Who is driving whom

The media, voters and the bandwagon

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Chapter 1:

All in the Game:
Effects of Opinion Polls on Party Coverage in the 2013 German Election Campaign
Abstract

Opinion polls form an important part of modern election coverage themselves, but might also shape amount and tone of subsequent party coverage. A typology is proposed for effects in stable poll contexts and tested using more precise analyses than earlier studies. A multilevel-model separates effects of 36 polls on coverage of 5 different parties in 11 different outlets, based on a manual content analysis (N = 3755) of the 2013 German Bundestag election campaign. Results show that changes in ratings influence party coverage in a counteracting fashion: coverage does not follow a bandwagon pattern of increasing polls leading to more (positive) coverage. Instead, the amount of party coverage for the front runner party increased after drops in its ratings, and the challenger party received more negative coverage after increases in its poll ratings. Media coverage did not follow the bandwagon but played an active role within the election campaign.

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Polls and party coverage dynamics

All in the Game: Effects of Opinion Polls on Party Coverage in the 2013 German Election Campaign

Opinion polls are a central aspect of modern democratic campaigns and media widely use them for their campaign coverage (Brettschneider, 2008). Much research has looked at the various effects of polls on voting and turnout (Hardmeier, 2008). There is growing evidence of a bandwagon effect of favorable poll reporting resulting in an extra boost for the front runner candidate/party, as voters are drawn to the likely winner (Robinson, 1937; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, and Aaldering, 2015). The enthusiasm of the crowds gives a party momentum and induces a positive spiral as favorable poll ratings shed a more positive light on a party and further increase support for it (Stolwijk, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2016). Most studies investigate the effect of polls on voters (see Hardmeier, 2008), but much less attention is given to their effect on media coverage. This despite of the strong theoretical role ascribed to the media in creating the bandwagon effect (Bartels, 1988; Patterson, 1993).

There are various indications that polls indeed alter campaign coverage and a series of effects have been described. Polls are an attractive news source for a number of reasons. They are constantly being released, provide a continuous stream of fresh news, require little newsroom resources, give coverage a scientific and objective connotation, and provide an opportunity for journalists to add commentary (Searles, Ginn & Nickens, 2016). As a result, polls are heavily covered (Bhatti & Pedersen, 2015; Brettscheider, 1997; 2008). Their coverage fits and fuels a tendency towards horse race coverage of campaigns in which campaign strategies, party performance and winning versus losing is emphasized (Aalberg, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2012). In addition, media discuss the use, effects, reliability and desirability of polls (Frankovic, 2005; 2008).

While highly relevant, this paper seeks to go beyond such effects of polls. Instead, its focus is on how polls might influence subsequent party coverage. Here party coverage will refer to the amount of any sort of (positive/neutral/negative) mentioning of a party or its politicians in the media that does not refer to poll results. Rosenstiel (2005) argues that polls create a context for journalists to explain and organize other news. Such indirect poll effects would be highly relevant from a normative rational voter perspective. A rational voter weighs pro's and con's of each party using the optimal information that can be acquired. If polls influence how much media attention a party receives, and the
tone in which it is covered, this would change the information environment of a voter. If a party is not (or hardly) reported on, how can a voter decide this party best represents her interest? If a voter wants to base her voting decision on information other than polls, such information would be available less equally and thus less optimally.

The literature on the influence of polls on party coverage is still limited. Previous studies have mostly looked at US presidential campaigns and primaries, but there are also studies on multiparty systems such as the Netherlands and Germany (Box-Steefensmeier, Darmofal & Farrell, 2009; Christenson & Smidt, 2012; Vliegenthart & Van Aelst, 2009; Jandura & Petersen, 2009). These studies tend to build their hypotheses on the bandwagon thesis. Overall, their results confirm this theory: more positive poll ratings appear to contribute to more and more favorable party coverage. However, there are many exceptions. Both Christenson and Smidt (2012) and Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2009) report inter-party/candidate differences, which do not fit the bandwagon theory. Likewise, Bartels (1988), Patterson (1993), and Sides and Vavrek (2013) find that the effect of poll ratings on party coverage has more to do with the position of a party in the horse race, than whether a particular poll rises or falls with respect to the previous poll. For example, emerging candidates are treated differently than steady front runners.

To aid in developing a general theoretical explanation for these different findings, the present study will first integrate the newer findings within the explanations offered by Patterson’s (1993) framework of poll-driven, generic campaign storylines. As the different storylines are not equally applicable to all campaigns, and depend on the availability of significant fluctuations in polls over time, different election races might be covered differently. In this study the influence of such context variations will be explored by examining an example of such a different election campaign context: The 2013 campaign for the German Bundestag elections. This was a campaign with relatively stable polls in combination with one party (CDU) having, and maintaining, a solid lead over the other parties in the polls. The campaign was stable as no party gained or lost more than 5% of the vote between its lowest and highest predicted poll rating during the campaign, and the front runner party and the main challenger party did not switch places at any point. This limits the applicability of two of Patterson’s (1993) storylines (that of a party gaining and of losing ground), which are most likely to foster bandwagon type coverage.
Although such poll dynamics are not uncommon, such campaigns have been studied far less frequently (see Bartels, 1987, for a typology of campaigns). Consequently, the 2013 German case offers an opportunity to get a better idea of the role of the race-context for how media party coverage responds to changes in poll ratings. Patterson’s (1993) framework will be extended by proposing a typology of how party coverage may respond to changing poll ratings under such conditions.

The effects of changing poll ratings on party coverage will be compared for coverage in eleven media outlets over time, for polls from each of seven different polling firms. In this way more polls published during the last key part of the campaign can be studied. Within a campaign, bandwagon effects occurring shortly before the election are of special interest. Polls matter most on Election Day, as it is on that day that voter preferences are transformed into institutional power. However, poll ratings are themselves an object of contestation, as different polling firms compete for attention. Different pollsters use different methods and consequently vary in systematic ways in their estimations. To investigate the influence of changes in poll ratings on media coverage in these critical last weeks of the campaign, and to include the full scope of poll information available, this study goes beyond previous research and proposes a model that takes differences between polling firms explicitly into account.

The study considers poll ratings published for all five main parties in the period between August 6\textsuperscript{th} and September 21\textsuperscript{th}, 2013. A content analysis measures the daily amount and (positive/neutral/negative) tone of coverage of each of these parties in the main TV-news broadcasts, national newspapers and is the first to also include coverage on newspaper websites in this regard. A multilevel-model with each outlet’s party coverage nested under the specific combination of outlet and party and the particular poll publication is used to compare coverage before and after each poll with changes in ratings. Results show that the influence of changing poll ratings on party coverage indeed appears to be context dependent. Media coverage is found to magnify small poll changes for larger parties and respond to them in a “counteracting” fashion: the observed pattern did not correspond to a bandwagon of increasing poll ratings leading to more (positive) coverage. The front runner (CDU) gets more coverage after decreases rather than increases in its poll ratings, while its trailing challenger (SPD) receives additional negative, rather than positive, coverage.
when it rises in the polls. The findings thus challenge the overall bandwagon effect suggested in some earlier studies.

**Theory**

There is much research on the influence of polls on media content in general, but little progress has been made since Bartels (1988) and Patterson (1993) in developing theory regarding the relation between polls and party coverage over time. To set the scene, this study draws on Hamilton’s (2004) market forces approach and Bennett’s (1990) indexing hypothesis, and then reviews how recent empirical findings fit into Patterson’s (1993) four generic storylines of a party leading, gaining ground, losing ground and trailing. This storyline perspective will then be applied and extended to the case of relatively stable-poll campaigns with a clear front runner party. Evidence is reviewed that outlines different possible media responses. A typology will be proposed describing four theoretically plausible effects on party coverage: poll magnification, counteracting, ignorance, and substitution.

**Polls and the Media**

Surveys show that journalists are interested in polls and often use them in their work (Weaver, 2008; Wichmann & Brettschneider, 2009). Journalist’ self-reports indicate that polls have a moderate influence on their news selection. If asked if opinion polls influence their perception of what is newsworthy they give a score of 2.5 on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very influential) (Weaver, 2008). Hamilton (2004) provides a theoretical explanation of why polls should have an influence on coverage. He retraces party coverage to the origin of the mass media and argues that market forces shape which news is reported and how. Different coverage attracts different audiences, which in turn determine advertising revenue. If Hamilton is right, strategic profit-seeking editors should be expected to follow their audience’s preferences for news, and thus the poll ratings which are indications of them. For this effect to be present, journalists need not even be consciously aware of how the market drives news selection. Competition between outlets over time ensures that only those making the best decisions will survive in the marketplace (Hamilton, 2004).

It appears that Hamilton’s (2004) perspective overlaps with the bandwagon thesis and both predict a positive relation between polls and
Polls and party coverage dynamics

amount and tone of party coverage. US studies show how audiences align their media consumption to their political preferences (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Hamilton, 2004). Consequently, in order to preserve or extend their audience, news outlets have an economic incentive to tailor their coverage accordingly. If polls for a party go up and the corresponding audience grows, media could be expected to follow. This argument could apply just as well to public outlets as to commercial ones, as public outlets are likewise interested in viewer ratings. Strömbäck, Karlsson and Hopmann (2012) report how, in selecting news, public and private German journalists rate the importance of an event being of interest to many people 4.24 on a scale of 1 to 5.3

The media bandwagon effect is also consistent with Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis. The higher a party's standing in the polls the more powerful and authoritative it becomes and thus the more worthy it is of coverage. Hopmann, de Vreese and Albæk (2011), for example, find how the incumbency bonus of additional media attention for governing parties is larger for parties expected to win an election compared to weaker governments. Taken together, these rough depictions of the market forces and indexing arguments indeed appear to lend strong plausibility to bandwagon thesis for the effect of polls on party coverage.

Still, there are likely many more factors affecting volume and tone of media coverage than merely responsiveness to audience' political preferences. For one, the newsworthiness of a party can be context dependent. For example, Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen (2015) argue that the newsworthiness of governing versus non-governing parties is different in election campaigns compared to regular coverage. They find that outside campaigns journalists follow the "watch dog" norm and focus on scrutinizing government behavior, while during campaigns journalists switch to the norm of impartiality and give more balanced attention to incumbent and challenger parties. In other words the newsworthiness of a party can be dependent on its institutional position and the phase of the electoral cycle. The same kinds of context effects on party newsworthiness can be expected to operate during, and within, the last intensive parts of election campaigns.

3 But see Lischka (2014) for differences in the reporting of economic news between public and private outlets.
Chapter 1

Generic Storylines

When taking a more detailed look at Bennett’s (1990) indexing hypothesis, he argues that the main mechanism behind it are the relations developed over time between media and powerful actors. Such ties guarantee a steady stream of news, in return media give these actors a preferential position in news selection and content. Such a dynamic is also likely for German polling agencies. Brettschneider (2008) describes the relationship between media outlets and polling agencies in Germany as “symbiotic”. News media are among the polling agencies main clients and specific outlets have longstanding partnerships with specific agencies (Holtz-Bacha, 2012). These relations are so good, partly because of the predictable and steady stream of news delivered by polls. Media, thus, have an active interest in their use of polls and are likely to give them a preferential position in the news as well (see Strömbäck, 2009).

Patterson (1993) argues that media will create a storyline out of these poll results, in order to turn this stream of polls into a continuous stream of news. This storyline might make some parties more newsworthy than others. In his study of US primary election coverage, Patterson (1993) listed four generic stories that can be applied depending on the position of a candidate within the horse race: gaining ground, losing ground, trailing or leading. Corresponding with the bandwagon thesis, those candidates who are gaining ground get the most favorable coverage. However, this phase of positive portrayal can be short-lived: as soon as the candidate’s gains are stabilizing or even falling again, the press reverts to its more usual, negative, style of coverage. The opposite of a gaining candidate is a candidate who is losing ground. When a candidate drops in the poll ratings the press starts to investigate the causes for this drop, yielding a corresponding negative tone of coverage. A third story is that of a trailing candidate, or “likely loser”, whose ratings are low and stable. This candidate is least likely to get good coverage. In fact, this candidate is least likely to get any coverage at all. There are a few variations within the likely loser coverage category though: weak contenders get little coverage, a candidate with ascribed potential might be awarded the status of “underdog” and even get favorable coverage, and a few losing candidates get a host of negative attention. The fourth generic story, that of a stable leading, front runner candidate, yields reasonably positive coverage, but not as positive as a gaining candidate, as media tend to focus on the maneuvers of this front runner candidate to maintain his lead.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

In line with this perspective, Sides and Vavreck (2013) report that the media coverage of emerging candidates in the 2012 US republican primary followed a three stage discovery-scrutiny-decline cycle. New emerging candidates with rising poll ratings start with positive coverage followed by negative coverage as they become the front runner, followed by lack of coverage when their support has evaporated (for a similar argument, see Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). According to Patterson (1993) this pattern of poll related coverage is more pronounced during primaries compared to general elections. This is because during primaries, contrary to the general election, there is no partisanship anchor available to differentiate candidates, each candidate is attacked by each of his five or more competitors, and voters are still less familiar with the candidates in question. Still, the difference in coverage depending on overall poll ratings (being ahead or behind in the race) and poll dynamics (rising or falling ratings), can be expected to hold for a general election as well, as there is a similar need for the media to build a continuing storyline.\(^4\)

Recent studies into the effect of polls on amount of coverage do not mention the need for a storyline, but their findings do seem to support this perspective. In general, they tend to find a positive relation between changing poll ratings and both amount and tone of coverage. Both Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2009), and Christenson and Smidt (2012) report how media generally positively adjust their amount of party/candidate coverage to changes in poll ratings.\(^5\) But they also find exceptions. Christenson and Smidt (2012) study the 2008 US primaries and show how the effect of polls on amount of coverage is not significant for all individual candidates. Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2012) found a relation for the three largest Dutch parties, but fail to find the effect for the smaller parties. In addition, the effect found for the largest party is negative, which they argue could be because for a leading party negative ratings are more newsworthy. This finding can fit well within the storyline perspective, a stable front runner does not automatically generate positive news as stable polls have little additional news value. When its ratings go up, this changes little about the likely outcome of the election and it does not fit in the storyline

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4 Of course media party coverage is formed by many other factors besides journalistic choices. Patterson (1993) for example, mentions economic indicators, and pre-fabricated stories that rival campaign teams aim to get into the media. In this paper, however, the origin of party coverage is not the main focus, but rather the resulting party coverage as presented by the media.

5 Also see McGowen and Palazzolo (2014) for a similar result across the 2012 US primaries, but using a different definition of poll/electoral success (momentum). See Shah et al. (1999) for a null finding.
of a party defending its lead. However, when it starts losing ground, this makes the race more exciting and fuels the need for stories with explanations of this drop, as well as stories how this party aims to defend the lead it still has. With respect to the (null) results of Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2012) regarding the smaller parties, this fits within the “trailing” party generic storyline. It makes sense that the effects of polls are less visible for parties that in general fail to make the news. These findings suggest that using the storyline approach as a context for the study of the effects of poll changes on party coverage might have the potential for a more general theoretical explanation.

Given this hypothesized dependency of party coverage on the horse race storyline, the stable poll ratings during of the 2013 German election campaign create a challenging case. As ratings were fairly stable during the last phase of the campaign, there is a corresponding lack in the need for stories explaining why a party wins or loses in consecutive polls. This leaves a void in potential coverage, for which journalists have to come up with a solution if they are to fill their pages. Nonetheless, journalists can still rely on the generic stories for the front runner party (and likely winner) versus trailing parties (which will likely lose). These two storylines can be expected to influence party coverage during the campaign, but are less prolific without their gaining ground and losing ground counterparts. The front runner party, CDU, can be expected to be most newsworthy and receive most attention as it is the likely winner, yielding positive stories about its qualities and why it is winning. However, it will also be subject to negative “watch-dog” coverage, as the media feel obliged to scrutinize the weaknesses of this potential winner. The CDU, in this specific case, is likely to get more coverage due to its authority of being the incumbent, which is amplified by its stable leading position in the horse race (Bennett, 1990; Patterson, 1993). The trailing parties can be expected to be either ignored or portrayed in a negative light. For the main challenger party (SPD), journalists might be prompted to go over all the potential causes for their likely loss. Still, the objectivity norm during election periods will push for balanced coverage and thus yield additional positive and negative attention for this challenger party (Green-Pedersen et al., 2015). Based on the trailing

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6 In addition to being a stable second in the 2013 horse race, the SPD can be considered the main challenger as during the 2002 campaign the SPD had made a jump of 10% in the polls to overtake CDU against previous expectations (Jandura & Petersen, 2009). In addition, the gap between SPD and CDU was portrayed to be smaller in August 2013, than in at the same stage during the 2009 election (“Wahlumfrage; Steinbrück macht sieben Prozentpunkte auf Merkel gut.”, 2013).
Polls and party coverage dynamics

party storyline, little coverage is expected for the smaller (trailing) parties, as they do not pose a serious chance to win.\(^7\) These expectations form a baseline for the expected overall party coverage in the present study. These baseline inter-party differences in coverage will be described rather than analyzed, as only five main\(^8\) parties competed. The storylines of the stable front runner and trailing parties, thus yield the following hypothesis on overall coverage:

\[H1: \text{The front runner party (CDU) gets most (positive, negative and neutral) party coverage, followed by challenger party (SPD), while the smaller parties (FDP, Linke, Grüne) get least (positive, negative and neutral) coverage.}\]

**Stable Polls and Party Coverage: A typology**

The dynamic question regards the effect of (small) changes in poll ratings on party coverage in such an election race. As said, the poll changes were quite small, which makes it unclear which reaction of the media should theoretically be expected. Logically, four different responses are possible: party coverage can follow poll changes, counter them, ignore them or replace coverage of them with other types of coverage. There is support in the literature for each of these four, quite different, possible reactions of media to such (small) poll changes.

**Magnification.** Even though strong upward or downward poll trends did not occur in the 2013 German federal election, the media still might be tempted to rely on the generic (bandwagon) storylines of gaining and losing ground. These stories are the most prolific from the viewpoint of the media, as each new twist can be presented as news. In general, changing ratings are continuously newsworthy, make the horse race more exciting and create the need for additional explanatory stories. To keep these storylines, the media could grasp any short term change and report on it as if it were the beginning of a strong

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\(^7\) As the German electoral system favors coalition based governments the performance of the FDP, as the first choice coalition partner of CDU, is highly relevant for the likely outcome of the election. Still, it is unclear whether poll increases/decreases of FDP would therefore make the FDP itself more or less newsworthy, as FDP would remain a trailing party. Even if FDP would be elected (they ended up not reaching the minimum German federal electoral threshold of 5 % of the vote), they would only be a very junior coalition party to the CDU. Poll dynamics of FDP might therefore even be expected to influence coverage of CDU rather than FDP, but this is beyond the scope of the present article.

\(^8\) Many more parties competed, but these five parties were most established as they were part of the federal parliament at the time. In addition, analyses done for this paper showed that they took up the bulk of the party coverage in the campaign. The party with most coverage after these five parties, AfD, received less than 1% of the amount of coverage that these parties received.
rising or falling trend. Therefore, the type of media response in which small changes in poll ratings positively affect party coverage is labeled “magnification” here. Indeed, studies find that journalists frequently interpret poll changes that fall within the sampling error as if they were substantial and meaningful (Bhatti & Pedersen, 2015; Brettschneider, 2008; Patterson, 2005). Extrapolating on these findings on poll coverage to party coverage would yield the expectation that party coverage increases with rising polls and becomes more positive in tone. This response would be in line with the bandwagon narrative of the generic gaining ground or losing ground storylines.

**Counteracting.** A related response would be to counter any poll change. This response type resembles the magnification type in that “meaningless” changes in polls are interpreted as meaningful, but it differs in the kind of interpretation given. Technically, “counteracting” would refer to any reaction in party coverage to changes in poll ratings that is at odds with the bandwagon pattern (narrative) in which positive poll changes lead to more (positive) party coverage. Counteracting coverage can result from journalistic choices, but also from outside actors seeking to get their own preferred interpretation and stories into the media. Journalists can select and interpret stories to build their own narrative, or simply report stories of outside actors that feed them.

Journalists in democratic corporatist countries like Germany are known for their interventionist interpretation of journalistic autonomy (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Schudson & Anderson, 2009; Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl, 2006). Donsbach and Patterson (2004) compare journalistic norms across countries and typify German journalists as “active-advocates”. This corresponds to the journalist types of “ideologues”, “missionaries” or “interpreters”. German journalists score highest on Donsbach and Patterson’s (2004) neutrality-versus-advocate scale, in that they seek to position themselves as independent from political parties and are critical to authorities. They also score very high on Donsbach and Patterson’s (2004) passive-versus-active scale, as they seek to actively influence politics by advocating their views. As Köcher (1986: 52) finds, “German journalists, however, assign considerably more importance than their British colleagues to the chance to pursue their own interests further and to influence political decisions, as well as to the role of critic and to opportunities for self-expression.”

As argued above, polls are one way that enable journalists to do so. When polls lack a continuing storyline of a gaining or losing candidate, an alternative
must be found to achieve the norm of journalistic independence. The most
direct way to do so would be to counter current political trends. In its purest
form, this would lead to an underdog-type effect in which party coverage
becomes more positive when poll ratings drop (see Ceci & Kain, 1982).

Alternatively, the counteracting response type could also reflect the effect
of campaigning by parties or other actors. For example, campaign teams
who witness dropping poll ratings of their party might be afraid that these
polls might induce more negative party coverage, and increase their efforts
to prevent this from happening. Mutz (1998) illustrated how outside actors
might be motivated by anti-bandwagon preferences. She reports how strongly
committed and highly knowledgeable supporters of a candidate increase
their campaign contributions after losses by that candidate in the polls. Mutz
quotes Kayden to help explain her findings (1985: 95), “the small donor derives
satisfaction -a moral uplift- from contributing to a campaign. The issues that
provide satisfaction are apt to be issues in which the donor is in the minority.
After all, if one is in the majority, why worry?” As campaign teams and interest
groups can be considered committed and highly knowledgeable, such same
motivations might guide their attempts to influence media coverage after
decreasing poll ratings. Indeed, Box-Steffensmeier, Darmofal and Farrell
(2009) report that during the 2000 US presidential election campaign, Gore’s
expenditures on campaign ads and commercials decreased, rather than
increased, for two days after an increase in Gore’s poll rating. In addition,
they find that Gore’s expenditures decreased, rather than increased, after
more positive media coverage of Gore. Both findings suggest that poll ratings
can motivate outside actors to interfere with media coverage in a way that is
contrary to a bandwagon narrative.

Ignorance. In contrast, a third possible response could be for the media
to ignore small poll changes. The literature on news values would suggest that
rather stable poll ratings would not make it in the news at all, because they lack
the key attribute of novelty/surprise (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill,

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9 In the article Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2009: 320) argue, “The Gore campaign’s expenditures decisions
were not exogenous to the expected vote, as the Gore campaign appears to have sought to build on
increases in Gore’s support by boosting its expenditures in response. A one unit positive shock in the
expected vote for Gore is predicted to have produced a cumulative increase in Gore expenditures for
most of the next eight days of the campaign.” However, it appears that the y-axis in the first panel of
their figure 4 to which they refer, and which they present on the same page, is either mislabeled or
misinterpreted. The figure shows a predicted two day decline in Gore expenditures following a one
unit positive shock in the expected vote for Gore.
Both Searles, Ginn and Nickens (2016) and Matthews, Pickup and Cutler (2012) find that stable polls themselves are less likely to be reported, and are reported in shorter articles with less interpretation than volatile polls. If stable polls are not newsworthy, how can they be part of a storyline and why would small variations in polls affect consecutive party coverage? In this case, no response in party coverage would be expected after small poll changes.

**Substitution.** A related kind of media response to small poll changes could be to substitute the horse race storyline with another storyline. As argued above, German media have a rather symbiotic relation with pollsters, as they rely on them for a steady stream of news. However, in this particular election that constant stream lacked strong twist and turns to report on. In other words, the expected steady stream of news dried up in the 2013 election. Zaller (1998) describes a case in which, similarly, an institutionalized news source dries up. In his study he finds how journalists are annoyed by attempts of politician’s media management tactics to manipulate their coverage. In order to bypass these attempts, but still fill their pages, they come up with their own, negative, campaign story. Journalists thus substitute a story they do not want for another kind of story to allow them to fill their pages.

Shehata (2010) extends the phenomenon of substitution to include poll coverage. He argues that, in addition to negativity, polls can also be a fruitful potential news source to use as a substitution for elite claims. Polls can be used to generate the kinds of storylines discussed above, and bypass storylines proposed by politicians. However, it should be noted that polls, in turn, have become an institutionalized news source in their own right. Thus, following the same line of reasoning, poll coverage could be subject to substitution just as well (also see Strömbäck, 2012b). Barring journalists want to follow politician’s media management tactics, the negativity described by Zaller (1998) would be the most obvious candidate to substitute polls. In this response type, more negative coverage would be expected after each publication of a stable/neutral poll rating compared to after a rising or falling poll.

These four different response types pose quite opposite expectations. The literature offers little guidance as to whether one of them might dominate the other. They could also cancel each other out, or perhaps one might apply to one party, while the other to another party. To explore how the different theoretical
perspectives outlined in the typology can help explain party coverage in the 2013 German Bundestag election, therefore, a research question rather than a hypothesis is formulated.

**RQ1:** How does party coverage change in relation to changes in party poll ratings over time?

**Method**

The aim of the analysis is to examine the effect of poll ratings on party coverage during those last crucial six weeks of the campaign. During that period a variety of polls are released. Poll ratings are themselves an object of contestation, as different polling firms compete for attention. Different pollsters use different methods and consequently vary in systematic ways in their estimations (see Appendix A). Previous research have roughly applied two methods to determine day-to-day poll ratings. One approach restricts itself to using only one polling source, usually in the form of a rolling cross-sectional survey (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2009). A second approach tries to combine ratings from different polling firms into a continuous measure. To do so they use the rating published for a certain day when available, regardless of source. When multiple firms publish their polls on the same day averages are used, and when no poll is published adjacent results are extrapolated (e.g., Jandura & Peterson, 2009). Both approaches have their drawbacks. In the first approach, it is unclear how unpublished ratings would influence the production of media content, especially as in Germany pollsters gather poll data over a certain time-slot and then take some time to analyze them before they publish the results. All published ratings are, in this respect, old when they reach journalists, as they represent voter preferences from a few days before. In the second approach, daily variations could be the result of differences in polling method (see Rosenstiel, 2005; Wlezien, 2003). In addition, in Germany, as well as in many other countries, there are established ties between some of the polling firms and some of the media outlets (Holtz-Bacha, 2012; Searles et al., 2016). Such ties could lead to differences between the influences of certain firms’ ratings on party coverage in different outlets (see Searles et al., 2016).
The design of the present study aims to address these issues by a more precise model specification. Analyses will combine the best of both approaches. Polls from multiple sources will be used, but each poll will be compared not to its most immediate predecessor in time, but to the nearest preceding poll by the same firm. These changes in ratings over time are then related to the party coverage between these consecutive polls by the same firm, for each outlet. In this way, each of the three issues listed above are avoided: Differences in polling methodology are accounted for as the focus is on change within the predictions of a single polling firm. The causal relation between polling information and media coverage is more direct as the publication date of the polls is used as the reference point for its influence, and by using data from all seven main polling agencies in relation to each of the eleven media outlets the multifaceted information environment and possible links between polling firms and media outlets are explicitly accounted for. One consequence of using this data structure is that each day of party coverage could be related to the poll ratings of each of the polling firms and thus occurs multiple times within the dataset. If only certain outlets respond to certain polling firms and not others, including all outlets biases our findings downwards. By including a range of polling firms as well as a range of outlets this downward bias is avoided, but only if all polling firms agree on the change in ratings. The observations included in this analysis are thus not independent, but related to the poll in question, to the party and outlet. A multilevel model is used to account for the various interdependencies in this party, outlet and poll publication-grouped data set.

Media Content Analysis

Sample. The content analysis (N = 3755 articles/TV news items) includes all campaign related text articles on the front page of the main German national newspapers (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; Die Welt; BILD-Zeitung; Süddeutsche Zeitung), on the main and politics tabs of newspaper websites (www.bild.de; www.spiegel.de; www.faz.net) and all items of the main TV news broadcasts (Tagesschau, ARD (20.00h); Heute, ZDF (19.00h); RTL News, RTL (18.45h); SAT.1 Nachrichten, SAT.1 (19.55/20.00h) from August 2nd to September 21th, 2013. Coding was done by five native German speaking coders in October and November 2013, after having received a two-week coder training.

10 Andreas Schuck received a VENI grant from the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) which financed this data collection.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

Dataset. As introduced above, the dataset is constructed by computing daily averages of party coverage per outlet over the periods between each consecutive poll publication by each polling firm. This yields a dataset of 36*11*5=1980 cases. For example, each poll about each party occurs 11 times in the dataset as it is related to the coverage in each outlet, similarly each outlet occurs (36*5=) 180 times as it is related to 36 published lists of polls about 5 parties. The coverage about each party in each outlet can be compared to the preceding coverage of that party in that outlet and the change in the poll rating for that party in polls by the same polling agency. The model thus makes 1980 of such comparisons.

Variables

Independent variable: Change in poll ratings. Poll ratings are expressed in percentages of the total expected vote, so 0.01 represents 1% of the vote. The absolute poll ratings used were coded for the day they were released in expected part of the party vote, and thus theoretically range between 0 and 1 (i.e., between 0% and 100% of the vote). The change in poll ratings represents the in-/decrease in the poll rating of a party as reported in the current poll with respect to the previous poll published by that same polling agency (M = -0.00; SD = 0.01; range [-0.03; 0.02]). In two cases the preceding poll was published before the start of the content analysis, but in each case the content analysis still contained (over) 18 days of preceding coverage to serve as a pre-poll publication benchmark. Polls are collected from 7 polling agencies and drawn from www.wahlrecht.de. Polls are included if they are published after August 9th and before September 20th. In this way there is enough content data left to estimate party coverage preceding each poll, and there is at least one day of coverage left after the poll, but before the election to estimate the effects of poll changes on party coverage.

Dependent variables. All dependent variables were calculated based on the content analysis. Specifically one set of items were used: the actor valence

11 In Germany voters can cast two votes, one Erststimme for a regional candidate and one Zweitstimme for a party. As the analysis here is focused on parties, the Zweitstimme is used, which is also the common practice among pollsters.

12 The preceding polls from before the start of the content analysis are from June 12th, June 16th. The polls themselves were published on August 21th and August 20th, leaving respective lags of 19 and 18 days of preceding media content. Analyses were repeated with and without these polls and yielded equivalent results.
coding. The actor valence coding denotes whether this article/item portrays this actor as very negative (-2), negative (-1), neutral (0), positive (+1) or very positive (+2) from the viewpoint of this actor. As the content analysis was part of a much larger project, a large number of specific actor codes where available for the coders. Coders were allowed to code up to ten (most prominent) actors within each article/item. Actors could be specific persons, like Angela Merkel, but also institutions or organizations such as a party, like “die Linke”. For this specific application of the content analysis all actors belonging to a party are recoded as representing a party. If multiple actors associated/referring to the same party were coded within the same article/item, their average valence score was calculated. The inter-coder reliability for the actor coding was assessed for a limited reliability test sample, as is common for the kind of large scale content analyses projects similar to the one in which this study is embedded. In this test sample not all parties were equally represented. Therefore, the best indications of reliability for each of the dependent variables are those referring to the two main parties CDU/CSU and SPD. From the actor valence coding, two main measures are deduced: amount of party coverage and valence of party coverage.

**Amount of party coverage** is denoted by the number of articles/items mentioning this party per outlet per day. The content of an outlet referring to a party is aggregated from article level to a daily level, and then averaged per day over each period between the publications of two polls by the same polling agency ($M = 0.86; SD = 0.80; \text{range } [0; 5]$; CDU Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.91; CDU percent agreement = 99%; CDU Standardized Lotus ($\lambda$) = 0.89; SPD Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.73; SPD percent agreement = 99%; SPD Standardized Lotus ($\lambda$) = 0.97, for Lotus ($\lambda$) see Fretwurst, 2013)). So on average each outlet published slightly under one article/item per party per day on their top spot. The coverage on the day of publication of the poll in question itself is excluded from analysis. If the timing of the publication of a poll is driven by campaign events, the coverage on these days might be a-typical. By omitting these days from the analyses any spurious correlation between poll ratings and coverage due to a campaign event is avoided.

13 For the purpose of the reliability test, in contrast to the actual content coding, coders could only indicate up to five actors per article/item.

14 Analyses were repeated including the coverage of the date of a poll publication to the (control of) coverage preceding the poll, yielding equivalent results.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

Valence of party coverage refers to whether the coverage related to this party or its politicians was explicitly described positive (+1), neutral/balanced (0), or negative (-1) (CDU Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.65; CDU percent agreement = 87%; CDU Standardized Lotus (λ) = 0.84; SPD Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.64; SPD percent agreement = 86%; SPD Standardized Lotus (λ) = 0.68). If various statements were made per article, the average valence was calculated. From this coding three variables were computed, each aggregated and averaged per day over each period between the publications of two polls by the same polling agency:
The number of positive articles per party in an outlet per day (\(M = 0.07; \ SD = 0.16; \ range \ [0; 1.33]\)), the number of neutral articles per party in an outlet per day (\(M = 0.63; \ SD = 0.59; \ range \ [0; 3.67]\)), and the number of negative articles per party in an outlet per day (\(M = 0.16; \ SD = 0.22; \ range \ [0; 1.5]\)).

Controls: Poll list. A categorical variable indicates for each case to which poll list (= list of poll ratings per party published by a polling firm) it refers. Each category refers to one instance (n = 36) in which one of the polling agencies publishes poll ratings for each of the parties (i.e., CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Grüne, Linke). Time trend. It can be expected that coverage increases towards Election Day. To control for such possible time trends in the data, each poll list publication is coded for the number of days from the start of the dataset (August 2nd) to its publication date, this variable thus increase towards Election Day. Separate time trends are estimated for the front runner (CDU), challenger (SPD) and small parties (FDP, Grüne, Linke). TV debate. German federal campaigns only have one TV debate between the two main party leaders, as this debate generates massive publicity two dummies are used (see Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). One to indicate whether the debate took place during the period of coverage directly after the publication of the relevant poll list (i.e. the period over which the dependent variables are calculated), and one for the period of coverage directly preceding the relevant poll list. These dummies only refer to CDU and SPD, as the other parties did not take part in the debate and descriptive analysis showed the debate had little effect on their coverage (not shown). Amount of campaign coverage. In addition to the debate, there might be other periods in the campaign which might trigger more coverage of all parties, as a general control for such events a measure is included summing the total number of articles/items

\[15\] Krippendorff’s alpha was calculated based on a four category coding, including “missing” if an article didn’t mention this party.
Chapter 1

referring to the election campaign, which might or might not refer to one or more of the parties, on average per day over the period between each two consecutive polls for the same polling firm. Again two versions of this measure is included, one referring to the period preceding the poll list, and one to the period following it. **Lag length.** One consequence of the data structure is that the number of days between two consecutive poll lists by the same firm might vary (range [2; 19], \( M = 7.06 \)), as the effects of polls on coverage might dissipate or escalate over time, differences in lag length might affect the findings, to control for this possibility two measures are included counting the lag length in number of days in the period preceding and following the poll list (See Appendix B for an example of the model equation used).

**Table 1** Descriptives of total, positive, negative and neutral coverage on average per day of the campaign in one of the outlets per party.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>coverage</th>
<th>CDU</th>
<th>SPD</th>
<th>FDP</th>
<th>Grüne</th>
<th>Linke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total scores can deviate from sum of positive, negative and neutral coverage due to rounding.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the overall campaign coverage of each of the five parties across all eleven outlets. It appears that most party coverage was neutral and only a small amount made explicit positive or negative comments about a party. The results overall correspond descriptively to H1. Front runner CDU indeed gets most total, most neutral and most positive coverage, but challenger SPD gets slightly more negative coverage. The smaller parties get least coverage, although still a substantial amount as over a third of all party coverage mentions either of these parties (see Figure 2 in Appendix A for an overview of party coverage over time)\(^{16}\).

\(^{16}\) As can be seen in figure 2 the fluctuations in party coverage from day to day seem to correlate between the parties, indicating the likely influence of campaign events, illustrating the importance of using a control for such across party fluctuations. The big peak in the center of figure 2 illustrates the effect of the TV debate.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

Table 2 Explained variance at the poll list, party, outlet and party-outlet combination levels, of five intercept only models explaining amount of party coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poll list</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlet</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party-outlet combination</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To explore the relevance of the interdependencies between the observations in the dataset in terms of the poll list they are related to, the party and the outlet, Table 2 shows the proportion of explained variance for each of these levels if tested separately on an intercept-only model (so without predictor variables). The table lists results for total amount of coverage, but results are similar for the other dependent variables in this study. The figures in the first three columns show that variance in amount of party coverage is largest across parties, there is also considerable difference between outlets and poll lists. These results justify a cross-party perspective for the analysis of these data, as apparently differences between parties account for much of the differences in party coverage within the dataset. The fourth column of Table 2 shows that the variance between combinations of outlets and parties is larger than just the sum of its parts. While 30% of the variance in total amount of party coverage is accounted for by the party level and 12% by the outlet level, the combinations between each party and each outlet explain 49%.\(^\text{17}\) Apparently, different outlets cover different parties differently, underlining the importance of properly accounting for these differences. The fifth column shows the nesting structure used for the analysis of RQ1 below, a cross-classified model of poll lists and combinations of parties and outlets.\(^\text{18}\) The bottom row shows that the remaining unexplained variance is smallest for this model, compared to the other models in this table. Using this specification is thus the most precise test for RQ1.

\(^\text{17}\) The literature disagrees on the appropriateness of using levels with less than twenty units (see Gelman & Hill, 2006), by using combinations of outlets and parties, this problem is avoided (as this level has \(11 \times 5 = 55\) units).

\(^\text{18}\) A cross-classified model allows each unit to be clustered separately in each of the levels, in this case poll lists and outlet-party combinations.
Chapter 1

To test whether there is any change in party coverage following poll changes, and whether this differs across parties, a series of models has been run. The various columns in Table 3 show the results of comparing the effects of changes in ratings for front runner CDU, challenger SPD and the other parties on total amount of party coverage, positive coverage, negative coverage and neutral coverage. The first row shows the effect for front runner CDU, the second for challenger SPD and the third for the smaller parties (FDP, Grüne, Linke). The first thing to notice is that there are no across party effects, in fact, the coefficients for front runner CDU are quite different from those of the other parties, and often opposite in sign. In addition, the coefficients for the front runner are the only ones to be significantly different from zero, while there are marginal significant effects for the challenger on amount of total coverage and negative coverage. For the front runner the effects of polls contradict a bandwagon effect, when CDU poll ratings go up the amount of their total, positive and negative coverage goes down. However, although the CDU had a solid lead over the other parties throughout the campaign, the changes in polls for CDU were on average negative ($M = -0.2\%$). Consequently, the more likely interpretation of the CDU results are that when its ratings go down, its coverage increases.\textsuperscript{19} The effect is modest: for each percent drop in the polls, coverage of the front runner grew on average with 0.09 (\(\beta = -8.61\)) articles/items. As the range of average party coverage per outlet per day is between 0 and 5 (prominent) articles/items, this is an effect amounting to 1.7\% of the range for each percentage point increase or decrease. To make this figure more transparent, note that it refers to 0.09 articles/items per day on average in each of the eleven outlets during the period until the next poll by the same polling firm. So if that period lasts 5 days, this amounts to an additional coverage of 5*11*0.09 \approx 5 articles/items across this time period across all outlets for each percent that the CDU drops in the polls. Note that there are no effects on neutral coverage, so effects refer to articles/items in which journalists give some (positive or negative) qualification to the CDU. This implies that such party references are interpretative rather than merely descriptive in nature. These results appear to align best with the counteracting type media response described above. More specifically, they correspond to Patterson’s (1994) leading party generic storyline. Still, the increase in coverage after a decrease in poll ratings is not generally positive.

\textsuperscript{19} Additional analyses splitting positive and negative polls confirm this interpretation.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

coverage, as would be expected for the underdog version of a counteracting type effect, but negative coverage increases at an about equal rate as well.

The effects for challenger party coverage are quite different. In line with Patterson’s generic trailing party storyline, the challenger (SPD) in general received less coverage than front runner CDU ($\beta = 0.38$ vs $\beta = 0.85$), and the effects of polls on its coverage were likewise smaller. The two marginally significant positive effects on total coverage ($\beta = 5.25 / 1.0\%$ of its range) and negative coverage ($\beta = 2.04 / 1.3\%$ of its range) again, broadly, appear to support the counteracting type media response. Apparently, increasing poll ratings did make the challenger more likely to be covered, but this increased coverage was mostly negative. Again the results do not fit neatly in any one type of media response within the typology outlined above. The positive effect of total SPD coverage with changes in poll ratings seems to support the magnification type, and resembles a bandwagon response. However, the negative tone of this coverage rather supports the counteracting type response. The results for the smaller parties (FDP, Linke and Grüne) are not significant, and support the typology’s ignorance media response category.

Looking at the various controls illustrates the robustness of the results. For example, the control for an SPD time trend shows that the SPD slightly gained in amount of coverage over time during the campaign ($\beta = 0.01$, p = 0.01). This increase is equivalent to 1 additional article/item per day (2.0% of its range) every ten days. However, SPD poll ratings were, on average, also slightly increasing over time. These two trends overlap for SPD, but the overall positive trend in amount of SPD coverage is not included in the positive effect found of its (on average positive) changes in poll ratings on amount of coverage over time, as it is controlled for. It could be that the average increase in poll ratings and amount of media coverage of the SPD are in fact related to each other and that the estimates presented here for responses in SPD coverage to changes in SPD poll ratings are underestimations. Still, one cannot be confident that the correlation between these trends is not spurious, so the conservative choice is to control for this part of the effect, as is done in this model (see Hollander's &

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20 Additional analyses were conducted to test the typology’s substitution scenario of neutral polls yielding more negative coverage compared to positive or negative polls, no significant effects were found.

21 SPD poll ratings increased, for example, according to Forschungsgruppe Wahlen from 25% of the expected vote on August 16, at the beginning of the campaign, to 27% of the expected vote by September 19, in the final days of the campaign.
Vliegenthart, 2008). The controls for the TV debate and other campaign events ("General amount of campaign coverage") also explain significant parts of party coverage (see also Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). External events thus have a strong influence on party coverage, and perhaps also on poll ratings, but these effects are excluded from the estimates of the effects of poll changes presented here. Including these controls thus increases the confidence in the robustness of the findings.

**Table 3** Results of multilevel model explaining next amount of total, positive, negative and neutral coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Total amount of party coverage (Coef.)</th>
<th>Amount of positive party coverage (Coef.)</th>
<th>Amount of negative party coverage (Coef.)</th>
<th>Amount of neutral party coverage (Coef.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change in front runner poll rating (CDU)</td>
<td>-8.61**</td>
<td>-3.69***</td>
<td>-3.53**</td>
<td>-1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in challenger poll rating (SPD)</td>
<td>5.25*</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>2.04*</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in poll rating (all parties)</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past amount</td>
<td>-0.05**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.17***</td>
<td>-0.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU time trend</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>-0.01***</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPD time trend</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
<td>0.00**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General time trend</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After TV debate</td>
<td>0.60***</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.07***</td>
<td>0.42***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before TV debate</td>
<td>0.22***</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General amount of campaign coverage after poll</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>0.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General amount of campaign coverage before poll list</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lag length before poll</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.00*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lag length after poll</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party dummies:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-CDU</td>
<td>0.85***</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
<td>0.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-SPD</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>-0.06***</td>
<td>-0.08**</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained variance at poll list level</td>
<td>3.75%</td>
<td>0.89%</td>
<td>3.98%</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained variance at party-outlet combination level</td>
<td>45.14%</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
<td>31.97%</td>
<td>42.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained by predictor variables*</td>
<td>10.27%</td>
<td>17.68%</td>
<td>7.18%</td>
<td>5.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>-1270.15</td>
<td>1261.24</td>
<td>653.38</td>
<td>-876.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Explained variance at poll list and party-outlet combination levels in the intercept only model minus the explained variance at the poll list and party-outlet combination levels in the models listed here. * = p<0.10, ** = p<0.05, *** = p<0.001, N(cases) = 1980, N(poll lists) = 36, N(parties) = 5, N(outlets)= 11.
Polls and party coverage dynamics

Discussion

Poll ratings influenced party coverage in line with Patterson’s (1994) generic storylines of leading and trailing parties. The front runner (CDU) received most positive and negative coverage throughout the campaign, followed by its main challenger (SPD), while the smaller trailing parties (Linke, Grüne, FDP) received least coverage. Still, their combined coverage amounts to about a third of all (prominent) party coverage in the campaign.

To combine Patterson’s (1994) storyline perspective with the studies of the effects of poll changes on party coverage, this study then took a closer look at the implications of Patterson’s (1994) approach for responses to changing poll ratings within the generic storylines of a leading party or a trailing party. In these two storylines, changes in poll ratings can be considered less relevant, especially when they are small. Accordingly, media could have responded by either ignoring these changes altogether, substituting the generic horse race storylines with negativity, or magnifying the changes to make the race appear to be about parties gaining and losing ground. However, results instead support a counteracting type response: party coverage did react to (marginal) changes in the ratings of the front runner and challenger party, but not in the bandwagon direction. In addition, the kind of effects found fit in the generic storyline applicable to the party in question. In line with a leading party storyline, negative ratings for the front runner (CDU) are found to be more newsworthy than positive ratings, replicating a similar finding by Vliegenthart & Van Aelst (2009). The additional coverage for the front runner was both positive and negative in tone. In line with a trailing party storyline, the effect found for poll increases on amount of coverage for the main challenger party (SPD) is positive, but the tone of this coverage was mostly negative. The effect of poll changes on media coverage for smaller parties (FDP, Grüne, Linke) was non-significant and thus corresponded to the ignorance type response: Their poll changes were ignored in building the party coverage agenda. Patterson (1993) argued that smaller parties matter little to the horse race and tend to be ignored in general.

The small effect sizes of the front runner (CDU) and challenger party (SPD) of changing ratings on coverage may likewise be indications of the ignorance type response. Apparently, the small changes in poll ratings were not magnified to the extent that they determined consecutive party coverage in a major way.
For the front runner party (CDU) a one percent decrease in the polls was found to increase its party coverage with about one article/item per day in any of eleven outlets. Although small, this effect can still be considered substantial, as these are articles/items in highly prominent media slots, such as the front page of a newspaper or the main TV news broadcast. The effect sizes reported here are also in line with previous research. Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2009) report an increase of two articles per week in any of three daily newspapers after a decrease of one percent in the polls for the front runner party (PvdA). These findings are very similar to those presented here: When converted to the scale used in the present study, Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2000) also find an effect of one additional article per day, in any of eleven hypothetical outlets, in response to a one percent drop in the polls.\(^\text{22}\)

Some other studies of the effects of polls on party coverage such as those by Patterson (1994), Sides and Vavreck (2013), Jandura and Petersen (2009) and Christenson and Smidt (2012) study campaigns with much more volatility in party poll ratings. They record jumps and falls of over 10% in candidate/party poll ratings and see one candidate overtaking the other to take the lead. Such campaigns lend themselves much more for generic storylines of a party/candidate gaining ground and losing ground (Patterson, 1994). Such twists and turns give journalists much more opportunity to use polls to structure their campaign narrative, so larger effects on party coverage can be expected. The results presented here can thus be considered a lower bound for the effects of polls on party coverage.

Party coverage of the larger parties, thus, did react to changing poll ratings. In Patterson’s (1993) terminology the CDU was the front runner party throughout the campaign\(^\text{23}\), and, in line with Patterson’s expectation, it received the most (positive and negative) coverage. However, it is unclear from Patterson’s (1993) work how party coverage of a front runner would react to small poll changes. Findings support a, modest, counteracting type of response. The relationship between poll changes and amount of front runner coverage was negative. Decreasing poll ratings led to an increase in its amount of coverage. The results for coverage of the main challenger party (SPD) are a little more complex. The

\(^{22}\) Vliegenthart and Van Aelst (2010) find two additional articles per week in three outlets, this corresponds to \((2/7=) 0.286\) articles per day, and thus \((0.286/3=) 0.095\) articles per outlet per day. Converting this to a situation with eleven outlets would therefore yield \((0.095*11=) 1.05\) articles per eleven outlets per day.

\(^{23}\) CDU always was ahead of its rival SPD by 10% or more in any of the polls.
marginal significant positive effect found of poll changes on amount of coverage supports the amplification type of response: Media seizing on small poll changes and amplifying their substantial meaning by projecting them (implicitly or explicitly) onto larger future trends. However, the additional coverage following increasing poll ratings was mostly negative, suggesting that the future trend projected was not in the bandwagon direction. Thus, overall, the results for the challenger party more likely support the counteracting type of media response. It appears German media and/or campaign teams and interest groups, build their own storyline around the poll results.

The typology of possible media responses to polls presented here shows that counteracting effects reported here were not the only ones possible. The media might, alternatively, have reported on the campaign using magnification of changes in poll results instead. As various studies find that party coverage can influence polls as well as be influenced by them, such reporting might have created a self-fulfilling prophecy (e.g. Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2009). Additional and positive coverage following the, in general, slowly increasing poll ratings for the main challenger party (SPD) could have amplified those changes, creating a further need for positive stories and triggered in a bandwagon. Such an effect was observed by Jandura and Petersen (2009) in the German 2002 Bundestag campaign. Many factors could have contributed to the counteracting effect found here, but the stable lead of the front runner in combination with the large and consistent gap with the challenger appear as a plausible explanation. In 2002 the gap between the two parties was much smaller and the challenger party (SPD) received a strong boom in positive coverage at the start of the campaign. Rising SPD polls nicely fitted the storyline of a successful party gaining ground. Indeed, the SPD soon was a credible opponent to the front running party (CDU) and overtook it in the polls around two weeks before the election. The much larger gap of 10% or more between the two parties in 2013, in combination with no party gaining or losing more than 5% of the expected vote at any stage of the campaign, made such a scenario unlikely for the 2013 election and thus warranted a different media response. Alternatively, the CDU campaign team might have learned from their failure in 2002 and successfully prevented a press narrative like that from happening.

24 in response to their handling of a flood in East Germany (Jandura & Petersen, 2009).
However, various other explanations are just as possible for the findings here. Parties and journalists all have their own stakes in the election campaign game. If polls do not show exciting trends or sudden jumps, journalists search for other ways to make the campaign appealing. Journalists might have used the opportunity of small poll changes to re-tell the front runner vs. likely loser story about CDU vs SPD. Alternatively, the changes in campaign coverage might have been the result of actors other than the media, as (CDU) campaign teams or other interested parties might have been motivated by negative polls to get more positive stories into the news (see Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2009). Using a quantitative content analysis enables more precise examinations of cause and effect, but the data at hand cannot differentiate between these various explanations for the effects found.

As the results support a counteracting response in party coverage to changes in poll ratings, they question an implicit assumption within Slater’s (2007, 2015) Reinforcing Spiral Model (RSM) of media effects. Slater (2015) explains how identity processes drive individuals to select media content in line with their attitudes, which in turn help form and sustain that identity. It appears the RSM implicitly assumes media content to be predictable in terms of attitude consistency, so that the individual media consumer is able to avoid counter attitudinal information through pre-selection. However, especially when attitudes are shifting, media outlets might also have some agency in this process. Media might follow, reinforce or contradict such shifts. They might deliberately seek to either provide attitude consistent coverage in line with the shifting attitudes of their audience, or oppose the shifts and actively appear or try to counter them through their choice and tone of coverage. They might do so for ideological reasons, as they want to advocate a certain political perspective and persuade their audience, but their motives can also be non-ideological, as general news values might steer them either towards or away from attitude confirming content.

Shifting poll ratings can be seen as an indication of such shifts in audience attitudes to which media may or may not respond. The results of this study show that when attitudes are shifting, media do not always provide “predictable” attitude confirming coverage. Increasing support for a party, as indicated by rising poll ratings, does not always generate more and more favorable coverage of this party. In this way individuals, even if they had selected an attitude confirming media diet, are confronted with counter attitudinal
messages. Slater (2015) notes that media selection can be driven by various motivations, including utility, pleasure or other emotional needs, which might lead to counter attitudinal message exposure. However, this study finds that such exposure can also result from media agenda building processes apart from motivated selection. Future research into the agency of media within the RSM can yield more insight into the effects of media agenda building when consumer attitudes are shifting.

As with any individual election case-study, there is only data on a limited number of parties and only within this specific campaign context. This makes it difficult to precisely explain differences with other campaigns. Larger analyses including more parties and elections can also explore party differences with party-level variables such as government versus opposition or left-right orientation. The same goes for explaining outlet differences with outlet-level variables, like ownership or left-right readership. The present study is already complicated by the many dependencies between cases (by party, outlet and poll list), but if possible, adding a cross-election or cross-country layer in future research would be highly interesting to yield more systematic explanations for the effects of polls on media party coverage.

In this paper the data is sorted according to periods before and after the publication of each list of poll ratings by a polling agency. This was done to capture effects distributed over a number of days, and avoid the various problems of aggregating different polls of the same party published on the same day, of comparing poll ratings of the same party by different polling agencies over time, or of dealing with days without any poll being published. This approach does have its own disadvantages though. One such possible disadvantage would be that it does not allow examining the differences between immediate and delayed effects, as it combines periods of different lag lengths into one analysis. However, the limited explained variance at the poll list level, and the small and non-significant coefficients for lag length effects provide some confidence that this problem is not too large.

Compared to earlier studies, this study has used a more precise model of changes of poll effects on party coverage and accounts for differences between polling firms, outlets and parties. It also examined a different kind of campaign: one with overall stable poll ratings. In lieu of exact theoretical expectations for such a case, a four category typology of media responses was proposed. Findings support a counteracting type response as party coverage
in the 2013 German campaign reacted even to marginal changes in poll ratings and, in line with the storyline perspective, in different ways for different parties. Party coverage in this democratic corporatist state did not mindlessly follow a bandwagon, but took a rather active role in the election campaign itself.