

Reporting the International System

Reporting the International System: Attention to Foreign Leaders in the US News Media, 1950–2008

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Information on foreign affairs reaches Americans primarily through the news media, yet we know little about why some global actors receive more attention than others. We constructed a new data set describing media attention to, and US state actions and discourse about, foreign leaders from 1950 to 2008 to assess which leaders receive more attention and why. The results of our analyses suggest that media attention is disproportionately allotted to (1) leaders of the most powerful countries in the international system; (2) leaders of countries experiencing instability and violence; (3) leaders of countries that domestic political elites (Congress and the president) pay attention to, or where the US is currently fighting a war; and (4) leaders of countries whose connections to global networks signal positions of neutrality vis-à-vis the Cold War superpowers. We do not find any evidence that media attention diffuses through connections in the world polity. We conclude that media attention to foreign leaders is a reflection of the dynamics of geopolitical struggles and conflicts rather than global interconnectedness. Thus, in the context of attention to world leaders, news values favoring conflict and struggle resonate more than news values favoring connections and cooperation.

Introduction

The news media are among the central institutions of democratic political systems and, in the US context, have a near-monopoly on the dissemination of information about foreign countries (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Larson 2000). Because states and their leaders are the legitimated actors in the contemporary global-cultural understanding of the international system (Chiozza and Goemans 2004; Galtung

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and Ruge 1965; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Migdal 1988, 206), journalists tend to focus on individual heads of state governments when reporting on international politics. Media attention to foreign leaders, therefore, reflects how journalists represent the international system, and foreign leaders that receive more attention in the US news media are more visible to the American public. These heavily covered leaders are more likely to enter American political discourse (Gamson 1992), which may shape domestic public opinion and American foreign policy toward their countries (Cohen 1963; Wood and Peake 1998). Yet, we know little about which leaders receive more media attention than others and why.

We build on a long sociological tradition that has examined why some people and events receive more media attention than others (e.g., Amenta et al. 2009; Clayman and Reisner 1998; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1973). Sociological theories of news gathering emphasize the role of journalists as gatekeepers guided by “news values”—norms that structure journalists’ conceptions of which people, groups, and events are newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979). In this study, we distinguish between two groups of news values: (1) those that favor conflict, novelty, violence, and power; and (2) those that favor connection and similarity.

Previous research suggests that either (or both) of these sets of news values might structure media attention to foreign leaders. The realist tradition in international relations, which sees the world as anarchic and dominated by the logic of survival and self-help, suggests that media attention may follow the contours of geopolitical power struggles, guided by news values that favor conflict, novelty, violence, and power (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Rosenblum 1979). By contrast, theories that draw on the liberal tradition in international relations, which focuses on cooperation and interdependence in a world structured by international institutions, suggest that media attention to foreign leaders may be guided by news values that emphasize closeness and similarity, flowing along shared ties to global networks, between countries with significant trade volumes, or among countries that share similar political systems (e.g., Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011; Linos 2011).

In what follows, we generate testable hypotheses about the structure of media attention to foreign leaders drawn from theories of international relations and news values. We then test these hypotheses using country-level fixed-effects regression analyses on two original data sets coupled with existing data. We analyze media coverage of leaders of 165 countries between 1950 and 2008 and find that media attention to foreign leaders generally follows geopolitical conflicts and struggles rather than connections via international institutions, trade, or political similarity. These findings suggest that news values favoring conflict, novelty, violence, and power are more resonant in the context of media attention to foreign leaders.

Competing Theories of the International System

The two central theories of the international system offer very different accounts of its nature. First, theories derived from the realist tradition argue that the international system is inherently anarchic, that states (rather than international or

transnational organizations) are the sole actors in this system, that states act to ensure their survival and maximize their interests, and that states interpret one another's actions according to their position vis-à-vis the most powerful states in the system (Mearsheimer 2014; Waltz 1979, 2000). The most powerful countries, then, are also the most important in the international system, and events that can potentially alter the global balance of power, such as wars and other geopolitical crises, are central features.

By contrast, theories that draw on the liberal tradition in international relations focus on economic, social, and cultural ties between states as vehicles for cooperation and long-term peace. Here, the international system is characterized not by anarchy, but by the interdependence fostered by international institutions and law; international network ties aid cooperation between states by facilitating commercial and information flows between states, transnational and international organizations are purposive actors in international relations, and states interpret one another's actions according to their relationship to global networks and adherence to the norms of international institutions (Deutsch 1957; Doyle 2005; Keohane and Martin 1995; Meyer et al. 1997). Scholars in this area argue that, especially since the end of World War II, power and wealth differentials among states have declined in significance as global networks provide an increasingly flat, nonhierarchical playing field (Boli 2005; Finnemore 1993).

Within the liberal tradition, world polity theory argues that states are embedded in a global network of international governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the United Nations that facilitate both the diffusion of information and "global" norms and policies (Beckfield 2010; Boli 2005; Boli and Thomas 1997; Meyer et al. 1997). States that are prominent within international organizations are thus seen as the most influential in the international system, and processes that increase connectivity among states, such as trade, are central features. Structural realists recognize that states central to international institutions are more influential, but argue that international institutions are simply "a reflection of the distribution of power in the world" (Mearsheimer 1994, 7), a sentiment that is echoed by sociologists critical of the world polity tradition who have demonstrated that global network membership is highly stratified (Beckfield 2003; Hughes et al. 2009; Smith and Wiest 2005) and that powerful core states are the primary actors driving the diffusion of information between countries (Barrett, Kurzman, and Shanahan 2010; Cole 2006; Fourcade 2006).

Conflict, Connection, and News Values in the International System

Realist and liberal theories of the international system can each be associated with a corresponding set of news values. Realist theories correspond to news values emphasizing violence, conflict, and power, while liberal theories correspond to news values based on connection and similarity. Previous research suggests that it is plausible that media attention follows either one, or both, of these logics. Below, we outline five broad sets of factors that correspond to these theories and news values to derive and test specific hypotheses.

Realist News Values: Conflict, Instability, and Novelty

Many features of instability central to realist theories, such as violence, novelty, and conflict, resonate with well-documented news values (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011). Following this logic, media attention to foreign leaders should be responsive to events that feature political instability, violence, and novelty. This suggests that (1) violent episodes of instability, including international war, adverse regime change, and genocide and ethnic conflict, should increase the attention leaders receive in the news media; and (2) nonviolent instability and novelty, such as elections and the newness of the regime, should make foreign leaders more newsworthy.

Realist News Values: Country-Level Socio-Political Attributes

News values that align with realist interpretations of the international system suggest that media attention should reflect differential status and conflicts over the global distribution of power, leading us to expect that states with greater economic and military power will receive more media attention (Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011; Wu 2000).

Similarly, journalists may prefer to cover rulers of personalistic regimes in which control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of a narrow group centered around an individual dictator (Geddes 2003). Since journalists tend to devote more attention to stories that revolve around individual actors than groups or social processes (Galtung and Ruge 1965), we expect that the relative power of a given leader within their domestic political system may influence media coverage allotted to that leader. Likewise, personalistic rulers are more likely to act against and openly condemn the most powerful actors in the international system, both of which may result in increased media attention (Chehabi and Linz 1998, 28).

Thus, we expect that (1) leaders of countries with greater military and economic capacity will receive more attention; and (2) leaders of personalistic regimes will receive more attention.

Realist News Values: Domestic State Attention

Realist theories of the international system emphasize the role of domestic elites in driving foreign policy in the interests of the state (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Mearsheimer 2014). This is in line with previous scholarship that has consistently shown that media coverage of international politics is heavily influenced by the actions and discourse of domestic political elites, primarily the president and Congress (e.g., Gans 1979; Groeling and Baum 2008). These theories offer differing predictions on the extent to which the president and Congress set journalists' agendas. The index model holds that media attention to issues is "indexed," or limited, to expressing only opinions found in mainstream political discourse (Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006; Entman 2003). A number of studies have empirically shown that media attention to foreign countries tracks closely with congressional attention; examples include El Salvador in the 1980s (Bennett 1990, 108,111) and Iraq in the 2000s (Howell,

Pevehouse, and Kriner 2007, 151–92). In these instances, these scholars argue, domestic political elites influenced media attention to the international system in order to further the state’s geopolitical interests.

From this literature, we form both a “weak” and a “strong” hypothesis (Howell, Pevehouse, and Kriner 2007, 161): (1) The “weak” hypothesis: the amount of attention a foreign leader receives is positively influenced, though not wholly determined, by state attention. (2) The “strong” hypothesis: state attention exhausts the systematic determinants of media attention to foreign leaders.

Liberal News Values: Country-Level Socio-Political Attributes

Liberal theories that emphasize similarity, proximity, and connectedness also have analogues in the literature on news values. For example, while realist news values suggest that the media may allot attention to personalistic leaders due to their association with conflict, other media scholarship suggests that leaders from countries politically similar to the United States should receive more attention than others (Chang, Shoemaker, and Brendlinger 1987; Joye 2009; Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011). Koopmans and Vliegenthart (2011), for instance, show that earthquakes in countries with more political freedom tend to receive more attention in the Western news media. Accordingly, this scholarship leads us to expect that leaders of countries that become more democratic will receive more attention (Wu 2000).

Liberal News Values: Economic and World Polity Ties

Global economic interdependence is a key element of liberal theories of the international system. Scholars in this area argue that economic exchanges create cross-cutting transnational ties that facilitate the diffusion of information and norms (Doyle 2005, 465). Thus, we expect that a given country’s economic relationship with the United States may influence media attention allotted to its leader. This proposition finds some support in the prior literature; Koopmans and Vliegenthart (2011) find, for example, that social and economic connections between countries lead to greater coverage of humanitarian disasters (see also Wu 2000).

Scholarship in the liberal tradition does not focus on economic connections alone. A central tenet of one such tradition, the world polity literature, is that various outcomes diffuse as a result of shared membership in international organizations. Scholars in this area have empirically demonstrated the increased adoption of “global” policies by states that are more embedded in the world polity network (e.g., that belong to a large number of international organizations) as a result of diffusion along ties, noting that powerful countries like the United States often fall behind other, less powerful countries in this regard (Boli 2005, 399; Meyer 2010, 12). From this perspective, media attention may be a function of embeddedness in the world polity. This proposition finds some support in the prior literature; Linos (2011), for example, finds that countries that are more embedded in the world polity are more likely to be emulated by other countries as a result of increased media coverage.

This literature leads us to expect that (1) leaders of countries with a greater trade volume with the United States will receive more attention; and (2) leaders of countries that are more embedded in the world polity network will receive more attention.

Realist/Liberal News Values: The Stratified World Polity as Reflection of Global Power

While classical world polity scholarship focuses primarily on embeddedness in the world polity network, more recent sociological critics of world polity scholarship draw on both liberal and realist theories in international relations, highlighting the importance of position and power in global networks in addition to embeddedness (Beckfield 2010; Hughes et al. 2009). According to this take on world polity theory, a country's position vis-à-vis the Cold War great power blocs may reflect postwar global power dynamics and, thus, structure media attention more than embeddedness as such. This proposition finds support in the prior literature; for example, Entman (2004) finds that news media reporting tended to reflect official ideological assumptions during the Cold War. Accordingly, leaders of countries that are more proximate to the United States than the USSR/Russian Federation in the global IGO network may receive more media attention. Alternatively, given news values that focus on conflict and change, the media may allot more attention to leaders of countries whose positions in the global IGO network do not reflect strong affinities toward either Cold War power bloc.

This literature also suggests that membership in specific IGOs might signal actors' positions in the international system and influence the amount of media attention they receive. The rise of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, a movement of third-world countries that cast itself as explicitly neutral with respect to the bipolar order, presented a challenge to the Cold War-era bipolar system (Duncan and Siverson 1982). While some scholars have interpreted NAM's anti-imperialist leanings as evidence of their de facto alignment with the USSR (e.g., Imam 1981), the archived documents of the NAM conferences reveal that only a minority of NAM members supported an approach to non-alignment that considered the USSR a "natural ally," with most members favoring the dissolution of bloc politics altogether (Jankowitsch, Sauvant, and Weber 1984, 179–91; see also Rajan 1990, 93, 105–6). NAM also threatened the "harmony of interests" between elites in the core and periphery (Ayooob 1989; Larrabee 1976), and enhanced the standing of many peripheral countries in international politics (Kullaa 2012). Scholars at the time pointed to NAM member-states as potentially disruptive "unstable components" in the international system (Deutsch and Singer 1964, 404). Thus, NAM leaders may have attracted more attention as a result of their geopolitical position.

These theories suggest that (1) leaders of countries that are more proximate to the United States than the USSR in the world polity will receive more attention; or (2) leaders occupying non-aligned positions vis-à-vis the superpowers will receive more attention; and (3) leaders of countries who brought their countries into NAM will receive more attention.

Data and Method

Data Collection

Our dependent variable is a measure of the amount of attention allotted to a foreign leader in the *New York Times* in a given year. To construct this measure, we used a list of names and titles for all foreign leaders of nation states from 1950 to 2008 from the Archigos data set (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). These data provide names of heads of government (HoG),¹ as opposed to heads of state (HoS). We appended the Archigos name list with alternative spellings of leader names and alternative titles. We then coupled this list with names of countries and associated adjectives and demonyms. Next, we conducted automated Boolean searches for all leaders coupled with their titles, nationality descriptors, demonyms, and alternative spellings of their names for each year that the leader was in power. We searched for articles that contained at least one of each of the following items: a formal title or given name for the leader, the surname of the leader, and a nationality descriptor or demonym for a leader's country.²

We refined our search terms using preliminary models to identify outliers, manually double-checking search terms for outlying leader-years. We repeated this analysis over four iterations of data collection, adding alternative spellings of names and additional titles and creating idiosyncratic search terms for leaders³ that were generating many false positives. Throughout, we were sensitive to cultural, political, and linguistic conventions⁴ that influence the ways the media referred to leaders. Our strategy inevitably misses many mentions of leaders, but minimizes false positives that can dramatically distort attention patterns.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is a measure based on yearly counts of articles mentioning a given foreign leader. Rather than using raw counts of articles, we follow collective action scholars in constructing a measure that accounts for differences in the visibility among articles (Andrews and Caren 2010; Vliegenthart, Oegema, and Klandermans 2005). Because front-page articles are generally more likely to be read than others, we weight front-page articles more highly in our measure. Media attention is also subject to “diminishing returns” in that an additional article for a leader who has already been mentioned 1,000 times that year is much less important than a first mention for a leader who has not been in the media that year (see Vliegenthart, Oegema, and Klandermans 2005); to capture this dynamic, we take the natural logarithm of our index. The dependent variable, y_{it} , is

$$y_{it} = \log(2 \times \text{total front page articles} + \text{total other articles}),$$

where i indexes foreign leaders, t indexes years, *total front page articles* refers to the number of front page *Times* articles that mention leader i , and *total other articles* refers to the total number of other articles mentioning leader i .

We analyze articles from the *New York Times*. As the nation's newspaper of record, the *Times* is by far the most analyzed paper in social scientific analyses of the national media agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 2009), collective action

(Earl et al. 2004), and cross-national analyses. While it is not entirely clear the extent to which the *Times* generalizes to other newspapers or the larger media agenda, analysts have often found that conclusions drawn from the *Times* are robust to the inclusion of other papers (Jackman and Boyd 1979; Jenkins and Perrow 1977), and that correlations between the *Times* and other national papers are high (Amenta et al. 2009; Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011, 640–41; but see Myers and Caniglia 2004). The *Times* is archived through ProQuest for the entire period in which we are interested, unlike other national papers. For those periods in which archives are available (1950–1985), we also collected data for the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. We ran our models using the logged total articles from all four papers from 1950 to 1985 with no substantive changes in the results. While these comparisons do not guarantee that hypotheses tested on the *Times* will generalize, they do suggest that the composition of foreign attention in the *Times* is similar to other national papers.

Independent Variables—Instability, Novelty, and Conflict

We use several measures drawn from data published by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) that deal with episodes of instability and violence in a given country-year (Marshall and Cole 2011). The first of these is a measure of the magnitude of *international wars* that a country is involved in. Second, we include a measure of *adverse regime change*, or the sudden collapse of central state institutions and/or their replacement by a more nondemocratic regime (Goldstone et al. 2010, 191). This variable captures the violence magnitude of a particular adverse regime change and is coded as an ordinal variable ranging from 0 to 4, with 0 indicating no adverse regime change and 4 indicating an extremely violent adverse regime change. We also include the PITF variables for *ethnic wars*—episodes of violent conflict between governments and national, religious, or other communal minorities—and *genocides and politicides*—sustained policies by governing elites that result in the killing of members of specific communal or politicized groups (Marshall, Gurr, and Harff 2009, 6,14). Like the *adverse regime change* variable, these are coded for magnitude. These measures were partially constructed from contemporaneous press accounts, raising potential endogeneity issues. However, the events tapped by these measures are major historical events and are thus likely to make it into the data set even if there is minimal press attention at the time. For example, despite the fact that the Cambodian genocide of 1975–1979 was largely absent from contemporaneous media accounts, it exists in our data as one of the largest episodes of genocide.

We also included two additional variables to tap into more institutionalized forms of stability and instability: data on *elections* and *leader durability*. The elections data are a version of the Archigos data set of national elections (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009), which we updated to 2008 using Carr’s Psephos election archive (Carr 2012). The resulting variable is a dummy indicating that a national election (parliamentary or presidential) occurred in that country-year. We constructed our measure of leader durability from the Archigos data; it is a running count of the number of years that a given leader has been in power.

Independent Variables—Country-Level Socio-Political Attributes

To measure state capacity, we use the (logged) *composite index of national capability* (CINC) based on the National Material Capabilities data set, part of the Correlates of War (CoW) project (Singer 1988). This variable is a widely used measure of state capacity that incorporates both military and economic power.

To construct our regime type measure, we started with Geddes's comprehensive Autocratic Regime Type data set (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2012), which provides regime types for nearly all nondemocratic countries during our time period. Next, we created a dummy variable for *personalistic regime* that includes any country in the data set with a personalistic element, both pure personalistic regimes as well as hybrid types (e.g., military-personalistic). Finally, to describe democracies and partial democracies, we follow Goldstone et al. (2010) in deriving a two-category measure derived from two variables in the Polity IV data set (Marshall and Jaggers 2002) that roughly correspond to the two dimensions that characterize modern governance according to Dahl (1971): (1) openness of executive recruitment; and (2) competitiveness of political contestation (Dahl 1971, 195). We added the resulting regime type categories, *full democracy* and *partial democracy*, to the Geddes regime type data to cover various levels of democracy and the numerous permutations of authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian regimes.

Finally, we constructed a measure of *total trade* between the United States and the target country gathered from the National Dyadic Trade data set, part of the CoW project (Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins 2009), by adding the (logged) total volume of US exports to each country-year to the (logged) total volume of US imports from each country-year in 2009 US dollars.

Independent Variables—Domestic Political Action and Discourse

We created original data sets to operationalize US state attention to foreign countries. First, we created a measure of *presidential attention* to foreign countries using a Python script to scrape mentions of the countries in our data set from State of the Union addresses, presidential proclamations, executive orders, and the introductory comments from presidential press conferences. These documents are consistently available through the American Presidency Project for every president over the period (Woolley and Peters 2011). We included only the president's opening statements in press conferences, before journalists have a chance to ask questions, to ensure that the variable solely reflected presidential agendas. We operationalized presidential attention as the sum of the percentages of each type of speech that the country was mentioned in. This construction has the advantage that mentions in rarer types of speeches, specifically State of the Union addresses, were weighted higher than mentions in higher-frequency speeches. Similarly, it also gives higher weight to mentions from presidents who give fewer speeches, proclamations, and so forth. In supplementary analyses, we treat mentions in the State of the Union address as a separate variable, with similar results.

We adopted a similar approach for measuring *congressional attention*. We obtained summaries of congressional hearings for our period from the Policy

Agendas project and searched these summaries for mentions of foreign countries. Following the recommendation of the Policy Agendas project in tracing attention over time, we then took the percentage of congressional hearings mentioning the foreign country as our independent variable (Baumgartner and Jones 2006).

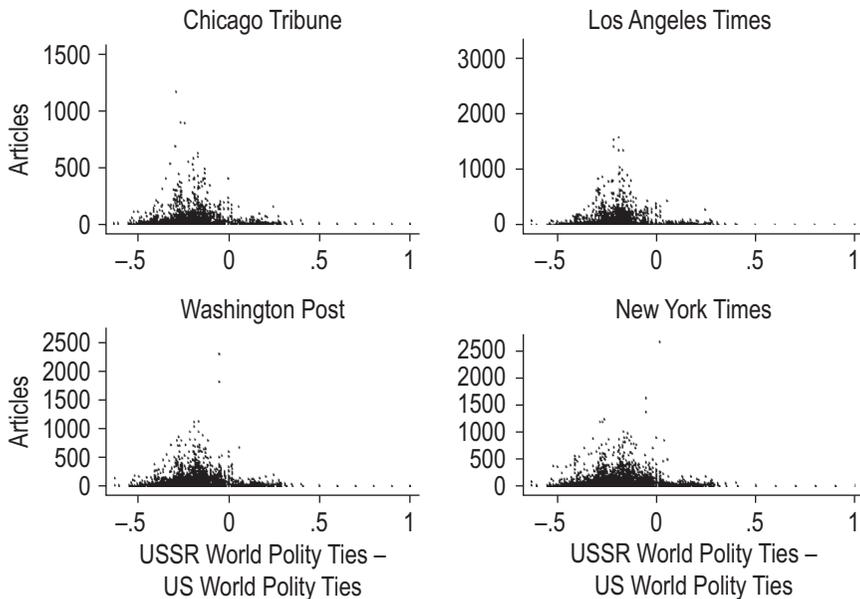
To account for US military presence and action, we created two variables. The first is the *number of US troops* stationed in a given country in a given year, drawn from an updated version of the Heritage Foundation's figures (Kane 2006). The second is a measure of *active engagement of US armed forces* in a given country. We coded this measure from the 2009 Congressional Research Service Instances of Use of US Armed Forces Abroad report (Grimmett 2010); it is operationalized as a dummy variable indicating active use of US armed forces in a given country-year.

Independent Variables—World Polity Embeddedness and Position

We constructed a set of variables to measure two aspects of countries' relationship to the world polity network. First, we measured both embeddedness in the world polity as well as a country's position in the world polity within the bipolar system vis-à-vis the United States and USSR/Russian Federation. To measure embeddedness in the world polity, we used the number of memberships (logged) in IGOs⁵ (see, e.g., Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000; Schofer 2004; Longhofer and Schofer 2010). To measure a country's political position vis-à-vis the poles, we measured the percentage of shared memberships in IGOs that a country had to the USSR or Russian Federation minus the percentage of ties the country had with the United States:

$$\frac{\text{Total shared USSR IGO Memberships} - \text{Total shared US IGO Memberships}}{\text{Total IGO Memberships}}$$

The measure theoretically varies from 1 to -1, representing all IGO memberships shared with the USSR and none with the United States, and the reverse, respectively. Empirically, the variable ranges from 1 to -.625, and the mean level of the variable is -.15, reflecting the somewhat greater centrality of the United States to the IGO network. While examples of shared ties that illustrate relative non-alignment among countries in a particular bloc abound (e.g., the United States does not belong to the International Criminal Court but the United Kingdom does), patterns of differential membership generally follow political cleavages. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the Rio Group, for example, were promoted by Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, and others as IGOs in opposition to perceived US dominance over economic IGOs in the Americas (Kozloff 2006). Likewise, the variation in our measure reflects differences among countries that historians might expect; staunch Cold War anti-communist Rhodesia, for instance, is at the US end of the distribution, with an average value of -.413 throughout its existence (1965–1979), while communist North Korea had a mean value of .176 over 1953–2008, and Nasser's Egypt (1955–1970) was close to the grand mean at -.17. Mean values also differed in the expected direction for countries in the Warsaw Pact or NATO (.167 and .04,

Figure 1. Scatterplot of USSR–US world polity ties and media attention

The figure above displays leader-year observations of the percentage difference in shared IGO memberships between the United States and the USSR and the number of articles in which a leader was mentioned. Leaders on the right end of the x-axis were more heavily tied to the USSR than the United States, while leaders on the left end were more tied to the United States. The figure shows that high levels of attention generally went to leaders of countries that were not overwhelmingly tied to either superpower.

respectively). As figure 1 illustrates, leaders of countries more toward the middle of this metric tended to receive more media attention.

We created a dummy variable for leaders that brought their countries into NAM. As figure 2 illustrates, leaders who brought their countries into NAM received more coverage than other leaders during our time period.

Missing Data

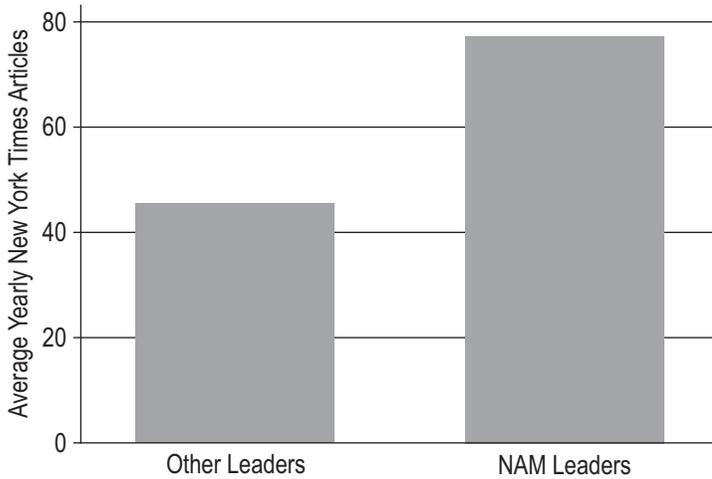
Some data were not available for all years, or were missing in some states. When there were gap years in the data, we linearly interpolated missing data. The remaining missing data were filled in using multiple imputation. We created seven imputations using the iterative chained equations approach, transforming all variables before imputing (von Hippel 2009).

Model

We estimate a linear regression model with country- and year-level fixed effects. For leader j in country i at time t , our model is:

$$Y_{ijt} = U_i + V_t + X_{ijt}\beta + \varepsilon_{ijt},$$

Figure 2. Comparing *New York Times* coverage: Leaders of non-aligned movement countries and others



where Y_{ijt} is the dependent variable, X_{ijt} is a matrix of country- and year-specific covariates, β is a vector of coefficients, U_i is a country-specific fixed effect (intercept) term, V_t is a year-specific fixed effect, and ε_{ijt} is an observation-specific error term.

Including country-level fixed effects ensures that any time-invariant characteristics of a country will be accounted for in the model, allowing us to exploit variation over time in our independent variables to test our hypotheses. The use of country-level fixed effects is also ideal because the sample is variable over time; decolonization, for example, led to a dramatic increase in the African states over the course of our data. To the extent that there are time-invariant unmeasured differences between African and other leaders, this will be incorporated and controlled by the country-level fixed effects. Including year-specific fixed effects controls for any year-specific change in attention across all countries, for example, the total number of articles that the paper ran in a current year (Woolley 2000) or domestic events that may have crowded out international coverage. We cluster our standard errors at the leader level in all analyses.

Which Leaders Were Covered in the *New York Times*

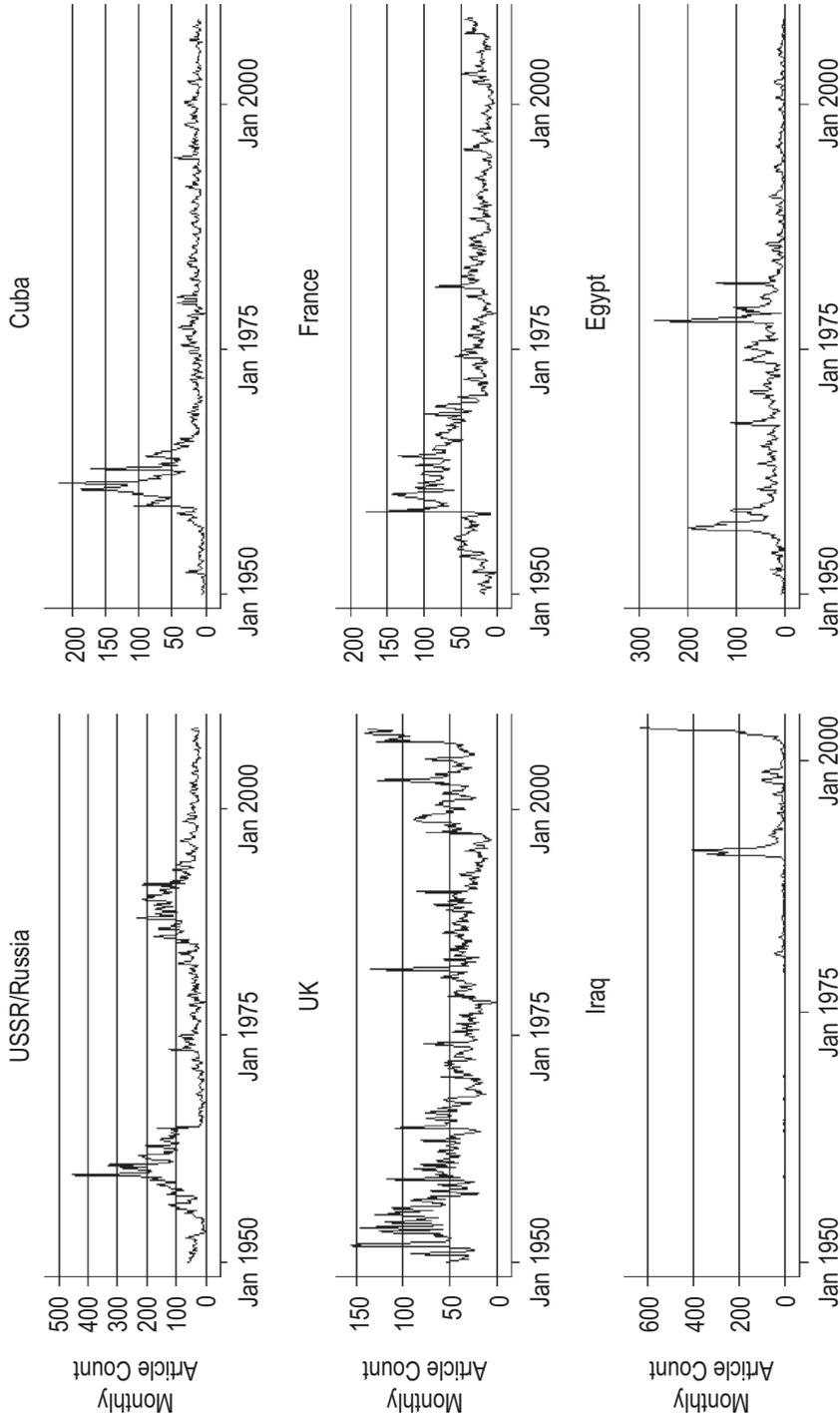
Before moving to results from statistical models, we present some descriptive results that illustrate which leaders were covered most in the *New York Times*. Table 1 presents the 30 foreign leaders who received the most coverage from 1950 to 2008. These leaders can be placed into a few geopolitical categories: (1) US enemies: USSR, Cuba, and China; (2) the most powerful US allies: France, the UK, and Germany; (3) Middle Eastern countries: Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Israel (with two of the above involved in the region's first main postwar crisis); (4) countries in which the United States is fighting a war: Iraq and South Vietnam; and (5) countries that occupied prominent non-aligned geopolitical positions: Yugoslavia and India. Leaders with longer reigns are also overrepresented among the most covered leaders.

Table 1. Thirty Most Covered Foreign Leaders in the New York Times, 1950–2008

Rank	Country	Leader	Total Articles
1	USSR	Khrushchev	13,225
2	Cuba	Castro	11,948
3	Iraq	Hussein	9,874
4	France	de Gaulle	8,930
5	USSR	Gorbachev	8,800
6	Egypt	Nasser	6,950
7	USSR	Brezhnev	6,632
8	Jordan	Hussein	6,535
9	Egypt	Sadat	6,220
10	India	Nehru	5,471
11	West Germany	Adenauer	5,431
12	United Kingdom	Thatcher	4,927
13	Yugoslavia	Tito	4,472
14	Russia	Yeltsin	4,363
15	United Kingdom	Blair	3,972
16	China	Mao	3,869
17	South Vietnam	Thieu	3,710
18	United Kingdom	Macmillan	3,661
19	United Kingdom	Wilson	3,605
20	France	Mitterrand	3,498
21	India	Gandhi	3,434
22	Israel	Begin	3,432
23	Syria	Assad	3,360
24	United Kingdom	Churchill	3,241
25	Iran	Khomeini	3,069
26	Russia	Putin	3,004
27	Libya	Qaddafi	2,870
28	Egypt	Mubarak	2,828
29	Philippines	Marcos	2,685
30	Indonesia	Sukarno	2,631

Figure 3 shows that temporal patterns in the coverage of leaders of key countries tracked geopolitical crises that these countries were involved in. The USSR is the most heavily covered during the Khrushchev years, especially during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Berlin Crisis, and receives a good deal of attention during the years leading up to and following its dissolution. Most attention to Cuba's Fidel Castro occurs early in his reign, immediately following the overthrow of Batista, during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Attention to

Figure 3. Media attention to leaders of selected countries



The figure above shows three-month moving averages of counts of *New York Times* articles to leaders of selected countries.

UK leaders is generally high and has multiple peaks, including one to Thatcher during the Falklands War. Attention to French leaders is dominated by Charles de Gaulle, especially during the Algerian Revolution. Attention to Iraqi leaders is dominated by Saddam Hussein during the first and second Gulf wars; Hussein received comparatively little attention during the Iran-Iraq War. Egyptian leaders received considerable attention during the Suez Crisis as well as the Camp David accords, when they were at the center of geopolitical conflicts and realignments. Attention to Yugoslavia's Tito (not shown) peaks in 1956 while he is initially meeting with the USSR to ease their strained relationship, followed by the Soviet quelling of the Hungarian Revolution, during which Tito sided with the Hungarian opposition.

Figures 4 and 5 display the geography of media attention to foreign leaders for the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Media attention is stratified by region, most notably with Africa, aside from Egypt and South Africa, receiving little attention in either period. Media attention is highly stratified within regions as well, with Soviet/Russian, Japanese, and Chinese leaders receiving the lion's share of attention in Asia. Leaders of France and the UK dominate European media attention, while Mexican and Argentinian leaders have received more attention in Central and South America. Leaders of some countries, such as France and the UK, continue to receive high levels of attention across both periods, while leaders

Figure 4. Total *New York Times* articles, 1950–1991

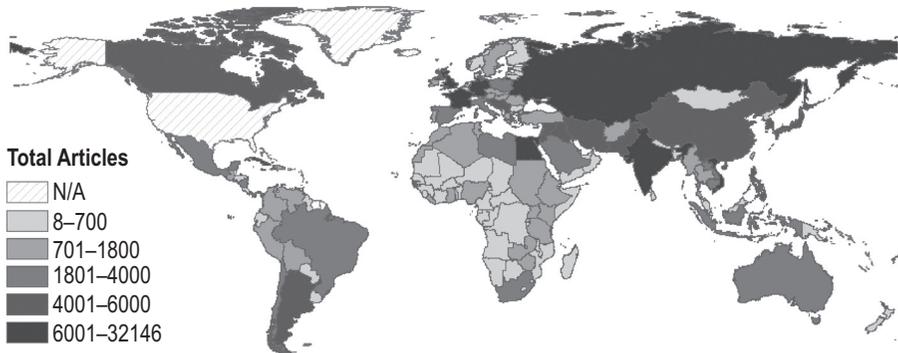
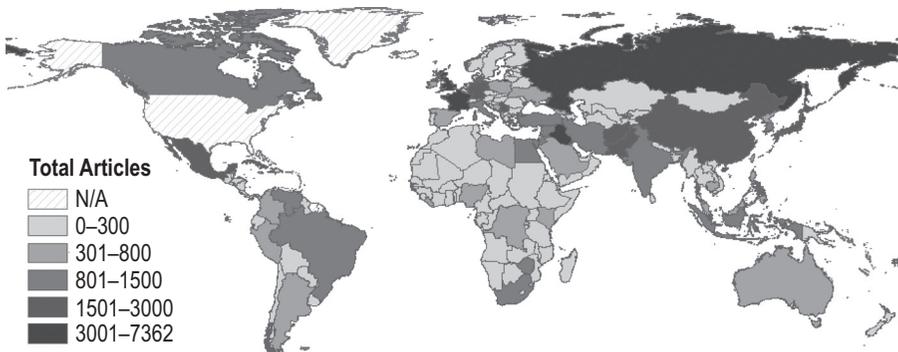


Figure 5. Total *New York Times* articles, 1992–2008



of other countries, most notably Egypt and India, lose their prominent place in the media to countries such as Iraq and Pakistan.

The descriptive evidence suggests that media attention to foreign leaders is responsive to geopolitical cleavages, while evidence for connection and proximity is more muted. The case of Canada—a country that is both highly central to the world polity and highly proximate to the United States in terms of physical location, culture, politics, and language but whose leaders do not receive much media attention—exemplifies this phenomenon.

Why Some Leaders Were Covered More Than Others in the *New York Times*

Table 2 presents the results of country-level fixed-effects models.

Instability, Novelty, and Conflict

Four of our six measures of political instability were statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction in both the nested and full models. Active participation in international war, adverse regime change, and the presence of ethnic war all significantly and positively predicted media attention. Institutionalized instability was also predictive; leaders receive more attention during election years. The presence of genocide was only predictive of media attention in the nested model; however, as we discuss later, this result is highly sensitive to the inclusion of two outlying years when the US media paid almost no attention to the Cambodian leader, Pol Pot. Finally, durability positively predicted media attention to leaders: they tend to receive more media attention the longer they remain in power.

US State Actions and Discourse

Our state action and discourse measures were likewise predictive of media attention to foreign leaders. Being mentioned by the US president was predictive of media attention in both the nested and full models. The same is true for congressional hearings. Of the military variables, being the current subject of US military action was a positive and significant predictor of media attention in both the full and nested models. Conversely, having US troops stationed in the country was not significant in either model.

Socio-Political Attributes of Countries

Countries that became more democratic tended not to receive more attention than those that did not, while leaders of personalistic regimes received more attention than other autocratic leaders. State capacity, as measured through the CINC variable, was positively associated with greater media attention in the nested model but not the full model.

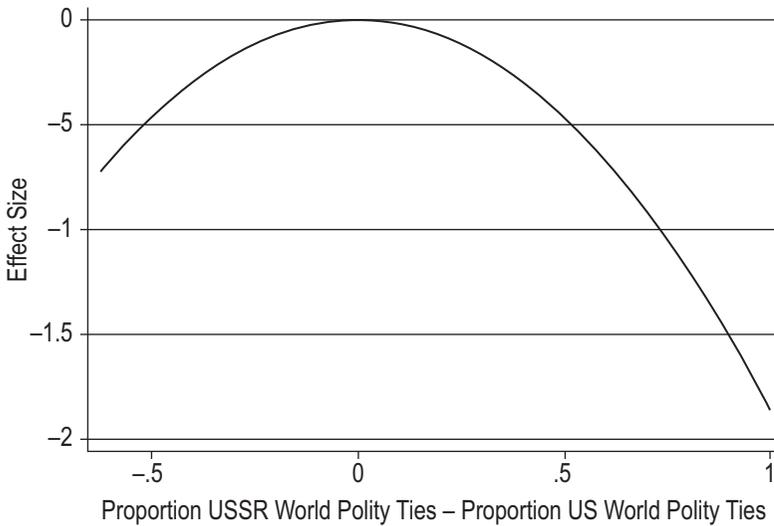
World Polity Embeddedness and Position

Our measure of economic ties, total trade between a leader's country and the United States, was not a significant predictor in the full model, but was significant

Table 2. Fixed-Effects Regressions on logged articles in NYT

	Instability/ War	State attention	Political attributes	Polity/ Economic ties	Full
International war	0.14*** (0.04)				0.08** (0.03)
Ethnic conflict	0.20*** (0.04)				0.17*** (0.04)
Genocide	0.13* (0.07)				0.11 (0.06)
Adverse regime change	0.31*** (0.04)				0.28*** (0.03)
Election year	0.13*** (0.02)				0.13*** (0.02)
Durability	0.02*** (0.00)				0.02*** (0.00)
Presidential attention		0.01*** (0.00)			0.01*** (0.00)
Congressional attention		0.86** (0.27)			0.74** (0.24)
US combat troops deployed		1.02*** (0.14)			0.82*** (0.11)
US troops stationed		0.00 (0.00)			0.00 (0.00)
Democracy			0.08 (0.09)		0.09 (0.07)
Personalistic regime			0.39*** (0.10)		0.34*** (0.09)
State capacity (CINC)			16.94* (6.88)		12.97 (6.70)
Total trade (logged)				-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Total IGO memberships (logged)				0.05 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.06)
Proportion USSR-US IGO ties				0.29 (0.31)	-0.14 (0.26)
Proportion USSR-US IGO ties (squared)				-1.61** (0.62)	-1.38** (0.52)
Non-aligned movement member				0.27*** (0.08)	0.22** (0.07)
N	8,741	8,741	8,741	8,741	8,741

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

Figure 6. Quadratic effects of ties to superpowers (USSR and US)

The figure above shows the effect of the difference in proportional ties, via co-membership in IGOs, to the USSR and United States as estimated by the regression in table 2. The x-axis runs from countries like Rhodesia (-0.6 in 1966–1967) that were closely tied to the United States, to countries like North Korea (1.0 in 1950) that were strongly in the USSR camp. The figure indicates that leaders of countries that cannot be taken for granted as US or USSR allies received more media attention.

and negative in the nested model. Embeddedness in the world polity, operationalized as the total (logged) number of IGOs that a country belonged to, was likewise not predictive of media attention. The proportion of ties to the USSR minus the proportion to the United States was not significant. The squared term for ties to superpowers was significant and negative—controlling for other factors, those leaders that were more exclusively tied to one or the other superpower received less attention than those that were not (see figure 6). Leaders who joined the Non-Aligned Movement also tended to receive more attention.

Robustness Checks

Our data show that media attention to foreign leaders is skewed toward a few leaders, countries, and events. The Cuban Missile Crisis and Suez Crisis, for instance, drew massive amounts of media attention to the leaders involved, and Saddam Hussein received more articles (2,648) in 1991 than did most leaders during their entire reigns. Leaders of the USSR received far more attention than those of any other country, even while the bipolar world they helped create structured media attention to other leaders. Readers might reasonably wonder whether many of our results are sensitive to the inclusion of a few outlying countries or historical moments. To address this possibility, we first reran our models after dropping the USSR, Cuba, and Iraq from the analysis. Results from these regressions were substantively identical. Second, we removed the 500 biggest

outlying observations, as defined by the difference between the predicted and actual value, from our analysis. Results were once again substantively identical—with one important exception.

The two largest outliers in our data are driven by the lack of attention to the Cambodian leader Pol Pot between 1975 and 1976, during which he received zero and two *Times* articles, respectively. Further investigation shows that this was due to two factors: first, Western observers did not know who was the leader of the secretive Khmer Rouge until 1976 and, second, American interest in South-east Asia dropped off sharply following the end of the Vietnam War (Power 2002, 109–11). Because this lack of media attention took place during one of the worst genocides in modern history, these observations heavily influence our estimates of genocide's effect on media attention—excluding these two observations makes genocide a significant ($p < .01$) and positive predictor of media attention in the full model. Thus, presiding over genocide may generally attract media attention to foreign leaders, although it failed dramatically to do so in the Cambodian case. Aside from this change in the coefficient on genocide, the models are remarkably robust to the exclusion of outliers.

Finally, in order to account for the effects of structural shifts in the international system on foreign news gathering that some scholars argue came with the end of the Cold War (Entman 2004; see also Holohan 2003; Norris 1995), we ran a model that specifically compares the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. In our Cold War model, we examined temporal interactions (Allison 2009, 19–20) for a number of variables, including time interactions for both presidential attention and congressional attention. The results of the time-invariant models are robust to the inclusion of the temporal interactions, suggesting that our results are not driven by political dynamics particular to the Cold War period.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings suggest that US media coverage of the international system follows structural realist logic and is driven primarily by violence, instability, conflict, and state interests. Results from our fixed-effects regression models suggest that news values corresponding to realist geopolitical factors drive media attention to foreign leaders, while those that favor the global interconnectedness emphasized by liberal theories do not. Further, our results provide evidence, in line with recent sociological critiques of world polity scholarship, that shared IGO memberships are not only vectors for the diffusion of information but are also reflections of geopolitical alliances. We came to this conclusion as a result of four major sets of findings:

First, we found that instability, novelty, and conflict matter greatly for attention to foreign leaders. Our results suggest that political instability and violence—whether institutionalized through elections or as the result of violent rebellions, genocide, international war, or ethnic conflict—predict increased media attention, as hypothesized by realist news values. While many studies have shown that novelty, violence, and conflict are key news values in various substantive domains, it is striking that five⁶ of our six measures of instability and violence were significant predictors of media attention, net of a number of controls and country-level fixed effects. The positive significant result for durability, however, indicates that

the media are also likely to cover actors with which they are already familiar (Galtung and Ruge 1965).

Second, we found that leaders of personalistic regimes tend to receive more media attention than leaders of democratic, party-hegemonic, or military regimes. This suggests that characteristics of personalistic leaders, such as their tendency to act and speak out against the most powerful actors in the international system, resonate with realist news values that privilege conflict, novelty, and instability. This stands in sharp contrast to studies that emphasize the primacy of liberal news values, which suggests that the media would pay more attention to leaders of democratic countries due to their political similarity with the United States. Results of both our nested and full models indicate that leaders of democratic countries are not more likely to be covered.

Third, our results show that when domestic political elites pay attention to foreign leaders through presidential speeches, press conferences, congressional hearings, or military action, journalists also pay attention. Despite the centrality of state attention to qualitative accounts (e.g., Entman 2004), this is the first large-scale quantitative study of foreign news coverage to include a measure of domestic state discourse and actions. By including multiple measures of state attention in our study, we were able to show that attention from the US state is one among many predictors of media attention. These results lend support to the “weak” hypothesis linking state attention to media attention and suggest that some models of media attention take an overly strong position on the role of the state in setting journalists’ agendas. In principle, this result might reflect world polity influences if the president and Congress allot attention according to network ties. Supplementary analyses show, however, that the president largely pays attention to powerful countries and those currently at war—particularly if US troops are involved. Thus, domestic political elite discourse is another path through which realist geopolitics influences news reporting.

Fourth, our results suggest that media coverage of international politics does not correspond with news values that favor connection and cooperation; neither trade ties nor embeddedness in the global IGO network facilitate the diffusion of media coverage of foreign leaders. By contrast, we find that network ties seem to matter only inasmuch as they reflect geopolitical position. We found that those leaders who were solidly in the US or USSR camp received less attention than leaders whose allegiances were unclear from their position in the world polity. Likewise, our results suggest that leaders who acted on their explicit neutrality by joining the Non-Aligned Movement received more media attention. For example, Yugoslavia’s communist but geopolitically independent leader, Tito, received a disproportionate amount of media attention⁷ during his reign, especially during periods of conflict with the USSR. Although NAM ultimately failed in establishing a third pole, its creation posed a challenge to the bipolar system dominated by the United States and USSR, leading journalists to take notice and cover these leaders more extensively than others.

If realist factors explain attention to foreign leaders, we do not expect that this is a complete explanation for all foreign news. Studies of media attention to foreign countries as such might find a stronger relationship between various measures of proximity and attention. For example, much of the US attention to Mexico may

be due to cultural influences such as cuisine or tourism, which does not seem to heavily impact coverage of political leaders. Our empirical focus on international politics by way of foreign leaders thus likely explains some of the differences in results between our study and other studies of international media attention that find a greater role for news values that favor connection and similarity between countries (e.g., [Koopmans and Vliegthart 2011](#); [Wu 2000](#)). Future work might show how news values vary across different substantive contexts.

In this paper, we restricted our attention to the US news media; it is possible that the distribution of media attention would differ in other contexts. First, while evidence suggests that there is limited cross-national variation in patterns of foreign news coverage between Western liberal democracies ([Koopmans and Vliegthart 2011](#), 640–44), systematic evidence on the comparative dynamics of attention between countries with state-run media and those with an independent press is lacking. Because even independent presses track domestic political elite discourse closely, we speculate that dynamics of attention would be similar, but future research in this area is warranted. Second, focusing on the US news media limits our results to international media coverage in the context of a global superpower; it is likely that media representations of the international system in less powerful countries are influenced by different factors. While we find little support for the hypothesis that media diffuse along shared network ties, for example, this finding may be a result of the US global reach and interests; in countries that are less actively involved in global geopolitical struggles, shared network ties may be more important determinants of media attention.

Finally, our methodology and measures fail to capture the entire complexity of the processes driving media attention to the international system. To take one example, our data do not accurately measure all aspects of geopolitics that influence media attention. While we have shown that media attention to certain leaders spiked during some high-profile crises, we lack the nuanced measures to incorporate the impact of such crises into our regression analyses, instead relying on variables that measure violence and instability more generally. Characteristics of specific crises (whether a powerful US ally or enemy is involved, for example) likely impact media attention. The relative lack of media attention to the Iran-Iraq War—which was extremely violent but posed little threat to the overall international system—serves as an interesting case in point. Future research might investigate how characteristics of particular crises impact the amount of media attention they garner.

Notes

1. For many states, such as the United States, the HoG and HoS are one and the same (the president). In other cases, the HoS is an honorary title with little real power attached, such as in the UK. In some cases, such as Iran, the HoS actually holds power, but the HoG is generally tasked with running the day-to-day operations of the state.
2. We would count an article that contained the following terms: “President,” “Hussein,” and “Iraq” as one article for former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. An article that referenced only Saddam Hussein, without reference to Iraq or Iraqis, would not be counted. This strategy limits false positives in the data set but inevitably misses some articles.

3. For example, Menachem Begin of Israel.
4. Chinese names, for instance, were inverted.
5. The world polity also consists of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). We do not analyze their effects for two reasons: first, systematic data are not available for shared INGO memberships. Second, since our paper deals with media representations of state and interstate politics, operationalizing world polity ties in terms of IGOs—political organizations consisting of nation-state member units—makes more substantive sense than using INGOs, whose missions and logic are often not tied to state-level politics. There is also an abundance of precedent for operationalizing world polity membership via IGO ties in the relevant literature (e.g., Boli and Thomas 1999; Ingram et al. 2005; Smith and Wiest 2005; Longhofer and Schofer 2010; Beckfield 2003, 2010).
6. Five includes the significant result for genocide if we drop the two outlying years of the Cambodian genocide.
7. Tito ranked thirteenth in all-time media attention.

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