

The media and left-populist dominance; an
analysis of coverage of Sinn Féin during the 2020
Irish general election

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SUMMARY

The rise of populism has been a topic which has attracted much attention in the past decade owing to the rise of candidates allied with this ideology across the globe. Left- populism however, and specifically forms of it which are electorally successful, is woefully understudied, which is to detriment of our broader understanding of populism. In this paper, my approach to studying this topic encompassing theories which largely center around the notion of media responsiveness. The research in this paper focuses upon the case of Sinn Féin in the 2020 Irish general election and relies upon data from Irish newspapers spanning a variety of publication types, which we analyse utilising a targeted dictionary analysis. Results show there is no relationship between either publication type or opinion-poll standing on media sentiment towards dominant left-populist parties. These findings contribute to the existing literature on left-populist media coverage, and owing to limitations in this paper there are avenues for further research on this topic.

Introduction

The topic under study in this research paper concerns that of the manner in which left-populist parties are covered in the news media, specifically that of the print media. The topic is one which warrants discussion owing to the recent electoral growth of, and increased focus on, populists of a variety of ideological types across the globe, of which left-populists in particular are acutely understudied (Hunger & Paxton 2022). I will study this area by focusing on two topics of interest, media coverage of electorally successful left-populists as a consequence of both publication type and their opinion-poll standing, exploiting the fact that these are topics which thus far have only either been studied in relation to relatively electorally unsuccessful left-populists or electorally successful right-populists. Owing to a variety of country-specific factors which I will further elucidate upon in my case selection section, I have decided to study media coverage of Sinn Féin, a relative outlier amongst European left-populists owing to its electoral success, during the 2020 Irish general election. The manner in which the study has been conducted is largely reliant upon quantitative text analysis methods, sourcing data from (1) LexisNexis to determine the effect of publication type on media sentiment, as well as (2) the Irish polling indicator to retrieve historical polling data to study the effect of opinion-polling data sourced on media sentiment (Louwerse & Müller 2023). In particular, the methodology of this thesis consisted of the Quanteda package by Benoit, Watanabe, Wang, Nulty, Obeng, Müller & Matsuo (2018) and the Bing sentiment dictionary by Hu & Liu (2004) for determining the sentiment of such media coverage, as well as utilising R for regression analyses. Whilst the findings of my research provide no evidence for my hypotheses which will be outlined in my theoretical framework, I believe it is evident that such research nonetheless contributes to the already existing broader literature on populism, the media and opinion polling. Insofar as further research is concerned, I will highlight the limitations of my study and express the manner in which I believe that there are numerous further avenues to study the role of dominant left-populists.

Literature Review

Beginning with that of the existing literature on the broader topic of populist political parties themselves, it is a topic which has received ever-increasing focus in political science research over the past two decades, owing to modernization, globalization and financial crises propelling such parties to ever-increasing electoral heights in a variety of countries (Hunger & Paxton 2022). Mudde (2004) provides a definition of populism widely accepted amongst scholars in the field when defining populism as an ideology which 'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. This naturally leads to a definition of populism which allows for the utilisation of this term by many parties across the political spectrum, owing to populist party family ideology being said by Mudde (2004) to consist of thick and thin ideologies. The thin aspect of populism will generally emphasise a popular or national sovereignty and stress the homogeneity of the people, this homogeneity can be described as either being inherent to the ideology of the party or merely resulting from the communicative style of the party (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). The thick aspect of populism will by contrast consist of those substantive elements of the party's ideology, such as whether its core program will adopt further positions which more closely align with those established parties on the left/right spectrum (Neuner & Wratil 2022). Whilst occasional arguments have been made by authors, such as Clark et al. (2008), that left and right populist parties share a 'populism' which leads to a similarity in both communicative style and substantive beliefs, it is unquestionably the case that going beyond a cursory analysis there are substantive differences which separate the two. The basis upon which left-populists and right-populists were formed provide an insight into some of these crucial differences, in that whilst right-populists have origins in either traditionally conservative, extreme-right or neo-fascist political parties or social movements, left-populists by contrast have typically emerged either as a result of the amalgamation of various progressive social movements and/or as a response to a

perceived electoral opportunity structure provided by both increasingly rightward-drifting social democratic parties and those parties with explicit ties to Marxist-Leninism (Jungar & Jupskås 2014, Damhuis 2020, March 2007). The decision to prioritize issues of immigration for right-populists has naturally led to the adoption of nativist social policies, as well as welfare policies marked by 'welfare chauvinism' and an approach to political economy defined by 'producerism' (Abts et al. 2021, Ivaldi & Mazzoleni 2019, Rathgeb 2021). In contrast, left-populism has been noted to mobilize upon the basis of an inclusionary social agenda, envisioning a greater level of involvement of the state in the economy, with a clear desire to see market forces subservient to a perceived 'common good', whilst not as electorally successful as the populist-right, unique opportunity structures in various countries have benefited the populist-left (March 2011, Agustín & Briziarelli 2018, Venizelos & Stavrakakis 2023).

Crucial to our understanding of populist political parties concerns that of the role of the mass media in relation to them, with such a role having become increasingly prominent in the past several decades. This can be attributed to the election campaigns and broader political coverage shifting from being labour-intensive operations, to being increasingly reliant on mass media to form a link with voters (Rubin 1981, Hogan 1997, Norris 2000, pp. 25 - 28). It has been noted this can occasionally take the form of the media often acting as a so-called transmitter for political parties campaigns and their associated messages, whereby such campaigns acting strategically can utilise the media to simply broadcast messages on specific issues directly to voters (Maier & Nai 2020, Flowers et al. 2003, Kriesi et al. 2009, pp. 354 - 355). However, the media has, perhaps more importantly, increasingly acquired an independent role in the dissemination of information concerning political parties during election campaigns, through the manner of (1) agenda-setting, (2) priming and (3) framing (Moy et al. 2016). Newspapers are perhaps one of the most important media institutions in a country insofar as political coverage is concerned, owing to the manner in which they provide widespread coverage of political events and act as agenda-setters in a manner

greater than that of other media institutions (Roberts & McCombs 1994, Harder et al. 2017). The 'commercial character' of mass media organisations has been shown to result in also display distinct effects as to the coverage of political events and parties, as opposed to broadsheet papers, noted for comprehensive coverage of political issues, it has been noted that tabloid newspapers contain content primarily associated with 'infotainment' and anti-elitism, providing a favourable opportunity structure for the coverage of populist politics (Mudde 2007, Sparks & Tulloch 2000, Franklin 1997). Whilst there are exceptions, such as Akkerman (2011), it is evident that tabloids have become a particularly supportive outlet for right-populism, with such papers either being providing outright support or, as is most common, accommodative coverage of them (Plasser & Ulram 2003, de Jonge & Gaufman 2022). An overwhelming consensus exists as to the effect of publication type on sentiment surrounding various topics associated with the broader populist party family, finding that those issues associated with the populist-right, such as migration and the European Union are portrayed in a more negative and sensationalist manner than in broadsheets (Matthews & Brown 2012, Tong & Zuo 2019, Baker et al. 2008, Khosravini 2009, Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017). The ramifications of such coverage for the populist-right in tabloids is wide-ranging, with their electoral success in multiple countries having been theorized, and empirically tested, by recent studies to be attributable to it (Plasser & Ulram 2003, Krämer 2014, Diehl et al. 2021, Michael Hameleers & de Vreese 2017). There are nonetheless instances of sentiment concerning issues which align with that of the populist-left in tabloids, concerning, as noted by Clemente & Gabbioneta (2017) and Yau et al. (2021), issues such as corporate 'greed' and food insecurity. Overall results however are more mixed insofar as parties are concerned with research finding that former British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was treated in a hostile manner in certain instances by the Daily Mirror, with an explicitly social-democratic editorial line, greater than that of conservative broadsheets, highlighting the extent to which its support for social-democratic politics was overshadowed by that of its support for British nationalist ideals

(Watts & Bale 2019, Bingham & Conboy 2015).

Insofar as the gaps within the existing literature outlined above are concerned, the most glaring gap concerns that of, as noted by Hunger & Paxton (2022), the manner in which existing studies on populist political parties have often treated them as if synonymous with right-wing populism, something which has been clearly elucidated upon above and shown not to be the case. Furthermore, Mudde (2007) notes that the relationship between the media and populism is one which has received little serious attention, less clear therefore, is that of the effect between publication type and sentiment surrounding populist political parties, specifically left-populist ones, with the little research being already conducted focusing on the populist-right. Owing to such varying findings, it should be noted that the behaviour of tabloids toward populists is not static across countries, with Hameleers & Vliegthart (2020) noting that whilst left-populist sentiment is relatively less popular in the Dutch tabloid media, this could be owing to the manner in which the electoral conditions of a country shape such behaviour. Given that it is the case no such studies have been conducted to determine the nature of tabloid coverage of left-populist parties in contexts where the national political context is favourable, overwhelmingly focusing on those where it is instead favourable to right-wing populists, this is something which warrants further research.

Furthermore, media coverage of political parties can extend beyond being affected by either the independent role of the media or the strategic choices of political parties, and instead be influenced by information external to them. The most consistent form of such stimuli in the political process concerns that of opinion polling, often commissioned by media organisations on a regular basis (Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck 2012). The role of media coverage of opinion polling in affecting subsequent candidate and party coverage is something which has attracted attention, and subsequent criticism, owing to the effect on the broader democratic process (van der Meer et al. 2015, Farjam 2020, Rothschild & Malhotra

2014). Such an increase in the frequency and coverage of opinion polling has also served to encourage the so-called 'horse-race' polling phenomenon, increasingly prevalent throughout the past several decades, whereby politics is viewed akin to that of a zero-sum game, with the public becoming increasingly-avid consumers of day-by-day polling due to the manner in which it allows for the political process has become a source of political entertainment, owing to a focus on 'candidates' popularity, momentum, and size of lead' rather than substantive political contestation (Ørmen 2019, Westwood et al. 2020, Iyengar et al. 2004, Atkin & Gaudino 1984, p. 125). Qualitative research in this area has highlighted the manner in which journalists, thoroughly embedded in a political environment dominated by 'horse-race' opinion polling, will utilize this steady stream of polling information so as to update their perception of their audiences opinions, and accordingly adjust their commentary and editorial decisions (Atkin & Gaudino 1984). Wlezien & Soroka (2019) found, in one of the only papers to address this topic, that this is indeed the case during the 2016 US Presidential election, in that there is a propensity for the media to follow public opinion as it relates to both the populist-right and centre-left candidates, with Tryggvason (2021) finding similar results with an emphasis on the populist-right *Sweden Democrats*. Such a shift in coverage in response to stimuli we should note however, will naturally only apply to those parties in the political mainstream, given that it has been noted by Minkenberg (2001) that burgeoning populist movements in their early days have encountered hostility from the 'establishment' or broadsheet papers, despite growing support (Schafraad et al. 2012, Art 2005, de Jonge 2019, Kyriakidou & Garcia-Blanco 2018). Further and more widespread growth in support for the populist-right across Western society however, owing to a combination of factors such as the 2008 financial crisis, demographic change, and the migrant 'crisis' provided increased support for such parties and in turn, their widespread rise consolidated them a legitimate political force and tempered 'establishment' media hostility, with the media having been shown to alter its attitude in the face of such widespread growth (Mendes & Dennison 2021, de Jonge & Gaufman 2022,

De Jonge 2021, Plasser & Ulram 2003). Conversely, the relatively stagnant and inconsistent electoral performance of the populist-left, owing to the lack of widespread electoral demand for such parties in most of the West, has meant that parties belonging to this group continue to experience disproportionately negative media coverage, even in countries where such parties perform electorally above-average, perhaps owing to the lack of consistent and widespread growth acting as a legitimising force, leading to widespread stigmatisation of parties belonging to this ideology relative to that experienced by its counterparts on the populist-right (Venizelos & Stavrakakis 2023).

Insofar as gaps in this area are concerned, the role of the media in responding to stimuli, namely that of opinion polling in this paper, and its resulting effect on the coverage of left-populist parties is an area which has not attracted the requisite attention to develop a clear consensus owing to both the limited broader research on this topic, as well as the already elucidated upon focus on the populist-left in the existing research in this area. There are methodological gaps in this area to which attention must be drawn to, with it remaining the case that the majority of research in this area has instead focused on the manner in which opinion polling has had an effect on the media sentiment concerning parties or candidates during a limited time period *prior* to an election, and whilst useful it nonetheless obscures the manner in which the dynamic between public opinion and sentiment continues after the 'hot' period of an election (Paterson 1993, Wlezien & Soroka 2019, Sides 2014). It is also noted by Tryggvason (2021) that such studies take place within a context whereby there was "minimal movement" in opinion polling for the parties or candidates under study, thus further obscuring any relationship between public opinion and sentiment. Whilst Tryggvason (2021) attempts to address these shortcomings, there is again minimal poll movement for the left-populist Swedish *Left Party* in particular which obscures its findings, primarily due to the manner in which the focus of the study is the effect on media sentiment related to the surge in support for the right-populist *Sweden Democrats* party and hampering its generalisability. Owing to left-populists, as elucidated upon already, suffering from

a unique stigma, not shared by right-populists, further research in this area is warranted.

Theoretical Framework

I will provide an overview of the concepts and theories which I will utilise to form the basis for the manner through which I expect dominant left-populists to be portrayed in a more positive light in tabloids, in comparison to coverage found in broadsheets. This can be seen and understood with the aid of the concept of media logic, which when discussed in the context of tabloid newspapers, can result in a stylistic congruence between such newspapers and the communication of populist political parties, regardless of the 'thick' ideology underpinning them, leading to so-called "media populism" (Krämer 2014, Mazzoleni 2008). The concept of media logic can be described as "news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format" in order to orient coverage towards its readership as best as possible, often on the basis of acquiescing to commercial considerations (Strömbäck 2008, p. 233). As a result of the tabloids perceived readership's social class and position in society, through the viewpoint of that of the ownership, a distinct aspect of coverage within tabloid journalism relates to the use of 'media populism' through anti-elite frames to cultivate a relationship with said readership, which serves to highlight the manner in which there is perceived to be a disconnect and resulting sense of alienation between the 'common' person consuming such content and that of an elite political/expertise class (Linda Bos & de Vreese 2011, Hallin & Mancini 2004). Furthermore, the content relating to such aforementioned frames utilised employing this conflict dynamic will go well beyond mere commentary on such sentiment, but rather take on a rather adversarial form, explicitly advocating on behalf of its readers in the face of perceived injustices perpetrated by this "elite" class against them, and whilst this has indeed included tabloids running their own campaigns advocating on behalf of various issues, it also means they will take on the role of positively framing those political actors or parties which they believe to

be sympathetic to the cause of their readers (Harcup & O'Neill 2001, Connell 2018). This anti-elite frame is expanded upon by Conboy (2006) who notes the cultivation of such a frame will be constructed on the basis of what are perceived to be the dominant concerns of the working class in a given national context, while he defines it being based in the UK on primarily white working-class grievances, and susceptible to concerns regarding immigration, this is not always the case and it is something which naturally can be highly dependent on the national political context (Hameleers & Vliegenthart 2020). The sentiment which is produced by tabloids is therefore something which I believe has clearly been shown to be in alignment with the communicative style of populist political parties, which therefore will result in positive coverage of them in contrast to a perceived elite as a result of advocacy by tabloids. This relatively sympathetic coverage is something which I believe has been clearly shown not to be dependent on the thick ideology of a populist party, but rather one which is malleable dependent on a given national context and is most capable of addressing its readers concerns by mobilizing on the basis of the strongest anti-elite frames in a given country, in contrast with existing research which instead portrays tabloids as being inherently right-wing publications, this leads to my first hypothesis which states;

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Tabloids will portray left-populist parties more positively than broadsheets in those countries where such parties are the dominant populist party.*

I will now provide the theoretical basis for the manner in which I believe that whilst populist-right parties are capable of having attitudes towards them by media organisations previously hostile to them changed in response to external stimuli, this is something which is not achieved as easily by left-populist parties. Media organisations unsympathetic to populists will often place them within what is often referred to conceptually as the 'protest-paradigm' (Norris 1980). Whilst this theory was developed in response to the coverage of the New Left anti-war social movement during the 1960's by the US media, it has since provided value in its application to the study of political parties deemed to be outside the 'mainstream',

and the resulting media coverage of them (van Spanje & Azrout 2022, Schafraad et al. 2012). Political parties, most commonly populist ones, which are placed by hostile media organisations within such a paradigm are accordingly defined by the use of a limited set of 'frames' which quickly become associated with the given political party, with it being noted that once this media frame has been associated, it remains relatively firm and difficult to alter in response to stimuli (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen 2011). It should be noted however, that such frames can be altered and are not completely static, albeit with the caveat that *significant* changes in the political context are required for such a change to journalistic routines, and thus a change to framing by such organisations. Such *significant* changes are in contrast with occurrences such as relatively routine changes in opinion polls regarding voting intention for a political party, with these instead leading to greater scrutiny of a party and an intensification of negative coverage within the 'protest-paradigm' (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen 2011, Norris 1980, Benford & Snow 2000, p. 273). Given the theory described by Norris (1980) as citing these *significant* changes to the societal and political context, it is evident, as suggested in the literature review above, that there has been relatively consistent and widespread growth across Western Europe insofar as the rise of the populist-right is concerned which would naturally appear to fulfill the conditions for such a widespread societal change and thus transform its image in hostile media organisations. By contrast, the lack of widespread and consistent growth of the populist-left, owing to the factors inherent to such parties described in the literature review, makes electoral growth for such political parties highly dependent on the national context and prohibits them from benefiting from such a change in framing in broadsheets owing to this lack of widespread societal change, even in those countries where they are dominant. This leads to my hypothesis that the populist-left will continue to suffer from the 'protest-paradigm' theory and coverage in newspapers typically opposed to them, those of broadsheets, and should instead get more negative in response to increased opinion polling, leading to my second hypothesis which states;

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Coverage of dominant left-populist parties will become more*

negative in broadsheets in response to positive opinion poll results.

Empirical strategy

Case selection

In choosing a left-populist party for the purpose of my study, this was rather challenging as it quickly became evident that many of the most prominent contemporary populists parties/movements on the left in the past few years were not suitable candidates. In the past decade, some of the most prominent and electorally successful examples of left-populists in the Western context have been The British Labour Party under the leadership Jeremy Corbyn and the Italian 5-Star Movement under Giuseppe Conte (Watts & Bale 2019, Manucci & Amsler 2018). Whilst these parties have all experienced periods whereby the leadership of specific individuals, as well as the political context, has resulted in them moving toward being widely defined by scholars to have an ideology and communicative style best described as left-populist, they nonetheless make for an unsuitable selection owing to the fact the wider party remains outside the more formally defined left-populist party family, being either nominally social-democratic or catch-all populist, and are more easily subject to drastic shifts in ideology in the event of changing social and political contexts, as was the case prior to and after their respective leaderships of these parties (Jacobs & Hindmoor 2022, Mosca & Tronconi 2019). Therefore, the case I have chosen to study for the purpose of this paper is that of party perhaps less globally prominent but perhaps more fitting for this study, that of Sinn Féin during the 2020 Irish general election. Whilst perhaps most well-known for being a political party associated with physical force Irish republicanism, this is an association which has waned in recent years owing to the renunciation of violence from 1997 onwards and rapid movement towards embracing an entirely electoral strategy (McAllister 2004, Maillot 2005). Sinn Féin fits well into the left-populist party family owing to manner in which it engages in

communication with the electorate, as well as many of its ideological positions, being consistent with much of the criteria defined in the literature concerning left-populist parties (March 2011). Furthermore, as noted by March (2011), many left-populist parties often reject the populist label, this is in contrast to Sinn Féin which, per the writing of one of its foremost politicians and ideologues, explicitly embraces the left-populist label and sees itself unabashedly as a member of this party family (O Broin 2009, Lavin 2020, O Broin 2013). Similarly, another reason underlying the selection of Ireland as a case encompasses the manner in which the Irish media environment can be described as one which is outsized relative to the overall population. Truetzschler (2008) has noted that owing to the improvement in Ireland's economic fortunes from the 1990's onwards, there has been a marked increase in size of the media landscape Ireland owing to both an increasingly educated workforce, as well as the development of industries which demand such a media landscape. The disproportionate size of the media landscape allows for greater attention to be paid by journalists in their reaction to political stories in a comparatively small country, allowing for an increased availability of data regarding their responsiveness. Whilst other countries would be expected to conform with the theoretical expectations outlined above insofar as the relationship between the media and left-populists is concerned, it is this increased responsiveness to such stories in Ireland which will provide greater ability to test our hypotheses.

Data

In order to retrieve data for my dependent variable, that of media sentiment, I utilised data from newspapers with the aid of the newspaper database retrieval tool LexisNexis. In order to test my hypotheses I retrieved data from a wide variety of newspapers, trying to maintain as equal a balance as possible between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. The tabloid newspapers utilised include the Irish Daily Mail and the Irish Herald, the broadsheet newspapers utilised include

the Irish Examiner, Irish Independent, Sunday Independent and The Irish Times, with Table 1 describing the distribution of this in much more detail. I utilised the filter function on LexisNexis to first restrict the time period from the 17th of December 2019 to the 7th of March 2020, this was done to encapsulate a time period as equal as possible prior to and after the general election campaign which lasted from the dissolution of the Irish parliament on the 14th of January 2020 to the election on the 8th of February. The main factor limiting the time period which I selected before and after the general election campaign period was my desire to omit the inclusion of both sentiment and opinion polling which may have been affected by the onset of Covid-19 and it's resulting impact on society, as it has been noted that from this period onwards, there was an increase in support for incumbent governments and politicians owing to the so-called 'rally 'round-the flag' (Yam et al. 2020). I then filtered this data to restrict my selection to those articles which mention Sinn Féin in a given article, however beyond this I also included any mentions of other terms used to refer to Sinn Féin, often colloquially, with these being "Shinner(s)" or "SF"¹. Similarly, in order to retrieve those articles which may not include the party title but are related, I also included any mentions of any members of Sinn Féin elected to the national parliament. This resulted in 1,853 articles matching all of my requirements, with 1482 of these are from broadsheets and 343 from tabloids.

Additionally, in order to test my second hypothesis, I then retrieved data concerning opinion polling before and after the election as it related to Sinn Féin, this was done utilising a database containing all historical poll information from the Irish Polling Indicator by Louwerse & Müller (2023). During the election campaign, opinion polling was commissioned and published almost exclusively by broadsheet newspapers, with the companies concerned those of Ipsos MRBI, RedC, Ireland Thinks, Behaviour and Attitudes. Nonetheless, a single poll was commissioned by Sinn Féin from Survation during the election campaign on the

¹The search terms for Sinn Féin and politicians whose names contained Irish characters were standardised to English characters (e.g. Eoin Ó Broin was changed to Eoin O Broin) as this better captured both Irish and English variations of the terms, which were often used interchangeably.

Publication Name	Publication Type	Count
Irish Daily Mail	Tabloid	303
The Herald (Ireland)	Tabloid	40
Irish Examiner	Broadsheet	40
Irish Independent	Broadsheet	522
Sunday Independent	Broadsheet	133
The Irish Times	Broadsheet	787

Table 1: Distribution of newspaper articles by publication name and type

6th of February, the results of this poll should be subject to numerous caveats owing to the manner in which internal political campaign polls have been noted by authors such as Fox (1997) to attempt to alter prospective voters views, and thus results, in a manner favourable to them (Survation 2020). However, as this poll naturally entered into the media landscape and was treated with a degree of authenticity owing to it being conducted by a recognised polling firm subject to minimum methodological requirements, I therefore believed it to be worthy of inclusion for the purpose of testing my hypotheses and manually added it.

Methods

In order to begin my research, it was first necessary to determine the sentiment of newspaper coverage to test $H1$ and $H2$, I decided a targeted sentiment analysis utilising a predefined dictionary would be the most efficient manner to conduct this, as it would allow me to determine the sentiment of the immediate context in which Sinn Féin or it’s politicians at the national level were mentioned. The immediate context referred to here was set at a window concerning 10 words either side of a mention of specified key words, as seen in Figure 5 of Appendix A, with the rationale to utilize this window on either side of the key word based on a previous approaches in similar studies by Tong & Zuo (2019), Bleich et al. (2018), who state a window of around this size is ideal for maintaining appropriate context when dealing with news media. The main package I utilised to perform quantitative text analysis on this data was the Quanteda package for R developed by Benoit, Watanabe, Wang, Nulty, Obeng, Müller & Matsuo (2018). Owing to, as

mentioned above, Sinn Féin and it's politicians having Irish language characters in their names, I first standardised such characters with their English language equivalents to simplify and expedite the workflow. Utilising functions from *Quanteda*, I engaged in various pre-processing steps which involved the removal of punctuation and stop-words. I initially utilised the NRC Word-Emotion Association lexicon by Mohammad & Turney (2013), however upon conducting a top features analysis of 50 words, I decided to settle on the Bing sentiment lexicon as I found that it better captured sentiment that more applicable to a political context (Hu & Liu 2004). The formula I utilised to develop an estimate of sentiment for an individual article was in keeping with that of previous applied and theoretical research by Proksch et al. (2019), Lowe et al. (2011);

$$\log\left(\frac{\text{Total positive sentiment} + 0.5}{\text{Total negative sentiment} + 0.5}\right)$$

As noted by Grimmer & Stewart (2013), it is crucially important to validate so-called "off-the-shelf" dictionaries in order to determine they were measuring sentiment in the manner I expected, I then undertook a number of steps to ensure this, primarily guided by best-practice in this area (Deng et al. 2019). I drew a random sample, utilising R code, of 200 instances, equally divided, of both negative and positive instances of dictionary key-words in individual documents utilising the *kwic* (Key Word in Context) function from the *Quanteda* package, well-beyond the 1% standard usually required for data validation purposes. I then manually observed contexts in which words were wholly unrelated to sentiment in the particular political context in Ireland and selected these for further observation, which led to manual removal of the words; *opposition*, *issue(s)*, *led*, *enough*, *unity*, *promises*. Furthermore, I then set Irish political parties as multi-word expressions, as it became clear that certain Irish political parties shared parts of their names with sentiment.² Upon completion of this task, I became confident with the validity of the dictionary in the measurement of political sentiment.

²The first word of the Irish political party 'Fine Gael' was counted as positive sentiment owing to the english word 'Fine' being in it's name.

In order to examine *H1*, I calculated a value based on the mean daily sentiment, based on values from the aforementioned formula, of all articles per day separately for both tabloids and broadsheets, which acted as my dependent variable, with my independent variable being a simple binary variable indicating the nature of publication type. In order to examine *H2*, I utilised the same calculation to derive a mean sentiment solely for broadsheet articles per day which acted as my dependent variable, with my independent variable being that of opinion polling data. Deciding on a measure for opinion polling data per day was slightly more complicated as it was not published on a daily basis as in other countries, I decided instead to utilise piece-wise constant interpolation for the polling data in keeping with Pereira (2019).³ The basis for choosing this approach lay primarily in previous research highlighting that journalists literacy insofar as the basics of opinion polling is concerned is lacking, and rather than expecting this group as a whole to make sophisticated inferences regarding polling, a simpler approach seemed consistent (Larson 2003, Toff 2019). These opinion poll results were also lagged by three days as, whilst some journalists may have prior knowledge of opinion polls and produce content accordingly for the same or following day, it will naturally take slightly more time for the wider media landscape to become fully aware of them (Atkin & Gaudino 1984).

Additionally, there were a number of additional features present in both models, such as a control being added in the form of a binary variable representing whether or not an article was published before or after the election, owing to the manner in which the actual results of the election can have a specific effect on sentiment regarding political parties (Gattermann et al. 2022). Furthermore, it is important to note that on certain time-periods, there is a high degree of variation in the amount of articles published by newspapers, an issue most prominently affecting broadsheets, owing to the low number of them, therefore I utilised the weight function when running regressions so as to account for this.

³On those days without polls, voting intentions remained at a level constant to those published in the last survey. Furthermore, on those days where more than a single poll was published, a simple mean of Sinn Féin's standing in the polls on that day was utilised.

In order to test the relationship for my first and second hypotheses, regression modelling would be utilised to determine the relationship between the two variables. Owing to the nature of the data being time-series, auto-regressive techniques were utilised in a manner consistent with that of Gujarati & Porter (1992) and a lagged dependent variable model was added in order to address how past behaviour, specifically concerning media sentiment, might affect current behaviour, methods in keeping with the approach utilized in similar studies (Rossini et al. 2018, Wlezien & Soroka 2019)⁴. There are a number of special considerations which were necessary owing to working with time-series data, in that we needed to ensure data was stationary and there was no auto-correlation. The first tests ran were Augmented Dickey–Fuller test to determine the stationarity of our time-series, all were shown to be non-stationary except for our opinion polling data, where we engaged in first-order differencing and re-ran this test to confirm stationarity (As seen in Appendix B). I then tested for auto-correlation in both models by generation ACF plots in R, with both models shown not to exhibit it. Another consideration owing to this being time-series data was that I initially added a control for the passage of time to my models, however, this control was later removed when it showed not to be significant, in keeping with Rossini et al. (2018). Similarly, as this is an OLS regression there are additional assumptions which we were required to verify, with these being ensuring our variables were not overly correlated, utilising variance inflation factor (VIF), ensuring a normal distribution with diagnostic plots, as well as heteroscedasticity (Faraway 2004).

Results

The results from the two regressions for *H1* and *H2* are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Model 1 shows us that there is a no statistically significant effect of newspaper

⁴As tabloids consistently do not publish on Sundays and both publication types don't on special dates (i.e. Christmas Day), our dependent lagged variable naturally does not take account of such dates and is based, for dates such as the Monday, upon the value of media sentiment on the Saturday instead.

publication type on media sentiment concerning dominant left-populist parties $[-0.02]$. This means that we fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in the way tabloid newspapers and broadsheets portray left-populist parties in countries where such parties are the dominant populist party.

	Model 1
(Intercept)	-0.10^* (0.04)
Tabloid publication	-0.02 (0.07)
Media sentiment $_{t-1}$	0.25^{**} (0.07)
Post-election coverage	0.12^* (0.05)
R^2	0.11
Adj. R^2	0.09
Num. obs.	141

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Media sentiment and publication type regression

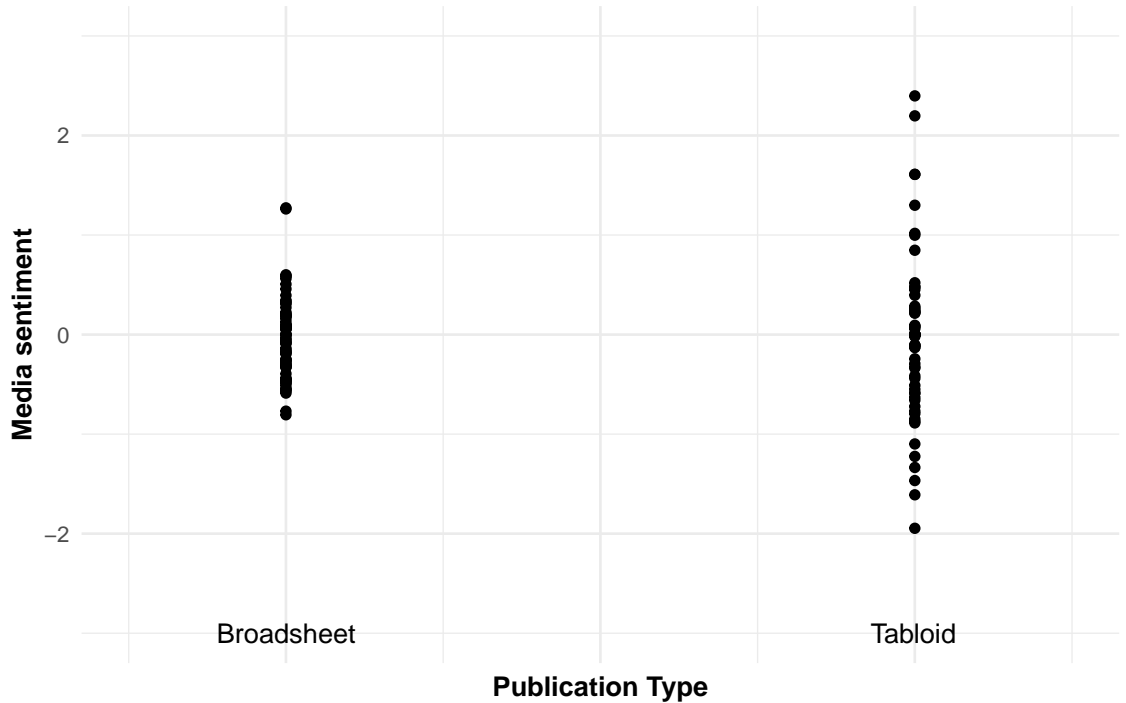


Figure 1: Publication type and media sentiment

As we expected owing to theoretical considerations, there is a strong and statistically highly significant positive effect of the lagged value of the dependent

variable [0.25, $p < .01$], meaning that the previous days net media sentiment will have an effect on current net media sentiment for dominant left-populists. This is something which is also true for our post-election coverage proxy variable, which is found to have a significant positive effect [0.12, < 0.05], meaning that coverage post-election is more positive than before insofar as dominant left-populists are concerned.

Model 2 produces almost identical results, with opinion polling concerning dominant left-populists having no statistically significant effect on subsequent media coverage of them. Similarly, as in Model 1, there is a strong and statistically highly significant positive effect of the lagged value of the dependent variable [0.24, $p < .001$], meaning that the previous days net media sentiment will have an effect on current net media sentiment for dominant left-populists.

	Model 2
(Intercept)	-0.10* (0.04)
Opinion polling _{<i>t-3</i>}	0.01 (0.01)
Media sentiment _{<i>t-1</i>}	0.24** (0.07)
Post-election coverage	0.12* (0.05)
R ²	0.11
Adj. R ²	0.09
Num. obs.	141

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Media sentiment and opinion polling regression

Again, this is something which is also true for our post-election coverage proxy variable, which is found to have a significant positive effect [0.12, $p < 0.05$], meaning that coverage post-election is more positive than before insofar as dominant left-populists are concerned.

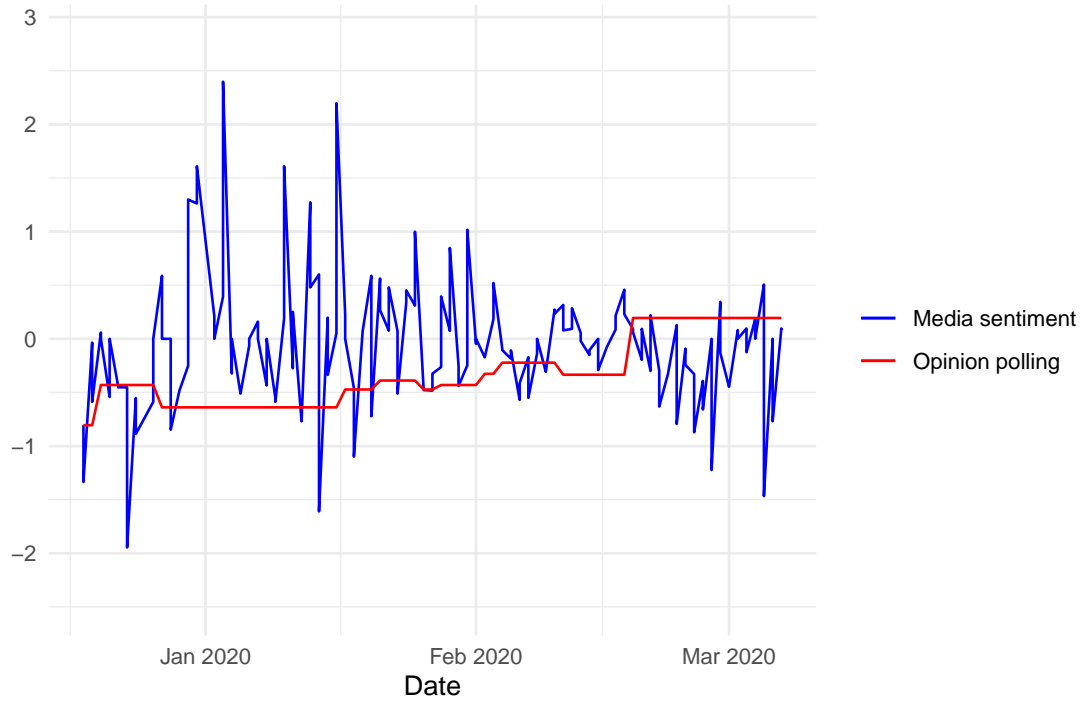


Figure 2: Re-scaled opinion polling trends and media sentiment over time

Robustness Test

Whilst the decision in this thesis was based on theoretical considerations, there is still considerable debate as to what the optimal text window is when conducting quantitative text analysis, of which a change could result in very different results for both Model 1 and Model 2. To explore the effects of changing this text window, the models were re-ran with the text window changed to 5 words and 15 words. Similarly, the nature of the opinion-poll lag is something which is not clearly settled, with a change in the lag again possibly having significant ramifications for Model 1 and Model 2. To explore the effects of changing this, the models were re-ran utilising a 1-day and 5-day lag. Looking at Models 3 to 6 in Appendix B, we find similar results for all, that is that there is no statistical significance between opinion-polling or publication type on media sentiment for dominant left-populists. We do see however in Models 3 to 6, that when the text window is varied from 5 to 15 words, that the level of significance for the post-election proxy becomes greater, [0.19, $p < 0.001$], [0.013, < 0.01], [0.19, $p < 0.001$], and [0.013, $p < 0.01$] respectively. Similarly, the level of significance for the lagged dependent variable is

reduced for the models when we vary the text window, ranging from $[0.15, < 0.05]$, $[0.010, p < 0.05]$, $[0.15, p < 0.05]$, and $[0.11, p < 0.05]$. Results insofar as changing the lag for opinion-polling is concerned do not show any substantial differences from the 3-day lag. Taking into the overall results when we vary conditions, I believe it is evident that our results are robust under a variety of conditions.

Discussion

Throughout the course of this thesis, I believe I have provided greater clarity as to the role of the media in covering left-populists, specifically in those countries where such parties are the dominant expression of populism. This clarity regarding media sentiment of such parties extends to publication type and in response to the external shocks most commonly felt during the electoral cycle by political parties, those of opinion polls. The results in this paper do not allow us to conclude that there is a clear distinction regarding the manner in which broadsheet and tabloid newspapers cover such parties, as well as in response to opinion polling. In spite of not receiving results to confirm our hypotheses, we have nonetheless provided a contribution to the broader literature in quantitatively testing theoretical considerations, from authors such as Hameleers & Vliegenthart (2020), that national political contexts shapes tabloid media receptiveness to left-populist parties, finding no support for such claims. Similarly, we provide a contribution to the little research on opinion-polling and media sentiment, by authors such as Tryggvason (2021), Wlezien & Soroka (2019), finding that for dominant left-populist parties, there is no evidence of a relationship between opinion-polling and media sentiment. Furthermore, whilst it may seem egregious to base such presumptions off regression models with admittedly low R^2 values, they nonetheless perform equivalent to models in similar studies (Wlezien & Soroka 2019).

There are however, a number of limitations to this thesis and further avenues for research which could be explored. Insofar as the case selection is concerned, this should be expanded as, in light of the results, whilst Sinn Féin has been noted by

authors such as McAllister (2004), Maillot (2005) as having transformed itself into a standard European democratic-socialist party, it may be the case that it still suffers from reputational 'baggage' not experienced by other dominant left-wing populist parties in the West. Similarly, further research would benefit from expanding onto other mediums, with it being noted by Schulz (2011) that in certain instances television coverage provide greater responsiveness for populist politicians owing to it's relatively personalized nature, although how much this holds for left-populists rather than right-populists remains to be seen. Additional qualitative research could also be performed to compliment the study and allow for greater model specification, building upon Corcoran (2004) and soliciting the opinions and methods of journalists when covering left-populists. Nonetheless, over the course of this paper, I believe I have provided greater clarity as to the role of the media in covering left-populists, both in terms of publication type and in response to external shocks, to a greater degree than that which has been studied thus far, and thus provided a framework for further research in this hitherto ignored area.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

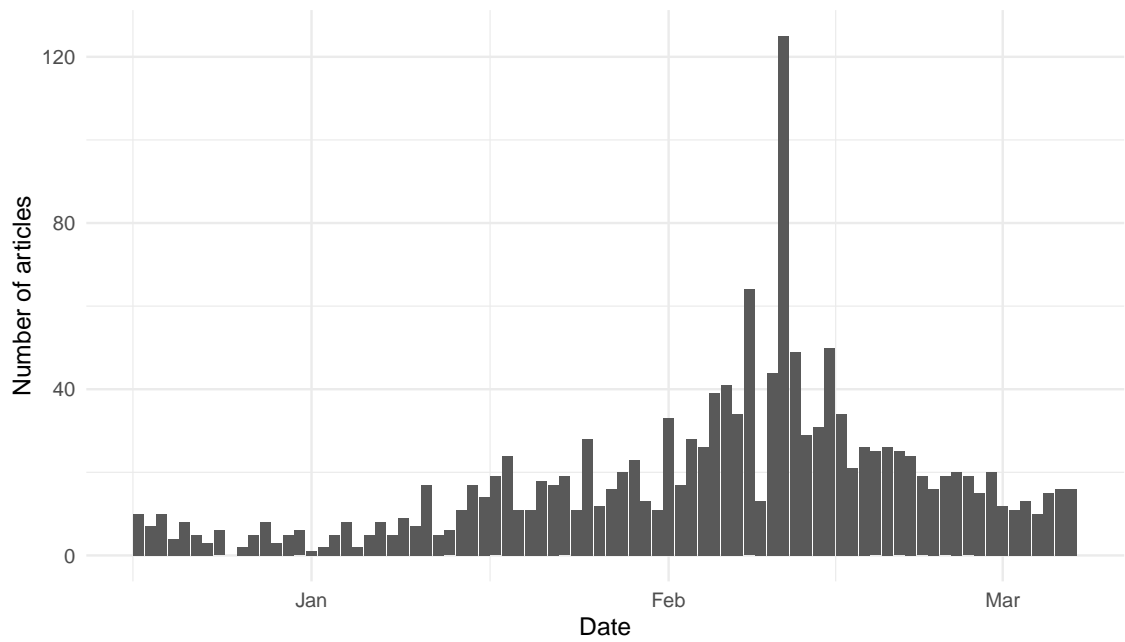


Figure 3: Daily count of broadsheet articles concerning Sinn Féin

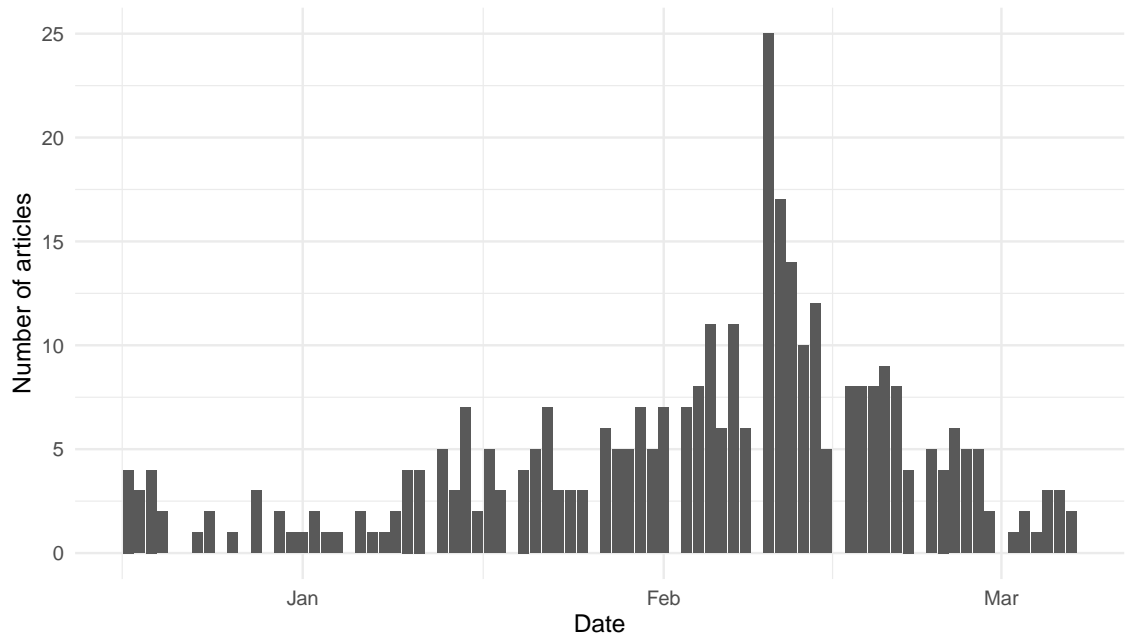


Figure 4: Daily count of tabloid articles concerning Sinn Féin

Sinn Fein *or* SF *or* Shinner *or* Mary-Lou McDonald *or* Pearse Doherty *or* Eoin O'Broin *or* Louise O'Reilly *or* David Cullinane *or* Kathleen Funchion *or* Donnchadh O Laoghaire *or* Martin Kenny *or* Aengus O Snodaigh *or* Imelda Munster *or* Brian Stanley *or* Maurice Quinlivan *or* Caoimhghin O Caolain *or* Martin Ferris *or* Dessie Ellis *or* Sean Crowe *or* Denise Mitchell *or* Jonathan O'Brien *or* Pat Buckley *or* John Brady

Figure 5: LexisNexis search terms

APPENDIX B

Series residuals

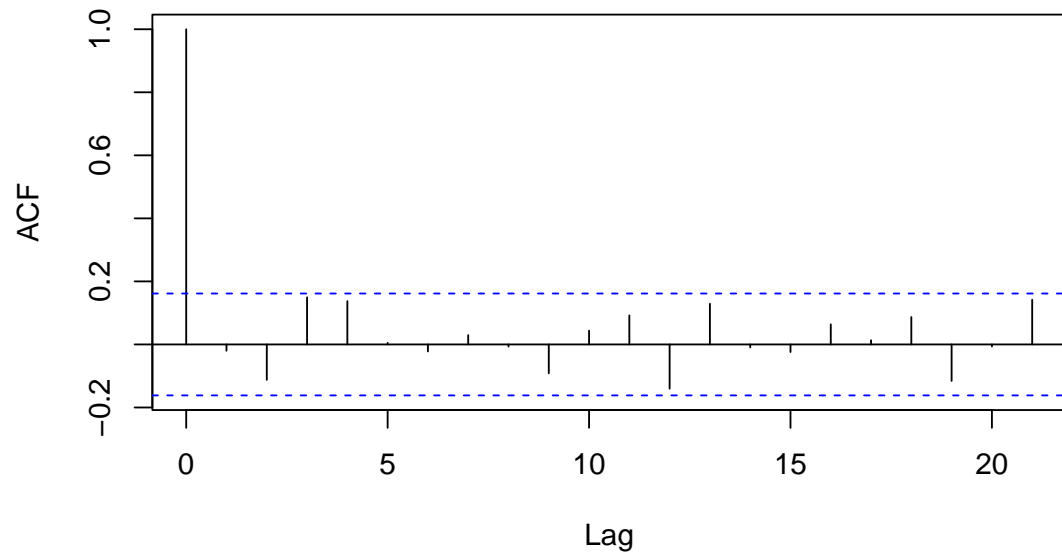


Figure 6: Autocorrelation function plot of Model 1

Series residuals

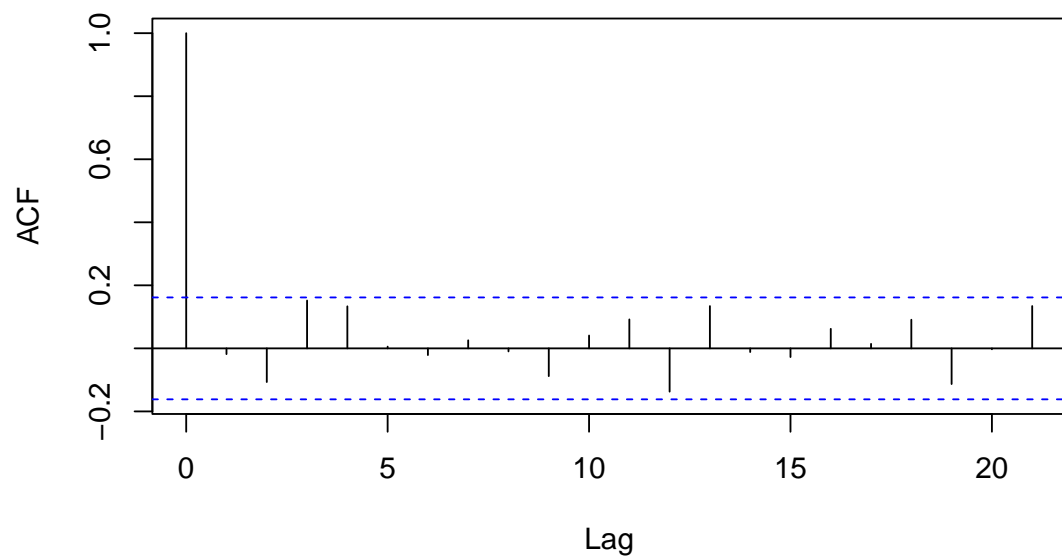


Figure 7: Autocorrelation function plot of Model 2

	Model 3
(Intercept)	−0.11* (0.04)
Tabloid publication	0.04 (0.05)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.15* (0.06)
Post-election coverage	0.19*** (0.05)
R ²	0.12
Adj. R ²	0.10
Num. obs.	147

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Model 1 with 5-word window

	Model 4
(Intercept)	−0.11** (0.03)
Tabloid publication	0.04 (0.04)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.10* (0.04)
Post-election coverage	0.13** (0.04)
R ²	0.10
Adj. R ²	0.08
Num. obs.	147

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Model 1 with 15-word window

	Model 5
(Intercept)	−0.09* (0.04)
Opinion polling _{t−3}	−0.00 (0.01)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.15* (0.06)
Post-election coverage	0.19*** (0.05)
R ²	0.12
Adj. R ²	0.10
Num. obs.	147

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 6: Model 2 with 5-word window

	Model 6
(Intercept)	−0.09** (0.03)
Opinion polling _{t−3}	0.00 (0.01)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.11* (0.04)
Post-election coverage	0.13** (0.04)
R ²	0.10
Adj. R ²	0.08
Num. obs.	147

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 7: Model 2 with 15-word window

	Model 7
(Intercept)	−0.10* (0.04)
Opinion polling _{t−1}	0.01 (0.01)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.25** (0.07)
Post-election coverage	0.12* (0.05)
R ²	0.11
Adj. R ²	0.09
Num. obs.	141

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 8: Model 2 with 1-day lag

	Model 8
(Intercept)	−0.10* (0.04)
Opinion polling _{t−5}	−0.01 (0.01)
Media sentiment _{t−1}	0.24** (0.07)
Post-election coverage	0.12* (0.05)
R ²	0.11
Adj. R ²	0.09
Num. obs.	141

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 9: Model 2 with 5-day lag

```
Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test  
data: dataset$sentiment_10  
Dickey-Fuller = -4.2787, Lag order = 5, p-value = 0.01  
alternative hypothesis: stationary
```

Figure 8: Augmented Dickey–Fuller (ADF) test of sentiment analysis time-series

```
Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test  
data: dataset$poll_differencing  
Dickey-Fuller = -5.6536, Lag order = 5, p-value = 0.01  
alternative hypothesis: stationary
```

Figure 9: Augmented Dickey–Fuller (ADF) test of opinion-polling time-series