

Image is Everything: Decoding the British Press' Portrayal of Leader Traits

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ABSTRACT

Voters form impressions of leaders based on what they see in the media. This study undertakes a content analysis of more than 3,000 newspaper articles published during the leader-centric 2017 British general election campaign to understand the portrayal of the two prime ministerial candidates, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, in the country's partisan press. I explore the extent and conditions under which partisan bias and media values such as fairness influenced the newspapers' construction of leader images with regard to two specific traits – competence and character. I find that partisan bias was dominant across the press and newspapers effectively serve as a proxy campaign vehicle for political parties by painting radically different images of the two leaders. The newspapers borrow from the playbook of negative campaigning by actively vilifying the candidate of the party they do not support. Contrary to expectations, this trend is also visible in the so-called quality press. Notably, partisan support of a candidate is expressed through silence by devoting less attention to the attributes of the candidate they would like to see elected. The findings lead to worrying questions about press ethics in the UK and the media's impact on polarisation of societies in liberal democracies.

Keywords: Personalisation of politics, leader traits, media coverage of election campaigns, partisan bias, media logic, polarisation

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INTRODUCTION

The date is April 9, 1992. Britain is set to vote in a general election. The Sun, one of the country's most widely-read newspapers, has on its front page a headshot of prime ministerial candidate Neil Kinnock embedded within a light bulb. The headline: "If Kinnock wins today will the last person in Britain please turn out the lights?" (Dowell 2012) Twenty-three years later, the same newspaper had a similarly memorable front page as Britain geared up to vote in the 2015 general election. This time, it featured a photograph of prime ministerial candidate Ed Miliband clumsily eating a bacon sandwich. The headline: "Save Our Bacon" -- a phrase which refers to avoiding a dangerous situation. The subhead: "Look at what Ed is doing to a hapless sarnie (sandwich). In 48 hours, he could be doing the same to Britain". A second subhead: "Keep him and his porkies (lies) out" (Martinson 2015).

The two front pages bore several similarities. In both cases, the newspaper used imagery and wordplay to tell its readers that the two prime ministerial candidates -- both from the Labour party -- were incompetent and should not be elected to office. Another commonality was that in the aftermath of the election results, it became conventional wisdom -- at least in media circles -- that it was these front pages that had contributed to the defeat of the two leaders and their respective parties. In fact, The Sun even declared itself the decisive factor in the 1992 election with its post-election day front page declaring in bold letters: "It's The Sun Wot Won It" (Dowell 2012). Political scientists would certainly be more skeptical and seek scientific evidence to determine whether it was indeed this front page that won the election for John Major's Conservative party. But that is beside the point. The purpose of these vignettes was to highlight elements fundamental to this exploratory research project, which examines how the British press portrays prime ministerial candidates during election campaigns and the

influences on their coverage of leader traits. Portrayal here refers to the holistic image of a leader that emerges from the pages of a newspaper based on assessments from a vast number of sources, not just evaluations made by the newspaper alone. One key aspect of the aforementioned examples was that the newspaper made opinionated assessments of the leaders. The second was that the newspaper was not afraid to be partisan by declaring its opposition to a particular leader and party while endorsing another. Lastly, with its call to action, the newspaper appeared convinced of its ability to influence voters. Going by the literature on voting behaviour, it is possible that the newspaper succeeded in this endeavour.

It has been well-established that voters look for certain qualities in political leaders (Bittner 2011; King 2002). Traits such as honesty and integrity can be considered a “shortcut” for voters and scholars unanimously agree that leader evaluations influence voting choice. Arguably, it does not matter whether the leaders actually possess these qualities as much as it matters that they are *perceived* to possess them. And this is why the media’s portrayal of leaders is so significant. Leaders are sharply in focus during election campaigns and according to Ohr (2015), election campaigns are fought via the media. Patterson (1980, 9) suggests likewise and points out that voters rely on the mass media for access to election campaigns, while noting that Colin Seymour-Ure goes as far as to suggest that a campaign exists only as a construct of the media. In other words, what the public sees is not the “real” campaign but rather the media’s version of it. This proposition could be extended to suggest that voters see the media’s version of leaders rather than the real version of them.

The personalisation of politics amid a perceived decline in voter partisanship has meant that candidate traits have over time come to dominate the media’s coverage of campaigns. Journalists assume that individual leaders matter and base their coverage on this premise (King 2002, 8). Within the media landscape, Ohr (2013) demonstrates how television made politics more personalised, even in less individual-centric forms of government such as parliamentary

democracies like the UK. This has plausibly contributed to the notion of the “presidentialisation” of parliamentary politics. Newspapers and radio have followed this trend of personalisation to keep pace with their rivals (Aarts et al. 2011). Bartle and Crewe (2003, 72) contend that the media covers elections as if they were “gladiatorial battles between two individuals rather than two armies”.

While media effects on voter evaluation of leaders are known to exist even in the most neutral media environments, it could plausibly be argued that the scope for influence is greater in Britain, where newspapers -- both the sensationalist tabloids and the more serious broadsheets -- are unabashedly partisan as they openly support either of the two major national parties. In addition, they are not subject to the standards of impartiality imposed on their counterparts in the broadcast media (Ofcom 2021). In other words, a hyper-partisan press may take the agenda-setting theory a step further by not just telling the public what to think about (McCombs and Shaw 1972), but also what to think. Therefore, in a partisan press environment, it can reasonably be expected that the same leader will be portrayed differently in different newspapers. But partisanship alone is too simplistic an explanation and does not offer insights into the context surrounding the portrayal of the leader.

British newspapers are openly partisan but they do not serve as mouthpieces for leaders and parties and a significant chunk of their readers support a different party (Bayram 2013). In addition, their coverage is not wholly defined by their affinity to a particular ideology or party. A number of other factors influence coverage such as journalistic values of fairness and accuracy. For instance, Strömbäck and Shehata (2007) stated that British newspaper journalists consider it their duty to advocate certain values and ideals. A leader not embodying those same values may present a conflict. The research aims to highlight such influences on the British’ press coverage with a specific focus on the portrayal of prime ministerial candidates during one election campaign. An interpretative approach will be adopted to offer a more nuanced view

of the mechanisms at play in the production of content. By better understanding the factors that affect media content, research exploring media effects on voters will be more consequential.

British elections have consistently conformed with the valence model of voting behaviour. Under this model, leadership image is one of the three major factors in electoral choice, with partisanship and economic performance being the other two (Clarke et al. 2004). But the prominence of leadership image is counterintuitive given that British voters do not directly elect their prime minister. Rather, they vote a single individual to parliament from their constituency and the leader of the party with the most parliamentarians becomes prime minister. In other words, in a country with a population of 66 million, it is only a few thousand voters in the party leader's parliamentary constituency who see the person's name on their ballot paper. This means that the personalisation of election campaigns in Britain is quite possibly a media construct. In reality, voter choices could well be defined by the merits of their local candidates and this may have rendered irrelevant past research on evaluations of prime ministerial candidates in the country. The British general election of 2017, however, offers a unique opportunity to meaningfully study how the media constructs the image of prime ministerial candidates.

The 2017 election lent itself perfectly to the aims of this study because leadership was the sole premise of the election even without the media's intervention. Despite the next scheduled election being a full three years away, the incumbent prime minister Theresa May of the Conservative party made the unexpected move to call a snap election. The move came months after Britain had voted to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016. May had become prime minister in the aftermath of Brexit, following the resignation of her predecessor David Cameron. Aware that negotiating a post-Brexit deal would require frequent parliamentary

approval, May wanted to increase her party's tally in the House of Commons¹, where it had only a few seats more than the simple majority required to keep her government afloat. Secondly, having inherited the office without public approval, a snap election was May's way of seeking legitimacy for her leadership. She said the election was called "to secure the strong and stable leadership the country needs to see us through Brexit and beyond" (Reuters 2017). In other words, it was the leader who was setting the agenda for the media -- this election was about leadership.

Another factor in May's decision to call the election was to take advantage of the perceived disarray in the opposition Labour party. Jeremy Corbyn, a backbench MP for several decades and notorious for frequently voting against his party, had unexpectedly been elected leader two years previously. Under Corbyn, Labour became increasingly left-wing and while he was popular among party members, he was not favoured by the centrist parliamentarians from his party. Corbyn lost a no-confidence vote just months before May called the snap election, but retained his position following another intra-party vote. Even so, this instability gave May the opportunity to contrast her apparently strong leadership with the weak leadership of her rival. Opinion polls, too, showed a massive lead for May, who had consistently high approval ratings, and a win seemed like a foregone conclusion².

May eventually went on to win the election but with a significantly weaker mandate. As her personal ratings tumbled, the party fell short of the halfway mark and had to form a coalition government with a regional party. Corbyn, on the other hand, managed to lead Labour to its largest vote share in years as his stock shot up during the campaign³. This makes it worth investigating how the images of the two leaders changed in a few weeks and whether this was

¹ The Conservatives had 330 seats in the House of Commons. The halfway mark was 325 seats.

² The Conservatives had a percentage point lead in double digits.

³ Labour increased its vote share to 40%. It had won 30% of the vote two years earlier.

reflected in the media's coverage. The sudden nature of the election also meant that the media could not premeditate their coverage and instead had to react to events as they happened.

By undertaking a comprehensive content analysis of four newspapers that were selected based on their partisan loyalties, this study aims to chart the portrayal of May and Corbyn, who were being presented to the public as prime ministerial candidates for the first time. To be sure, this study does not concern itself with the outcome of the election or the performance of the parties. Instead, it seeks to offer keen insights into the practices adopted by a partisan British press with regard to shaping the image of national leaders. The findings are intended to be useful for scholars studying media behaviour, journalists who wish to introspect on their work and campaign managers seeking cues on media strategy. In addition, it will also raise questions about the role of the press in liberal democracies.

The research will proceed as follows. The first chapter will delve into the existing literature on leader traits and influences on media behaviour while laying out the theoretical framework of the thesis. The subsequent chapter will place the theoretical elements in the context of the 2017 election and list the expectations of the research. The third chapter will be devoted to the methodological aspects of the study, including the data collection and the coding techniques employed for the content analysis. The fourth chapter will describe broad trends that emerge from the coding process, while the fifth chapter will reconstruct the campaign as told by the various newspapers with the aim of answering of the research question. The sixth chapter will compare the coverage to make concrete inferences about the British media's portrayal of leader traits. A final chapter will conclude by discussing the implications and reflecting on the study's limitations.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The goal of this study is to decode the British press' portrayal of leader traits in election campaigns. This will be done by examining how four UK newspapers constructed the image of two prime ministerial candidates in the 2017 election and the factors that influenced the depiction. In the discussion of the literature and the theoretical framework that follows, two concepts will be explored in detail. The first is the concept of leader traits, which has been widely researched and deserves a thorough review as it constitutes a key element of the study. The second concept is influences on media behaviour, the findings of which will serve as the basis for the expectations of this research.

1.1 Categorisation of Leader Traits

Research in this area goes back more than six decades and arguably stems from The American Voter. In their seminal work on voting behaviour, Campbell et al. (1960, 54) note that “although a candidate is likely to be seen partly in terms of his connection with party and with issues of public policy and matters of group interest, he will be evaluated as well in terms of personal attributes”.

To begin with, the concept of leader traits needs to be properly defined. Broadly speaking, leader traits refer to the characteristics that define party leaders or individual candidates vying to become the head of government (King 2002, 3). The concept does not refer to party affiliations but rather aspects of individual personalities that can be both political, such as leadership and competence, and non-political such as physical appearance and likeability. With regard to specific traits, researchers have over the years identified a battery of characteristics. Scholars examining traits have turned primarily to statistical analysis of national election

surveys for their research. More recently, comparative studies have been possible owing to the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Bittner 2011).

Thermometers were initially used as a way of assessing the personal popularity of leaders. Survey respondents were asked to rate leaders on a scale and then the difference was computed and compared across candidates. However, as Johnston (2002, 174) rightly points out, thermometers carried too much “non-personality freight” and did not reveal anything about the specific traits that matter. In addition, political traits are more niche and hence require a distinct approach. The more effective technique was to turn to specific survey questions. While some countries kept the trait-related questions open-ended, others specifically asked respondents to match leaders to specific traits. While open-ended questions helped identify leader-specific traits, close-ended questions have enabled researchers to narrow traits to a fixed number of categories or dimensions via a combination of factor analysis and intuition (Bittner 2011, 31).

To be sure, no consensus that has emerged on the structure of traits. Different researchers use different traits in their analyses and even omit some that have previously been shown to matter. For example, Bartle and Crewe (2002) analysed the 1997 British election and included traits such as “caring”, “decisive” and “someone who sticks to his principles”. But there is an emerging trend of convergence largely owing to Donald Kinder’s work with the American National Election Studies (ANES). The dimensional analysis of Kinder (1983) threw up four main categories: competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. However, I argue that the streamlined approach adopted by Bittner (2011), who makes inferences based on 35 election studies across seven countries (mostly parliamentary systems) with varying institutional environments, should be considered the best way forward. She reasonably contends that as many as 35 traits can be collapsed into just two categories -- Character and Competence. Contained within these “anchor traits” are supplementary ones such as honesty, responsiveness, warmth, among others.

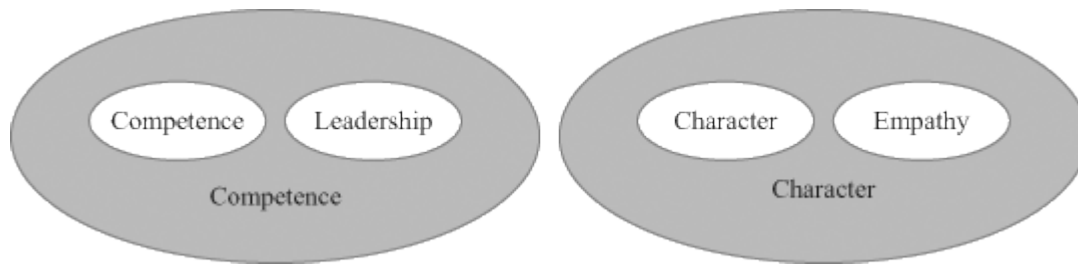


Figure 1: Amanda Bittner's (2011) two-dimensional structure of leader traits

In keeping with the line of argument above, this study will assign evaluations of leaders in the British press to two categories: **Competence and Character**. While the criteria for assigning leader evaluations to these categories will be fully described in the methodology chapter, competence will broadly refer to the candidate's ability and skills to do the job while character has more moral and personal dimensions. It is to be noted, however, that there are correlations both within and across dimensions. Integrity can be classified as both a political ability and a non-political one depending on the context (Brettschneider and Gabriel 2002). Even so, collapsing traits into categories makes sense because of the scope for redundancy. For instance, character and integrity are essentially the same thing. Secondly, the competence and character dimensions offer a parsimonious option for scholarly analysis. Evidence from the bulk of studies suggest it is rare for a leader to rank highly on both character and competence. Former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau was an anomaly in this regard (Johnston 2002).

While it is true that research on traits has been based on voter inferences, it can be plausibly argued that journalists make evaluations along the same lines given that they are interpreting events with the voter in mind. The media constantly supplies fresh cues on candidate traits during election campaigns. In the British case, this new information from the media is tightly packed into a campaign of five to six weeks, significantly shorter than campaigns in other parts of the world. But for voters to trust this information, it is important for them to understand the media attitudes and behaviours that shape the portrayal of these traits.

1.2 Identifying the Influences on Media Content

Given that the crux of this thesis is to examine the factors that influence the media's portrayal of candidate traits, this section will explore some of the key theoretical concepts in this regard. While a number of studies have explored the influences on media content, Shoemaker and Reese's (1991) work in *Mediating The Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* remains an authoritative text in this sphere of research and will contribute significantly to formulating the expectations of this study. Based on extensive research on media practices, the authors proposed a "Hierarchy of Influences" model that included ideology, extra-media forces, organisation, routines and individuals. All these factors contribute to the media's function of gatekeeping, wherein editors deem what is worth publishing from the large pool of information at their disposal (White 1950). This study will primarily build on two influences in the model -- ideology and routines.

1.2.1 Partisan Bias

As mentioned earlier, the British press is openly partisan and this is not by any means a new phenomenon. The first page of this study highlighted The Sun's partisan coverage of prime ministerial candidates between 1992 and 2015. Before that, too, the press regularly took sides in election campaigns and Margaret Thatcher was also known to go the extra mile in courting newspaper owners⁴. But while the example of The Sun illustrated the point that the British press is unafraid of revealing its political preferences, this newspaper differs from its peers in a way that does not serve the aims of this study. The Sun endorsed both Conservative and Labour leaders for prime minister at various times and these endorsements were largely driven by commercial considerations rather than any hardcore ideological commitment⁵. More generally, however, the British press has been rooted in its support for one side or the other

⁴ Thatcher and Blair both actively courted The Sun's proprietor Rupert Murdoch for the paper's endorsement.

⁵ The Sun is believed to have supported both Thatcher and Blair in the hope that they would impose fewer press regulations.

based on the paper's own position on the left-right ideological spectrum. And given that just two parties have alternated in power for several decades, this ideological support has manifested itself in support for either Labour (left) and Conservatives (right).

Media research indicates that these ideological affiliations consciously and subconsciously influence the production of content and contribute to what is known as "partisan bias". Simply put, partisan bias in the media is reflected by the tendency to frame coverage in support of a particular party or individual. Ideological bias falls within the scope of partisan bias, but ideology is not a prerequisite for partisanship. Partisanship is expressed in the form of editorial endorsements of a political candidate, opinion columns, access slots in television or radio, and advertisements (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 40).

Partisan bias can manifest both at the individual and the organisational level. For instance, Schneider and Lewis (1985, 7) note that the profession of journalism attracts individuals who are in general more liberal than most. In fact, the concept of gatekeeping mentioned earlier was derived from a study by White (1950) in which an editor omitted articles from publication based on ideology. But ideological bias is not necessarily evident in the final output. For instance, in his study of the 2008 US presidential campaign, Entman (2010) makes the case that personal ideologies of journalists do not result in unbalanced news. However, when the ideological commitments are at the organisational level and political support transparent as with the British press, it is plausible that this partisan bias seeps down to gatekeeping functions and overall coverage.

Scholars have previously examined partisan bias in press coverage and produced some notable findings. For example, Haselmayer et al. (2017) studied media reports from the 2013 general election in Austria and found that partisan bias coloured media coverage of individual party messages. The subtext of the study was that the media was more likely to report on events

featuring the favoured parties of their readers. To be sure, the partisan bias here does not refer to supporting everything the party does, but rather giving it more attention. Previously, Hallin and Mancini (2004, 136) divided the origins of this bias into supply-side and demand-side factors in which ideological links of a media organisation to a certain party prompt more and better coverage. Eventually, partisan bias will likely result in certain ways of framing the news being favoured over others.

In the British case, newspapers and their readers are both conscious of their partisan biases, but past research indicates that such awareness can also influence coverage. For instance, Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 46) note that some journalists consciously let their biases shape their coverage. However, other journalists go out of their way to overcompensate and present alternative viewpoints. On the face of it, one might assume that British journalists would not be afraid to let their partisan biases influence their work. But there are reasons to believe that partisanship may not necessarily dominate their coverage and other factors such as journalistic values of fairness, balance and accuracy as well as media routines may alter the dynamics of coverage (O'Neill and Harcup 2009; Shoemaker and Reese 2013).

1.2.2 Media Logic

While partisan bias is expected to be a key aspect in the portrayal of prime ministerial candidates in the British press, this section will attempt to highlight other factors that likely influence coverage. As Stromback and Shehata (2007) note, imbalance in media coverage can exist even without partisan bias. One crucial element is “structural bias”. Hofstetter (1976) initially devised the concept, noting that structural biases take place “when some things are selected to be reported rather than other things because of the character of the medium or because of the incentives that apply to commercial news programming”. Gulati et al. (2004, 23) expanded on this concept by asserting that structural bias refers to the tendency in which “norms of journalism or reporter behaviour favour news about some topics over others and that

this news emphasis advantages some candidates and disadvantages others”. These norms include traditional values of the profession such as presenting both sides of an argument.

Simply put, the circumstances of news production can influence the final output (Graber 2014) and therefore partisanship and the related ideological bias alone cannot account for the media’s portrayal of candidates. For example, news is often biased against losing candidates because editors consider them to be newsworthy as the underdog, as opposed to the candidates’ policy positions or ideology dictating the nature of coverage (Shoemaker and Reese 1991, 1996). Similarly, Hamilton (2004) has shown that the media gravitates towards negativity and people and events that deviate from what is subjectively considered normal.

The notion of structural bias is also related to concepts such as Altheide and Snow’s work on “media logic” (1979, 1983) and Shoemaker and Reese’s (1991) focus on “media routines”. Media logic refers to the format of communication playing a pivotal role. For example, the nature of television meant that it was logical to mainly focus on individuals, with soundbites from leaders becoming part of the template. Similarly, newspapers have institutionalised habits such as an eye-catching front pages and including sections such as Letters to the Editor.

Media routines refer to how journalists go about their jobs of news gathering and producing content. For instance, independent of their political affiliations, journalists are naturally drawn to conflict and known to criticise all actors in a campaign and put a cynical spin on events (Just et al. 1999). With reference to campaigns specifically, the media is known to predominantly focus on horse-race coverage and apply the “game frame” to its reportage (Benoit et al. 2015). Graber (1994) surveyed editors and found that substantive issues were typically relegated to the background because news organisations published or aired stories based on three important factors: conflict, proximity and timeliness. Furthermore, Patterson (1976) argues that “novelty” plays a significant role in deciding whether a piece of information is considered newsworthy.

Researchers are not alone in their awareness of these media tendencies. Crucially, candidates and their campaign staff have made similar observations and try to produce “pseudo-events” to boost the quantity and tone of their coverage in the news (Boorstin, 1994). Similarly, candidates also resort to attacking their opponents and making exaggerated claims to take advantage of the media’s attraction to conflict. (Patterson 1976, 7) notes that candidates have the ability to nudge the press in the direction of what they want them to see.

In the age of social media, leaders such as Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau project favourable images of themselves through carefully choreographed photo-ops which are then picked up by the mainstream media (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019). This trend is particularly visible in Britain, which has a well-established political public relations industry. This was a significant factor during Blair’s tenure, when his “spin doctors” were successful in framing the media’s coverage of him (McNair 2000). It is unclear, then, in a general sense whether it is the candidates or the media that set the campaign agenda. But past research on Britain suggests that more “party-initiated material” appears in British press (Semetko et al. 1991, 173). This is partly explained by partisanship and partly because the British media is less inclined to influence the campaign agenda. Media routines may, therefore, have a considerable influence on coverage.

The bottomline that emerges from the appraisal of the literature is that apart from partisan bias, other factors can also influence the nature of coverage and result in particular parties and leaders being favoured over others and certain frames being chosen over others. The crucial difference is that partisan bias can be put down to ideological considerations while the other influences can be attributed to journalistic norms and routines.

In Britain specifically, partisan bias and media routines may overlap as a result of the increase in interpretative journalism as observed by McNair (2000, 71). Evidence of this tendency to interpret news could be visible in the press' inclination to insert its own voice in reportage. In other words, the newspaper's opinion will increasingly dominate the hierarchy of sources to which the publication attributes information. For instance, a comprehensive analysis of newspaper coverage of US elections over 50 years (Benoit et al. 2005) showed that reporters were the dominant source in articles. On the subject of sources, Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 101) also note that while some influences on content are the result of conscious biases, others can be attributed to factors such as accessibility. For example, party spokespersons may be more willing to speak to certain newspapers than others and this can affect the nature of coverage.

1.3 Reformulating the Research Questions

For the purpose of this research, I narrow down the influences on the British press' portrayal of leader traits to two specific concepts. In keeping with the literature discussed above, the first concept is **partisan bias**, which will refer to the newspaper's evaluations of leader traits being rooted in its support for a particular party and its ideology. The second concept will be called **media logic**, an umbrella term that will include Altheide and Snow's definition as well as elements such as structural bias and media routines. In short, media logic will refer to factors influencing evaluation of leader traits in the press that are a product of the media's commitment to journalistic values and institutionalised practices of news gathering and production. To be sure, this narrowed focus in no way implies that these two factors are the only influences on media portrayal. Rather, the research scope is limited to examining partisan bias and media logic. Arguably, one significant influence on coverage would be commercialisation. But in the case of a partisan press such as the UK, it can be argued that commercial considerations are an

antecedent that have already led to the personalisation of coverage and consequent focus on traits. The influences discussed in this study flow from there.

After defining the concepts and accounting for the case being studied, the research question can be reformulated as:

To what extent did partisan bias and media logic influence the British press' portrayal of candidate traits in the 2017 general election?

While this research question is aimed at understanding the driving forces of the media's portrayal, the study also aims to understand how the images of the prime ministerial candidates were built over the course of the campaign. With this objective in mind, a second research question emerges:

Under what conditions did partisan bias and media logic manifest themselves in the British press' portrayal of candidate traits in the 2017 general election?

While these will be the overarching questions guiding the research design, a number of additional themes are expected to emerge based on the specificities of the 2017 British election. The next chapter will place the aforementioned theoretical framework in the context of this election and lay out the expectations of the research.

CHAPTER 2: CASE CONTEXT AND EXPECTATIONS

This chapter will offer a background on British politics and the country's press before combining the theoretical framework and the context of the 2017 election to build expectations about potential answers to the research questions.

2.1 Personality Politics on the Road to 2017

The past decade has witnessed dramatic changes in British politics. Traditionally dominated by two parties in the Westminster mould⁶, the country's party system has grown increasingly fragmented of late. One factor has been the rise of regional parties in the home nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But these nations combined account for less than a fifth of the seats in the House of Commons. Therefore, it is only the national parties that can realistically lead government formation.

The Liberal Democrats broke the decades-long hegemony of the Conservatives and Labour in 2010. After the election threw up a hung parliament⁷, the Liberal Democrats signed up as a junior partner in a coalition government with the Conservatives. Much of the credit for the Liberal Democrats' success went to its leader, Nick Clegg. His charismatic performance in Britain's first-ever televised election debates attracted glowing media reviews and was widely seen as fuelling his party's success while dealing a blow to the less personable incumbent, Gordon Brown (Parry and Richardson 2011).

It is true that the Liberal Democrats were part of the government until just two years before the 2017 general election. However, the party suffered a heavy defeat in the 2015 election and was reduced to single digits⁸. It was still picking up the pieces when the snap election in 2017 came

⁶ The Westminster system is conducive to two parties alternating in government.

⁷ The Conservatives had the most seats but fell 20 short of a majority.

⁸ The Liberal Democrats had broken a key manifesto promise on reducing university tuition fees.

along and so it was not realistically in contention to be part of the government, let alone see its new leader become prime minister. For the national media, therefore, this election was a binary choice between Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn.

Going into the 2017 election, the Conservatives had been in power for seven years and Labour had not won an election since Blair led the party to a third consecutive victory in 2005. Blair left office two years later and was succeeded by his long-time chancellor Gordon Brown, whose less charismatic persona and aversion to the media was in stark contrast to the fresh-faced and media-friendly Cameron. The personal aspects of these two leaders, combined with the aforementioned success of Clegg in the television debates, was commonly explained as a factor for the results of 2010 (Cowley and Kavanagh 2010).

In 2015, Ed Miliband led the Labour challenge to the incumbent Cameron. As mentioned in the introduction, Miliband was frequently mocked in the press and caricatured as nerdy cartoon character Wallace (Wintour 2014). He was labelled as ‘Red Ed’ by the right-wing press who vilified him for his father’s Marxist background (Gaber 2014). After Labour suffered a major defeat in the 2015 election, the party elected Corbyn as its leader. Corbyn was a rank outsider in the internal leadership race given that he subscribed to a left-wing ideology that was radically different from the centrist politics that propelled Labour to power under Blair. The right-wing media’s portrayal of Corbyn after he became Labour leader focused on his Marxist beliefs and his rebellious tendencies (Cammaerts et al. 2016).

Before taking over as prime minister, Theresa May had served in the powerful position of Britain’s home secretary for six years under Cameron. Before that, she had made a name for herself as a Conservative spokesperson and had infamously called her own party the “nasty” party” (Rentoul 2019). When she became prime minister, there was greater media focus on her personality and because of her gender, there was the historical aspect of being only the second

woman prime minister of Britain. Inevitably, comparisons were drawn with Thatcher and similarities such as both leaders being daughters of vicars were pointed out (Williams 2020).

Both May and Corbyn had been in the public eye for several years before the 2017 election. Even so, the media portrayals of them were mainly broad strokes and neither leader had been scrutinised in the context of the high-stakes arena such as a general election. More importantly, the 2017 election would naturally generate interest from the public about these two individuals as they had to choose who would navigate the country at a crucial time.

2.2 What to Expect from a Partisan Press

I will now discuss the expectations of the research based on the literature and taking into consideration the facts of the election. To reiterate, the goal of the research is to understand the role of partisan bias and media logic in a partisan press environment and specifically examine how these two factors contributed to the portrayal of May and Corbyn during the 2017 election.

Britain's national newspapers differentiate themselves both by their ideological support as well as format. Right-wing newspapers consistently endorse the Conservatives while left-wing newspapers stand behind the Labour party. Some titles are centrist and have endorsed both parties at different periods while others like The Sun have been driven by commercial interests. This study only considers newspapers with stable party affiliations. The other distinguishing factor is format, with daily newspapers either using the broadsheet or tabloid format. Broadsheets are considered the more "serious" newspapers that primarily focus on current affairs and attach greater importance to journalistic values while being more measured in tone. Tabloids, on the other hand, focus more on entertainment, crime and sport but also devote significant attention to politics. They are less committed to journalistic principles and are notorious for their sensationalism.

At its heart, this research is exploratory but the literature and theoretical framework trigger certain expectations that guide the subsequent research design while also offering indications about where to shine a light on the data. For example, given the partisan nature of the British press, it seems fairly intuitive that partisan bias will be a significant factor in the portrayal of leaders. However, this expectation must stand up to empirical testing and the research will examine whether:

- A newspaper that endorses a specific party will have more positive evaluations than negative evaluations of the party leader's traits
- A newspaper that endorses a specific party will have more negative evaluations than positive evaluations about the rival party leader's traits

The second expectation is not as intuitive given that newspapers – broadsheets, in particular, which are less opinionated -- need not actively portray a challenger negatively if it is committed to journalistic values of fairness. Or it might instead focus more on the positive aspects of the leader it endorses. Based on the differentiated nature of broadsheets and tabloids, it is expected with regard to the theoretical framework that:

- Partisan bias will be more prominent in tabloids than in broadsheets
- The impact of media logic will be more visible in broadsheets than tabloids

Apart from the differences between broadsheets and tabloids, the variation between the coverage by left-wing and right-wing newspapers will also be worth investigating with regard to whether they prefer certain leadership traits over others. In the US, for example, Hollan and Prysby (2014) demonstrate that left-wing Democrats are influenced more by perceptions of competence while right-wing Republicans are influenced more by integrity. It is worth investigating whether such preferences manifest themselves in the British context.

On the whole, however, it is expected that all the papers irrespective of ideology will attach more importance to competence than character. This is because agenda-setting is expected to play a prominent role in trait evaluation. May set the agenda for the election by making leadership the focus. Her campaign slogan of “strong and stable leadership” can be placed under the trait category of competence. Based on the previously discussed premise that the British press takes its cues from parties along the lines of an inverted agenda-setting theory, it is expected that the competence trait will dominate evaluations of both leaders during the campaign. Additionally, since competence traits correspond to more “performance-relevant” criteria (Bean and Mughan 1989) rather than personal aspects, it is expected that:

- Competence evaluations will exceed character evaluations for all newspapers

If a different result emerges, it could be the outcome of specific events during the campaign in which the media reset the agenda. Alternatively, it could also be because of certain ideological preferences mentioned earlier.

The role of sources was briefly discussed earlier. While examining the image of leaders that appears in newspapers, it is not just the paper that makes evaluations but other sources such as opposition leaders, columnists, voters and even the leaders themselves. With broadsheets ostensibly more committed to balance, it is possible that even though partisan bias may manifest itself in the choice of news to report on, the paper may not necessarily intervene personally in evaluating leaders. Doing so would be an indicator of partisan bias. In contrast, incorporating evaluations from diverse sources would be an indication of media logic. With tabloids less committed to balance, it is expected that they will be less reluctant to make assessments and also publish evaluations from sources favourable to the party they support. Therefore, it is expected that:

- The newspaper will be the dominant source of evaluations in tabloids
- Tabloids will refer to sources more favourable to the interests of the candidate they support.
- Broadsheets will contribute less to the evaluation of leaders than tabloids and incorporate evaluations from non-partisan sources

While these generally constitute broad expectations, the real objective of the research is to delve into the nuances of how partisan bias and media logic shaped the coverage of the press' coverage of May and Corbyn. This will be done by undertaking a descriptive and analytical review of media coverage during the campaign and identifying the defining aspects of how the two leaders were portrayed. It will include exploring the role of current events in shifting perceptions of the two leaders from the point of view of the newspapers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Thus far, the theoretical concepts of leader traits and media influences have been discussed and the broad expectations of the research laid out. In this chapter, I will discuss the data collection process and how the main concepts will be operationalised and measured.

Past research in this sphere has often resorted to interviewing journalists in order to understand the nuances of coverage (Peiser 2000; White 1950). However, I argue that interviewing journalists would confound the results of the research owing to social desirability bias. In addition, given the four-year gap between the election and this study, journalists are unlikely to accurately remember and describe the factors that contributed to their coverage. Thirdly, there is a question mark over whether journalists can thoroughly weigh the consequences of their actions during hectic election campaigns and whether they would introspect on their actions, especially if confronted with a critical analysis of their work.

Given this background and the aims of this study, it was decided that content analysis would be the preferred approach. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 218) put it, from media content we can infer many of the factors that shaped it. And according to Riffe et al. (1998, 10), the advantage of this approach is that “researchers can examine content after the fact of its production and draw inferences about the conditions of its production without making the communicators self-conscious or reactive to being observed while producing it”. These advantages eliminate many of the disadvantages of the interview approach, even though it has drawbacks such as being limited to the final output. The choice of data for this study was therefore based on the premise that it would contain active and latent clues that would answer the research questions.

3.1 Data Collection

Traditionally, the scope of content analysis in elections has ranged from one newspaper across several campaigns (Nollet 1968) to a number of newspapers in one campaign (Patterson 1976). For this study, it was deemed appropriate to take the latter approach in order to make more insightful inferences about the variation in coverage among different newspapers based on the same set of events.

Articles were collected from four British national newspapers in order to provide a representative overview of the coverage. The four newspapers were Daily Mirror, The Guardian, Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph. One criteria for selecting these newspapers was their high circulation figures as well as the availability of articles. Keeping in mind the study's focus on partisanship, these newspapers represent both sides of the ideological spectrum and party support, with the Mirror and The Guardian representing the left-wing and supporting Labour, and the Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph representing the right and supporting the Conservatives. The partisan leanings of the two newspapers was confirmed based on examining the history of their political endorsements during elections as well as surveys in which readers were asked to place the newspapers along the ideological spectrum (Smith 2017). The selected publications were also a combination of tabloids (Daily Mirror and Daily Mail) and broadsheets (The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph). The choice of newspapers would therefore aid in capturing not just the variation between ideological camps but also between newspaper formats that adopt different journalistic norms.

The study acknowledges the fact that newspaper circulation has been consistently falling amid the boom in digital media. Even so, they remain a formidable force especially considering the fact that they are read particularly by older voters who are more likely than the younger generation to cast a ballot (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018, 36). At the same time, the dominant newspapers have moved their coverage online and attract a larger readership. With no space

constraints, they can also publish more content and the younger generation is also likely to consume this news. Therefore, it was decided to also incorporate articles from the websites of the four aforementioned newspapers which were pooled together on the LexisNexis database.

A corpus of newspaper articles was compiled using LexisNexis. While May called the election on April 18, 2017, the official campaign only began a fortnight later following the dissolution of parliament. Therefore, the corpus only included articles published between May 3 and voting day on June 8. The official campaign spanned roughly five weeks. Separate searches were run in LexisNexis for articles containing the full names of the two leaders. A separate dataset was then constructed for May and Corbyn. The dataset for each leader contained separate subsets consisting of the articles mentioning them in each newspaper during the course of the campaign. Additional subsets split the articles by week. The overall idea was to analyse the data separately for each leader by newspaper and by week, draw comparisons between how different newspapers portrayed the same leader and then compare how the two leaders were portrayed overall.

The rationale for including all the articles published during the campaign rather than singling out a representative sample was aimed at nullifying the limitations that often emerge from analysing a single case. With a large corpus, it was hoped that the findings of the study would be more generalisable and boost validity.

3.2 Methods of Analysis

The content analysis involved a two-step approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methods. While the quantitative approach was used primarily to identify broad trends, the qualitative approach was used for the purpose of explanation. Multiple research projects aimed at understanding media behaviour based on content analysis have resorted to framing techniques. In the UK, specifically, Dekavalla (2016) made use of frames to ascertain how

British broadcasters covered the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. Framing theory is based on the notion that people's perceptions are likely to be affected when media messages are presented within certain frames (Goffman 1974; Scheufele 2000). This premise perfectly suited the aims of this study and therefore framing theory was adapted to the analysis to understand the frames that were applied to the portrayal of candidates traits during the 2017 election.

Four frames were applied to the corpus based on the categorisation of leader traits as Competence and Character. Then, the sources -- individuals and groups -- who made the evaluation or devised the frame were identified to help provide clues about the influence of partisan logic and media logic in the press' coverage of the two leaders.

Once the data was prepared and the coding of frames completed, a quantitative analysis was conducted to identify the frequency of items appearing in the set categories and to compare the differences in the coverage of the leaders across the four newspapers. After identifying trends based on the guiding questions and expectations of the research, the numbers were placed in context by reconstructing the campaign from the perspective of the varying leader evaluations appearing in the four newspapers.

3.3 Coding Process

3.3.1 Trait Evaluations

Once the corpus of articles was created, the articles were coded in two steps. The first was a closed coding scheme based on framing theory. To understand the nuances of the press' coverage of leader traits, it was essential to first identify the traits of Competence and Character in the corpus. To operationalise the leader traits and also account for sentiment, positive and negative tags were used in the evaluations. Therefore, the first stage of the coding process involved four categories, namely **Competence (Positive)**, **Competence (Negative)**,

Character (Positive) and Character (Negative). Importantly, it must be noted that articles as a whole were not coded for whether they were positive or negative but merely the evaluation of the leader within the article.

Broadly speaking, the unit of analysis chosen for the coding process was phrases within the articles. Therefore, each article in the corpus could potentially be assigned multiple codes if it contained several different evaluations. However, strict coding rules were applied to root out duplicates and overuse of evaluations that could potentially confound the results. For example, the coding took into account the standard template for most newspaper articles. This includes a headline and a subhead or a single line that summarises the article. If the headline and subhead contained the same evaluation, then this was counted as a single evaluation and not two. Similarly, the first line of news articles generally elaborates on what is mentioned in the headlines. In such cases, too, only the initial evaluation was coded. The same schema was applied to articles featuring a quote elaborating on the first line or headline. For example, consider this article:

Jeremy Corbyn on Friday attacked what he called the “weak and wobbly” leadership of Theresa May after the prime minister changed her mind on a key manifesto promise. “With this embarrassing U-turn on the dementia tax, the prime minister has shown that she is anything but the ‘strong and stable’ leader she claims to be,” the Labour leader said at a campaign rally in Manchester.

In the example given above, multiple traits were mentioned. However, only one code of Competence (Negative) was assigned to this part of the article as Corbyn was only making a single evaluation that was expanded by the newspaper in keeping with its format for structuring articles. Simply put, a single code was assigned to the expression of a single thought. In this case, all the descriptive words were deemed to belong to the competence category. Had Corbyn

used a word such as “immoral”, an additional code of Character (Negative) would have been added.

The intention behind implementing such an intensive and manual qualitative coding process was to standardise the process and also account for context. For example, had computer-based analysis been deployed, “strong and stable” would have been coded as a positive evaluation even though Corbyn intended the exact opposite. Therefore, the nuanced coding approach was also able to account for irony and sarcasm.

As far as assigning evaluations to specific categories was concerned, the coding process involved referring to Bittner’s (2011) comprehensive list of traits allocated to the two categories of Competence and Character and then determining whether the evaluation was positive or negative based on the context. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, there are correlations within categories and some traits can fall into both categories. To remedy this problem, the circumstances of the evaluation were taken into consideration as well as whether they fit into the definitions of ability-related qualities for Competence and more moral and personal dimensions for Character.

The significance of correctly understanding context can be demonstrated from the example of one evaluation that frequently appeared during the coding process. Kenneth Clarke, a veteran Conservative leader, once described his colleague May as a “bloody difficult woman”. Clarke meant this as an insult and therefore the evaluation was coded as Character (Negative). However, May flipped the script in her favour by frequently describing herself as a “bloody difficult woman” during the campaign to highlight her grit. In such cases, therefore, the evaluation was coded as Character (Positive). A comprehensive list of the assigned codes is accessible in the Appendix, while the evaluative words used to describe the two leaders will be listed in Chapter 5.

While the coding process may be complex, I argue that its strength lies in accounting for nuance. In addition, the implementation of strict coding rules and the parsimony of categories would boost the chances of intercoder reliability should this coding approach be implemented in future studies.

3.3.2 Trait Attributions

While leader traits were operationalised using the four categories mentioned above, influences on the media were operationalised by identifying the sources of the trait evaluations at the same time that the traits were coded. In other words, the individual or group that described the leader in positive or negative terms for Competence and Character was identified.

An open coding approach was deployed for this stage of the coding process. To help determine the final categories, articles from a random sample of broadsheets and tabloids were analysed. On the basis of a thorough reading of these articles, seven codes emerged which were then applied to the entire corpus. The categories of “Sources” that emerged were as follows: Newspaper, Columnist, Opposition, Colleagues, Voters, Self and Other. For example, an instance of Theresa May calling herself an able leader was coded as Competence (Positive) - Self while the instance of a voter calling Jeremy Corbyn honest was coded as Character (Positive) - Voter. A detailed description of these categories is provided below:

Newspaper: Any evaluation deemed to be made by the newspaper staff was included in this category. It included assessments made in the opinion sections of the newspaper as well as in regular reporting of news events in which the reporter’s voice was inserted.

Columnist: Evaluations made by columnists who did not belong to the newspaper’s regular staff were included in this category. The names of columnists were carefully scrutinised to identify their affiliations with the paper being analysed. The rationale behind this step was that newspapers often carry disclaimers which state that the views expressed by the columnist are

personal and not shared by the newspaper. This would imply that columnists could potentially present alternative viewpoints. An effort was made to distinguish columns by newspaper staff, non-newspaper staff and party leaders. Only evaluations from the non-newspaper staff made it to this category.

Opposition: Following on from the previous category, if the criticism of a prime ministerial candidate was made in a column written by a member of the leader's rival party, then this evaluation was attributed to the Opposition category. Similarly, any positive or negative evaluations made by someone from a different party to the leader was placed in this category.

Colleagues: The opposite criteria was applied to this category, with evaluations originating from a member of the same party as the evaluated leader being classified under Colleagues. For Theresa May, this classification was extended to her cabinet ministers and other members of her prime ministerial staff.

Voters: This category was limited to evaluations made by members of the voting public. Typically, this included assessments made in the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper as well as the *vox populi* element -- a factor of media logic -- in which voters are interviewed at campaign rallies or when reporters travel to constituencies to get a sense of the mood on the ground (Wheeler 2017). In addition, evaluations made in opinion polls were also extensively referenced. However, care was taken to ensure that only personal ratings were included in this category and not party popularity or estimated vote shares.

Self: This category simply included evaluations made by leaders in which they explicitly touted their own credentials.

Other: This category consisted of evaluations made by a wide variety of sources, but the frequency of these sources was not deemed sufficient or important enough to warrant their own

category. Examples of Other sources included European Union dignitaries, foreign leaders, industry representatives and celebrities.

The idea behind identifying the sources was to operationalise partisan bias and media logic. For instance, a disproportionate number of positive evaluations made by a newspaper that endorsed the same leader could be interpreted as partisan bias. Similarly, consistently negative evaluations by a paper about the leader of a rival party would also be a strong indicator of partisan bias. Also, the dominance of negative evaluations by sources diametrically opposed to the ideological views of the paper would indicate the influence of media logic as it shows an inclination to incorporate alternative viewpoints. However, while the number of source attributions can measure the nature of bias to a certain extent, it is only through an interpretative approach that accounts for context that substantive inferences can be made. Concrete insights were drawn by interpreting the interplay between the use of sources and corresponding evaluation of traits.

CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE INQUIRY

This chapter seeks to identify broad patterns and trends based on the tallies that resulted from coding the entire corpus for evaluations of leader traits and the sources of evaluations. In all, the number of articles that were coded across all newspapers stood at **3,202**. Articles mentioning Theresa May accounted for 58.5% of the total corpus while articles about Corbyn constituted 41.5%. There were overlaps as a large number of articles mentioned both leaders. The fact that May's corpus was bigger than Corbyn's was along expected lines given that she was the incumbent and her role as prime minister meant that news about her would extend to events outside the electoral arena. The volume of articles on a week-by-week basis was roughly stable until the final week of the campaign, when there was a massive spike in the number of articles about both leaders. This was to be expected as it is logical that there would be more interest in the leaders as election day neared. It must also be mentioned that the final week of data contained articles for nine days as the campaign period was not evenly split into five weeks. To account for this anomaly, all results that measure changes over time will be discussed in percentage terms rather than absolute numbers.

Despite being mentioned in fewer articles overall, 60% of the articles about Corbyn contained an evaluation about him, much higher than the 45% of articles about May that contained assessments. This contradicts the expectations based on previous research that the incumbent is likely to be under more scrutiny than the challenger (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). Another surprising result was that the proportion of articles containing evaluations was roughly the same -- around half -- across all papers, even though it was expected that the more outspoken tabloids would have a higher proportion. The numbers from the early days of the campaign suggest that The Guardian's articles contained very few evaluations to begin with. However, in the last week of the campaign, the proportion of articles in The Guardian that contained evaluations

was higher than even right-wing tabloid, *The Daily Mail*. Just as the number of articles containing evaluations shot up during the final week of the campaign, so did the proportion of evaluated articles across newspapers, hinting at a greater focus on image-building as the vote neared.

While all four newspapers had more articles about May than Corbyn, the proportion of articles containing an evaluation of the leader not endorsed by the newspaper was significantly higher than the non-evaluations. Similarly, the proportion of articles containing evaluations of the leader supported by the party was less than the number of articles without evaluations. In the *Daily Mail*, for instance, two out of every three articles mentioning the prime minister did not contain an evaluation of her. In contrast, two out of every three articles mentioning Corbyn did contain an evaluation. This would appear to suggest greater trait-related scrutiny by the newspapers on the leaders from the other side as opposed to the leader of their co-partisan. The only exception was *The Guardian*, where the proportion of non-evaluations was more for May and less for Corbyn. However, the total number of evaluations (different from evaluated articles) was higher for the leader from the other side in all four papers. The gap was massive for the tabloids, which had nearly triple the number of evaluations for rival leaders as compared to the individual they endorsed for prime minister. The numbers were less stark in the broadsheets.

4.1 Trait Evaluations: Attack is the Best Form of Defence

The influence of partisan bias starts to become apparent when the overall sentiment of evaluations is examined. If the coverage of all the four papers is compared, then the negative evaluations in the *Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* stand out. Negative evaluations of May comprised 70% of the *Mirror*'s evaluations of both leaders combined, while the *Mail* was not too far behind as negative evaluations of Corbyn dominated the overall assessments of leaders appearing in its pages. More than 90% of the evaluations of May in the *Mirror* were negative,

while the number stood at 80% in The Guardian. In contrast, two out of every three evaluations of May in the right-wing Daily Mail were positive. while just over half the assessments of May in The Telegraph were positive. Therefore, while it was clear that the prime minister emerged as an overwhelmingly negative figure in the left-wing press, she only had a lukewarm portrayal in the Conservative-supporting Telegraph as well.

Table 1: Sentiment-wise split in evaluations of Theresa May across newspapers.

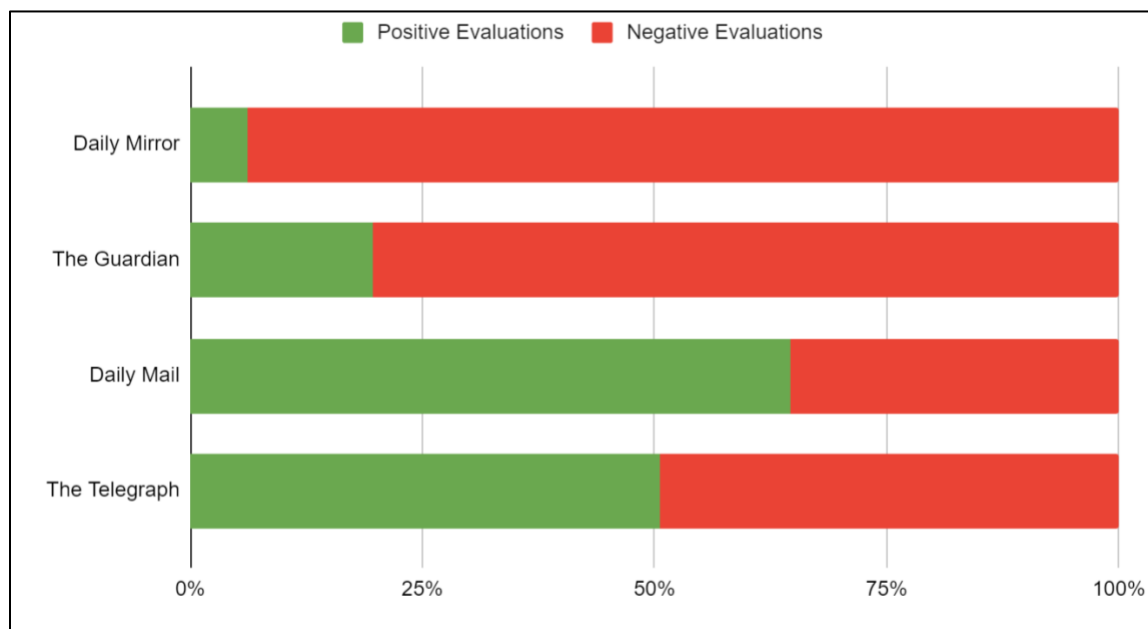
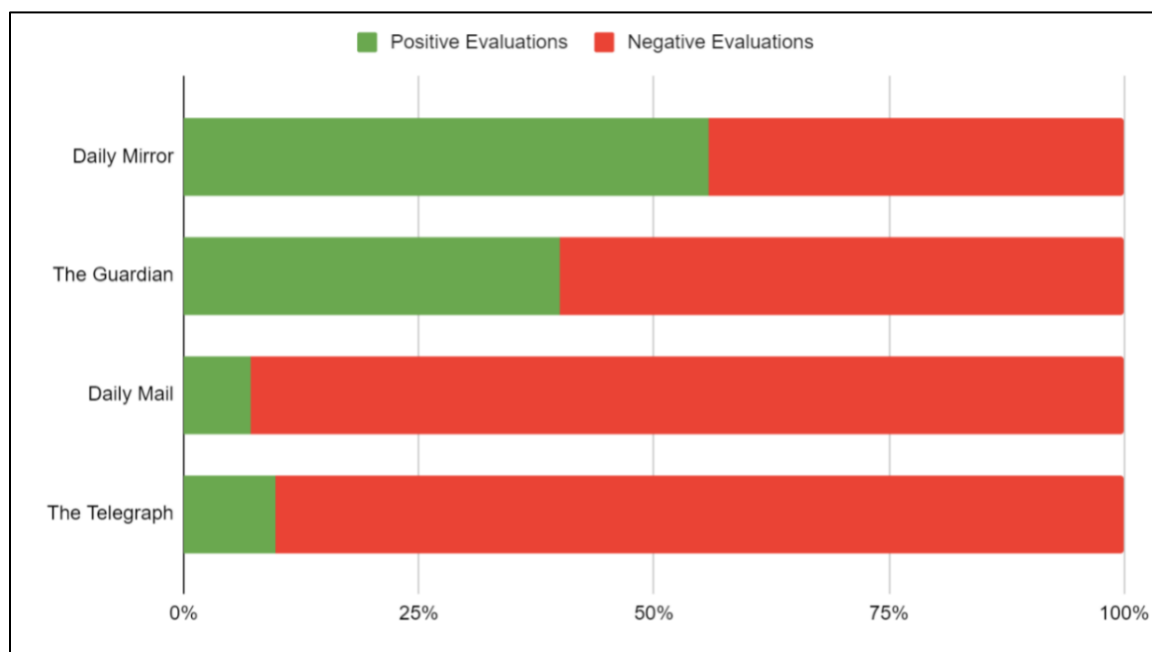


Table 2: Sentiment-wise split in evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn across newspapers.

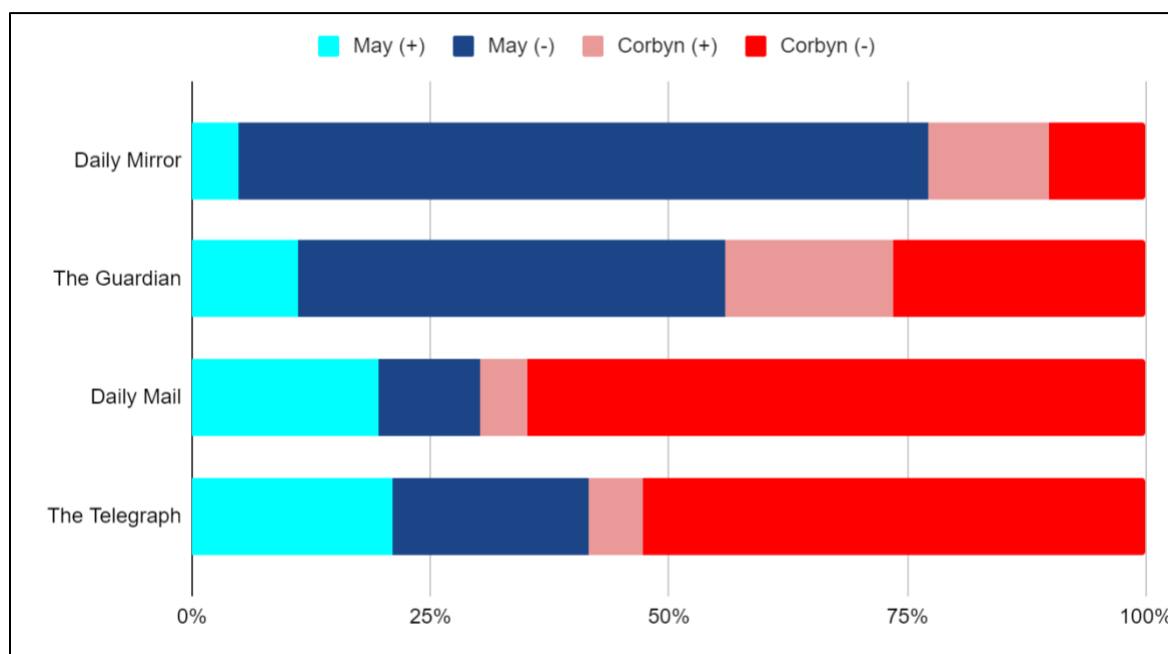


Corbyn, however, emerged even worse through the lens of a paper that was ostensibly backing him. Just four of out every 10 evaluations of Corbyn in The Guardian were positive and a little more than half of the evaluations in the Daily Mirror were in his favour. Corbyn did not come out looking remotely good in the pages of the papers supporting the Conservatives. Nine out of every ten evaluations of Corbyn in both the Daily Mail and The Telegraph were negative. An additional observation was that the Labour-supporting newspapers had more positive evaluations of Corbyn in the final week of the campaign while simultaneously carrying more negative evaluations of May. The Conservative-supporting papers, on the other hand, persisted with a negative portrayal of Corbyn throughout even as positive evaluations of May did not significantly increase in the final week.

At face value, what these numbers indicate is that the support from all four newspapers for the endorsed leader was less than enthusiastic, especially in the broadsheets. In addition, the leaders were also not discussed as much in the pages of the paper that supported them. Instead, what emerged from these newspapers was greater scrutiny and negativity about leaders from the other side of the ideological spectrum. The reasons for this outcome will be further examined in the next chapter, **but an early analysis suggests that the papers expressed partisanship primarily through negative coverage of the leader from the other side.**

In terms of the expectations of the research, The Guardian was the only exception to the prediction that the number of positive evaluations of the supported leader would exceed the number of negative evaluations. However, as expected, the number of negative evaluations of the leader of the Conservatives was higher than the number of positive evaluations.

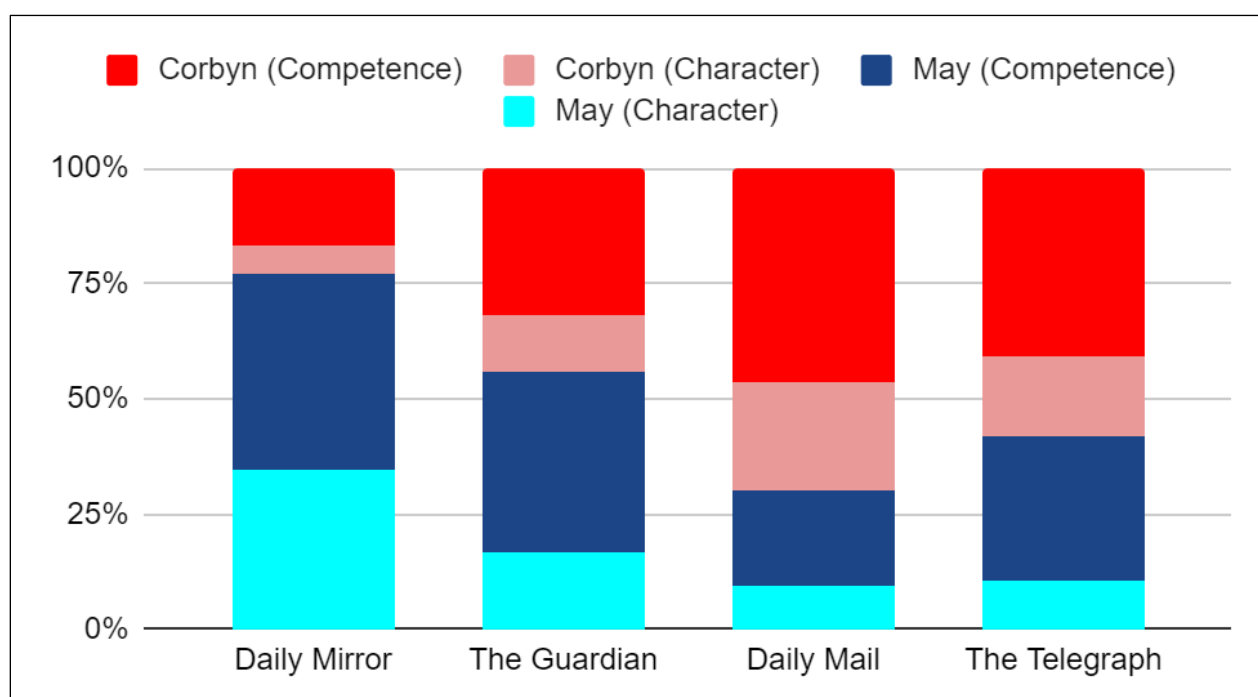
Table 3: Sentiment-wise split in evaluations for both leaders within each newspaper.



While I have so far examined the tallies of positive and negative evaluations appearing in the newspapers, another expectation of the research was that the competence trait would be evaluated more than the character trait. In three out of the four papers, competence evaluations exceeded character evaluations by a ratio of 3:1. The only exception was the Daily Mirror’s portrayal of May, where character constituted nearly half of the total evaluations. Even so, competence evaluations still comprised the majority.

What this suggests is that not only were the performance-relevant criteria as predicted by Bean and Mughan (1989) in greater focus, but also that the agenda-setting of “strong and stable leadership” on May’s part had a clear effect given the big disparity between competence and character evaluations overall. The disparities observed earlier with regard to positive and negative evaluations was also evident when the competence and character distributions were tallied. An astounding 95% of the character evaluations of Corbyn in the Daily Mail were negative while 70% of the character evaluations of May were positive.

Table 4: Competence and Character evaluations for both leaders within each newspaper.



The roles were reversed in rival tabloid Daily Mirror, where just 3% of the character evaluations of May were positive amid just nine positive mentions over five weeks compared to 273 negative character evaluations. Evaluations about Corbyn's character featured just 48 times in this newspaper as opposed to 282 times for May. For Jeremy Corbyn, six out of every 10 character evaluations in the Daily Mirror were positive.

The gaps between evaluations were also large in the broadsheets but not as lopsided in as the tabloids. Both The Telegraph and The Guardian contained poor character evaluations with regard to the leader of the other side. But as far as the leader of the party they supported was concerned, the depiction was less black and white. Only half the character evaluations of May in the Telegraph were positive while just four out of ten character evaluations of Corbyn in *The Guardian* were positive. The reasons for this will be further examined in due course.

4.2 Trait Attributions: The Newspaper's Voice is Heard Loudest

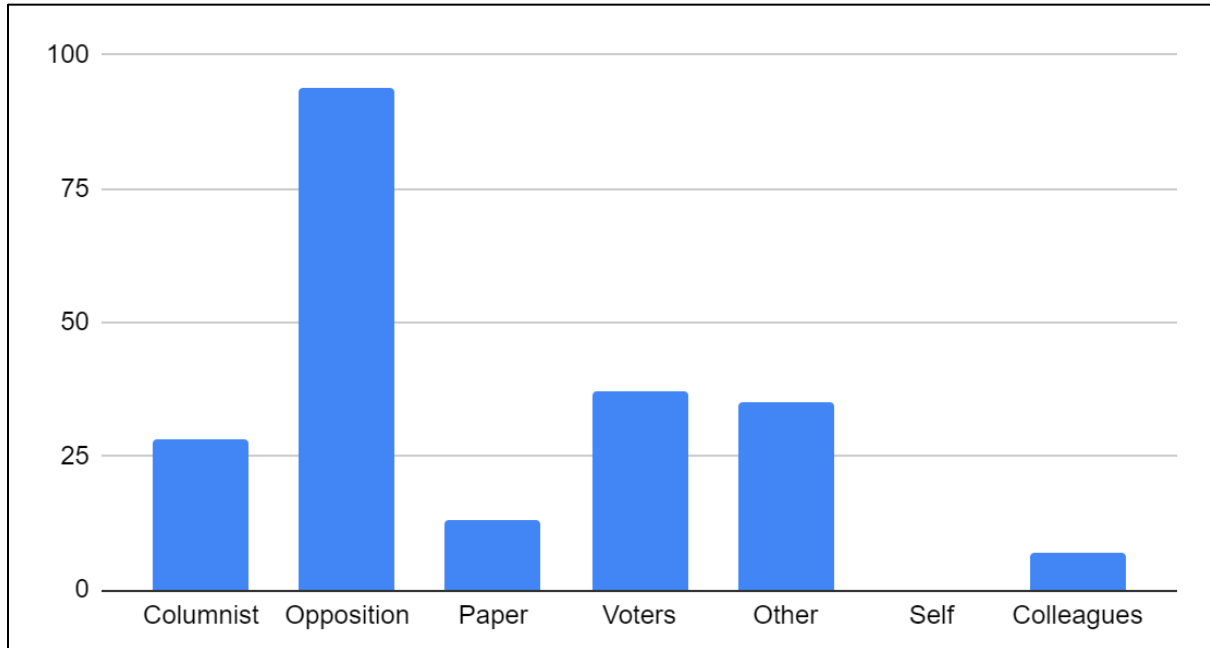
While the use of sources will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, I will provide a short overview of results that emerged from the coding in order to provide some additional context to the trait evaluations discussed above. As a reminder, the gap between positive and negative evaluations was massive in all four newspapers for leaders of the party it did not support and were more balanced for the endorsed party's leader. A review of the use of sources suggests that the voice of the newspaper accounted for a third of all evaluations of Corbyn in three of the four newspapers. Interestingly, in the Labour-supporting Guardian, the paper's opinion comprised less than 10% of the total assessments. But columnists accounted for a fifth of all evaluations, thereby creating scope for further investigation. Voter evaluations were more prominent in the left-wing papers than in the Mail and the Telegraph. Separately, The Guardian, Mail and The Telegraph all had a large chunk of evaluations of Corbyn by members of the Conservative party.

The paper, columnists and voters accounted for almost all the positive evaluations of Corbyn in the Mirror. In The Guardian, columnists and voters accounted for 70% of positive evaluations, with the paper just accounting for 10% though its contribution increased in the final week. The Daily Mail and the Telegraph did not contain many positive evaluations about Corbyn.

In The Telegraph, the paper and columnists combined accounted for nearly half the negative evaluations about Corbyn. The opposition accounted for another quarter. Voters were hardly in the mix, while in the Daily Mail, negative evaluations were equally split between the paper and the opposition. In The Guardian, there were a large number of opposition voices (nearly half) that contributed to the negative evaluations of Corbyn, whose negative evaluations overall exceeded positive evaluations in the Labour-supporting paper. This might indicate that The

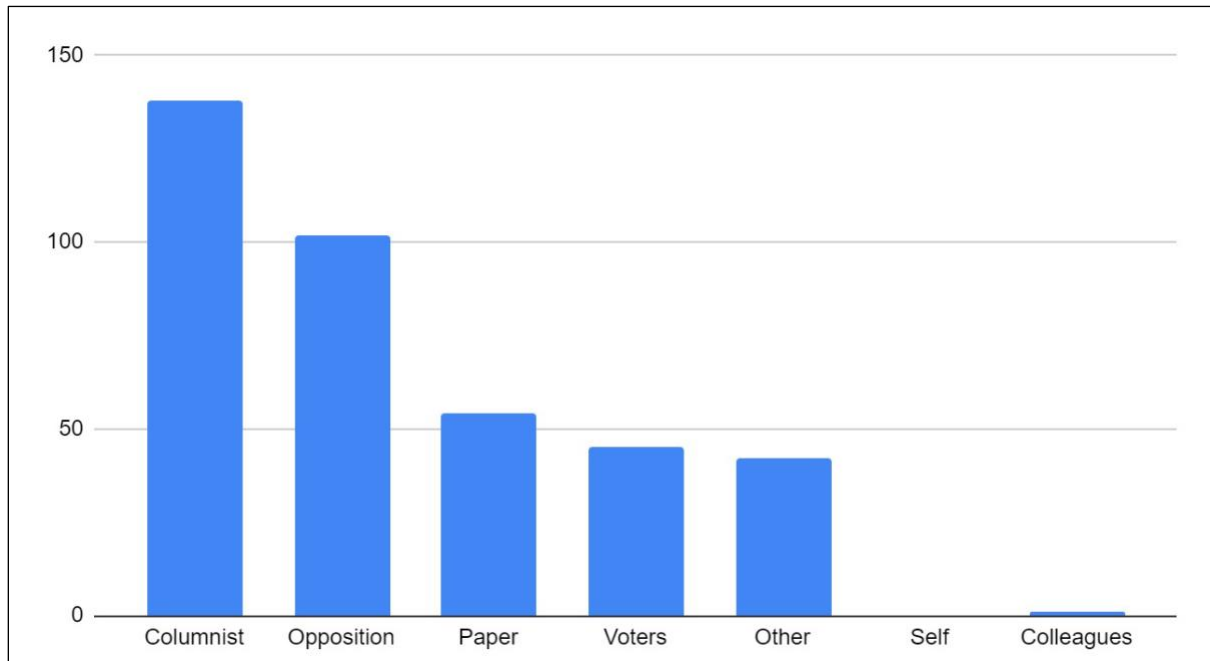
Guardian gave more space to opposition voices by virtue of media logic. The Mirror also had opposition voices but contained few negative evaluations overall of Corbyn.

Table 5: Attributions for negative evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn in The Guardian.



For positive evaluations of May in the Daily Mail and the Telegraph, the vast majority of support came from the paper and columnists. Positive evaluations about May in the Mirror and The Guardian generally originated from voters, possibly on account of opinion polls mentioning her favourable approval ratings.

In the Mirror, the paper and the columnists accounted for half of the negative evaluations of May. Opposition and voter voices were not prominent. In The Guardian, columnists accounted for a third of negative evaluations and the paper barely contributed. Opposition voices contributed significantly but voter voices rarely figured. In the Daily Mail and the Telegraph, the sources for criticism of May were evenly split between categories, but interestingly it was the Other category that dominated negative evaluations.

Table 6: Attributions for negative evaluations of Theresa May in The Guardian.

These numbers do indicate some broad patterns that emerge within and across newspapers. For three of the four newspapers, positive evaluations about the leader they endorsed were generally driven by the newspaper itself and complemented by columnists and occasionally voters. Similarly, negative evaluations of the rival party leader were driven by the paper's assessment and opposition voices in three of the four newspapers. The only exception to these observations was The Guardian, where the newspaper stayed relatively silent until the last week of the campaign and let columnists and voters make most of the evaluations in its pages. The context for these variations will be thoroughly examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: STORIES BEHIND THE NUMBERS

While the previous chapter sought to identify broad trends that emerged from the content analysis, this chapter is devoted to exploring these patterns in detail and directly confronting the expectations of the research while also making unique observations. An overview of the quantitative analysis of the data makes it apparent that readers of the four newspapers would have been left with contrasting impressions of the two prime ministerial candidates. While the evaluations of both leaders were generally negative, it was clear that all the newspapers had tepid and fewer evaluations about the leader on their side of the ideological spectrum. The vast majority of evaluations were dedicated to denouncing the leader from the other side, with the newspaper's voice leading the charge. The right-wing papers as a whole were more positive about May than the left-wing papers were about Corbyn, with The Guardian in particular carrying a large number of negative portrayals of the Labour leader as compared to positive evaluations.

In the pages that follow, I will reconstruct the 2017 election campaign from the point of view of the four newspapers and elaborate on the specificities of the competence and character frames used. The idea behind this reconstruction of events is to identify the triggering events and other factors that contributed to the variation in portrayals on competence, character and the related sentiments between the four newspapers. Interestingly, all four newspapers witnessed the same set of events during the seven weeks of the campaign and yet emerged with vastly different impressions of the two leaders. The manner of the newspaper's coverage of such issues will be examined below.

Before breaking down the coverage of the newspapers, I will first discuss some important context that shaped coverage during the election. With Brexit being the primary trigger for the snap election and May pitching her ability to secure a good "divorce" deal, the issue was

expected to dominate the election especially given the short campaign period. As things turned out, however, Brexit was overtaken by a number of current events and was relegated to the background by the time voters visited the ballot box. A full description of the events is available in the Appendix.

In short, the campaign started out with a focus on Brexit before attention turned to local elections and the manifestos launched by the two parties. The television debates between the leaders were expected to be a major talking point, but not in the manner as expected as the two leaders did not end up debating face-to-face. The last fortnight of the campaign took an unexpected turn following two terror attacks, the second one just five days before the election. This led to national security becoming the most salient issue. The subsequent sections will examine how these issues were covered in the respective newspapers by reconstructing the trait portrayal of the two leaders. **Whenever specific evaluations are quoted from articles in the corpus, the number of the week in which they appeared will be mentioned in parentheses at the end of the sentence.**

5.2 Portraits of Theresa May

5.2.1 Daily Mail: A Case of Come What May

In the early days of the campaign, the Daily Mail's coverage of Theresa May primarily centred around a Brexit controversy in which the prime minister was criticised by EU officials. The paper was quick to jump to the defence of May, calling her "defiant" and "forceful" in her negotiations with the EU. However, to defend her credentials, the paper had to frequently mention the context and this is why the EU's assessment of her as "being from another galaxy" frequently cropped up in the articles (Week 1). As a result, the negative evaluations of May in the Daily Mail actually exceeded the positive evaluations during the first week. Aside from Brexit, the paper was effusive in its praise for the prime minister after the Conservatives' strong

showing in the local elections and as it built up to the launch of the party's manifesto. Examples of its partisan praise during this period included headlines such as "A Leader Who Is Reaching All Of Britain" and "May's Mental Health Revolution".

Positive evaluations of May gather steam in the second week, with the paper spearheading the praise for both competence and character. May was variously described as strong, bold and "a truly remarkable woman" (Week 2). The paper and its columnists continued to drive the positive valuations of May in the third week, with negative evaluations mainly coming from the opposition. Throughout the campaign, very few Labour voices featured in the pages of the Daily Mail. On the other hand, comments by Conservative leaders were a mainstay in the right-wing tabloid.

When the manifestos were announced in the third week, the newspaper immediately showered praise on May. Even as some of her proposals had a centrist element to them and raised eyebrows within Conservative ranks, the Daily Mail called her "utterly candid" and "pragmatic". One editorial headline read: "At Last, A PM Who Is Not Afraid To Be Honest With You" (Week 3). When the implications of her social care policy were pounced upon by opposition leaders, the paper still stood by her and applauded her for being "receptive to feedback". However, the controversy snowballed and the opinion polls reflected a sharp decline in support for the Conservatives. Even so, the paper did not resort to explicitly criticising her when she made the decision to backtrack on the proposal, instead calling it a "sensible decision to seek out consultations" on the idea and subsequently a "mistake that she was wise to correct" (Week 4).

Then, the news cycle changed dramatically with the Manchester terror attack. The paper described May's speech in the aftermath of the attack as "controlled, civilised outrage" and called her "poised, sympathetic, sturdy" (Week 3). Given that internal security was one of the

main aspects of May's previous role as home secretary, her record came under scrutiny in other sections of the media after the terror attack. However, such criticism was hardly addressed in the Daily Mail. It adopted a similar tone when the second terror attack took place, with one editorial reading: "No Snarling. No Hysterics. Theresa Isn't Built Like That" and praising her "coherent and uncompromising plan" to tackle terror (Week 3). It also backed her decision to keep away from the TV debates, stating that her "judgment has seldom looked sounder".

Despite standing by May, the paper noticeably carried few evaluations about her overall -- perhaps aware of the negative press she was already receiving -- even in the final days before the vote. This ties in with the finding of the quantitative analysis about less coverage of the endorsed leader. On the whole, it can be said that the Daily Mail was consistently supportive of May throughout the campaign. Even when the prime minister came under fire from other quarters, the newspaper either supported her or addressed the criticism only in passing, thereby shielding her through the use of silence. Partisan logic was therefore clearly the dominant influence on the Daily Mail's coverage of May. Readers of the Daily Mail were likely convinced that their leader was indeed "strong and stable" based on her portrayal in the paper.

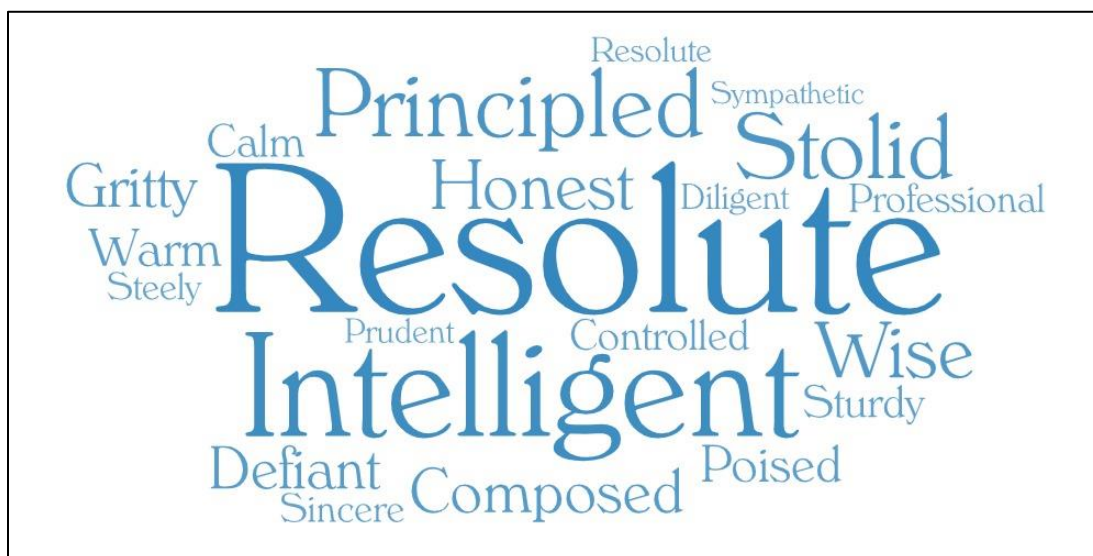


Figure 2: Positive evaluations of Theresa May by the Daily Mail and The Telegraph.

5.2.2 The Telegraph: Ideology Before Individual

The Telegraph offers an interesting insight into the dynamics of partisan bias. Despite a long history of being a Conservative-supporting newspaper, the party's leader did not come across as particularly impressive in its pages. This was largely because the paper was ideologically committed to the extent that it was devoted to preserving the image of the party over its leader. To be sure, the paper was effusive in its praise for May at the start of the campaign. But as the weeks wore on, this opinion changed dramatically owing to what it perceived as May's betrayal of core Conservative values.

Despite being a broadsheet, the paper inserted its voice even in regular reporting of events and stood firmly behind May in the early weeks when the going was good. It praised her for "uniting the party" after its success in the local elections and then jumped to her defence when EU leaders attacked her, saying "Bravo Mrs May for retaliating" (Week 1). But the paper's perceptions of May changed when policy proposals started to emerge from the Conservative camp. When speculation began about what the paper saw as unorthodox policies being devised by May's team, the paper issued a warning with an editorial that was headlined "PM must not forget voters' aspirations". Even so, the paper only stated disagreement but did not question her credentials. When the Conservatives' lead in the polls started to fall, the Telegraph reiterated its support by stating that "May has proved her capability time and again" (Week 2).

But the attacks started to get personal when she called for the energy price cap mentioned earlier, which the paper saw as being a slight to the core Conservative base of business owners, running headlines such as "Meddling May". Again, the paper largely stayed away from evaluations but carried voices of voters who made criticisms such as "none of Mrs May's predecessors put leader before party as she is doing". But as May's policy positions continued to stray from what The Telegraph believed to be core Conservative values, it went on the attack. After May backtracked on the so-called dementia tax, the paper did not mince words, stating

that “May became the first prime minister in living memory to change a manifesto pledge before an election” and “Prime Minister accused of offering ‘weak leadership’”.

When she skipped the TV debates and sent her home secretary instead, it ran the headline “Amber Rudd, the strong and stable leader that her missing boss was supposed to be”. In the aftermath of the terror attack, the paper did back May and mentioned that she was a “notably thoughtful home secretary” but also questioned her competence when investigations pointed to intelligence failures under her watch. Even in the final week of the campaign, The Telegraph made its feelings clear, with ideology at the heart of the argument: “When she appeared to turn into just one more rebranding robot, uttering the ritual formula on the need for ever more public spending as an answer to all our problems, she deprived herself (and her side) of any chance to win the important argument” (Week 5). A column written by the paper’s long-time editor urged readers to vote for May even though she was “uninspiring”. The paper went to the extent of stating that May had looked “cowardly in terms of her own character as leader”. But despite its misgivings about May, the paper was simultaneously keen to stress that she was still a far better option than Corbyn in ideological terms.

It was clear, therefore, that The Telegraph’s evaluations of May were shaped by events during the campaign. Its responses and criticisms of her, however, were defined by what they regarded as a deviation from Conservative beliefs rather than born out of media logic of fairness. It initially “outsourced” the task of criticism to voters and columnists, but eventually participated in such negative evaluations as well. Even so, the balance between positive and negative evaluations overall was evened out by the paper’s initial praise for her as well as the large number of Conservative colleagues who backed their leader.

5.2.3 Daily Mirror: Pulling No Punches

The left-wing tabloid was scathing in its portrayal of the prime minister from the outset. The number of negative evaluations held steady for the first four weeks before a massive surge in the final week in which just nine out of the 281 evaluations of May in its pages were positive. The negative portrayals were driven across the board by the paper and by members of the Labour party, with partisan voters also chiming in during the last week. Conservatives were conspicuous by their absence, while there were only token mentions of other sources.

While the right-wing papers sought to defend May over her talks with the EU, The Daily Mirror claimed she had “orchestrated a fake row” and accused her “putting political greed ahead of the country’s prosperity” (Week 1). The prime minister was also called “cruel” and “blood sport loving” over her proposal to allow fox hunting in the UK. May’s “strong and stable” slogan was also frequently mocked in the pages of the Daily Mirror.

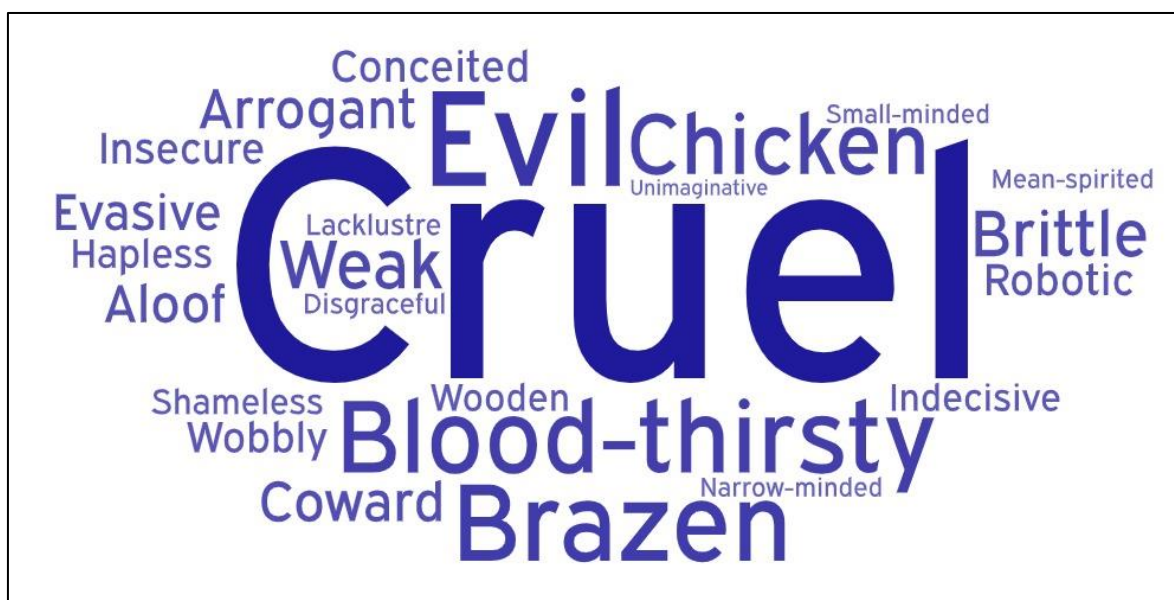


Figure 3: Negative evaluations of Theresa May by the Daily Mirror and The Guardian.

Amid speculation that May would propose an energy cap in the Conservative manifesto, it openly accused her of “stealing” the idea from former Labour leader Ed Miliband (Week 2). It also painted the prime minister as a coward, initially for allegedly hiding from voters to avoid

uncomfortable questions and subsequently for avoiding the TV debates. The newspaper went to the extent of sending a person dressed as a chicken to follow May on the campaign trail. The tabloid became more vocal about May as the campaign rolled on. Readers were given the impression of a cruel, out-of-touch leader with headlines such as “Stayaway May Still To Show She Cares” (Week 3). Even measured criticism of her by Corbyn was sensationalised through headlines such as “Tory Leader's Putting The Con Back Into Conservative”. The views from columnists were particularly scathing, as May was referred to as a “plastic patriot” and a “meal stealer” and branded as having a “sham personality” (Week 5).

Following the controversy over May’s social care proposal, the paper plainly called her “weak and wobbly” over her decision to modify the manifesto pledge. While “dementia tax” became the common description of the proposal across the media, the Daily Mirror went a step further with headlines such as “Theresa’s War On the Elderly” (Week 3). Following the terror attacks, the paper attacked her record as home secretary and said that the “terror flop” prime minister’s authority had been damaged beyond repair (Week 4).

The newspaper pulled no punches in the final week. By this point, the polls had also narrowed, and it seemed possible that Labour might have a chance of defeating the Conservatives. In its overwhelmingly negative coverage of May during the final week, the Daily Mail ran headlines such as “Corbyn Or Coward -- The Choice Is Clear” and “Why You Can’t Believe A Single Word She Says”. The paper also went on to mock her for “making an election about ‘personality’ when she doesn't have one” and said “She has been exposed for what she is: evasive, limited and indecisive”. The evaluations from voters were also dismissive, with a letter to the editor noting that “her weakness and cowardice are there for all to see, as well as her arrogance and disdain for the public.”

Overall, a reader of the Daily Mirror would have been left with the impression that their prime minister was a robotic, cowardly and cruel woman who lacked the ability to connect with the public. The partisan bias of the newspaper was overwhelmingly evident, with the paper dominating evaluations and media logic minimally present.

5.2.4 The Guardian: Partisan Bias Outsourced

The Labour-supporting broadsheet tended to approach its coverage as merely an observer of events rather than an evaluator. Yet, its partisan bias shone through albeit in different ways from the tabloids. In general, The Guardian reported on happenings in the election without any opinion about the events in keeping with the media logic of separating news and opinion. In fact, the paper's voice was largely absent from its coverage of May. Despite publishing a large number of articles mentioning May, she was seldom the focus of the articles and the paper generally covered the election in terms of a contest between the two parties. However, when it came to the number of evaluations of the prime minister present within the text, a different picture emerged.

The negative portrayals of May far exceeded the positive portrayals of her. The trend was consistent on a week-to-week basis and the disparity massively jumped in the final week of the campaign. While this large gap was visible in the Mirror as well, the difference in The Guardian was that the paper's opinion was not the driving force for these negative portrayals. Instead, consistently during the course of the election, it was columnists who were responsible for negative assessments of the prime minister. Their contribution was not just reflected in quantity but also in quality. While the paper occasionally adopted a critical tone in its coverage of May, columnists made direct and personal attacks against her. Examples of this included "May is too cowardly" and "Theresa May recites Labour's lines, but doesn't mean a word of them" (Week 2), among others.

The Guardian's coverage provided the impression that whenever the paper found a bone to pick with May, it enlisted a columnist to write about it instead of directly addressing the topic in its editorials. When May's manifesto appeared to make overtures to working class voters -- Labour's core voting base -- a number of columns appeared attacking the prime minister's credentials in this regard. A case in point was "Theresa May's Tories Aren't A Workers' party. Don't Believe Her Hype". The paper also interjected during this period with an editorial which said that "the prime minister has form on making impressive promises and then failing to live up to them" and that "Theresa May seems to think everyone is out of step but her" (Week 3).

Another notable aspect of the newspaper's coverage was that a large number of negative evaluations originated from voters, particularly in the Letters To The Editor section. As was seen with the evaluations by columnists, the evaluations by voters too were not flattering, as she was labelled "arrogant" (Week 3). Plenty of Labour criticism of May also found its way into The Guardian's pages, but evaluations of her by Conservative leaders were few and far between.

In its regular reporting of events, The Guardian continued to maintain a distance and even included praise of May from voters who favourably compared her with Margaret Thatcher. Some of its editorials also acknowledged positives in her manifesto and while it stated disagreements, it largely did not resort to personal attacks. During the social care controversy, the paper once referred to her as "weak and wobbly" but did not continue with this line of attack. It also questioned her record as home secretary following the terror attack but did not consistently pursue the narrative. During the final week, however, The Guardian became increasingly aggressive in its criticism of the "ever diminishing" May and her "wooden leadership". One comment said that "Theresa May has resembled a malfunctioning robot for most of this election campaign". This line of attack was also pursued by columnists who called her "weak-chinned" and "weak-willed" (Week 5).

In short, partisan bias was clearly evident in The Guardian's choice of sources for evaluations of May. Interestingly, however, the bias was manifested in the form of using columnists and voters to attack the prime minister rather than the paper using its own voice. In the last week, however, all pretences were dropped and the paper keenly contributed to vilifying the Conservative leader for both her competence as well as her character.

5.3 Portraits of Jeremy Corbyn

5.3.1 Daily Mirror: Reluctant Support

Despite the outspoken nature of tabloids and the paper's personal attacks on May described earlier, the Mirror did not have much to say about Corbyn until the final week. After the big defeat for Labour in the local elections, there were several negative evaluations about Corbyn from voters and colleagues. On its editorial pages, the paper expressed doubts about Corbyn and said that the Labour leader "might find it easier to wake up Britain by admitting what is likely to happen on June 8, not what he would like to occur" (Week 1). It acknowledged reservations about him by saying that "he can be trusted to do what he says but there are worries he's not up to the job" (Week 1).

On the other hand, when there were positive evaluations of Corbyn in the Mirror, they were driven by the paper's assessment. It frequently spoke warmly about his character -- making just one negative evaluation about his character during the entire campaign -- but was less effusive about his competence. It did not seek to shield him even in reportage of current events, running the headline "Jezza ducks & dives on Brexit" over Corbyn's reluctance to confirm whether he would go through with Brexit if elected (Week 2).

Negative evaluations in the Mirror were primarily driven by voters, with part of this being an outcome of the paper frequently referencing opinion polls in which Corbyn did not fare well on personal ratings. Opposition voices were few and far between, with primarily the prime

minister's comments on Corbyn featuring. As Labour's poll numbers went up and the prospect of the party causing an upset became realistic, the Mirror started to close ranks around Corbyn. When Labour's manifesto was launched, it said that "Corbyn 's bold vision is refreshing", called him a "man of ideas" and said that "Jeremy has started to transform into a Prime Minister in waiting" (Week 2). Following an appearance on a talk show, the paper praised Corbyn and said that he had "delivered the best TV performance of his leadership" (Week 2).

In the final week of the campaign, the Mirror did not refer to the right-wing press' barrage of accusations of Corbyn over his perceived attitude to terrorism. In a final push before election day, it frequently sought to contrast Corbyn with May, stating that "when it comes to foreign policy and defence, the Labour leader is a far safer bet than a Conservative recklessly spilling blood" and that "Corbyn outclasses the PM on every level" (Week 5). Its endorsement of the Labour leader made its reservations apparent. An editorial noted that "Corbyn's surprised many on the campaign trail, including us, with his passion and energy", but also noting that "Jeremy Corbyn is no Superman" and "neither Mr Corbyn nor Mrs May are all we would wish".

On the whole, it can be said that the Mirror did not enthusiastically make the case for Corbyn to be elected and he was seldom the subject of articles. The paper was convinced about his honesty but less so about his competence, yet rallied around him as the election got nearer. In terms of partisan bias, evaluations were still the driving force as the paper chose not to talk about the controversies surrounding their leader and also did not offer much space to voices from the Conservative party. Its inclusion of several negative voices from voters was notable but the role of media logic was not clearly apparent.



Figure 4: Positive evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn by the Daily Mail and The Guardian.

5.3.2 The Guardian: Media Logic Takes Over

The effect of media logic was clearly visible in The Guardian’s portrayal of Corbyn. Until the last week of the campaign, negative evaluations of Corbyn exceeded the positive evaluations of him. This trend was primarily driven by the fact that the paper did not say much about the Labour candidate even while Conservative criticism of him drove up negative evaluations. And the reason why Conservative evaluations were so prominent in The Guardian was down to its efforts to maintain balance. In other words, while the paper may have neutrally reported on a new Labour manifesto announcement or a Corbyn speech, it always carried a reaction from the Conservatives in order to provide both points of view. The Conservatives had orchestrated a clear line of attack, with all its representatives frequently referring to Corbyn as “weak” and this evaluation appeared repeatedly in the coding process.

As far as its own position to Corbyn was concerned, the paper was initially lukewarm and published a column titled “No more excuses: Jeremy Corbyn is to blame for this meltdown” following the party’s big defeat in the local elections (Week 1). But such was the paper’s commitment to not commenting, that in the third week of the campaign it made no evaluations

whatsoever about Corbyn and instead focused its attention on dissecting the party's prospects as a collective. It seldom made him the focus of coverage apart from interjecting during major events such as the launch of the Labour manifesto, with an editorial lauding Corbyn for taking a "bold step" and "outlining a striking agenda" (Week 2).

Ground reporting highlighted Corbyn's popularity during rallies but the paper still did not express clear support for him. It also reported on his failings such as when he could not remember the cost of a manifesto pledge during an interview and also acknowledged that "security was not his strong suit" following the twin terror attacks (Week 4 and Week 5). In terms of evaluations from voters, the Letters to the Editors column reflected a relative balance between positive and negative evaluations.

During the final week of the campaign, however, the paper intervened to a great extent. While the contribution of The Guardian to the positive evaluations of Corbyn during this period was notable, more striking was the consistent praise from columnists and voters. Various columnists noted that "Corbyn shows there's a new way of doing politics" and summed up his campaign as "positive, good-natured and... hopeful" (Week 5). Therefore, even though the paper continued to publish comments from Conservative voices while there was minimal input from Labour voices, it became clear that partisan bias emerged as the key driver of evaluations in the final week of the campaign. The paper did not question his character during this period even though the right-wing papers were simultaneously questioning whether Corbyn was loyal to Britain. It endorsed Labour and noted that "Corbyn has shown that the party might be the start of something big rather than the last gasp of something small" (Week 5).

On the whole, however, it could not be said that readers of The Guardian would have had a clear impression of Corbyn by reading the newspaper. With the proportion of positive evaluations being less than negative evaluations of Corbyn and the inclusion of sharp personal

attacks from Conservatives, readers might have sensed a lack of enthusiasm about the Labour candidate as media logic took over.

5.3.3 Daily Mail: Making It Personal

From the first week to the last, negative evaluations of Corbyn exceeded the positive evaluations by a huge margin in the Daily Mail. The positive evaluations of the Labour leader remained in single digits every week. In the last week, there were 236 negative evaluations of Corbyn compared to 21 positive assessments. But as stark as these numbers are, they still do not tell the full story of Corbyn's partisan-driven portrayal in the tabloid. A more revealing number would be 13, which is the number of pages that the Daily Mail devoted to making the case for why Corbyn was an "apologist for terror" and detailing what it claimed was his past record of "taking tea with terrorists" (Week 4). Readers of the Daily Mail were painted a dystopian picture of a world in which Corbyn would be prime minister, using his alleged background of "supporting Britain's enemies" to make this case.

The tabloid began attacking Corbyn in the early days of the campaign, calling him "hapless and incompetent" (Week 1). The initial weeks were dedicated to questioning his competence based on ideology. It used the word "Marxist" as an insult to describe Corbyn and sought to paint him as a "radical" in the negative sense of the term (Week 2). When Labour released its manifesto, it said that Corbyn would bankrupt Britain and warned about a return to the UK of the 1970s, when unemployment was extremely high (Week 2). It also said that he was clueless on defence and embraced May's tagline of a "coalition of chaos" to describe the possibility of a Labour-led coalition forming the next government. Not much was said about Corbyn's character during this time. But everything changed when the first terror attack took place in Manchester.

The line of attack began with the paper accusing Corbyn of trying to “make political capital out of the tragedy” when he raised questions over May’s record as home secretary (Week 4). But in the days that followed, Corbyn was portrayed as an enemy of the state in the pages of the Daily Mail. The paper published previously known information about Corbyn’s past meetings with IRA and Palestinian leaders and claimed that “Corbyn has been a shameless apologist for the world's men of evil” (Week 4). One headline read: “Thirty Years Of Cosying Up To Men Of Violence”. The punchline was that Corbyn 's “attitude to terrorism should ultimately disqualify him from ever being prime minister”. These attacks continued right up until the end of the election campaign, along with further warnings about Corbyn’s competence such as the possibility that he would “plunge Britain into a recession”. In the end, the paper said: “We urge our readers to save Britain from the terrorists' friends” (Week 5).

The Daily Mail’s coverage was clearly driven by a high degree of partisanship. It pooled content from columnists and Conservative voices to dismiss Corbyn’s credentials on both competence and character. The voice of voters was almost entirely absent in evaluations of Corbyn. There was no apparent effort from the paper at any stage to find a balance or seek out responses from Labour to its criticisms. Based on seven weeks of coverage, it could be said that the Daily Mail was devoted to creating an alternate reality to keep Corbyn out of office.



Figure 5: Negative evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn by the Daily Mail and The Telegraph.

5.3.4 The Telegraph: Doubling Down on Partisan Bias

Like the Daily Mail, The Telegraph's evaluations of Corbyn were also primarily driven by partisan bias. The negative assessments of Corbyn appearing in the paper were consistently much higher than the positive evaluations of the Labour leader, which were few and far between. Despite the expectation that The Telegraph's status as broadsheet would lead it to adopt a more measured tone, this did not appear to be the case with regard to its coverage of Corbyn. The paper's voice was evident in both regular reportage of events as well as in editorials, it seldom sought the opinion of voters and Labour leaders, and columnists complemented the negative portrayal of Corbyn in its pages.

While the paper let Conservative criticism of Corbyn dominate its coverage in the first week of the campaign, The Telegraph quickly became outspoken as the Labour manifesto was announced. Its initial quarrels with Corbyn were ideological but it also made personal attacks, with remarks in which it called his ideas "nightmarish" and labelled him "useless, unpatriotic and an overt economic socialist" (Week 2). Interestingly, the paper inserted its own evaluations of Corbyn in headlines and framed articles in a partisan manner. The Labour manifesto was framed as "Corbyn's manifesto to take Britain back to the 1970s" and referred to Corbyn as "invincibly ignorant" (Week 2). It went to the extent of calling Corbyn "Hugo Chavez on steroids", a reference to the late Communist leader of Venezuela.

As with the Daily Mail, the focus pivoted from ideology and Corbyn's alleged incompetence to raising question marks about his character with regard to his alleged links to terrorists. Again, the paper made strong evaluations in headlines, referring to Corbyn's alleged "betrayal". In the aftermath of the Manchester terror attack, the paper made revelations about Corbyn's alleged ties with terrorists and claimed that the UK would be "unsafe" with Corbyn as prime minister. Columnists complemented these negative assessments by stating that Corbyn's "moral failings" should disqualify him from office (Week 5). It also kept up an attack on Corbyn's

competence in the final week of the campaign, warning voters not to let him take charge of Brexit as “the result would be chaos, and the undoing of everything good the Tories have ever done in office” (Week 5)

Overall, The Telegraph’s portrayal of Corbyn was overwhelmingly driven by partisan considerations. As was the case with its portrayal of Theresa May, the paper’s ideological commitment stood out and it based a large number of evaluations on what it perceived as Corbyn’s Marxist leanings. Yet, these ideological considerations were subsequently overtaken by its portrayal of Corbyn as unpatriotic. The role of media logic was not visible as it did not compromise on strong language in its headlines and expression of opinion in routine reportage.

DISCUSSION

The two previous chapters sought to examine the patterns that emerged from the coding of the corpus and reconstruct the portrayal of May and Corbyn from the point of view of the four newspapers in the sample. In this chapter, the coverage will be compared to identify key similarities and differences that address the research questions of the extent and conditions under which partisan bias and media logic influenced the portrayal of leaders.

It is clear that partisan bias holistically emerged as the dominant influence on the media's portrayal of the prime ministerial candidates across newspapers and traits. There was one notable exception, as media logic characterised the evaluations of Corbyn in The Guardian. Despite the clear influence of partisan bias, the manner in which it manifested itself was not uniform and it these differences that offer key insights into the behaviour of the British press. **While partisan bias and media logic were examined as separate phenomena, the analysis indicated there was a potential interaction between the two.** It is highly possible that media routines in fact reinforce partisan bias. Given the media's attraction to negative events, all four newspapers doubled down on partisan-driven negative portrayal of a leader when given the opportunity.

Table 7: Dominance of partisan bias in portrayals of May and Corbyn.

	Daily Mirror	The Guardian	Daily Mail	The Telegraph
Theresa May	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jeremy Corbyn	✓	✗	✓	✓

In the pages that follow, I will highlight these differences and discuss specific themes that cropped up in the research. This includes the concept of negative partisanship as the newspapers effectively ran a proxy negative media campaign on behalf of the parties they

supported. I will discuss how partisanship coloured almost everything that the newspapers did and how they went beyond the agenda-setting expectation of not just telling voters what to think about, but also what to think. I will also discuss one of the main findings of the research, which is how newspapers use silence as an expression of their partisanship.

6.1 Nuances of Partisan Bias

The most salient observation from the analysis was that the respective readers of the two Conservative-supporting newspapers and the two Labour-supporting newspapers would have emerged with entirely different impressions of the two leaders based on the coverage they were exposed to during the seven weeks of the campaign. This is because each publication constructed their own version of the campaign, along the lines of Seymour-Ure's argument that the reality of campaigns is the media's version of events (as cited in Patterson 1980, 7).

Ideology-based disagreements were expected, but the newspapers in the sample elevated their assessments of leaders to the level of personal attacks that were driven by partisan considerations. The broadsheets, too, did not pull punches. This conclusion has been arrived at by noting the vast numerical disparities between positive and negative evaluations of the leaders as well as qualitatively examining the use of sources and frames used in making those assessments.

All four newspapers drove the positive portrayal of their endorsed leader and the negative assessments of the leader of the opposing party. But there were some notable nuances and exceptions. The Guardian, for example, chose to keep its voice out from the negative assessments of May in its regular reportage and its criticism in editorials was understated. Yet, the prime minister came across negatively in the pages of The Guardian owing to highly critical and personal attacks made by columnists. It could be argued that the decision to deploy columnists was driven by partisanship even though the decision to be neutral in regular

reporting was the result of media logic that aimed at balance. Separately, media logic was at play in the evaluations of Corbyn in the same newspaper. For most of the campaign, The Guardian was silent with regard to evaluations of Corbyn. However, its media logic of telling both sides of the story resulted in the inclusion of Conservative voices who made a large number of negative evaluations. The end result was that The Guardian actually contained more overall negative evaluations of the leader it supported than positive assessments.

The impact of media logic was negligible elsewhere as partisan bias was overwhelmingly apparent. The Daily Mail stood by May throughout despite her missteps and she was portrayed in the paper as the “strong and stable” leader that she had set out to be. The Telegraph began the campaign by showering praise on May, but she lost credibility in the eyes of the paper when she deviated from what it considered to be core Conservative values. It made an unenthusiastic endorsement of her leadership at the end of the campaign, suggesting that its desire for a Conservative government was the primary motivation.

While the two right-wing papers may have differed in their degree of support for May, what brought them together and made clear their partisan bias was their commitment to discrediting Corbyn. From the start of the campaign until the end, both papers consistently carried negative assessments of the Labour leader. This was led by editorialising by the newspaper and actively supported by columnists, the largescale inclusion of criticism from Conservative leaders and selective use of voters opinions. From the middle of the campaign until the end, both newspapers deployed what could best be described as “attackdog journalism” (Gaber 2016) to tarnish the image of Corbyn. This research does not evaluate whether the allegations made by any of the newspapers were true or not, but it can be said without reservation that the Daily Mail and The Telegraph painted a portrait of Corbyn that rendered him virtually unelectable to its readers. While their initial disagreements with him centred around ideology and what they

saw as “radical” economic beliefs, by the end of the campaign they had turned him into an enemy of the state who mingled with terrorists and was a threat to national security.

While the right-wing newspapers sought to systematically discredit Corbyn, the Labour-supporting press did not do much to boost his prospects. Their support for the Labour leader could best be described as lukewarm as *The Guardian* in particular acknowledged his strengths and weaknesses in equal measure. It only threw its weight behind Corbyn towards the end of the campaign. Instead, much like the right-wing papers, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* were more focused on the other side. The *Daily Mirror* consistently attacked the prime minister with vigour. She emerged as a cruel and incompetent person who lacked a personality and was not up to the task of leading the country.

The Guardian preferred to keep its interventions to a minimum in its portrayal of May, but shed its inhibitions and made evident its partisan bias in the final week as it wholeheartedly criticised May’s credentials (See Appendix). Simultaneously, it published columns and opinions from voters that complemented the paper’s personal attacks. Yet, the negative portrayal of May in the left-wing papers was benign in comparison with the demonisation of Corbyn in the right-wing press. Simply put, the right-wing papers were more vocal than the left-wing papers in their negative evaluations of the leader they opposed, while the left-wing papers were less effusive than the right-wing newspapers in their endorsement of the leader they supported. The imbalance in portrayal clearly favoured the incumbent.

6.1.1 Negative Partisanship and Support Through Silence

Two notable trends emerge from the leader portrayals described above. The research began with the expectation that if a newspaper supported a certain party, then positive evaluations of the party’s leader would be higher than the negative evaluations and vice-versa for the opposition party. While this expectation was met, it also proved to be too simplistic because it

did not account for the massive disparity between positive and negative evaluations that would emerge overall. In other words, all the newspapers channeled their efforts towards discrediting the challenger rather than talking up the credentials of the leader they supported.

With regard to image building, the newspapers built a clear image of the opposing leader while only offering minor insights into the image of the leader they endorsed. If the newspapers were classified as political campaigners, it could be said without hesitation that they ran a negative campaign on behalf of the parties they supported. In the process, they plausibly contributed to the notion of negative partisan attitudes, in which voters are motivated to participate more out of fear about what another leader will do rather than the positive contributions of another leader (Greene 2005). One explanation for this polarised coverage could be that all the newspapers perceived the leader of the party they supported as not up to the task.

On balance, the newspapers' coverage of the candidate of the party they supported was just about more positive than negative. But the most revealing trend was the massive difference between the overall evaluations of the endorsed leader as compared to the evaluations of the rival party's leader. It leads to the inference that **newspapers may be expressing their partisan bias not by passionately defending their endorsed leader, but rather by adopting a policy of silence and not talking about them at all or reducing the salience of personalisation.** This becomes apparent when comparing the simultaneous coverage of both leaders in the respective newspapers during specific events.

When Theresa May's manifesto U-turn was dominating the campaign, the right-wing papers switched the focus to criticisms of the Labour manifesto while only occasionally referring to May's missteps. For their part, the left-wing papers let May campaign's implode during this period and did not give Corbyn much attention. Similarly, Corbyn's alleged links with terrorists became a smokescreen used by right-wing newspapers when the prime minister was under fire

over the two terrorist attacks. While the Daily Mail and The Telegraph panned Corbyn on a daily basis for being unpatriotic, the Labour-supporting newspapers barely mentioned anything about Corbyn's seemingly chequered past. In other words, the newspapers were seemingly doing their endorsed leader a favour by not discussing them during a negative news cycle and instead turning the focus on the challenger. Throughout, these shifts in portrayal were guided by events as the campaign shifted from one news cycle to another.

The change in events also influenced the emphasis on specific traits. While competence dominated overall trait evaluations across the board, character was the dominant frame during specific periods. The Daily Mirror, for instance, emphasised character by portraying May as cruel for her proposed "dementia tax" and her refusal to participate in TV debates. In the right-wing press, the focus was Corbyn's competence during the early weeks of the campaign when policy was in focus, but dramatically switched the focus to character by discussing his alleged links with terrorists. However, no conclusive evidence could be drawn along the lines of Hollan and Prysby (2014), who found that left-wing and right-wing supporters vary in their preference of traits. But this could be an outcome of the agenda that May set for the election, which prioritised competence. The parties were also successful in influencing media coverage of traits with readymade taglines such as "strong and stable" and "weak and wobbly".

6.1.2 Ethics Don't Matter When the Stakes are High

The last week of the campaign presented the most prominent evidence of the dominance of partisan bias in evaluations of leaders. In all four newspapers, positive evaluations of rival party leaders were mentioned only in passing. While the impact of media logic was occasionally visible during the early weeks of the campaign, what became clear was that the voice of the newspapers became louder as the campaign wore on. By the last week, all four newspapers had effectively turned into proxy campaigners for the parties they supported. With the gap between the parties narrowing in the opinion polls, their coverage suggested a final push to get their

preferred parties in government with little regard for the norms of balance and fairness. The clearest example of this was *The Guardian*, which until the final fortnight of the campaign had taken a hands-off approach to coverage of both leaders. But towards the end, it removed the shackles and pushed for the defeat of the Conservatives.

6.1.3 Selective Use of Sources

Most newspaper papers drove evaluations by inserting their own voices in articles, but there were also other elements that contributed to the dominance of partisan bias on evaluations. Three of the four newspapers disproportionately gave a voice to leaders from their supported parties. One factor could have been that Conservative leaders were more accessible to right-wing papers while Labour leaders would be more willing to speak to left-wing papers. But in the age of social media, both parties and their leaders have dedicated pages in which they post views that are accessible to the public. Therefore, it can plausibly be argued that it was a partisan-driven decision not to include opinions from the other side. The only exception was *The Guardian*, which let media logic take over and included critical voices of Corbyn in its pages.

The use of voter opinions in the Letters to the Editor section was also interesting. Most of the tabloids selectively included voices of voters who supported their leader of choice while incorporating voter criticism of the rival leader. The evidence, therefore, suggests a partisan bias in the selection of letters. *The Guardian* was an exception to this trend during some weeks of the campaign but once again was dominated by partisan considerations in the final week.

6.2 Proposed Hypotheses

Based on the inferences from this study, I propose a set of hypotheses that could be tested in future research, especially in increasingly partisan press environments such as the US.

- Partisan bias in coverage of candidate traits will manifest during the final week of the campaign even if it is absent during other times
- The volume of evaluations of leaders will increase over the course of the campaign and peak in the final week
- During a positive news cycle for the candidate of the party they support, a media outlet will increase the degree of personalisation in coverage
- During a negative news cycle for the candidate of the party they support, the media outlet will decrease the degree of personalisation in coverage
- If a partisan outlet is not enthusiastic about the credentials of the leader of the party it supports, it will place more emphasis on portraying the rival leader as deviant
- Competence evaluations will exceed character evaluations unless specific events make one trait more prominent
- Partisan broadsheets will outsource the task of evaluating rival leaders negatively to columnists
- Partisan broadsheets will demonstrate less evidence of media logic and more evidence of partisan bias as the election gets nearer
- Media logic will only dominate leader evaluations in partisan broadsheets during the initial stages of a campaign

6.3 Limitations

While I argue that the research produced some noteworthy insights, its scope was only limited to one particular aspect of the media's portrayal of candidate traits at the expense of others. The coding of the data, for example, only examined evaluations within articles and did not account for the general tone of articles and their placement within the newspaper. For instance, the negative framing of articles in general did not emerge from the coding technique and could have shed more light on the degree of polarised coverage. In addition, the evaluation did not

include images. Therefore, the right-wing press' frequent use of pictures of Corbyn dressed in what was called "Marxist attire" was not included in the analysis and would have provided a clearer sense of the image-building process. Another aspect that the coding of articles was unable to reveal was the gender dynamics in the portrayal of leaders. In the case of May, her personal appearance was frequently commented on but not considered for analysis as a clear-cut assessment was not made.

The study limited itself to examining the two influences of partisan bias and media logic but left out a number of other influences. It was stated in Chapter 2 that commercialisation was considered an antecedent to partisan bias and media logic. But it is possible that the influence of commercialisation was increased by the fact that the newspapers have to take into consideration their online presence, where the era of clickbait journalism means that even broadsheets have to sensationalise their coverage to stay relevant (Munger 2019).

Another drawback of the study is that it only went so far in explaining the evaluations of the leaders. While content analysis succeeded in bringing out the vastly different portrayals, interviews with journalists would have helped to provide more context about the factors that influenced their coverage. Such interviews would have been useful for confirming the attitude within newsrooms to certain candidates and the influence of individual journalists and groupthink on coverage.

6.4 Implications

One of the most significant implications of this study is that research on partisan bias in the media should pay greater attention to what is *not* mentioned in coverage as such insights may prove to be more revealing. The research also demonstrates that events during a campaign -- even a short one -- can significantly alter the media's framing of leaders. With a constant barrage of negativity, the newspapers across the spectrum did not just tell their readers what to

think about, but decided what their opinion should be. As Freedman (2017) notes, given the constant portrayal of Corbyn as dangerous if not deficient, it was unlikely that these frames did not appear in discussions among voters.

In research on the 2015 general election in the UK, it was found that negative campaigning by parties hurt their electoral prospects (Walter and van der Eijk 2019). But given the fear-based campaign undertaken in the 2017 election, it is plausible that other researched effects of negative campaigning affected the vote. In other words, partisan newspapers may or may not have been successful in mobilising voters to support their preferred party, but they could have deterred undecided voters along the lines of research by Riker (1991) and Lau (1985).

This research was focused almost entirely on the campaign process but did not discuss the results. Based on May's reduced majority, it was argued that the press had lost its power as Corbyn had achieved considerable success despite the barrage of criticism against him from the right-wing newspapers. It was said that voters had realised that the image of him portrayed in the press widely differed from what they saw on the more neutral television channels, where the "real" Corbyn was on display (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). While this might be true, the obituaries for British the press are premature. The seat tallies tell only part of the story, as the Conservatives in fact increased their vote share by 6. One possibility is that the campaign of fear against Corbyn succeeded in convincing more people to vote for the Conservatives. Corbyn came so close to unseating May despite the disparaging coverage of him and one can reasonably wonder whether the outcome would have been different had the press been more neutral.

The research also presents many normative considerations. Had the four papers alone been responsible for voter perceptions of the two prime ministerial candidates, Corbyn would not have stood a chance. To be sure, newspapers from both sides engaged in negative campaigning

on a massive scale. But even though May was portrayed as cold, heartless and weak in the pages of the Labour-leaning press, this did not compare with Corbyn's depiction as a terrorist sympathiser and a threat to national security in the Conservative-supporting press. In addition, the overall tone of portrayal was negative and plausibly triggered voter apathy. Given the UK's status as a liberal democracy, the nature of press coverage witnessed during his election raises questions about whether this hyperpartisan coverage is a threat to democratic ideals. The negative partisanship on display in the press may serve to reinforce the high levels of polarisation that was already evident in the Brexit vote. And with commercialisation on the rise in digital media, partisan bias and personalisation is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

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APPENDIX

1. Raw Data

All original articles downloaded from the LexisNexis database as well as subsequent coding tallies are accessible at this [link](#).

2. Summary of Main Campaign Issues

Brexit: The first week of the campaign was dominated by Brexit as British and EU representatives came together to discuss the contours of an exit deal. The highlight was a leaked conversation that appeared in the German media in which senior EU officials were critical of May, with unflattering words such as “delusional” being used to describe the British prime minister. Corbyn, meanwhile, was not part of these discussions but his apparently ambiguous stance on how Britain should leave the EU was discussed in the newspapers.

Local elections: Shortly after the general election campaign began, elections for local authorities were held. Labour suffered a heavy defeat in these elections and this contributed to a sense that under Corbyn’s leadership, the party would not stand a chance in the general election. According to polling agencies such as Survation, the Conservatives held a massive lead of 18 percentage points at this stage of the campaign (Reuters 2017). This lead would be narrowed down to just one percentage point when voting day arrived.

Manifestos: The launch of party manifestos has traditionally been a keenly-awaited event in British election campaigns. Unpopular manifesto proposals and failure to keep promises can hurt parties. With policy issues at the heart of manifestos, the differences between the two parties are along the lines of the traditional left-right divide. The Conservatives tend to be averse to state intervention and prefer to keep taxes low while Labour advocates higher state spending and higher taxes on the rich. During the 2017 campaign, two manifesto-related issues took centre stage. The first was a proposal by May’s Conservatives to impose a cap on energy

tariffs that would benefit consumers but potentially hurt the business community. The second and more controversial manifesto issue was a social care proposal by May in which she proposed that anyone who received care in their own home would have to pay for it through the value of their home following their death.

TV debates: Unlike the US, leader debates are not the norm in the UK and 2010 was actually the first time that such debates were held in the country. In 2017, May and Corbyn were reluctant to confirm their participation and the speculation became a popular topic.

Terror attacks: National security became the most important issue in the final two weeks of the campaign after two terror attacks. The first one took place at a concert in Manchester, with a bomb blast leaving 23 people dead and hundreds injured. Two weeks later, a vehicle intentionally rammed into pedestrians in London and its occupants then stabbed people at nearby restaurants. Eight people were killed and dozens injured in the attacks. May's leadership and Corbyn's past record of attending protests came under heightened scrutiny.

3. Supplementary Results from Quantitative Inquiry

Table 1: Distribution of competence and character traits across newspapers

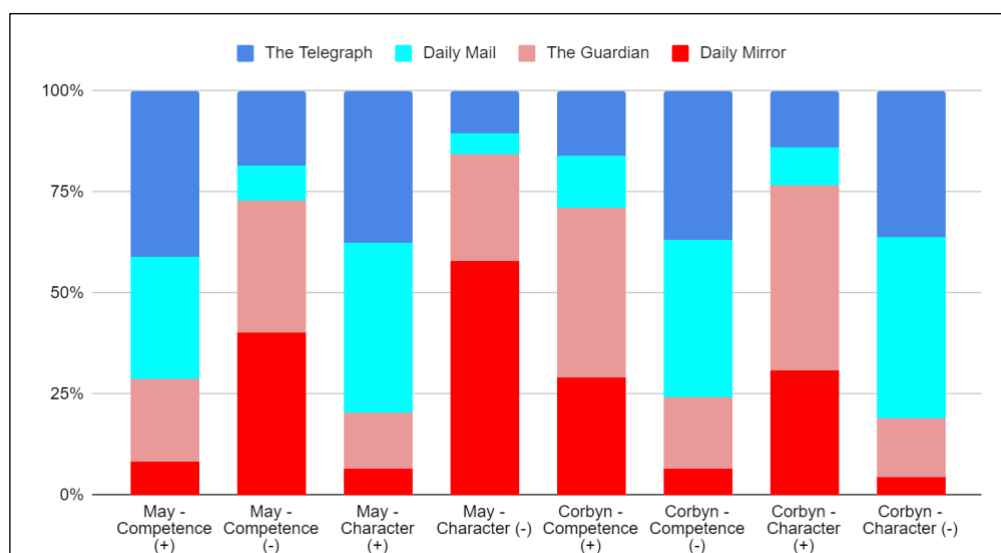


Table 2: Proportion of evaluated and unevaluated articles across newspapers.

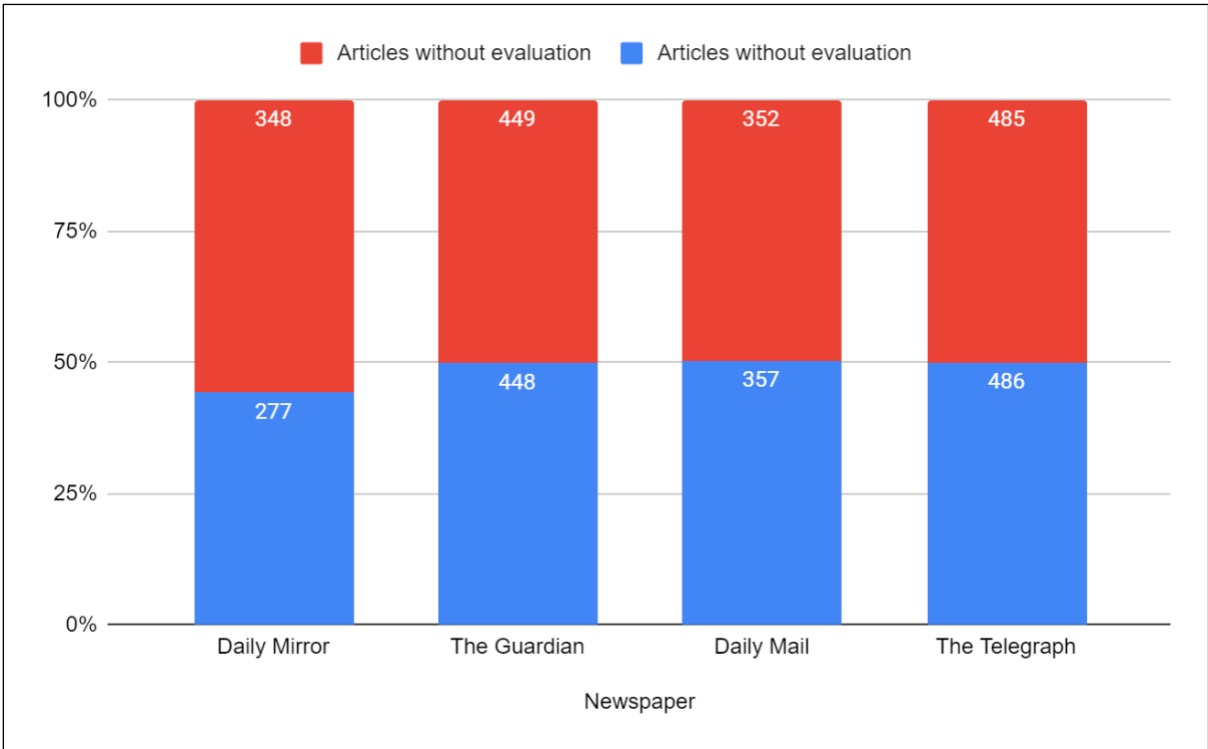


Table 3: Proportion of evaluated and unevaluated articles for each leader across newspapers.

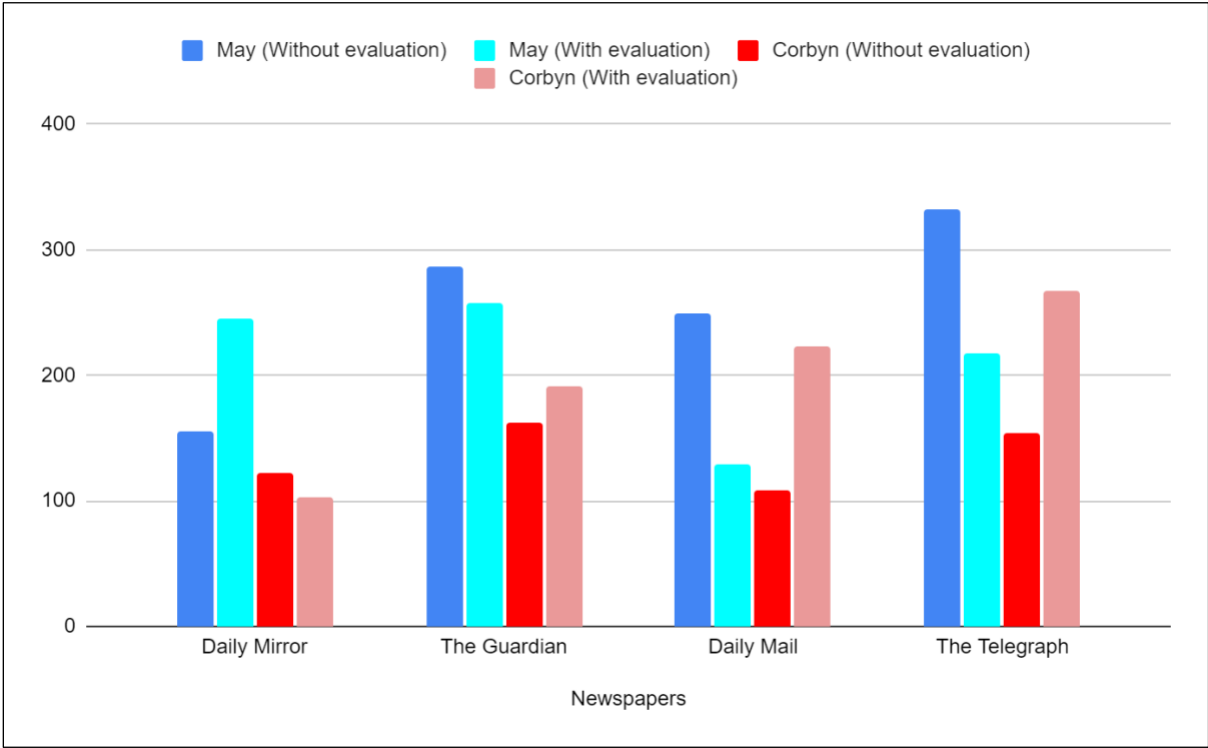


Table 4: Distribution of sources for trait evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn across newspapers.

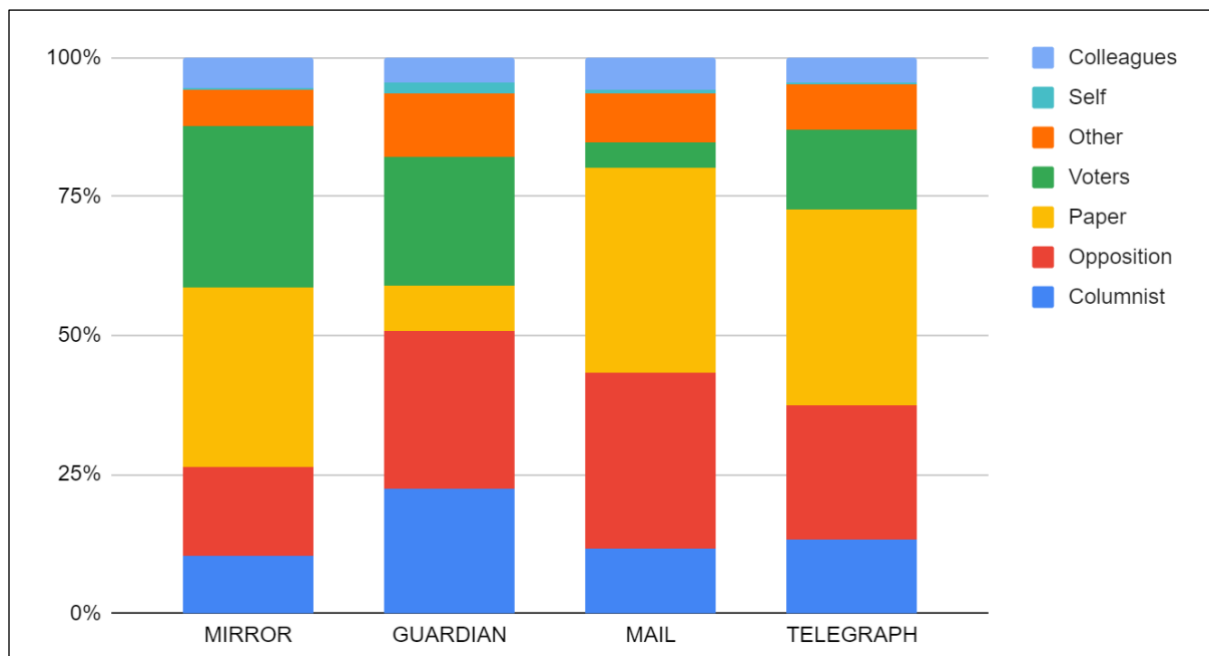


Table 5: Distribution of sources for trait evaluations of Theresa May across newspapers.

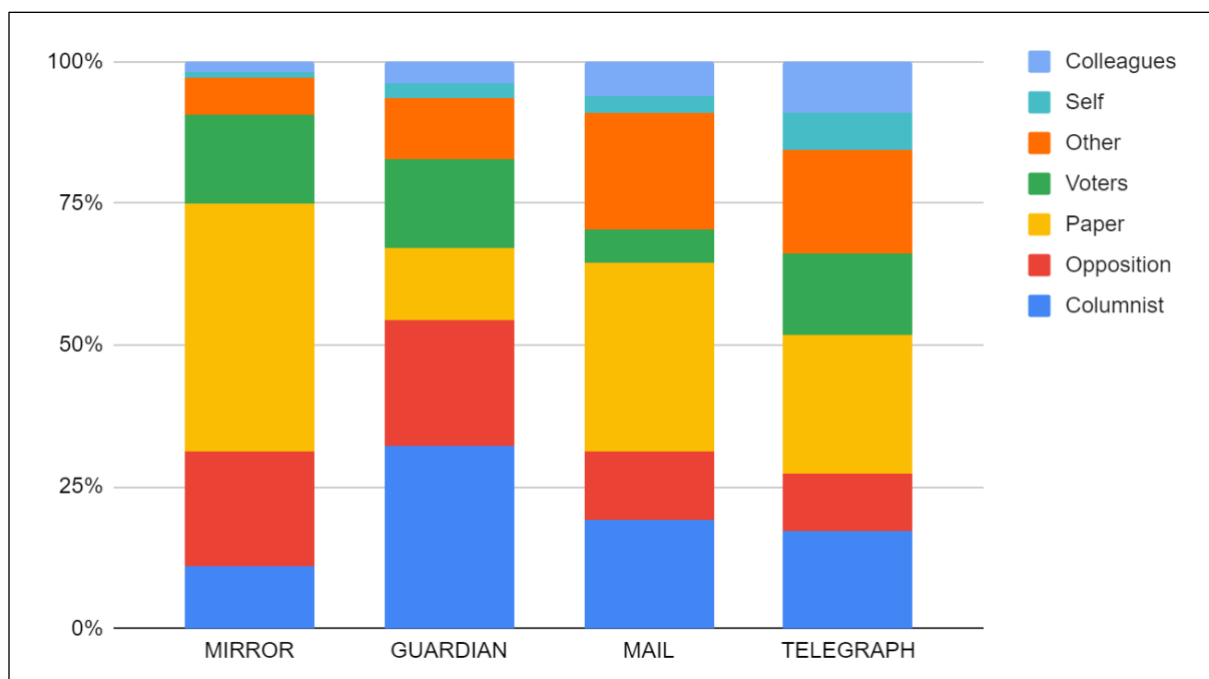


Table 6: Week-wise distribution of evaluations of Theresa May in The Guardian.

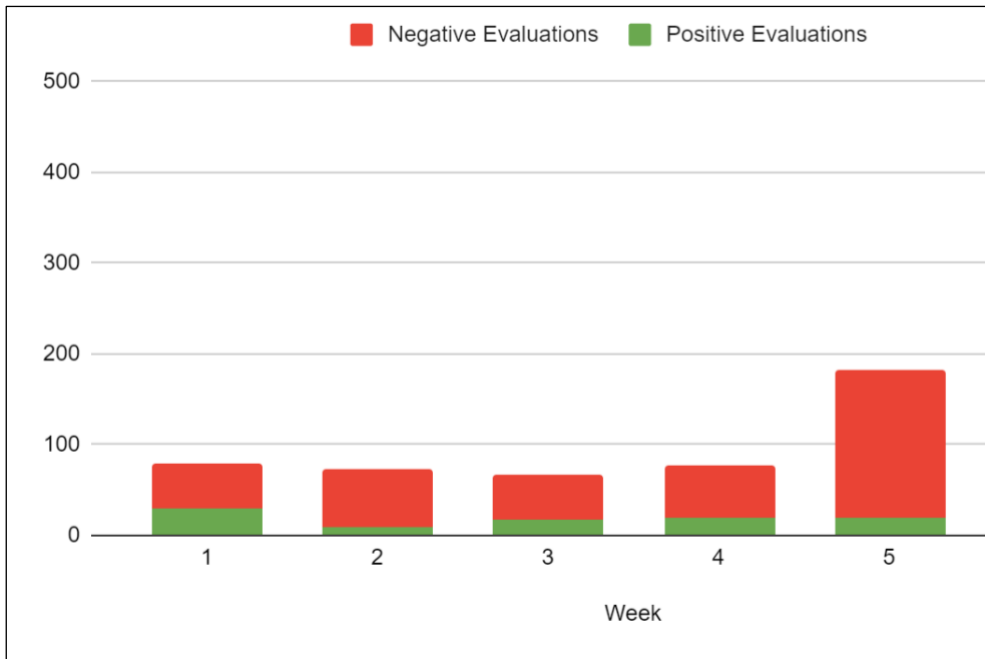


Table 7: Week-wise distribution of evaluations of Jeremy Corbyn in The Guardian.

