

Choosing a media outlet when seeking public approval

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Abstract This paper considers the media outlet choice of a politician who seeks public approval for a political agenda in a broadcast interview. The available media outlets differ in their “toughness” towards the politician. An interview with a tougher media outlet is more informative, but is also more likely to yield a negative outcome. The choice of the media outlet determines the accuracy of the information that flows to the public and the volume of citizens who consume that information. The analysis shows that (1) politicians who enjoy sufficient popularity are likely to avoid tough media outlets, (2) when seeking approval for controversial agendas, politicians are more likely to appear in tougher outlets.

Keywords Media outlets · Public approval · Broadcast interview · Strategic politician

JEL Classification D72 · D83 · L82

1 Introduction

The ability to utilize broadcast media effectively is central to a successful political career. In modern politics, media effort and skill dovetail with political activity. To this end, politicians and public officials including legislators, cabinet members, diplomats, city mayors and even presidents regularly appear in televised interviews to introduce, explain, defend and advance policy positions and agendas.

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From a politician's point of view, much can go wrong during a broadcast interview, as evidenced by numerous infamous examples. A regular complaint by politicians is the so called gotcha questions they sometimes face. These are questions, they claim, that merely aim to embarrass and discredit them, rather than subjecting their policy prescriptions and political experiences to balanced scrutiny.¹ While good journalism requires raising any issues that may help the public to evaluate a politician's credentials and policy position, politicians often argue that they suffer from a media bias, especially when they appear in media outlets with opposing political orientations. Accordingly, the likelihood that a broadcast interview hurts a politician or improves his/her fortunes is perceived to depend heavily on the identity of the interviewer and the media outlet hosting the interview.

A good example for this perception is former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin's now infamous interview with the CBS host Katie Couric. Palin was Senator John McCain's running mate during the 2008 presidential election when she appeared in a series of TV interviews with Couric.² In her memoirs, Palin states that "the campaign's general strategy involved coming out with a network anchor, someone they felt had treated John well on the trail thus far. My suggestion was that we be consistent with that strategy and start talking to outlets like FOX and the *Wall Street Journal*...but for some reason Nicolle Wallace [a senior campaign staffer] seemed compelled to get me on the Katie bandwagon..." This account clearly indicates that Palin was seeing more conservative news outlets such as FOX News and the *Wall Street Journal* as more accommodating than the left leaning CBS in terms of a better interview outcome.

While an interview with an "accommodating" media outlet is less likely to hurt a politician, a soft interview that is perceived to be deliberately hiding the politician's weaknesses may not be very effective in persuading the public. These considerations suggest that the choice of the media outlet on which to be interviewed is a strategic one for the politician. This paper develops a formal model to analyze the following questions. When seeking public approval for a political agenda, should a politician always avoid critical media outlets and give access only to those perceived to be more accommodating? When is it worthwhile to go through a baptism of fire and face a tough interview that could potentially hurt the politician? How does the politician's optimal media outlet choice depend on factors such as the popularity of the politician and the extent of public controversy his or her agenda generates?

The model features a politician who seeks to build public approval for a political "agenda".³ The agenda's type, which can be good or bad, is *ex ante* unknown to all parties, including the politician. In the baseline model, I consider a population of citizens who are homogenous with respect to the prior beliefs they hold over the agenda and the aversion they have towards approving it. In particular, all citizens assign the same prior probability that the politician has a good agenda. The baseline model refers to this prior probability as the politician popularity. Furthermore, the benefit that a citizen receives when she approves

¹ A very recent example of such complaints is the letter to NBC news by the chairman of Republican National Committee, Reince Prebus, who, after the televised Republican debate hosted by NBC in November 2015, wrote that "the moderators engaged in a series of gotcha questions, petty and meansprited in tone, and designed to embarrass our candidates."

² These interviews now are generally considered to have damaged Palin's campaign seriously.

³ The particular interpretation of this agenda can be varied. The politician could be a potential candidate running for public office and might be seeking to increase the public's approval for his/her candidacy. Another possibility is that the politician could already be occupying public office and might be seeking public's approval for a policy initiative such as a health insurance reform, trade legislation, Supreme Court nomination, etc.

a good agenda or when she does not approve a bad agenda is the same for all citizens.⁴ A citizen is more averse to approval and the agenda therefore is more controversial when the benefit she derives if she does not approve a bad agenda is higher. I refer to this benefit from not approving a bad agenda as the extent of public controversy that the agenda generates. Ex ante, the citizens' prior beliefs and the extent of public controversy the agenda generates are such that no citizen approves the agenda without further information on the agenda's type.

The politician can approach a media outlet for an interview. The interview outcome is a signal (good or bad) that is correlated with the agenda's type. Hence, the interview can provide the viewers with additional information. A continuum of potential media outlets exists that the politician can approach. The media outlets are indexed according to their "toughness" which captures an outlet's lack of favorable bias towards our politician. Formally, the toughness of a media outlet is described by the probability that an interview with that outlet reveals a bad signal when the agenda is bad. If the agenda is good, the interview always reveals a good signal regardless of the media outlet chosen. This framework thus formalizes the idea that an interview with a "tough" media outlet, that is, an outlet whose political orientation is more at odds with that of the politician is more likely to reveal bad news if the agenda is bad. Hence, a tougher outlet is more informative.

On the demand side, becoming a viewer is assumed to be costly and voluntary for individual citizens. A citizen thus watches a televised interview only if the ex ante benefit of becoming a viewer outweighs the cost. A citizen's benefit from watching the interview is driven by the desire to make the correct approval decision, that is, approving a good agenda and not approving a bad one. Therefore, the citizens are more likely to become viewers when they perceive the interview to be more informative on the agenda's type.

In this setting, the politician strategically chooses the media outlet to maximize the fraction of citizens who approve his agenda. The analysis first shows that a viewer approves the agenda only when an interview with a sufficiently tough media outlet reveals a good signal. The viewership volume that the interview attracts is increasing in the toughness of the media outlet and the popularity of the politician, but it is decreasing in the extent of public controversy. Given this viewership behavior, the analysis then solves for the optimal (approval maximizing) media outlet choice. The optimal media outlet toughness the politician chooses is (i) decreasing in the politician's popularity, (ii) increasing in the politician's own optimism about the agenda, and (iii) increasing in the degree of controversy the agenda generates.

The baseline model captures the politician's popularity simply by the common prior probability that the citizens believe he has a good agenda. In order to capture the politician's popularity in a richer setting, I also present an extension with heterogeneous citizens. In this extension, all citizens continue to have the same prior beliefs about the agenda's type, and they all derive the same benefit from approving a good agenda and not approving a bad one. However, it is now assumed that it is costly for some citizens to approve the agenda regardless of the agenda's type. I interpret this approval cost as arising from the citizens' heterogeneous sentiments towards the politician.

More specifically, the extended model introduces two types of citizens. A certain fraction of citizens are *unfriendly* in the sense that they have negative sentiments towards the politician. Regardless of the agenda's type, these unfriendly citizens incur a cost when they approve the agenda. This cost can be thought of as psychological and may simply

⁴ Throughout the paper, I use the female pronoun when referring to the citizens and the male pronoun when referring to the politician.

arise owing to the personal emotions the politician triggers. Approving the politician's agenda may also be costly because of a citizen's own political leanings and loyalties.⁵ The remaining fraction of the population is composed of *friendly* citizens who do not incur any cost to approve the agenda. In this alternative framework, the politician's popularity is captured by the fraction of friendly citizens in the population.

The analysis with heterogeneous citizens delivers very similar insights. As in the baseline model, a viewer approves the agenda only when an interview with a sufficiently tough media outlet reveals a good signal. The minimum media outlet toughness that unfriendly citizens require for approval is greater than the one required by friendly ones. Hence, an outlet that is sufficiently tough for friendly citizens may not attract any viewership among unfriendly citizens. When the fraction of friendly citizens, and hence the politician's popularity, is larger than a certain critical level, the politician chooses a softer media outlet that attracts viewership only among friendly citizens. Below that critical level of popularity, he chooses a tougher outlet to attract viewership among both types of citizens. Therefore, in this alternative setting as well, the toughness of the media outlet chosen is decreasing in the popularity that the politician enjoys.

These results can provide useful insights into understanding when a politician strategically avoids tough interviews while seeking public approval. The analysis suggests that a sufficiently popular politician can seek approval optimally through accommodating media outlets. Such a politician does not need to leave his comfort zone to face critical media outlets, since he faces an easier task for obtaining approval from an already sympathetic public. A declining popularity, however, may force the politician to seek approval through appearing in tougher outlets. Furthermore, the politicians are more likely to appear in tougher media outlets when seeking approval for controversial agendas. For such agendas, the public is more averse to approval. The politician thus faces a higher persuasion threshold, which can be overcome only by appearing on a tougher media outlet with the hope of revealing to the public a more informative good signal. These insights are discussed further using some anecdotal examples in Sect. 6.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses the related theoretical literature. Section 3 presents the baseline model. Section 4 includes the analysis and main results. Section 5 presents an extension with heterogeneous citizens. Section 6 provides a discussion and concludes.⁶

2 Related literature

This paper contributes to the growing theoretical literature on the interaction between media organizations and politics.⁷ The key contribution of this paper is to analyze how political actors can strategically influence news provision and news consumption to advance their agendas by managing media exposure. The specific question on which I

⁵ For example, a left leaning citizen may find it harder to approve a broad public spending program that is consistent with her political views simply because the agenda is pushed by a conservative politician. Similarly, a citizen who opposes military intervention abroad may find it harder to support a military disengagement agenda when it is proposed by a politician disliked by her political group.

⁶ The formal proofs that are not presented in the text can be found in the Electronic supplementary material.

⁷ Gentzkow et al. (2016) offer a unifying framework on the origins of media bias and distinguish between supply- and demand- driven theories. Prat (2016) presents a recent survey of the theoretical literature on the governmental influence on the media. Prat and Strömberg (2013) provide a general survey of the political economy of mass media, also including a discussion of empirical work.

focus, namely the optimal media outlet choice of a politician who seeks public's approval, has not been studied previously.⁸ However, three main features of the model relate the present work to the existing literature. First, the provision of political news is driven by the *possible* political orientations of media outlets. Second, news consumption by the public is voluntary and is determined by the perceived informativeness of the media outlet. Third, and perhaps what is most important, the politician is a strategic actor who recognizes the political orientations of different media outlets and the public's media consumption behavior when choosing the outlet on which to appear for an interview. Below, I discuss these features in relation to the existing literature to distinguish my contribution.

2.1 Orientations of media outlets

Political news provision in the model, that is, the probabilistic relationship between the interview's outcome and the true state of the world, is driven by a media outlet's exogenous attribute. I refer to this attribute as *toughness*. In particular, the toughness of a media outlet describes that outlet's lack of favorable bias towards our politician. While I do not model the source of this bias explicitly, a possible interpretation is that the bias stems from a given media outlet's political orientation. This is not to suggest that the incentives of the broadcast media are completely ideologically driven. What is crucial for my purposes is to identify a media outlet by its tendency to "play along" with the politician and suppress bad news.⁹ In other words, one does not need to interpret the media outlets in my model as purely politically-oriented. As Prat and Strömberg (2013) argue convincingly, a media outlet with no political motivation can display or deny favorable bias towards a politician merely to advance its commercial interests.

Politically oriented media outlets are a feature common in supply-side theories of media bias. In that work, media firms with political agendas distort news or cover issues selectively to achieve desired political outcomes. Baron (2006) shows that it can be optimal for profit maximizing media firms to allow discretion to politically oriented journalists who report biased news, when these journalists are willing to accept lower pay in exchange for that discretion. In Anderson and McLaren (2012), media firms have preferences over consumer actions and can withhold information strategically. They show that concern about information withholding provides a rationale for merger restrictions in media industries. Duggan and Martinelli (2010) show that the media is less informative when it favors the frontrunner, avoiding issues that may lead to surprises. Bovitz et al. (2002) study how the internal organization structure of a politically driven media outlet can be an obstacle when leading public opinion. These papers have a different focus than mine. The strategic actor in my model is not the politically oriented media firm, but it is the politician

⁸ The political communication literature has long recognized the growing importance of broadcast media relative to traditional means of communication. In a seminal paper, Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) refer to this process as the "*media-zation of politics*." In an early analysis of the US Congress, Kedrowski (1996) identifies a new breed of legislators, that called "media entrepreneurs" who use media appearances and media coverage to promote their legislative initiatives.

⁹ My specification captures the idea that an interview a conservative media outlet, such as Fox News, conducts with a liberal politician is tougher and more informative to the viewers than the one Fox News conducts with a conservative politician. Consistent with this specification, in the case of print media Chiang and Knight (2011) find evidence that newspaper endorsements for the Democratic candidates from left-leaning newspapers are less influential than are endorsements from neutral or right-leaning newspapers and likewise for endorsements for the Republican candidates.

who controls the media's access to relevant information by optimally choosing an interview host.

2.2 News consumption behavior by the public

As I discuss shortly, a common modeling assumption in the literature is that citizens use information from political news to make a private decision. This feature is also present in my setting. All citizens value more information on the agenda's type, as it helps them to make a correct approval decision. In the model, the citizens make their viewership decision according to their perception of the favorable bias towards the politician in a given media outlet and the degree of controversy the agenda generates. The perception of bias determines the information content of the interview and hence the *ex ante* benefit for the citizen of becoming a viewer. Such behavior seems consistent with the empirical evidence provided by Durante and Knight (2012) for the case of Italy. As the news content of public channels switched to a right-wing bias following the 2001 national elections, the authors find that viewers responded to these changes by modifying their choice of news programs. In the case of Russia, Gehlbach and Sonin (2014) similarly document a sharp decline in the viewership of NTV, a commercial station, after its takeover by state-controlled Gazprom and the forced replacement of its top journalists with those more accommodating to Kremlin.¹⁰

2.3 Strategic politician

The focus on a strategic politician whose objective is to persuade the public to take a certain action relates the present paper to the Bayesian persuasion theory of Kamenica and Gentzkow (2011). Kolotilin et al. (2016) apply this theory to a media censorship model and characterize an autocratic regime's optimal censorship policy. Alonso and Camara (2016) study Bayesian persuasion with heterogeneous priors and provide conditions for a sender to benefit from persuasion.¹¹ Differing from this literature, in my model the politician's policy also affects the number of citizens who choose to receive the information, since the citizens' decision to become viewers is endogenous.

In a broader context, the politician's desire to control and influence the flow of information that reaches the public relates this paper to the public choice theory of the mass media. This theory predicts worse outcomes in places where the media is controlled tightly by the government. As Leeson and Coyne (2005) point out, this theory has dominated the investigations of mass media in the economic literature. For example, Djankov et al. (2003) document that in countries where the government owns the media, citizens are poorer, have shorter life expectancies, have less access to sanitation and suffer more from corruption. Leeson (2008) shows that when governments own a larger share of media outlets, regulate the media industry more heavily and actively control the content of news, citizens are more politically ignorant and participate less in politics.¹² Besley and Burgess (2002), Coyne and Leeson (2004) and Strömberg (2004) show that media freedom

¹⁰ Similarly, Chan and Stone (2013) analyze the effects of media proliferation on electoral outcomes assuming that voters may choose news that is too partisan from an informational perspective.

¹¹ Gill and Sgroi (2008, 2012) consider Bayesian persuasion with a privately informed sender. Leeson (2013) offers a public choice application of Bayesian persuasion in the context of tax evasion.

¹² For a study of the political knowledge effects of partisan media for the specific case of Fox News, see Schroeder and Stone (2015).

improves government responsiveness to the wants of the electorate.¹³ Leeson and Coyne (2007) illustrate that politically autonomous mass media outlets can strengthen policy ownership by politicians and help promote better economic outcomes. Gehlbach and Sonin (2014) study an autocratic government that prefers biased news coverage to mobilize a population for a collective goal. They show that a large private advertising market may reduce bias, but also can induce the government to nationalize all media outlets. Even when a government has little direct control, Besley and Prat (2006) show that it can still capture media outlets if media diversity, commercial motives and the transaction costs involved in bribing media outlets are sufficiently low. My politician has no direct control over media outlets, nor can he bribe them, but can still influence coverage by choosing which outlet to appear for an interview.

3 Baseline model

3.1 The politician and the citizens

The model features a politician whose objective is to maximize the fraction of the public that approves a particular political agenda. The *type* of the politician's agenda depends on the unknown state of the world ω , which can be good ($\omega = g$) or bad ($\omega = b$). In what follows, I refer to the realization of state ω as the *agenda's type*. The politician has no private information on the agenda's type and believes that the agenda is good with probability $\pi \in (0, 1)$.

A continuum of citizens exists with mass one. The citizens are homogenous with respect to their prior beliefs about the agenda's type. All citizens assign a probability $p \in (0, 1)$ that the politician has a good agenda. In the baseline model, I refer to the probability p as the politician's popularity. Section 5 introduces a framework with heterogenous citizens and provides an alternative way of capturing the politician's popularity.

3.2 Demand for political news

Each citizen must decide on a private action that is either to “approve” or “not approve” the politician's agenda. The interpretation of what “approval” means can be varied. Approval might mean defending the politician's agenda to friends and colleagues, being vocal about it at a cocktail party or on social media, decorating one's car with bumper stickers in support of the agenda, joining a rally, donating to or volunteering for the politician's campaign, and so on. The *private action* motivation to acquire costly political information is perhaps the most commonly adopted assumption in the literature.¹⁴ While stylized, that modeling choice allows me to introduce a demand for costly political information without requiring any citizen's decision to be pivotal.¹⁵

¹³ In very recent work, Yazaki (2017) examines the effects of local and national newspapers on local political accountability in the case of Japan.

¹⁴ See, among others, Strömberg (2004), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Baron (2006) and Anderson and McLaren (2012).

¹⁵ Citizens may also acquire political information to use when voting. However, the probability that any citizen is pivotal in the election is arbitrarily small. Hence, becoming a more informed voter yields a negligible payoff in the form of improved electoral outcomes. As a result, the voting motive alone is not sufficient for citizens to acquire costly information (see Prat and Strömberg 2013).

Formally, each citizen i chooses a private action $e_i \in \{a, n\}$ where $e_i = a$ corresponds to approving the agenda and $e_i = n$ corresponds to not approving it. Following Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1998), the payoff $v_i(e_i | \omega)$ of citizen i from an approval decision $e_i \in \{a, n\}$ is described as

$$v_i(n|\omega = b) = q, \quad v_i(a|\omega = g) = 1 - q, \quad v_i(a|\omega = b) = v_i(n|\omega = g) = 0, \quad (1)$$

where $q \in (0, 1)$. The above specification implies that approving the agenda ($e_i = a$) is the correct action in state $\omega = g$, whereas not approving it ($e_i = a$) is the correct action in state $\omega = b$. Each citizen receives a payoff q when she does not approve a bad agenda and receives a payoff $1 - q$ when she does approve a good agenda.

Ex ante, a citizen i approves the politician’s agenda if and only if

$$E[v_i(a)] \geq E[v_i(n)] \Rightarrow p \geq q. \quad (2)$$

To approve the agenda, a citizen must believe that the agenda is good with a probability at least q . As q increases, it becomes harder to convince the citizen to approve the agenda. This aversion to approval might arise because of the agenda’s controversial nature. In what follows, I refer to the parameter q as the degree of public controversy the agenda generates. When q is high, the agenda is more controversial. Furthermore, I impose the following parametric restriction on the prior probability citizens assign to the politician having a good agenda.

Assumption 1 $p < q$.

The above restriction in Assumption 1 implies that, ex ante, no citizen approves the politician’s agenda without receiving further information. Assumption 1 thus provides a rationale for the politician to provide the citizens with more information by appearing in a media interview to capture at least some approval.

3.3 Media outlets

A continuum of potential media outlets on the unit line is available for the politician to approach for an interview. A media outlet is indexed by a parameter $z \in [0, 1]$ that captures its “toughness” towards the politician. Specifically, the toughness parameter z measures the media outlet’s lack of favorable bias towards our politician. This exogenous attribute of a media outlet can be thought of as arising from the outlet’s ex ante political leanings. If conducted, the interview generates either a good signal ($s = G$) or a bad signal ($s = B$) to viewers. The toughness z of a media outlet is then described by the probability that an interview hosted by that outlet reveals a bad signal when the agenda is bad. Formally, an interview with a media outlet with toughness z provides the viewers a signal $s \in \{B, G\}$ where

$$\Pr(s = G|\omega = g) = 1 \text{ and } \Pr(s = B|\omega = b) = z \in [0, 1]. \quad (3)$$

The formulation in (3) implies that a media outlet cannot produce a bad interview outcome when the agenda is good, but potentially can prevent a bad outcome when the agenda is bad.¹⁶ The ex ante likelihood that a bad agenda is revealed as bad in the interview depends on the toughness of the media outlet. A tougher media outlet is more *inclined* to ask tough

¹⁶ In Sect. 4.4, I relax this assumption and show that the politician never chooses a media outlet that can produce a bad signal when the agenda is good.

questions and hence is more likely to reveal a bad signal when the agenda is bad.¹⁷ In that respect, z measures the media outlet's lack of favorable bias. The above specification thus formalizes the idea that different media outlets, perhaps owing to their political orientations, have exogenous and commonly known attitudes towards our politician.¹⁸

3.4 Viewership

Becoming a viewer is costly for citizens. A citizen i must pay a idiosyncratic private cost c_i to watch the interview. The random variable c_i is distributed uniformly on the unit interval $[0, 1]$. The assumption of an idiosyncratic private cost of consuming news is common in the literature. In their survey of the theoretical literature on media bias, Gentzkow et al. (2016) refer to c_i as citizen i 's private time cost of news consumption.¹⁹

The viewership decision of a citizen i is described by the indicator function $\lambda_i : [0, 1] \rightarrow \{0, 1\}$ where $\lambda_i = 1$ when this citizen pays the cost c_i and watches the interview, and $\lambda_i = 0$ when the citizen does not pay c_i and does not watch the interview.

To summarize, the sequence of events in the model is summarized below.

- Stage 1 The politician chooses the media outlet on which to appear for an interview.
- Stage 2 Observing the media outlet's toughness z , the citizens make their viewership decisions.
- Stage 3 The interview sends the viewers either a good or a bad signal.
- Stage 4 All citizens choose whether to approve or not approve the interviewed politician's agenda.
- Stage 5 The agenda's type is realized. Those citizens who did not approve the agenda receive a payoff q if the agenda is bad, whereas those who did approve it receive a payoff $1 - q$ if the agenda is good.

4 Analysis

The analysis proceeds as follows. The next section describes the optimal approval decision for citizens. I endogenize the interview's viewership volume in Sect. 4.2. Given the optimal viewership and approval decisions of citizens, I set up and solve the politician's optimal media outlet choice problem in Sect. 4.3.

¹⁷ In my setting, the signal that the interview sends cannot be misinterpreted by its receivers. In Stone (2011), both consumers and reporters misinterpret information for ideological reasons and have biased beliefs about the extent to which others misinterpret information.

¹⁸ For example, a right leaning politician appearing on Fox News might face an interview with softer questions (a relatively low z) compared to the case when the same politician appears on a more liberal outlet such as CNN or CBS. The key point is to identify a media outlet by its tendency to "play along" with the politician.

¹⁹ In the baseline model, this private cost is the only source of heterogeneity among citizens. The citizens are homogenous with respect to their prior beliefs about the agenda's type and the benefit they derive from their approval decisions. If all citizens had a common cost c , for a given media outlet toughness z , either all citizens would watch the interview or no citizen would watch it. The idiosyncratic private cost assumption yields a viewership volume that is linear and increasing in the media outlet toughness.

4.1 Approval decision

Given the toughness of the media outlet chosen by the politician and the particular interview outcome, those citizens who have watched the interview update their beliefs about the agenda's type. Those citizens who do not become viewers choose $e_i = n$ by Assumption 1. Since a bad signal perfectly reveals that the politician's agenda is bad, all viewers choose $e_i = n$ when the interview reveals $s = B$. Let us now characterize the condition under which a viewer approves the agenda when the interview reveals $s = G$.

Given media outlet toughness z , let $\hat{p}(z)$ denote the posterior probability that a viewer assigns to the agenda being good when the interview reveals a good signal. We have

$$\hat{p}(z) \equiv \Pr(\omega = g | \lambda_i = 1, s = G) = \frac{p}{p + (1-p)(1-z)}. \quad (4)$$

A viewer with the posterior belief $\hat{p}(z)$ chooses $e_i = a$ if and only if

$$\begin{aligned} E[v_i(a) | \lambda_i = 1, s = G] &\geq E[v_i(n) | \lambda_i = 1, s = G] \\ &\Rightarrow \hat{p}(z)(1-q) \geq (1-\hat{p}(z))q \\ &\Rightarrow \hat{p}(z) \geq q. \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Using (4), the approval condition in (5) can be rewritten as

$$\hat{p}(z) \geq q \Rightarrow z \geq \frac{q-p}{q(1-p)}. \quad (6)$$

Therefore, the politician can secure approval if and only if an interview with a sufficiently tough media outlet reveals a good signal. This result is stated formally below.

Lemma 1 *A viewer approves the agenda if only if $s = G$ and $z \geq z_{\min}$ when the minimum media outlet toughness is given by*

$$z_{\min} = \frac{q-p}{q(1-p)} \in (0, 1). \quad (7)$$

Minimum media outlet toughness z_{\min} is increasing in q and decreasing in p .

4.2 Viewership decision

Consider a citizen's ex ante expected payoff from watching the interview. Given Assumption 1, the default action of this citizen is $e_i = n$. When this citizen does not switch his action to $e_i = a$ even after watching an interview that reveals $s = G$, the citizen experiences no gain from becoming a viewer. That is the case when $z < z_{\min}$, i.e., when the media outlet does not exhibit the minimum required toughness. Hence, suppose that $z \geq z_{\min}$. In this case, a viewer's ex ante expected payoff from becoming a viewer is given by

$$\Pr(s = G)\hat{p}(z)v_i(a|g) + \Pr(s = B)v_i(n|b) - c_i. \quad (8)$$

The first term in (8) follows, because for $z \geq z_{\min}$ a viewer chooses $e_i = a$ when the interview reveals $s = G$. With the posterior probability $\hat{p}(z)$, the action $e_i = a$ yields to that citizen a payoff $v_i(a|g) = 1 - q$ where $\hat{p}(z)$ is described in (4). The second term in (8) follows from the fact that when the interview generates $s = B$, this signal perfectly reveals

the agenda as bad.²⁰ In this case, the viewer chooses $e_i = n$ and receives a payoff $v_i(n|b) = q$ with probability one.

If a citizen does not become a viewer, she chooses $e_i = n$ again by Assumption 1. In this case, the citizen receives a payoff of $v_i(n|b) = q$ with the prior probability $1 - p$ that she assigns to the agenda being bad. Therefore, provided that $z \geq z_{\min}$, a citizen watches the interview if and only if the ex ante expected payoff from doing so described by (8) is at least as large as $(1 - p)v_i(n|b)$. The participation constraint for a citizen to become a viewer thus takes the form

$$\Pr(s = G)\hat{p}(z)v_i(a|g) + \Pr(s = B)v_i(n|b) - c_i \geq (1 - p)v_i(n|b). \quad (9)$$

Simplifying the expression in (9), one finds that a citizen becomes a viewer if and only if

$$c_i \leq (1 - p)qz - (q - p), \quad (10)$$

where $z \geq z_{\min}$. Since $c_i \sim U[0, 1]$, we have the following Lemma.

Lemma 2 *Viewership volume is given by*

$$V(z) = \begin{cases} (1 - p)qz - (q - p) & \text{if } z \geq z_{\min}, \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

The viewership volume is (i) increasing in the toughness z of the media outlet, (ii) increasing in the popularity p of the politician and (iii) decreasing in the degree of agenda's controversy q .

4.3 Optimal choice of media outlet

The politician's objective is to choose a media outlet that maximizes his total expected approval. Given the viewership condition in (10), a citizen becomes a viewer only if the media outlet toughness satisfies $z \geq z_{\min}$. Conditional on becoming a viewer, this citizen then approves the agenda whenever $s = G$. As a result, in equilibrium all viewers approve the agenda when the interview reveals a good signal. The politician achieves no viewership and hence no approval, if he chooses a media outlet with $z < z_{\min}$.

Recall that the politician assigns a prior probability π to his agenda being good. Therefore, from the politician's point of view, a media outlet with toughness z reveals a good signal with an ex ante probability of $[1 - (1 - \pi)z]$. Formally, the politician's problem is to choose a media outlet toughness z to maximize expected approval given by

$$S(z) \equiv [1 - (1 - \pi)z]V(z). \quad (12)$$

In this objective function, the viewership volume $V(z)$ is described in (11). Maximization of (12) with respect to z yields the following result.

Proposition 1 *The optimal media outlet toughness that the politician chooses is given by*

$$z^* = \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{1 - \pi} + \frac{q - p}{q(1 - p)} \right). \quad (13)$$

²⁰ This observation follows from the signal technology specification in (3).

We can now describe how optimal media outlet toughness z^* in (13) depends on the exogenous parameters q , p and π . As Lemma 2 illustrates, the interview's viewership volume declines when the agenda becomes more controversial (as q increases) and rises when the politician is more popular (as p increases). Since citizens approve the agenda only if they are viewers, as q increases the politician chooses a tougher media outlet. This observation follows because with a more controversial agenda, convincing the public to become viewers requires a tougher and hence more informative outlet. Therefore, z^* is increasing in q . As p increases, citizens assign a higher prior probability to the politician having a good agenda. In this case, they can be persuaded with a good signal from a less tough media outlet. Accordingly, z^* is decreasing in the popularity of the politician. As π increases, the politician becomes more optimistic that the interview will reveal a good signal. Owing to this effect, the politician's primary concern becomes increasing viewership volume by choosing a tougher outlet rather than increasing the likelihood of a good signal by choosing a softer outlet. Therefore, z^* in (13) is increasing in π . These comparative statics results are stated formally below.

Corollary 1 (i) When the politician is more popular (as p increases), he chooses a softer media outlet. (ii) When the agenda is more controversial (as q increases), the politician chooses a tougher media outlet. (iii) When the politician is more optimistic about the agenda (as π increases), he chooses a tougher media outlet.

To identify the implication of the politician's prior beliefs about the agenda's type for his media outlet choice, so far I have assumed that the citizens and the politician assign different prior probabilities to the agenda being good. One can set $\pi = p$ in (13) and obtain the following result.

Corollary 2 When the politician and the citizens have the same prior beliefs about the agenda's type, that is, when $\pi = p$, we have $z^* = (2q - p)/[2q(1 - p)]$.

4.4 Bad signal for a good agenda

The baseline model studied so far does not allow for a negative interview outcome when the agenda is good. In this section, I relax that assumption. As before, an interview with a media outlet reveals either a good or a bad signal. Suppose now available media outlets are indexed according to a vector (y, z) where

$$\Pr(s = G|\omega = g) = y \in [0, 1] \text{ and } \Pr(s = B|\omega = b) = z \in [0, 1]. \quad (14)$$

In this new formulation, a media outlet can generate a negative signal with probability $1 - y$ when the agenda is good. A media outlet with $y < 1$ exhibits *negative bias* towards the politician in the sense that an interview with that outlet can produce a bad signal for a good agenda with a positive probability.

Does the politician ever find it optimal to grant an interview to an outlet with $y < 1$? The answer is no. An interview with such an outlet always undermines the politician's objective of maximizing expected approval. Two reasons underlie that conclusion. First, conditional on a good signal, an outlet with negative bias ($y < 1$) makes approval harder and hence reduces viewership. As y declines (more negative bias), a viewer updates her beliefs to a lesser extent after receiving a good signal, since this signal is now less informative. That weaker response makes securing approval after a good signal harder. As such, the viewership that the interview attracts also shrink as y declines. Second, an outlet with $y < 1$ ex ante makes it less likely that the interview produces a good signal further, thus

undermining expected approval. The proof of the following result, presented in the ESM, formalizes these observations.

Lemma 3 *In equilibrium, the politician never chooses a media outlet that can produce a bad signal for a good agenda with a positive probability, i.e., $y^* = 1$.*

5 Heterogenous citizens

In the baseline model, the politician's popularity is captured by the common prior probability that the citizens assign to the politician having a good agenda. This interpretation may be seen as restrictive. One may argue that the citizens' prior beliefs about the agenda's type could be driven mostly by the specifics of the particular agenda in question and not so much by their attitudes towards the politician himself. To capture the politician's popularity in a more natural way, this section introduces heterogeneity among citizens.

As in the baseline model, all citizens are assumed to have the same prior beliefs about the agenda's type. Furthermore, all citizens again receive the same payoffs when they do not approve a bad agenda and when they approve a good one. I now assume that it is costly for some citizens to approve the politician's agenda. The idea is that some citizens have negative attitudes or sentiments towards the politician. That makes it costly for them to approve his agenda regardless of their information on the agenda's type. That cost may arise from the personal emotions the politician triggers. It may also be driven by a citizen's own political leanings and loyalties. For example, a politically left leaning citizen may find it hard to approve an agenda that is consistent with her political views simply because the agenda is pushed by a conservative politician that she dislikes. In this alternative setting, I refer to the politician as more popular when the fraction of the population that finds it costly to approve his agenda is smaller.

Consider now a population in which a citizen can belong to one of two groups. A fraction $\mu \in (0, 1)$ of citizens have negative sentiments towards the politician. I refer to those citizens with negative sentiments as *unfriendly* types (denoted by type $\theta = u$). The remaining fraction $1 - \mu$ of citizens are sympathetic towards the politician. I refer to those citizens as *friendly* types (denoted by type $\theta = f$). The only difference between a type u and type f citizen is the cost that a type u citizen must incur to approve the agenda. Regardless of the agenda's type, a type u citizen incurs a cost $k > 0$ when she approves the agenda, whereas a type f citizen incurs no approval cost. I now refer to the politician as more popular when μ is smaller.

As before, all citizens receive the same payoff q when they do not approve a bad agenda, receive $1 - q$ when they approve a good agenda and receive zero payoff otherwise. Furthermore, all citizens assign the same prior probability p that the agenda is good regardless of their types. For simplicity, I assume that the politician also assigns the same probability p that his agenda is good.

Ex ante, a type f citizen approves the agenda if and only if $p \geq q$. I maintain Assumption 1 and assume that $p < q$. Therefore, even the friendly citizens do not approve without additional information on the agenda's type. The politician can provide more information on the agenda's type by appearing in an interview. The media interview technology is again described by (3). To become a viewer, citizen i of type $\theta \in \{u, f\}$ must pay an idiosyncratic private cost c_i^θ which has a uniform distribution on the unit interval.

In the remainder of this section, I analyze this alternative model following similar steps as in Section 4.

5.1 Approval decision

Given Assumption 1, regardless of her type a citizen again approves the agenda if and only if she becomes a viewer and the interview with a sufficiently tough media outlet reveals a good signal. However, owing to the cost k they incur when they approve, type u citizens require a minimum toughness level which is strictly higher than the one required by type f citizens.

Lemma 4 *A citizen of type $\theta \in \{u, f\}$ approves the agenda if only if she becomes a viewer and the interview with a sufficiently tough outlet reveals $s = G$. The minimum media outlet toughness for type f and type u citizens are given by*

$$z_{\min}^f = \frac{q-p}{q(1-p)} \text{ and } z_{\min}^u = \frac{q+k-p}{(q+k)(1-p)}. \quad (15)$$

For any $k > 0$, we have $z_{\min}^u > z_{\min}^f$.

Remark 1 Suppose that a type u citizen does not incur a cost k to approve the agenda, but heterogeneity is introduced in the following way. A type $\theta \in \{u, f\}$ citizen receives a payoff q_θ when she does not approve a bad agenda and receives a payoff $1 - q_\theta$ when she approves a good agenda. Furthermore, assume that $q_f = q$ and $q_u = q + k$ where $k > 0$. Introducing heterogeneity in this alternative way yields exactly the same approval behavior as in Lemma 4. One could also introduce heterogeneity by assuming that the citizens differ in the prior probabilities that they assign to the agenda being good. Suppose a type θ citizen assigns a prior probability p_θ that the agenda is good and assume $p_u < p_f$. In this formulation, one again obtains two minimum toughness thresholds with $z_{\min}^u > z_{\min}^f$ similar to those derived in Lemma 4. The implication for approval behavior is the same in all three cases. A citizen (i) who incurs a cost to approve regardless of the agenda's type ($k > 0$) or (ii) who requires a higher posterior belief to approve (higher q) or (iii) who starts with a more pessimistic prior belief on the agenda's type (lower p) requires a higher minimum media outlet toughness to approve the agenda.²¹

5.2 Viewership volume

A citizen pays the cost and becomes a viewer only if she anticipates that she will change her default action and approve the agenda following a good signal. Given Lemma 4, no type f citizen becomes a viewer if $z < z_{\min}^f$ and no type u citizen becomes a viewer if $z < z_{\min}^u$. The following result describes the total viewership volume that a media outlet with toughness z can attract.

Lemma 5 *For a given media outlet toughness z , the total viewership volume $V_T(z)$ that the interview attracts is given by*

²¹ Among alternative ways to introduce heterogeneity, the one adopted in this section seems to be the most natural and analytically tractable one. I am grateful to an anonymous referee whose comments helped me to introduce heterogeneity in this manner.

$$V_T(z) = \begin{cases} (1 - p)(q + \mu k)z - (q - p + \mu k) & \text{if } z \in [z_{\min}^u, 1], \\ (1 - \mu)[(1 - p)qz - (q - p)] & \text{if } z \in [z_{\min}^f, z_{\min}^u], \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \tag{16}$$

The total viewership volume in (16) indicates that viewership is always increasing in media toughness z . However, when type u citizens also become viewers, the viewership volume is more sensitive to z for any $\mu > 0$ and $k > 0$.

5.3 Optimal media outlet choice

When choosing the toughness of the media outlet optimally, the politician basically chooses whether to seek approval only among type f citizens or among both type f and type u citizens. An optimal policy $z_f^* \in (z_{\min}^f, z_{\min}^u)$ attracts only type f citizens as viewers, whereas an optimal policy $z_b^* \in [z_{\min}^u, 1]$ attracts both types of citizens. The politician’s choice between these two optimal policies depends on the expected approval volume that he can generate in each case. One should also note that for an optimal policy z_f^* that targets only type f citizens to be feasible, the approval cost k of type u citizens must be sufficiently high. Otherwise, this policy attracts type u citizens as well. In particular, one can observe from (15) that

$$z_{\min}^u - z_{\min}^f = \frac{p}{(1 - p)q} \left(\frac{k}{q + k} \right). \tag{17}$$

Unless k is sufficiently large, not enough difference exists between the approval behaviors of type f and type u citizens, and the region $z_{\min}^u - z_{\min}^f$ is too small to sustain an optimal policy. In the subsequent analysis, I maintain the parametric restriction $k > q$. As shown in the ESM, the restriction $k > q$ is both necessary and sufficient to ensure that an optimal policy z_f^* that targets type f citizens only does not attract type u citizens as well, that is, $z_f^* < z_{\min}^u$.

The analysis of the politician’s optimal media outlet choice (see the ESM) reveals that the politician’s optimal policy depends crucially on the fraction μ of type u citizens in the population. When μ is less than a critical threshold and hence the politician is sufficiently popular, he targets only type f citizens. Otherwise, he targets both types of citizens.

Proposition 2 *A unique threshold fraction $\mu^* \in (0, 1)$ of unfriendly (type u) citizens exists such that the politician’s optimal policy is described as follows:*

- (i) *For $\mu < \mu^*$, the politician targets only friendly (type f) citizens and chooses an optimal media outlet toughness of*

$$z_f^* = \frac{2q - p}{2q(1 - p)}. \tag{18}$$

- (ii) *For $\mu \geq \mu^*$ the politician targets both friendly (type f) and unfriendly (type u) citizens and chooses an optimal media outlet toughness of*

$$z_b^* = \frac{2q - p + 2\mu k}{2(q + \mu k)(1 - p)}. \quad (19)$$

The proof of Proposition 2 in the ESM also verifies that $z_f^* \in (z_{\min}^f, z_{\min}^u)$ and $z_b^* > z_{\min}^u$. Proposition 2 establishes that when his popularity is below a critical threshold, the politician targets both types of citizens by choosing a tougher media outlet. Above that popularity threshold, it is optimal to target only type f citizens with a softer outlet. As μ increases, a larger fraction of citizens must incur a cost to approve the politician's agenda regardless of the agenda's type. In this case, it takes a good signal from a tougher media outlet to obtain their approval. Furthermore, as the politician becomes less popular, the toughness z_b^* of the outlet chosen increases. Finally, the optimal media outlet toughness levels z_f^* and z_b^* chosen under both regimes rise as the agenda becomes more controversial (as q increases). The following Corollary formalizes these comparative statics results.

Corollary 3 *The equilibrium with heterogenous citizens has the following properties:*

- (i) *A politician who enjoys sufficient popularity ($\mu < \mu^*$) chooses a softer media outlet than one who lacks sufficient popularity ($\mu \geq \mu^*$). That is, $z_f^* < z_b^*$.*
- (ii) *z_b^* is increasing in μ , that is, the optimal media outlet toughness chosen to target both types of citizens increases as the politician becomes less popular.*
- (iii) *Both z_f^* and z_b^* are increasing in q . That is, under both regimes the politician chooses a tougher media outlet as the agenda becomes more controversial.*

6 Discussion and conclusion

In modern politics, managing relationships with the news media is of critical importance for a successful political career because the public receives most of its political information from the media, including online outlets. In this context, the live broadcast of political interview has been recognized as one of the principal ways in which the politicians can interact with reporters and influence public opinion (see Brandts and Voltmer 2011). The politicians thus seem to pay particular attention to the orientations of different media outlets when they choose which outlet to appear for a broadcast interview. As Durante and Knight (2012) document for the case of Italy after the 2001 national elections, the public's perception of the bias by a given news channel causes a shift in their viewership decisions. For this reason, the choice of the media outlet for an interview affects not only the persuasiveness of the politician's interview performance in the eyes of the public, but also the number of citizens who "tune in" for this performance.

This paper introduces the politician as a strategic actor who optimally chooses the media outlet for a broadcast interview when seeking public approval for a political agenda. The main contribution of the paper to the existing literature is to analyze how political actors can influence news provision and news consumption to advance their agendas by controlling their media exposure. The choice of a media outlet for a broadcast interview is one instance in which politicians do seem to exert a fair amount of control over this exposure. The analysis shows that politicians who are sufficiently popular are more likely to avoid tougher media outlets. When seeking approval for controversial agendas, however, politicians are more likely to grant access to tougher outlets. While the model is

stylized, these results can provide useful insights.²² In the absence of any empirical research providing guidance, in what follows, I provide some anecdotal evidence that supports the analysis.

Politician's popularity. The following episode during the rise of Margaret Thatcher to become the first female British Prime Minister provides an interesting example that lends some support to this prediction.

During the winter of 1978–79, later dubbed by the British Press as the “winter of discontent”, the Labor government in Britain faced growing public unease as a result of rising unemployment and a series of damaging labor strikes. Jones and Robins (1992) provide an excellent account of how Margaret Thatcher, the leader of the opposition at the time, skillfully managed media relationships and broadcast interviews under the guidance of her public relations strategist Gordon Reece, himself a former television presenter:²³ “*Thatcher was advised to avoid tough encounters with heavyweight interviewers and instead look for easier opportunities for exposure, including friendly interviews. Instead of giving interviews or press conferences in which she might be caught out, Ms. Thatcher was presented in a series of eloquent visual settings, the most enduring perhaps, being the calf she obligingly cuddled in an East Anglia farm, while the equally obliging media worked their cameras.*”

Given the Labor Party's growing unpopularity during the 1979 election campaign, which is still remembered by the Conservative Party's slogan of the period “Labour is not working” and Ms. Thatcher's rising stock, her strategy of avoiding tough interviews seems to be consistent with the results of this paper. In this example, Ms. Thatchers' now iconic embrace of the calf clearly did not target any skeptics, who all loathed the manipulative nature of the image, but rather aimed to endear herself further to sympathetic voters.

Sarah Palin's interview with CBS host Katie Couric, discussed in the introduction, also seems to be consistent with the results of this paper. Sarah Palin was a relative unknown when she became Senator John McCain's running mate during the 2008 US presidential election. Given her lack of popularity among the public, the media strategists in the Palin camp might have seen it as worthwhile for her to appear in a tougher interview.

Public attitudes towards the agenda. Young (2008) examines the broadcast interview strategies used by Australian Prime Minister John Howard in 2003 to present his case for military action in Iraq, when opinion polls showed that a large fraction of Australians opposed the war. She reports that Howard conducted 13 television and 22 radio interviews during February and March of 2003, covering a wide range of media outlets that included those very critical of any military intervention. Given the accepted wisdom in public discourse that Australians are disengaged with politics in normal times, this interview strategy supports this paper's prediction that controversial agendas call for appearing in tougher media outlets.

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²² While historical accounts (see McNair 2000 and Jones and Robins 1992 for the British case), are available, very little empirical research exists on the political broadcast interview. Most of the published studies is done using tools of sociolinguistics, syntactic pattern of speech and discourse analysis. See, for example, Clayman et al. (2006).

²³ See the essay “Politicians, Broadcasters and the Political Interview” by Jones in Jones and Robins (1992).

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