degree of alternativeness and the extent to which they are driven by political values and agendas differ. Rather than conceptualizing mainstream and political alternative media as two distinct types of media, they should hence be conceptualized as located at different spaces on a spectrum (c.f. Brems, 2023; Holt et al., 2019; Klawier et al., 2022; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). Thus, some political alternative media might mainly seek to complement mainstream news media, for example by focusing on issues deemed under-covered by mainstream news media, whereas others are hostile to and seek to undermine trust in and use of mainstream news media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Holt, 2020). Similarly, some political alternative media might largely follow journalistic norms and values such as seeking to provide verified, truthful, and impartial information (Johansson, 2019; Kovach, & Rosenstiel, 2021), while others are more strongly guided by political goals, such as supporting a certain political party, agenda, or narrative. Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) thus distinguish between media guided by “reality-check dynamics” versus

“propaganda feedback loops” (see also Strömbäck et al., 2022). In the US case, they also found a right-wing media ecology dominated by propaganda feedback loops, that is distinct from “the rest” – including mainstream *and* left-wing alternative media – that are largely guided by reality-check dynamics.

Still, in some cases even political alternative media that are hostile toward mainstream news media may seek to adapt to some forms and conventions of traditional news media as means to gain journalistic legitimacy (Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Heft et al., 2019; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Nygaard, 2019). For example, they might mimic the traditional news media composition of news, the inverted pyramid with the most important information coming first. Further, the presentation of information is often made to look like in mainstream news media, and claims might be backed up with the use of news sources, although selected and cherry-picked to support a certain narrative. Some political alternative media may also present information as factual, even if it has not been verified and may be false and misleading (Boberg et al., 2020; Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Strömbäck, 2023; Wagnsson, 2022). On the surface they may thus follow the journalistic norm in that news should be impartial and free from value-laden terms, even though the actual content is skewed in a certain direction (Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Nygaard, 2021; for the similar strategies of fake news, see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Tandoc, 2019).

In terms of extant research on how political alternative media cover politics, previous research has investigated aspects such as source and topic diversity (Buyens & Van Aelst, 2021; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022); frame repertoires (Klawier et al., 2022), and the coverage of specific issues such as immigration (Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019). Other studies have focused on the news agenda in different political alternative media compared to political parties they have ties to and to mainstream news media (Brems, 2023), and how political alternative media position themselves against and criticize mainstream news media (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019; Mayerhöffer, 2021). In the Swedish case, one important study is Holt (2016), who compared the content in right-wing immigration-critical alternative media and mainstream news media with respect to what subject areas they cover (e.g., politics, business), the use of sources (e.g., at least two sources), the focus and framing (e.g., thematic, or episodic framing), and the journalistic style (e.g., descriptive or interpretive journalistic style). One finding was that the coverage in mainstream and political alternative media in many respects was quite similar, but also that the tonality was much more negative in the political alternative media (see also Holt, 2020). A common finding in this and other studies is

that political alternative media tend to be highly reliant on the news coverage in mainstream news media, which often forms the basis for follow-ups and re-framings in the alternative media (Brems, 2023; Holt, 2016; Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019).

Another common finding is that the boundaries between mainstream and political alternative media are not always clear-cut, that the degree to which political alternative media differ from mainstream media varies, and that one strategy political alternative media employ for gaining legitimacy is by emulating traditional journalistic conventions and forms (Brems, 2023). On a more fine-grained level, by for example extensively covering crime when committed by immigrants but not when committed by natives, right-wing alternative media can appear as reporting in a quite descriptive style while still pushing a clear political narrative that immigrants are criminals (Klawier et al., 2022, p. 1388). Thereby, political alternative media may “create an appearance of objectivity” (Nygaard, 2019, p. 1159).

While research on how political alternative media cover politics and society has expanded significantly in recent years, thus far there is however only limited research on how they cover the key political event that election campaigns constitute, how the coverage of election campaigns differs between mainstream and political alternative media, and that include political alternative media from both the left and the right. One exception is McDowell-Naylor et al. (2022), who investigated the role of political alternative media in the 2019 UK election. In contrast to the present study, it did however not present a systematic comparison of the content in political alternative and mainstream news media. The extent to which the election coverage differs *between* and *within* mainstream and political alternative media thus largely remains unclear.

Between politicization and mediatization: key dimensions of election news

How the media cover politics is always important, given that their coverage might exert significant influence on what issues people think are the most important (*agenda-setting*) (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020), the standards by which people judge political alternatives (*priming*) (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010), and how people understand and perceive issues, events, and actors (*framing*) (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019). How the media cover politics also have effects on people’s knowledge (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021) and (mis)perceptions (Garrett et al., 2016; Hmielowski et al.,

2014; Strömbäck et al., 2022). Thereby, the news media may also influence how people vote.

All this matters greatly during election campaigns, given that the stakes then are so high. Not surprisingly, there is therefore extensive research on the mainstream news media's election news coverage. In this line of research, two key concepts are *politicization* and *political bias* on the one hand and *mediatization* and *structural bias* on the other (D'Alessio, 2012; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008; van Aelst et al., 2008). A common denominator for these theoretical perspectives is criticism that mainstream news media do not provide objective and impartial accounts of reality, as they should according to theories about journalistic objectivity (Johansson, 2019; Kovach, & Rosenstiel, 2021; Schudson, 1981), but rather news that is biased and deviates from reality. This is however where consensus ends.

According to theories emphasizing politicization and political bias, a key explanation for how mainstream news media cover politics and society is ideological and political biases among those who own the media or cover the news, i.e., journalists (Lichter, 2017). Most often, this kind of criticism comes from the political right, accusing mainstream news media for liberal or leftist bias (Domke et al., 1999; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023; Watts et al., 1999). The underlying reason provided for the alleged leftist or liberal bias are surveys showing that journalists in general tend to be more liberal or leaning to the left politically than people in general, and this is assumed to be reflected in how mainstream news media cover the news (Grose-close & Milyo, 2005). In a structural sense, the argument is similar when news media are accused of rightist or conservative bias, although this criticism points toward the fact that most mainstream news media are commercial businesses, assumed or actual ideological and political biases among those who own the news media, and the notion that the news media is influenced by corporate and hence right leaning and conservative interests (c.f. Bagdikian, 2000).

According to theories emphasizing mediatization and structural bias, the news media coverage is instead mainly explained by the fact that mainstream news media are complex and commercial organizations which have developed certain trans-organizational routines and procedures for discovering, valuing, selecting, producing, and finally covering the news (Cook, 2005; Hofstetter, 1976; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). As such, they need to compete for audience attention and revenues from audience consumption, as well as for advertising revenue (Hamilton, 2004). This creates incentives for mainstream news media to keep down costs, while simultaneously maximizing the prospect of being successful in the competition for audience attention (Hamilton, 2004), and to balance that with

professional journalistic norms and values which emphasize the importance that the news provides people with verified, impartial and truthful accounts of reality (Asp, 2011; D'Alessio, 2012; Johansson, 2019; Niven, 2002). From this, and the media dependency on media formats, follows a certain news media logic, referring to the news values and storytelling techniques developed by mainstream news media to take advantage of their formats (print, audio, audiovisual) and their need for journalistic legitimacy and competitiveness in the struggle for audience attention and revenues (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). In the words of Hofstetter (1976, p. 34), structural biases thus occur “when some things are selected to be reported rather than other things because of the character of the medium or because of the incentives that apply to commercial news programming”.

Importantly, thus far research in countries where the news media are politically independent – including Sweden – provide limited if any evidence that the election coverage in mainstream news media is politically biased (Asp, 2011; D'Alessio, 2012; Johansson, 2022; Lichter, 2017; Niven, 2002; see also Hassell, 2020). In stark contrast, there is ample evidence suggesting that mainstream election news coverage is shaped by structural biases and news media logic, although the degree to which this is the case differs between countries and media outlets within countries (Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019, 2023; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008).

Two caveats should be noted though. First, in ever-changing media environments it cannot be taken for granted that historical patterns continue to hold. The fact that previous research suggests limited or no political bias does not preclude that such biases may evolve. Second, previous research has not taken political alternative media into account, and it can be expected that their election coverage differs both from the election news coverage in mainstream news media and from each other's. Empirically, the key question then is how the election coverage in left- and right-wing political alternative and mainstream media differ. Based on this, the theoretical and analytical question is whether their election coverage is better explained by theories related to mediatization and structural bias or politicization and political bias.

Research design, methodology and data

This study focuses on election news coverage in Sweden. In brief, Sweden constitutes a prototypical case of the democratic corporatist model of media and politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Strömbäck et al., 2008) and a media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014), with strong public service broadcasting and historically widespread

newspaper readership. At the national level, the Swedish news media system is dominated by two public service TV news shows (Rapport and Aktuellt), one commercial TV news show (TV4), one public service radio news show (Ekot), two quality morning newspapers (Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet), and two tabloids (Aftonbladet and Expressen). Regarding the newspapers, on the editorial pages Dagens Nyheter and Expressen are independently liberal, Aftonbladet social democratic, and Svenska Dagbladet independently conservative. In their news coverage, they all claim to be independent and impartial. Importantly, systematic content analyses based on the Swedish Media Election Studies (SMES) and other studies have found that there is no systematic political bias in their election news coverage (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). Hence, a recurring finding is that while some party or parties always get more beneficial coverage in a specific election campaign than others, what party or parties get more beneficial news coverage differ between election campaigns.

Over the last decade, political alternative media have however become more prominent, and research suggests that the Swedish alternative media ecology is more developed than in many other countries. This holds in particular for right-wing alternative media (Heft et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2018). This combination makes Sweden an interesting case to study.

Empirically, in this study we will use data from the 2022 Swedish Media Election Study (SMES). The SMES builds on quantitative content analyses and has been conducted for every national election going back to 1979 (Asp & Bjerling, 2014).

The SMES cover the last four weeks of election campaigns, which in 2022 translates into the period August 16–September 11, 2022. The selection of news media in SMES focuses on national morning newspapers, tabloid newspapers and TV and radio news on traditional platforms (paper editions and broadcast news). In this article we chose to limit the scope to comparisons between traditional newspapers and political alternative media (online). Admittedly, in a media ecology where mainstream media also focus on online reporting, the choice to analyze traditional platforms for mainstream media could be questioned. However, a recent study comparing online and offline election news during the last two weeks of the campaign found no significant differences in the coverage along the dimensions analyzed in this article, even if the number of articles online was greater (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2023).

Political alternative media was for the first time included in the SMES in the 2022 election campaign. Dagens Nyheter (DN) and Svenska Dagbladet (SvD) represent national morning newspapers

while Aftonbladet and Expressen are national tabloids. With respect to political alternative media, Dagens ETC was selected as a leading left-wing political alternative media, while Nyheter Idag was selected as a leading right-wing political alternative media (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2023; Newman et al., 2023).

For all media, the selection of news articles was based on the following criteria: 1) news stories in the main section of the newspaper, 2) signed by journalists, 3) placed on pages with the headline “politics” or equivalent (i.e., articles in the cultural or sports sections were excluded), 4) where headline, picture or preamble refers to domestic politicians or political institutions, and 5) deals with national politics (e.g., articles dealing with local or regional politics were excluded). Even if the main focus was on election stories, news about issues relevant to the election campaign was included in the sample even if no explicit reference was made to the campaign. In general, the sample strategy was to include stories if they in some way could be seen as relevant – even implicit – to the election campaign, like stories on energy, migration, health care or climate change. However, only a few articles (less than 10) fall under this “implicitly” criterion. Only articles with more than 10 lines were included. For online outlets (e.g., political alternative media), the third, fourth, and fifth criteria were used to select relevant news articles using keywords (see appendix).

All articles were coded by a single coder, instructed by the PIs of SMES, and the reliability was determined by the same coder re-coding a sample consisting of 120 articles (approximately 8 percent of the whole sample) after the entire sample was coded. The intra-coder agreement (Holsti’s Formula) ranged between 0.93 and 0.98. Compared with inter-coder reliability test, intra-coder tests are considered as a weaker form of reliability and is sometimes referred to as “stability reliability” (Neuendorf, 2002).

The news agenda, framing, journalistic style, and actor treatment

In the empirical analyses and comparisons between the different media, we will focus on four aspects: *the news agenda*, *framing*, *journalistic style*, and *actor treatment*. For the news agenda and actor treatment variables, the unit of analysis is the number of issues and actor appearances, while for the framing and journalistic style variables, the unit of analysis is full articles.

The *news agenda* was coded using a predefined set of categories. The variable consists of 26 categories of political issues (economy, health care, energy etc.) and other news content categories measuring ideology, the government issue, political scandals, opinion polls and categories focusing on game-aspects of the election campaign.

Only categories related to political issues were considered in the present analysis. It was possible to code 5 different issues for each news story (for details, see Johansson & Strömbäck, 2023). Analytically, a closeness between issue ownership of politically close political parties and the issue agendas in the media can be interpreted as a sign of politicization and political bias.

The *framing* theme is analyzed by using variables capturing *issue frame*, *strategic game frame*, and *scandal frame* in the news reporting (Nord & Strömbäck, 2018; Strömbäck, 2004). *Issue frame* includes news stories focusing on issues and issue positions, on real-life conditions with relevance for issue positions, and on what has happened or what someone has said and done to the extent that it deals with or is depicted as relevant for the political issues. *Strategic game frame* includes news stories that frame politics as a game, personality contest, as strategy, and as personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions (Aalberg et al., 2012, 2017; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). News stories that focus on the tactics or strategy of political campaigning, how they campaign, on the images of politicians, on political power as a goal, and on politicians as individuals rather than as spokespersons for certain policies, count as strategic game frame. The same applies for horse race coverage. Scandal frames include news stories where something is framed as a political scandal, and these alleged scandals may be about private moral, financial, or power scandals, or scandalous utterances made by politicians, so called talk scandals (Ekström & Johansson, 2007, 2019). Analytically and following previous research, the framing of politics as a strategic game and as scandals can be interpreted as signs of mediatization (Nord & Strömbäck, 2018; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011).

Journalistic style is measured by two variables. The first focuses on whether the articles are dominated by a *descriptive* versus *interpretive* journalistic style. The journalistic style was coded as descriptive when an article is dominated by telling what happened in a rather straightforward, descriptive style and focuses on known facts, whereas it was coded as interpretive when an article is dominated by analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, or explaining a situation while also describing aspects of it. Particular attention was paid to the dominant storyline, and whether it builds on a journalistic interpretation (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012, 2017). The variable capturing *value-laden terms* refer to overt commentary and terms used by the journalist that are clearly subjective or carry connotations that cannot be considered neutral, for example, whether something is good or bad, true, or false, without support from verifiable facts. Similar to the framing of politics, an interpretive journalistic style and use of value-laden terms can be interpreted as signs of mediatization

(Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011; Strömbäck & Nord, 2018), as traditional journalistic norms suggests that journalists should report in an impartial and neutral way (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Actor treatment builds on three different variables: *acting actor*, which refers to the political actor who is doing/saying something in the article, the *addressed actor* which captures the political actor someone is talking about or referring to in the news story, and the *evaluation of addressed actor*, which measures how the addressed actor is evaluated – positive, negative, or neutral. The list of acting/addressed actor includes all political parties and party leaders in parliament alongside other actors, although we here will only consider political parties/party leaders. It is possible to code 5 acting actors and 10 addressed actors since every acting actor can address two actors in the codebook. As for the evaluation, it is possible to give an evaluation to every addressed actor (10 totally for each article).

Results

Turning to the results, one of the most important aspects of the media's election news coverage is the news agenda, referring to what issues are most salient in the news. As been shown by previous research, the news agenda influences both what issues people think are the most important (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021) and the standards by which people compare and evaluate the political alternatives (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The political parties thus struggle between them to influence the media agenda and to get the issues which they own – i.e., issues that the voters associate with the parties and which the parties have a reputation for competence – into the media spotlight (Green & Hobolt, 2008; Walgrave et al., 2009). For example, the Swedish parties to the right typically want the debate to focus on issues such as crime and migration, and the parties to the left on welfare issues such as schools and health care but also climate change. In 2022, the media agenda was however influenced by the downstream effects of the Russian war against Ukraine, such as high energy prices and inflation (Bolin et al., 2022). This can be seen in Table 1, showing the ten most prominent issues on different media's agendas.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
Crime	7	13	18	22	10	20
Economy	8	8	19	10	15	11
Energy	9	29	12	8	10	10
Migration	12	24	8	15	8	9
Environment	19	4	5	7	8	5
Health care	2	2	8	5	9	6
Defense	1	3	7	3	4	9
School	6	2	1	7	6	8
Social welfare	1	5	8	5	5	2
Foreign policy	0	1	3	2	4	4
Other issues	35	9	11	16	21	16
In total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Articles	255	132	410	361	613	445

Table 1: The issue agenda in the news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (percent).

Note: Chi square tests of the issue agendas show significant differences (<.001) between all media outlets.

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

The results show that on an overall level, the most prominent issues in the mainstream news media were economy, crime, energy, and migration. This was also true for the right-wing Nyheter Idag, although they emphasized energy and migration much more than the mainstream news media. The most salient issue in the left-wing ETC, on the other hand, was the environment, followed by migration and energy. Migration was mainly framed as criticizing the

Sweden Democrats and other parties' policy on migration. ETC had also a larger share of "Other issues", as housing (8 percent) was one of the most salient issues in their coverage during the campaign. In the other media, this issue was almost invisible.

These results suggest both similarities and differences within as well as between the categories of political alternative and mainstream media. To make this analysis more systematic, Table 2 presents the similarity in the coverage of political issues during the 2022 election campaign using a matching index. The closer the coefficient is to 1, the more similar was the news coverage of political issues.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
ETC	X	.54	.53	.68	.71	.63
Nyheter Idag	.54	X	.61	.66	.59	.58
Aftonbladet	.53	.61	X	.73	.78	.79
Expressen	.68	.66	.73	X	.78	.84
DN	.71	.59	.78	.78	X	.79
SvD	.63	.58	.79	.84	.79	X

Table 2: Correlation between issue agendas in news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (Matching index).

Note: The matching index $(1 - (\sum d/2))$ is a measure that indicates how well two distributions match one another (d = difference in proportions; denominator = 2 makes the maximum value of the matching index = 1 and the minimum value = 0). Asp evaluates the matching index and argues it is more suitable for distributions with few observations (Asp, 1983).

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

The results show how political alternative media are alternative in two senses. First in relation to mainstream news media, where the matching coefficient is lower in comparison to the mainstream news media. ETC reached the highest agenda similarity to the morning newspaper DN (.71) and the lowest to the tabloid Aftonbladet (.53). Nyheter Idag shows even lower numbers of similarity, where the highest agenda resemblance was found in relation to the tabloid Expressen (.66). These figures should be compared to the comparisons between the morning newspapers and tabloids, where the agenda matching varied between .73 and .84. Second, the political alternative media are also alternative in relation to each other. The matching index between ETC and Nyheter Idag was one of the lowest (.54).

In other words, the political alternative media provided issue agendas differing both from mainstream news media and from each other, but the issue agenda in ETC was overall more similar – and less alternative – to the issue agenda in mainstream news media than the issue agenda in *Nyheter Idag*.

The framing of politics

Another important aspect of how the media cover election campaigns is their framing of politics. In general, research has shown that the media framing of events, issues, actors, or processes can have significant effects on people's perceptions (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). In terms of the framing of politics, research shows that the framing of politics as a strategic game – in contrast to the framing of politics as issues – increases political cynicism and reduces substance-based political knowledge as well as media trust, and political interest (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann et al., 2015; Shehata, 2014; Zoizner, 2021). There is less research on the effects on scandal framing, but these are likely to be similar to the effects of strategic game framing (von Sikorski, 2018).

In terms of how Swedish mainstream media frame politics during election campaigns, previous research has found significant differences between media types, with commercial broadcasting and tabloids most prone to frame politics as a strategic game or as scandals, even if the framing of politics as a strategic game is common in all media (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). The question here is whether the same holds true for the political alternative media.

The results in Table 3 shows that the framing of politics diverged significantly between political alternative media and mainstream news media. In particular, the results show the scandal frame being significantly more common in ETC (21 percent) and, in particular, *Nyheter Idag* (36 percent). In contrast, between 10-12 percent of the articles in the tabloids and 7-8 percent in the morning newspapers were dominated by a scandal frame. A more detailed analysis further shows that the political alternative media were more prone to highlight talk scandals (Ekström & Johansson, 2007, 2019), where utterances, gaffes and slip of tongues were scandalized.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
Issue frame	57	22	47	30	64	43
Strategic game frame	22	42	43	58	27	50
Scandal frame	21	36	10	12	8	7
In total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Articles	114	81	213	227	242	238

Table 3: Framing in news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (Percent).

Note: Cramer's V comparing ETC vs Nyheter Idag = .35 ***, ETC vs Aftonbladet = .23 ***, ETC vs Expressen = .34 ***, ETC vs DN = .18***, ETC vs SvD = .30***, Nyheter Idag vs Aftonbladet = .33 ***, Nyheter Idag vs Expressen = .27 ***, Nyheter Idag vs DN = .41 ***, Nyheter Idag vs SvD = .38 ***, Aftonbladet vs Expressen = .18 ***, Aftonbladet vs DN = .18***, Aftonbladet vs SvD = .08 ***, Expressen vs DN = .35***, Expressen vs SvD = .15***, DN vs SvD = .24***. Articles where no frame could be detected are not included.

*** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

Beyond this, different patterns emerge when comparing the framing of politics as issues versus a strategic game in political alternative and mainstream media. To begin with, there are large differences between ETC and Nyheter Idag, where ETC was one of the outlets among all the investigated media that most often framed politics as issues (57 percent) whereas Nyheter Idag was the outlet most seldomly used this frame (22 percent). With respect to the mainstream media, there is – in contrast to the coverage of earlier election campaigns – no clear pattern that the strategic game frame is more common in the tabloids than in the morning newspapers (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). Instead, the framing of politics as a strategic game was more common in the morning newspaper SvD than in the tabloid Aftonbladet, and vice versa with respect to the framing of politics as issues. There is thus no clear demarcation between political alternative media, tabloids, and morning newspapers. Instead, the framing of politics in ETC was more similar to the framing of politics in DN and Aftonbladet with a more frequent use of issue framing, while Nyheter Idag was more similar to SvD and Expressen with a more frequent use of strategic game framing.

Descriptive versus interpretive election news coverage

Even if a large part of the news is about describing for example what has happened and who has said what, a significant part of news journalism also includes journalistic interpretations of why things have happened and what the consequences might be (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012, 2017). Such interpretations may range from more neutral analysis to highly subjective commentary. While there are different measurements of an interpretive journalistic style (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012), research suggests that an interpretive journalistic style over time has become more common in mainstream news media (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). With respect to political alternative media, to our knowledge there is only one previous study, suggesting that an interpretive journalistic style is more common in Swedish right-wing political alternative media than in mainstream news media (Holt, 2016).

The key question then is the extent to which election news stories in political alternative and mainstream media during the 2022 Swedish election campaign were characterized by a descriptive versus an interpretive journalistic style. The results are presented in Table 4.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
Interpretive	46	36	45	44	22	28
Descriptive	54	64	55	56	78	72
In total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Articles	114	84	217	232	245	242

Table 4: Interpretive and descriptive approach in news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (Percent).

Note: Cramer's V comparing ETC vs Nyheter Idag = .10 **, ETC vs Aftonbladet = .04, ETC vs Expressen = .02, ETC vs DN = .24 ***, ETC vs SvD = .17 ***, Nyheter Idag vs Aftonbladet = .09 ***, Nyheter Idag vs Expressen = .07 **, Nyheter Idag vs DN = .13 ***, Nyheter Idag vs SvD = .07 **, Aftonbladet vs Expressen = .01, Aftonbladet vs DN = .24 ***, Aftonbladet vs SvD = .18***, Expressen vs DN = .23 ***, Expressen vs SvD = .16 ***, DN vs SvD = .06 ***. Articles where no frame could be detected are not included.

*** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

The results show a key difference between morning newspapers on the one hand and tabloids and political alternative media on the other. The morning newspapers consistently have the largest share of articles characterized by a descriptive journalistic style, while the tabloids and the political alternative media are quite similar in terms of the share of articles with a descriptive versus an interpretive journalistic style. At the same time, there is a difference between ETC and Nyheter Idag, with the former having a larger share of articles with an interpretive journalistic style.

Important to reiterate however is that this variable taps into whether the articles *mainly* tell what happened in a rather descriptive, straightforward style and focusing on known facts as opposed to mainly analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, or explaining a situation while also describing aspects of it. Hence, a descriptive journalistic style does not preclude that an article may include some subjective assessment or interpretations. To tap into this, the SMES investigated the extent to which the articles overtly included value-laden terms that are clearly subjective or carry connotations that cannot be considered neutral. The results are displayed in Table 5.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
Value laden terms	64	70	62	59	38	45
No value laden terms	36	30	38	41	62	55
In total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Articles	114	84	217	232	245	242

Table 5: Value-terms in the news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (Percent).

Note: Cramer's V comparing ETC vs Nyheter Idag = .06 *, ETC vs Aftonbladet = .02, ETC vs Expressen = .04, ETC vs DN = .25 ***, ETC vs SvD = .18 ***, Nyheter Idag vs Aftonbladet = .07, Nyheter Idag vs Expressen = .10 ***, Nyheter Idag vs DN = .29 ***, Nyheter Idag vs SvD = .22 ***, Aftonbladet vs Expressen = .03, Aftonbladet vs DN = .25 ***, Aftonbladet vs SvD = .17 ***, Expressen vs DN = .22 ***, Expressen vs SvD = .15 ***, DN vs SvD = .07 ***. Articles where no frame could be detected are not included.

*** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

To some extent the results mirror the ones pertaining to the journalistic style, with the use of value-laden terms being lowest in the morning newspapers and higher in the tabloids and the political alternative media. Worth noting is that the difference between the tabloids and the political alternative media is not significant. At the same time, value-laden terms were most common in Nyheter Idag, even though it had a lower share of articles characterized by an interpretive journalistic style than both ETC and the tabloids. This is a reminder that a descriptive journalistic style might still hide journalistic subjectivity (Nygaard, 2019).

Biased election coverage and actor treatment

One of the most discussed aspects of how the media cover politics in general and election campaigns in particular pertains to the issue of political bias. A common phenomenon, known as the hostile media phenomenon (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Perloff, 2015), is that partisans tend to think that the media are biased against them in favor of the other side in a political conflict or campaign. In the SMES, the question of bias is addressed by an actor treatment index which summarizes the way an actor is treated in the news (for details, see appendix). Positive numbers indicate a positive treatment, negative numbers a negative treatment, and 0 that an actor gets an equal amount of visibility and positive criticism as negative criticism.

Important to note is that this measure focuses on how political actors were treated *in* the news and not *by* the news. It captures visibility, praise, and criticism in the news, but does not distinguish between praise and criticism coming from other political actors or from the journalists covering the news. A negative/positive actor treatment thus does not necessarily mean that the journalists covering the news were negative/positive toward a particular political actor; it might also mean that a particular political actor in that media received a lot of negative/positive criticism by other political actors. This said, journalists in the end select news and utterances praising or criticizing politicians which can lead to ideological bias in the news even if journalists themselves are not using value laden words.

With this caveat in mind, Table 6 shows the actor treatment of the two governmental coalitions and each of the political parties per investigated media.

	Political alternative media		Tabloids		Morning newspapers	
	ETC	Nyheter Idag	Aftonbladet	Expressen	DN	SvD
Left wing Coalition	+17	-10	+20	+15	+32	+29
Left Party	+27	+3	+12	+15	+19	+26
Social Democrats	+3	-17	+18	+11	+27	+26
Green Party	+22	+11	+27	+13	+49	+30
Centre Party	+24	-26	+28	+26	+50	+41
Right wing Coalition	-5	+21	+7	+12	+15	+15
Liberal party	+8	+13	+29	+16	+6	+29
Moderate party	+2	+21	+5	+20	+31	+17
Christian Democrats	+9	+36	+12	+29	+28	+19
Sweden Democrats	-17	+20	-3	0	-2	+5

Table 6: Treatment of governmental coalitions and political parties in the news coverage of the Swedish General Election 2022 (AT-index).

Note: The index is constructed by adding the number of times an actor says or does something in the news, based on the assumption that all politicians strive to be visible in the news during an election campaign. The number of times someone else is addressing the actor positively is then added and finally subtracted by how often the actor is addressed negatively. To make the index vary between fixed numbers (+100 and -100) and enable comparisons across media and actors, the number from the calculations is divided by the total number an actor is visible as actor or addressed and multiplied by 100 (see Asp 1983 for more detailed information).

Source: Swedish Media Election Studies 2022

One finding – consistent with previous research – is that positive actor treatments were more common than negative actor treatments (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019, 2023). This is the case for all mainstream media except for the Sweden Democrats in *Aftonbladet* and *DN*, although the actor treatment index is close to zero. Another striking finding is how the actor treatment in the political alternative media clearly differed from each other and from mainstream media. This holds in particular for the right-wing *Nyheter Idag*, which gave a more favorable treatment to the right-wing coalition (+21) and less favorable treatment to the left-wing coalition (-10) than all other media. They also gave a much more positive treatment of the Sweden Democrats and the Christian Democrats compared with all the other media. In contrast, the actor treatment of the right-wing coalition was more negative in left-wing ETC than in all the other media. At the same time, the actor treatment of the left-wing coalition was less positive in ETC than in *DN*, *SvD* and *Aftonbladet*. The most important reason for this is because the Social Democrats received a less positive treatment (+3) in ETC than in any of the mainstream media. However, the general tendency to give the left-wing parties a more favorable treatment can mainly be explained by the extensive criticism toward the Sweden Democrats, which lowered the index for right-wing coalition.

Further comparing the ETC and *Nyheter Idag*, the results show how ETC gave the right-wing parties – and in particular the Sweden Democrats – a less favorable treatment than any of the mainstream news media. In contrast, *Nyheter Idag* gave all the left-wing parties a less favorable treatment compared with any of the mainstream news media. The contrast is particularly evident in the actor treatment of the Centre Party and the Sweden Democrats.

Taken together, these results thus show that the actor treatment in the left- and right-wing political alternative media differed sharply between them, but also that they differed in relation to the actor treatment in the mainstream media.

Discussion and conclusions

Against the background of the increasing importance of political alternative media across Western democracies, this study set out to explore (1) how the coverage of the 2022 Swedish national election differed between left- and right-wing political alternative and mainstream media, and (2) whether their election coverage can be better explained by theories related to politicization and political bias or mediatization and structural bias. Based on the findings, the study offers five takeaways.

First, in several respects the election coverage in political alternative media diverged systematically from mainstream news media. More specifically, they differed in terms of the issue agenda, their

stronger focus on scandal frames, their more extensive use of value-laden terms in the news, and in the pattern where there is a linkage between their political leaning and how different political actors were treated.

Second, the political alternative media were also alternative in relation to each other, where the left- and right leaning alternative media focused on different political issues in their reporting and gave ideologically actors close to them a more beneficial treatment. At the same time, ideologically more distant opponents were generally treated less favorable.

Third, the political alternative media do not always differ from mainstream news media, and in some respects, they seem to use a mainstream style of reporting to gain journalistic legitimacy. This is suggested by the findings that the share of interpretative versus descriptive reporting was not systematically different when comparing political alternative media and mainstream media. The same tendency was found for the use of strategic game frames and issue frames, where there were differences between outlets, but not related to media type. Another sign of this is that Nyheter Idag, despite using a rather descriptive journalistic style, still was the media with the most widespread presence of clearly-value terms in their articles.

Fourth, in several cases there is a pattern where the differences are most pronounced between the left- and the right-wing political alternative media, with mainstream media in between. This holds in particular for the more political aspects of the election coverage, such as the actor treatment, suggesting that political alternative media offer a different kind of election coverage than mainstream news media. While this may not be particular surprising, it is a reminder that not all political alternative media are alike, and that there may be clear differences not only between political alternative and mainstream news media but also between different alternative media (Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Klawier et al., 2022; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023). Hence, too far-reaching generalizations about political alternative media should thus be avoided.

The question then is whether the differences found between political alternative media and mainstream news media can best be explained by theories related to politicization and political bias on the one hand and mediatization and structural bias on the other. Our answer and the fifth takeaway are that both theoretical perspectives have explanatory value, although to different degrees for different media types. The signs of politicization of election coverage and political bias is quite clearly connected to the political alternative media, where the issue agenda and actor treatment diverge,

both from mainstream news media and from each other. (see also Brems, 2023; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). In other words, in political alternative media, there is a clearer linkage between issue ownership of nearby political parties, the issue agenda in the political alternative media, and the treatment of political actors than in mainstream news media. We find no other explanation for these patterns and differences than an expression of politically biased reporting. The election coverage in mainstream news media on the other hand is more similar across the different media, which indicates that the news coverage is better explained by factors related to mediatization and structural bias. Since there are quite systematic differences between how the election was covered in the tabloids and the morning newspapers, it strengthens the conclusion that mediatization and structural bias are the most reasonable explanations for how mainstream news media cover election campaigns. This conclusion is further strengthened by longitudinal studies showing how mainstream media over time tend to follow each other in how they cover election campaigns (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2023). This is not to say that there are no signs of mediatization in the political alternative media. For example, the framing of politics as a strategic game was about as common in *Nyheter Idag* as in *SvD* and *Expressen*, and an interpretive style was about as common in the political alternative media as in the tabloids.

In essence, then, our findings suggest that political alternative media do function as an alternative to mainstream news media in that they offer more politicized coverage of election campaigns. Interestingly, our findings largely reflect those of other studies comparing the news coverage in mainstream news media and political alternative media (e.g., Brems, 2023; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Heft et al., 2024; Klawier et al., 2022), which suggests that differences between mainstream news media and political alternative media pertain both to election campaigns and more routine political periods. That said, more systematic research on both differences and similarities between how different political alternative media and different types of mainstream news media cover politics and society is clearly needed.

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