

COVERAGE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS OF 1999: NATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERES AND EUROPEAN DEBATES

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Abstract

This article is based on the results of an eight-country study on national media coverage of European political and cultural affairs, which included the final week of the European Parliament election campaigns.

The research was carried out during two monitoring periods in 1999 with the co-operation of partner institutes in France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Coverage of the campaigns in each country provided an opportunity to examine media debates during a political event at a level above the nation-state. The coding of news items and articles allowed for a quantitative assessment of news coverage and frequency of reference to particular topics, while a qualitative overview of coverage by national experts facilitated the comparison of national debates. While the elections represent a process of political participation outside the national sphere, there is no corresponding common sphere of debate, which can be examined in relation to this exercise of citizenship. Comparing the activity in the various national spheres highlighted some of the distinct national ideas and debates about European Union membership while also bringing to the fore some common concerns and debates which reflect growing political and economic integration.

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Introduction

The last European Parliament (hereafter, EP) elections of the century left an uncertain view of the future of European citizenship with low turnouts, apathy and a lack of media debate on EU policies raising the question as to when this level of governance will be balanced by public participation. In the context of a larger research project the focus on the coverage of the elections illustrates the amount of information available to the public, but also examines national debates and discourses about Europe. As regards information provision and discussion of policies in relation to the EU, this article outlines the different performances of national media in the sense of contributing to European citizenship or political identification with Europe. In relation to debates about Europe, the article highlights where national issues occlude those at the supra-national level, where national interests are intertwined with European politics and where a clear development of a "Europeanisation" of national spheres is occurring.

A growing area of concern related to the problem of a "democratic deficit" at the EU level has been the idea of a "communication deficit" as regards the political process. Discussions of democratic development in the EU are frequently focussing on the opportunities for debating and participating in policy processes. At the nation state level Habermas originally pictured such as public sphere as ideally being accessible for a range of civic participation (Habermas 1962/1989). At the European level the policy community does include a range of consultative voices such as industrial, scientific, employer and union organisations, although with unequal impact. Access to this sphere is however limited, and also distorted by the influence of interest aggregation and lobbyists (Gardner 1991; Greenwood and Ronit 1994; Mazey and Richardson 1993). The extent to which a common European media has emerged has largely been one that operates in the service of the policy community, the business and political elites, and as such does not play a role in any wider civic participation (Schlesinger and Kevin 2000).

In the absence of a specific "European public sphere" within which a "European" election campaign could be conducted with a focus on EU policy issues, EP Parliamentary alliances and party agendas, we must turn to the national media spheres in order to examine the dissemination of the EU political and policy process. In this way it is possible to examine the Europeanisation of national public spheres.

A hypothetical European sphere of publics would, amongst other things: (1) involve the dissemination of a European news agenda; (2) need to become a significant part of the everyday news-consuming habits of European audiences; (3) entail that those living within the EU have begun to think of their citizenship, in part at least, as transcending the level of the member nation-states (Schlesinger and Kevin 2000, 228).

Media Coverage of Europe

The impact of the media on people's knowledge of, and opinions regarding Europe is regularly surveyed in the context of the Eurobarometer. The premise is that people with a higher level of media consumption tend to feel better informed and express a more positive attitude towards a European identity i.e. increased

exposure to formal education and mass communication tended to promote favourable attitudes to European integration (Inglehart 1970). Janssen (1991) contested this premise and stressed the importance of the actual content of messages of political communication and their impact on attitudes. Similarly, one significant Eurobarometer finding concerns the fact that users of print media tend to express above average negative attitudes to membership in the EU (EC 1997), implying a necessity to examine the content of print media. Furthermore knowledge does not necessarily imply support as in the case of the Danes, while support does not always imply knowledge as in the case of the Irish during the Maastricht debate. For example, data (EC 1992) for Ireland revealed a high level of positive perception of the Maastricht summit coupled with the majority of respondents who felt they had a medium to high level of understanding of the issues involved. When asked to mention some of the key themes addressed by the treaty the levels of salience of these issues was extremely low.¹ In some cases respondents are more honest about their lack of understanding but not, it would seem, aware of the contradiction in having negative or positive opinions. Similarly, in mid-1998, sixty six percent of UK respondents claimed to be against Economic and Monetary Union (hereafter, EMU), while only thirteen percent felt they were well informed about EMU. Of Irish respondents only seventeen percent felt well informed, while sixty nine percent were in favour (in Italy the figures were 17% feeling well informed and 79% in favour).² An influencing factor, namely elite debate, on the contradiction between knowledge and support will be further addressed below.

Studies on media coverage of European elections, and national referenda on decisions regarding closer integration, have helped to highlight some of the problems inherent in the communication flows from the "supranational" level of governance to the public via national or regional media. Cross-comparisons of news agendas particularly regarding common issues and themes, prove useful tools in assessing trends in the activities of the media. The nature of media coverage of European Union politics has been of interest to academics particularly from the first European parliament elections in 1979. Blumler (1983) edited a multi-author collection of studies carried out across Europe after the first European parliament elections investigating campaign frameworks, election involvement, messages and perceptions in a cross cultural dimension. While the study outlined distinct characteristics of the approaches to the elections in the different member states, the approach in all nine countries was largely to emulate the frameworks for coverage and broadcasting of national elections which tended to vary in tradition and practice across countries. Studies conducted by Leroy and Siune (1994) compared the role of television in the election campaigns in Denmark and Belgium (in 1979, 1984 and 1989). In general these studies concluded that content remained "nationally bound" but the development of a separate party system in Denmark did have the effect of increasing debate about the EU.

One of the major characteristics of European election campaigns has been the focus on domestic issues and the election generally amounts to an indication of satisfaction with government performance (Bogdanor 1989) with little attempt to engage the citizen in debate about Europe. The functions of the Parliament, the agenda of the national parties in Europe, or the affiliation of groups in the Parliament, are seldom clarified. All these factors inhibit the development of any

type of European public sphere for addressing common issues or assisting the public in learning about the actualities of European governance.

More recently, studies have begun to focus on the ongoing coverage of European political and cultural news or of particular case studies of EU issues, more particularly regarding scandals and crises such as the BSE crisis, or the resignation of the Commission. In the case of the later the co-operation between investigative journalists is considered an indication of a developing public sphere as regards EU politics (Meyer 1999). Examinations of referendum campaigns and coverage related to the European Union reveal the extent to which the core issues can be clouded by peripheral issues. Such was the case during the Maastricht debate in Ireland with the "X case" (Holmes 1993), or during the British referendum on continued membership of the EC which focused more on the instrument (i.e. the referendum) itself rather than the substance of the debate (Bristow 1976). The Danish referenda on Maastricht, did however address some central issues, and the vote change has been attributed to elite manipulation of public opinion through further campaigns and media coverage (Siune, Svensson and Tonsgaard 1994).

Palmer (1999) comparing coverage of EMU in four countries with a focus on "agents" and "events" concluded that EMU is framed in French and German news as a transnational economic issue while in Britain the framing is of an internal political issue, illustrating differences in national discourses. The issue of elite opinions and debates regarding the single currency was addressed by Risse et al (1998). They argued that there is a different basis for elite attitudes in different countries. Essentially the differences between countries emerged as more important than individual differences, whether gender, socio-demographic or political. They further conclude that "the legitimization of the EC is not secured not only because anti-European citizens do not support unification, but also because pro-Europeans do so out of concerns related to their own countries. Both anti-Europeans and pro-Europeans are nationals, not Europeans" (Risse et al 1998, 138).

This suggests that when elites and politicians remain focused on economic factors that message filters through to the citizen, largely disseminated through the media. The conclusion again must be that overall attitudes are strongly influenced by politicians and elites, and usually by means of arguments presented in terms of economic loss or gain. Gerke's (1998) findings were similar in relation to public attitudes measured during EU referendum campaigns and questioned the extent to which Europeans were in any way focused on a "shared destiny" rather than simply on economic perspectives. Hence an interesting aspect of examining media coverage of European and EU issues involves the various discourses about Europe that are reflected, particularly in the printed press.

The European Parliament and Its Role in the EU

Before discussing national coverage of the election campaigns³ it is worth noting the Parliament's role and decision-making powers in relation to central EU policy issues. The Treaty of Rome (1957) gave the Parliament initially just a consultative role, with the Commission proposing and the Council of Ministers disposing legislation. The introduction of direct elections in 1979 helped to increase the legitimacy of the European Parliament, and the subsequent Treaties have extended the Parliament's influence in relation to amending and adopting legisla-

tion. The co-decision procedure now applies to a wide range of issues such as the free movement of workers, consumer protection, education, culture, health, Trans-European networks, employment, discrimination and EU fraud prevention. The original co-operation procedure⁴ previously applied to a large number of areas but since Amsterdam the scope of this procedure has been reduced in favour of the co-decision procedure and now applies only to certain aspects of economic and monetary union. Hence the Parliament is now on equal footing with the Council as regards decision-making in a range of policy areas particularly to do with free movement and social policy. Parliament's assent is required for important international agreements, e.g. the accession of new Member States or association agreements with third countries, the organisation of Structural and Cohesion Funds and the tasks and powers of the European Central Bank.⁵ Additionally, the Parliament must be consulted on the "main aspects and basic choices" relating to Common Foreign and Security Policy (hereafter, CFSP), and to policing and security.⁶ While the levels of direct impact that the EP may have on policy decisions vary between policy areas, the elections should, in a sense, place the EU, as a whole, in the spotlight for a period of time allowing for a more general discussion on the EU project.

A further important aspect of the EP role in the European Union has been the involvement in appointing and approving the members of the Commission and with regard to overall electoral participation certain events of 1999 undoubtedly had an influence on the attitudes of the public towards the EU. The resignation of the Commission compounded public perceptions regarding corruption at the European level and the idea of the EU "grave train." It is difficult to assess whether the general public understood the role played by the European Parliament in this affair by exerting its powers regarding acceptance of the European Commission. Recent Eurobarometer data claims that "EU citizens are now significantly more likely to express satisfaction with the way democracy works in the European Union (42%) than they were in spring 1998 (+7%)" (EC 1999a). This change in opinion is interpreted, by the Commission, as a positive response to European Parliament involvement in the protection of democratic interests at the EU level.⁷

From a media perspective one senior BBC official noted that "when they (the European Parliament) actually started to take some real decisions about the European Commission, they started to get coverage. I think when they start to make decisions that matter this is going to happen more and more."⁸ It is, however, likely that there remains a lack of public understanding regarding the division of powers at the EU level. Hence, any disgrace for one institution could have the effect of smearing the others, particularly in instances where "Europe" in a "generalising" sense, or "Brussels" in a "diminishing" sense, has become a "catch-all" expression for the European Union in many media outlets.⁹

Patterns in European Parliament Election Coverage

As mentioned earlier, coverage of elections throughout the member states has traditionally been characterised by a focus on domestic issues often amounting to a type of referendum on the incumbent government (Bogdanor, 1989). By and large our study of the election campaigns indicated similar tendencies. As table 1 illustrates, the majority of coverage in each country did not deal with many of the

central policy issues at the EU level; implying coverage was focused on the campaigns, personalities and domestic issues. For example, in Spain, the coverage of the elections was described as not having been an occasion to discuss Union problems or to reinforce European citizenship, but rather domestic issues served as a barometer of the popularity of the two main parties, the PP (Partido Popular) and the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español). Furthermore, the political discourse was dominated by a strategy of attack on opponents. Political corruption was a relevant issue in this strategy and the mass media reflected this. The pattern was similar in Italy with a focus on internal political games and strategies, with little attention being paid to European policies. This was particularly apparent in the press with the exception of *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the only outlet reporting the main European policies and directives, although focusing on economics. In Ireland some of the candidates explicitly stated that the elections should be treated as an opportunity for the electorate to express their opinions as to the performance of the incumbent national government.

Likewise in Britain, particularly in the quality press outlets, the elections focused on the divisions within the two main parties over European issues. Peter Riddell, writing in *The Times* (17 May) noted how Europe was an incredibly important issue within the ranks of the Conservative Party, yet was deemed relatively unimportant among the wider electorate, where issues such as health and education were viewed as priorities.

Table 1 reveals that the Spanish coverage was more comprehensive than the British, Italian or Irish. The Spanish report refers to issues that received special attention in the press including economic integration and the “Euro,” Common Agricultural Policy (Hereafter, CAP), unemployment, social policy; CFSP, and the “democratic deficit” but indicates an absence of discussion of political integration.

Dutch media coverage concentrated on reimbursements of fictitious expenses, the expected low attendance rate of the elections, and interviews with prominent Dutch members of the European Parliament. *NRC Handelsblad* (June 5) included a special appendix dedicated solely to the European Union. Overall the last week was characterised by a low amount of coverage with little attention paid to “visions of Europe” in the various party platforms. Further description of the Irish campaign claims that virtually every Irish party (with the possible exception of the Green) adopted a standard Irish campaigning approach — clientelist and localist. Candidates stressed what they could do for their European constituency (e.g. better roads, more jobs etc.) rather than their stance on more explicitly “European” issues. As a consequence coverage of the European Parliament Elections failed to engender much media coverage of specifically European issues such as Agenda 2000, EU expansion, CFSP etc., as these were not campaign issues. According to the Swedish report the situation has improved somewhat in Sweden compared to the last EU elections (their first) and there was more of a focus on EU issues rather than on the earlier arguments about EU membership. This is indeed reflected in the coverage as illustrated in tables (1+2) wherein Swedish coverage (both television and press) covered a wide variety of EU policies. While the elections thus provided a platform for national political issues and rivalries, there were certain EU policies, which came to the fore in the national campaigns.

Election Coverage in the Context of National News Agendas

The crisis in Kosovo and the subsequent peace talks overshadowed much of the European Parliament campaign period. The extent to which European security issues and the role of the EU in conflicts in Europe were integrated into national debates on Kosovo varied widely between countries and will be referred to briefly in the context of policy coverage below.

A further issue, which dominated the final week of campaigning, was the dioxin scandal in Belgium. This led to discussions of EU regulation of food production and a re-emergence of a lack of trust regarding food production beyond the national borders, which was most apparent during the BSE crisis of March 1996. By and large the references to Belgium during this time were considered balanced and neutral but quite a lot of negative coverage (between one third and a half of references) was given in France, Italy, Spain and Ireland, with the German and British remaining neutral. The Italian report describes the nature of the news from Belgium as having a clear "us/them" rhetoric which interestingly switched during the subsequent Coca-Cola crisis to an issue with a more "global flavour," addressing the blaming discourse towards the American model of globalisation and to American imperialism.

While the dioxin affair was of major importance in all countries, in The Netherlands the main story in this period was the Dutch Cabinet crisis, which dominated political discussion and overshadowed the European campaigns. In Spain, the European elections coincided with regional government and mayoral elections causing a decrease in interest in the European elections. Consequently, European issues were not clearly differentiated from national ones in the candidates' discourse. The Socialist party (PSOE) tried to involve the Popular Party (PP) candidate in a case of corruption concerning EU agricultural funding (the "flax case"), and the PP accused the PSOE ex-Ministers of having incorrectly negotiated the integration of Spain in the Union. This struggle was emphasised during the June period making flax the "key topic" of the campaign.

Overview of Coverage

All election news items, in selected outlets, during the last week of the campaigns including both electronic and printed media are outlined in table 1. This illustrates the spectrum of election information available in the outlets monitored (see table 3 for list of outlets). These items¹⁰ were cross-referenced with a selection of topics relating to EU policy areas (and some of the more abstract topics) and show the extent to which election coverage actually dealt with policy issues. As in some cases policy issues constitute a very small percentage of coverage it can be assumed that the other news items dealt with different issues or were more focused on the actual campaigns, personalities etc. This aspect of the coverage is explored in more detail below in reference to commentary on the campaigns.

The wider research revealed that coverage of European issues in Germany far outweighed that of any other country, but it is the French media outlets that paid most attention to the European elections. It is also reasonable to say that the Swedish, German and French media display a wide range of discussion of EU policies

and European themes in their coverage. In proportional terms the coverage in the other countries may not be as lacking in depth as is apparent from the chart, although both the Irish and the Italian media coverage of EU policies and related topics in the context of election coverage seems sparse.

Table 1: News Items Relating to the EP Elections Cross-referenced with Relevant Topics (June monitoring only)

	Total	E. ID	E. CIT	E. INT	E. EXPE.	Pol cul	CFSP	EMU	Unemploy	Funding	CAP
France	263	14	22	30	2	26	20	18	17	13	4
Germany	147	15	12	13	9	30	9	17	4	8	14
Ireland	71	0	2	3	4	3	5	2	0	3	1
Italy	75	4	4	6	0	6	1	2	3	0	2
Netherlands	47	1	0	12	0	7	2	9	1	8	4
Spain	114	6	11	8	2	2	4	18	5	9	14
Sweden	156	3	12	14	13	78	39	34	9	13	20
UK	99	1	0	11	0	24	1	39	0	1	0

Total: the total number of articles dealing with the elections in each country, in the second monitoring period: last week of election campaigns in June.

These totals were cross-referenced with the following topics in order to show where debates about the elections coincided with discussions on EU related topics. Several topics may, in some cases, have appeared in the same news item.

CAP: Common Agricultural Policy

Funding: EU funds and budget

Unemploy: Unemployment

EMU: Economic and Monetary Union

CFSP: Common Foreign and Security Policy

E. Pol cul: European political culture

E. Exp: EU Expansion

E. Int: European integration

E. Cit: European Citizenship

The CAP was not widely referred to in the context of the EP elections but was primarily discussed in connection with the dioxin scandal. The expansion of the EU was not a major election issue but given more consideration in Germany and Sweden (probably for geographical reasons) and in Ireland (possibly as regards the potential loss of structural funds). Common foreign policy issues hardly surfaced in the UK media in relation to the EU elections but seemed a relatively important issue in the Swedish media due to neutrality.¹¹

In the UK media we can see that almost half of all articles relating to the elections made reference to the single currency, indicating the way in which this issue continues to remain central to any debates about the EU in the UK. EMU also appears quite prominently in the Swedish media. In the other countries the single currency is, in proportion to overall election coverage, a minor issue, perhaps indicating its acceptance as a *fait accompli*. The topic "European political culture" was included to reflect debates regarding the political processes at the European level both in relation to the electoral process of the European parliament and also any discussions regarding the other institutions, particularly the Commission. Reference to this aspect of the elections occurs most frequently in the British and Swedish media but the coverage is largely neutral. For the Swedish media (particularly television) this involved a critical comparison between European political culture and Swedish political culture. A different, more negative, picture may have emerged during the European Commission crisis.

It is worth referring to some observations that were made in the coverage across types of media outlets. On both German television channels monitored the European elections received practically no coverage (one news item on each) during the last week of the campaigns, when the news focused on Kosovo and on the dioxin scandal, with reference to CFSP and the CAP. Compared to German press coverage and the television coverage of the other countries this is rather surprising. The Swedish television channels and ARTE, and to some extent the French channels, had a wider range of discussion of EU policies and European themes. Aside from election news, EMU was the only topic discussed on UK television while the CAP (in relation to the dioxin crisis) was the main issue dealt with on television in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain.

In quantitative terms the French press (national titles), followed by the German and Spanish, provide the most coverage of the election and the German, French, Swedish and Spanish press appear to have more coverage of other policy issues. EMU is quite an important issue in all countries due to fluctuations against the dollar, primarily in the UK and Sweden, where this issue is more politicised by being directly linked with the election campaigns. With regard to more "national" concerns, funding and the EU budget are no longer central to British debates about the EU, but were an important part of the debate in Germany, Spain, Sweden and France. In Germany both the CDU and the Social Democrats addressed the issue of "fairness" as regards the German contribution to the EU budget, in their campaigns.

Of the regional papers monitored the French, German and British had most coverage of the European elections with *The Herald* mirroring the importance of EMU in the British press in general while apparently providing some balanced coverage of the single currency issue. *The Herald* also tended to adopt a distinctively Scottish perspective, assessing events and arguments related to the European elections in terms of their implications for Scotland and, especially, for Scotland's newly devolved Parliament. Of a total of five news items referring to CFSP in the British outlets monitored, during the June period, three appeared in *The Herald* possibly implying a slightly different focus on the security debate in Scotland as opposed to the rest of the UK media. The CAP and funding were both given a good deal of coverage in the Irish, Dutch and Spanish titles with funding and unemployment being quite important in *Ouest France*. The more "European" topics are reasonably well covered in the regional titles showing a similar pattern to press coverage as a whole. Questions regarding European citizenship are most prominent in the French regional newspaper, as is the case with the other French newspapers.

Coverage of Other Member States

A further indicator of the extent to which the coverage of the elections takes a European view can be seen in the reference to the other member states. Table 2 outlines the percentage of election coverage in each country (total of television and press news items cross-referenced with member states) which refers to EU states.

The British, Irish and German media had little coverage (as a percentage of overall coverage) of events in other countries connected with the elections. In the

German case this is again surprising given the overall range of news that refers to Europe or other Europeans. The other four have a large percentage (between one quarter and one third) of news items referring to the other member states. While Italy included other member states in much of the election coverage, reference was made to just six countries. Conversely the Irish and German media, while not referring regularly to other EU countries, have more or less mentioned all of them. A further point in relation to this is that despite the disinterest in the UK media outlets monitored as regards other member states, the UK was the most frequently mentioned EU member in France, Germany, Ireland and Italy. The Netherlands was the only exception with the media showing more interest in its neighbours Germany, France and Belgium. Germany and France also always appear in the top three countries mentioned by the media in each country. The Swedish and French media in the study appear to have provided more comprehensive coverage of the elections in terms of policy issues, and also the extent to which reference is made to other member states.

Table 2: Percentage of European Parliament Election Coverage which Refers to Other Member States

UK (6)	5,1
Germany (14)	8
Ireland (13)	10
Netherlands (11)	24
Italy (6)	25,3
France (14)	30
Spain (14)	34
Sweden (14)	34,5

Numbers in brackets indicate the number of member states mentioned.

Where the EU Impacts on the National Sphere

Not surprisingly, the EU election campaign in the UK provoked lively debate. Both the Conservative and the Labour parties are quite divided over the issue of European integration with the government being, in general, more in favour of closer integration. While Prime Minister Tony Blair requested that the elections should not be used as a referendum on EU membership or EMU, it was only to be expected that these issues would be subject to some emotive journalism. As pointed out above, EMU was referred to in almost 50% of all the election coverage. Rupert Murdoch's UK newspapers expressed opposition not just to the Euro but to the concept of the EU elections in general. *The Times* focused on the Euro as an important election issue, while one columnist (in a subtle sense) advocated abstention as the best use of the vote. *The Sun* was far more explicit in its suggestions for "10 (alternative) uses for a load of Euro ballot (papers)" including suggesting they be used as confetti or as draught excluders.¹²

In contrast to its daily counterpart, the *Sunday Times* (Scottish edition), on June 6, reported more positively on the European Parliamentary elections and it made a direct appeal to voters to take part. Similarly, in Germany, the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (WAZ) offered a series about the German parties and their campaigns and

another series about single candidates. On June 12th the paper included a commentary with the title "Vote!" dealing with the low participation in other countries and arguing for the importance of the Parliament. On the day before the elections, despite some previous criticism of the elections, the *Bild* presented an article on the bottom of the front page entitled "European elections: Why they are so important for us."¹³ In this short article basic information is given on the number of persons entitled to vote, and on the competencies of the European Parliament (with no clear hint whether the "us" in the headline refers to Germans or Europeans).

During the Irish campaigns two issues appeared which touched on a more European perspective although both, by their nature, can still be considered central to issues of national interest. In relation to enlargement of the EU several newspaper articles¹⁴ explicitly stated that the European Parliament (and thus Irish MEPs) would have the power to determine a large measure of the extent of enlargement. While the press outlined the implications for Ireland of this development there was no attempt to outline the candidates' positions on this issue thus not really fulfilling the responsibility to assist the citizen in making informed choices. Another issue was the question of Ireland's possible membership of NATO's Partnership for Peace, rather more a global issue than a European one but useful for candidates opposing the government stance on this issue.

A wider European issue appeared in the Italian media regarding the emergence of a common European Left political program, based on the Blair's "Third Way" presented as the new "political identity" of the "left" European governments, but noting divisions in the proposal of an "alternative way" by French politicians. This allowed for a potentially more "European" debate as regards political culture and common trends in European governance. Similarly, in the German media, this discussion took place on the national as well as on the European level. The Green Party, the trade unions as well as some members of Schröder's party, the SPD, argued against the French idea which was criticised as neo-liberal without providing any idea about how to organise social security and employment. In a way this debate elicited parallel discussions about Europe's strategies on the national as well as on the European levels.

In relation to this perspective it is interesting to note how the international press responded to the results of the 1999 elections. Most stories focused on the defeat of the European left, or the success of the European (centre) right.¹⁵ This illustrates the way in which the EU can be, from the outside, regarded as a single political entity with opposing blocs of political ideology. This is an aspect of EU politics seldom reflected in the national sphere due in some respects to a lack of debate regarding cross-national alliances and the "party" structure within the parliament.

Commentary on Campaigns at Home

Some further interesting characteristics of coverage of the election campaigns included the tendency towards media commentary on media coverage and political debates. Much of the discussion in the UK revolved around the lack of debate, the fact that central issues were not being discussed, and the likelihood of a low turnout in the elections. Similar commentary on the lack of debate occurred on TG1 in Italy. The discussion regarding abstention also appeared in the Italian press

and most media outlets reflected the lack of interest in the elections after the first three polls in the UK, The Netherlands and Denmark.

The Irish media regularly referred to confusion on the part of voters as to the relevance of the elections in their lives. One TV3 vox-pop feature on the European elections made it clear that most people were completely unable to see the relevance of the elections or indeed of their MEPs. The possibility that the media themselves might have borne some of the blame for this was never broached let alone seriously discussed.

Another trend, one which can be seen as a type of “personalisation” of the campaigns, involved what might be described as “novelty” candidates which were given media attention in other countries. In Italy TG5 reports underlined the “pop” aspects of the elections dealing with “bizarre” candidates from the spheres of show business or sport. Similarly, in Ireland the ex-Eurovision winning candidate Rosemary Scanlon attracted a good deal of media attention. European journalists regularly express the difficulty that they have in convincing national editors of the importance of EU news stories. The attempt to brighten the news with more interesting or personalised angles merely reflects the trend at the national level due to the commercialisation of media outlets. “It is always an enormous task to cover the news in an attractive way. Otherwise readers just lose interest. It is funny to say maybe but thanks to crises, fraud, etc., the interest in Europe has somehow increased.”¹⁶

This type of candidature did not occur in the Spanish elections but, on a different note, the Spanish media aroused interest in the two main opposing candidates in the election who happened to be female. In this instance the media displayed its skill at trivialisation of a political process. One example dealt with Loyola de Palacio (Popular Party and Commissioner in the EU) with commentary on her image and lack of make-up.¹⁷ The Swedish media devoted some coverage to the first “Swedish” mayor in England, Ann Evander, who ran as a candidate in the UK elections.

A further theme regarding candidates in the national campaigns emerged in the German media and could be considered as a type of criticism of “European political culture.” While other countries indicated an overabundance of “novelty” candidates, a contrary complaint in the German media was the lack of familiarity with candidates. On June 10, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) published a long report on the campaign in Germany¹⁸ including an interview with the former president of the European Parliament, Klaus Hänsch (SPD) emphasising the problem of unknown candidates.

Part of this problem lay in the campaigning strategies wherein most of the posters and advertisements did not show the candidates but rather general slogans, some of them being implicitly critical of the European Union. One example was an advertisement of the Social Democrats with two identical cucumbers claiming that instead of regulating irrelevant details Brussels should deal with the basic problem of unemployment and social security. Some slightly more cynical commentary on the candidates occurred where a correspondent criticised the election campaign from the citizen’s perspective of not knowing the candidates. With two quotes from a German TV comedy, the *Bild* refers to the above-mentioned criticism about not sending the very best people to Brussels. The European Parliament was called a “reception camp for the remaining stock of political parties”; and the elections were criticised as “legalised deportation with full pay.”¹⁹ Criticism of candidates

also appeared in the UK press, in particular, in a story regarding allegations of expenses fiddling of a Labour MEP: "Euro MP in £1.5m Expenses Probe."²⁰ The story implied that EU expenses were even covering payment of a gardener and with its references to expense "fiddling" and the "gravy train" reinforced the negative image of over-paid Euro MPs enjoying a lavish life style at the tax payer's expense. A further issue of contention related to the actual electoral process as reformed by the Labour Government. This introduced an element of proportional representation but included a system wherein candidates were presented in a "list system." In an editorial *The Times* attacked the closed list system of voting, noting what it saw as the very real differences on Europe which existed between the pro-European Liberal Democrats, the slightly less enthusiastic Labour government and the anti-Euro Conservative Party. They urged that "voters who care about Europe should read these manifestos and discover that even if they cannot choose their MEP, that does not mean that the forthcoming election, however depressingly undemocratic the form they are to take, offer them no choice at all."²¹

During the earlier period of the study one British columnist speculated about the future role that the former Conservative MP Chris Patten might play in the European Commission. In addition he noted that the Amsterdam Treaty relating to policing networks in Europe was likely to have more impact on ordinary lives "than any other EU activity."²² Ferdinand Mount, writing in *The Times* outlined the Euro-sceptical position that any closer links would involve the loss of British sovereignty. Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* simply re-stated already well known (among broadsheet readers at least) pro and anti-Euro positions. The launch of the parties' manifestos attracted attention in all the papers, however the overall tenor of reporting was factual and low key.

While the European Parliament's UK Office had previously detected a shift and slight softening in the previous predominantly anti-Europe stance of the London-based media, they also recognised that part of their job involved attempting to influence the tenor of European Parliament stories. "In many respects it's fire fighting, because the editors and many of the journalists have their own agenda anyway. So they will write their own story and then come for confirmation, denial or information."²³

Commentary on Campaigns in Other Countries

Reporting on the campaigns in other countries the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) offered a serial with portraits of European countries each day.²⁴ With regard to the campaign in France, they emphasised the "dominating inner political perspective": "In France, Europe hardly happens." The article on the United Kingdom and Ireland dealt with the British debate on participation in EMU. With regard to the Netherlands the correspondent described the Dutch parties' concern about the low interest in the elections among the Dutch population. Reports on Spain, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland followed. A similar overview of the campaigns in other countries was published by the SZ headlined: "Europe's underestimated power. The weary election campaign shows that citizens and politicians are almost not interested in the European Parliament — unjustly."²⁵

In reference to campaigns in other countries, the French report gives the example of the election coverage on the *Le Monde* Internet site, which summarised the

campaigns in each of the fifteen member states. These stories were all sourced from AFP and included some observations regarding the campaigns in other countries. While the German press claimed that “Europe hardly happens” in France one of these *Le Monde* articles stressed indifference in Germany to the elections due to lack of knowledge about the Parliament and the more pressing concern of the Kosovo crisis. The lack of television coverage in Germany may in some sense verify this idea of general indifference. Another article referring to the Italians as the champions of “Euro optimism,” points to the focus on domestic issues possibly because local by-elections, municipal and provincial elections were being held on the same day. Other articles made reference to the single currency debate in the UK, the dioxin scandal in Belgium and the Dutch cabinet crisis.

Spanish coverage of the elections was mainly grouped with coverage of local and regional elections (*El País* and *ABC*) and in *El Mundo*, they were in the “National” section. An additional section called “European elections” (in *ABC* and *El País*) and “Europe” in *El Mundo* was dedicated to news related to European campaigns in other countries. *El País* also included interviews with relevant political personalities and features on different issues. As such the majority of articles were largely factual summaries of the campaign issues in other countries without a particular “European” approach to comparing debates on policy issues.

Commentary on other countries allowed for some reflection on the national perspective on Europe. In Germany several articles expressed concern that Germany was not taking Europe seriously enough. The Prime Minister of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber, criticised the European influence on Bavaria and the importance of the elections: “Even if the people don’t believe it, the nomination of Romano Prodi as President of the European Commission is at least as important as that of the Federal Chancellor.”²⁶ A similar argument is made in an article entitled “Learning from the British and French. Germans are less determined in following their interests.”²⁷ It is reported (without concrete reference) that in Brussels, German and Italian civil servants are seen as the most “European,” whereas their French and British colleagues are more closely linked to their respective national capitals. A high-level German EU official is quoted arguing that a fear of accusations of nationalism cause many Germans in Brussels to exercise an exaggerated restraint. The second article here implies a questioning of the more “European” perspective of German political actors.

While the coverage of campaigns in other countries was a common aspect of the reporting there has been some questioning as to the value of such articles. The authors of the Irish report pointed out that they felt that there a certain amount of tokenism underlying this sudden and short-lived increase in European coverage. *The Irish Times*,²⁸ for example, reprinted two reports on the progress of the European Elections in Spain and Portugal — the paper offered no particular rationale for singling out these two countries, nor was there anything in the articles that appeared particularly newsworthy.

In the context of dealing with other campaigns little attention is paid to the EP representatives in other countries. One reason for the lack of coverage of a variety of political actors at the EU level is the tendency to focus on the activities of the home Commissioners or national representatives at the European Parliament rather than other European actors. As one journalist claimed when “writing a story about

the European Parliament I'm going to focus more on what Irish MEPs are doing than their counterparts in France or Germany."²⁹ Likewise in the Netherlands "coverage is also very much related to the Dutch commissioner only and to subjects that have to do with his responsibilities."³⁰ Again the central issue was the need to "personalise" the news in order create public interest.

Conclusion

European Parliament elections continue to be a national event with by and large national party candidates and a focus on national issues, or in some cases an event where satisfaction with national political leaders can be expressed. Understandably this is reflected in media coverage. The media's role to some extent is to report on the campaigns, candidates and issues. The lack of debate on specific EU policy issues, decided at the EU level but impacting on the lives of citizens, is reflected in the data analysis, outlining different national approaches. There were, however, many attempts to approach the elections from a European perspective. In the press this included publishing guides to the elections, outlining the stance of particular parties on EU issues, and covering campaign developments in other countries. The depth of analysis as regards the European debate in other countries will of course vary and whether this type of coverage is merely an example of "tokenism" is open to debate. At least the appearance of comparative coverage across the EU indicates a developing perspective, which moves beyond national boundaries. The French and Swedish press coverage appears to be most comprehensive in terms of range of topics and other member states being discussed.

Alongside the trends and developments mentioned above there has been an increase in the amount of shared and syndicated articles between European outlets. For those with access, the internet versions of media outlets can offer a much deeper sphere of analysis with links to previous stories, political parties and NGOs involved in debate and policy process. The introduction of the Euro has certainly enhanced this process with the sharing of stories online between titles such as *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *El País* and *Aftonbladet*. The online coverage of elections also allowed greater access to information about the campaigns in other countries as illustrated by *Le Monde*.

Overall there is an incremental development of space in European media outlets for debate and exchange regarding common issues and policies. Hence the presentation of a "European news agenda" is more developed in some countries than in others and due to the focus on different issues can not be considered as homogenous. Also the extent to which the media enhances political identification, or the development of European citizenship, also varies across countries and sometimes across outlets within national spheres, based on both information provision and discussion.

Several obstacles are apparent which inhibit the media's role in this process. In discussions with journalists it has been remarked that political news in general requires some controversy or "personalisation." This has certainly been the case as regards many of the candidates who received media attention. On the other hand there was criticism of "unknown" and inferior candidates.

The majority of debates remain focused on national issues or European issues relevant to the national interest. Given that support for, or engagement with, the

European Union has by political leaders, traditionally been couched in terms of “national interest” or “cost and benefit” measurement this continued link of the “European” with the “national” is hardly surprising.

Table 3: Outlets Monitored for the Study: Audience Figures, Circulation and Market Share* (% indicated where known)

	Public service France 2	Commer- cial TV	Quality Press	Quality Press	Quality Press	Regional Press	Tabloid
France Circulation/ audience share	News 9-10% ARTE** News	TF1 News 15%	Le Figaro 360,441	Le Monde 385,254	Libération 169,814	Ouest France 757,841	
Germany Population reach/ Programme share	ARD Tagesschau 9.5 m (35%)	RTL Aktuell 4.23m (20.6%)	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 1.3%	Süddeutsche Zeitung 1.8%		Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung 4.6%	Bild-Zeitung 4.4m copies 17.9% reach
Ireland Circulation/ Channel share	RTE 9 o'clock 44%	TV3 News 6%	Irish Independent 165,657 Sun Independent 315,599	Irish Times 112,623	Sunday Tribune 84,566 Sunday Business Post 49,621	The Cork Examiner 60,578	The Star 87,443
Italy Readership/ Programme share	RAI UNO TG1 34%	Canale 5 TG5 25%	Il Sole-24 Ore 1,551,000	Corriere della Sera 3,159,000	La Repubblica 3,086,000		
The Netherlands Circulation/ programme share	NOS Newscast 32.1%	RTL 4 Newscast 20.8%	NRC Handelsblad 266,254	De Volksrant 347,055	De Telegraaf 777,010	De Gelderlander 179,505	
Spain Circulation/ Channel share	TVE-1 Telediaro 24.9%	Antennæ Noticias (23.4%)	ABC	El País 440,28	El Mundo 284,519	Diarro de Navarra 63,000	
Sweden Circulation/ Channel share	TV2 Rapport 47%	TV4 Nyheterna 48%	Dagens Nyheter 350,000	Aftonbladet 400,000	Expressen 340,000		
United Kingdom Circulation/ market share/ viewers	BBC 9 o' Clock News 5m viewers	ITV Evening News 5m viewers	The Times 737,000 (4.7%) The Sun Times 139,800 (1.4%)	The Guardian 398,000 (2.5%) The Observer 400,000 (.4%)		The Herald (Scotland) 100,938	The Sun 3,739,000 (23.6%)

* Based on figures for 1999 supplied by national partners, and/or web-sites.

** 'ARTE's average share of the market rose from 3% (France) and 0.5% (Germany) in the first half of 1997, to 3.5% and 0.7% respectively between July 1997 and mid-June 1998.' Source: <http://www.artefr/> (Figures for overall channel viewing only)

Notes:

1. D. Kevin, Widening and Deepening the European Debate: Political Communication in Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, PhD dissertation, CEEPA, UCD, Dublin 1995.

2. Europe's New Currency: Gambling on the Euro, *The Economist*, 2 January 1999.

3. Research partners: Prof. Michael Palmer, Université Paris III, Dr. Uwe Hasebrink and Claudia Lampert, Hans-Bredow Institute, Prof. Paschal Preston, Dr Roderick Flynn and Debbie Ging, Dublin City University, Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Federico Boni, Università di Genova, Dr. Leen d'Haenens, University of Nijmegen, Prof. Esteban Lopez-Escobar and Dr Rosa Berganza, University of Navarra, Dr. Lars Nord, The Institute for Democratic Communication, Mid Sweden University, Prof. Philip Schlesinger, Dr. Raymond Boyle, Dr. Gillian Doyle and Dr. Vincent Campbell, Stirling Media Research Institute, Scotland. The research was financially supported by the European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam.

4. Art. 252 of the EC Treaty.

5. In *Serving the European Union. A citizen's guide*, 2nd ed. Luxembourg, OPOCE, 1999, http://www.db.europarl.eu.int/dors/oeil/docs/FR212_doc_en.htm.

6. Amsterdam Treaty, Title V, Article 21; Title VI, Article 39.

7. Anna Melich, European Commission representative, speaker at "Transnational Communication in Europe" conference, Berlin, October 1999.

8. BBC journalist interviewed for UK report.

9. Journalists interviewed admit to the tendency to substitute "Europe" and "EU" in reporting.

10. Many of these cross-referenced topics may have appeared in the same news item so may constitute a larger number than the total number of election items.

11. Coverage of the Kosovo crisis was a further aspect of this research, publication forthcoming.

12. *The Sun*, 10 June 1999, cited in UK report.

13. *Bild*, 12 June 1999, cited in German report.

14. For example *The Examiner*, 8 June 1999, p. 5, cited in Irish report.

15. Based on Reuters news stories cited in French report.

16. Dutch journalist interviewed for project.

17. *Diario de Navarra*, 6 June 1999, p. 8., cited in Spanish report.

18. Gherkins Instead of Faces. Trying to attract voters is not easy for Members of the European Parliament — almost nobody knows who they are and what they do, *SZ*, 10 June 1999.

19. *Bild*, 8 and 9 June 1999, cited in German report.

20. *The Sun*, 20 May 1999, cited in UK report.

21. Manifestos for Europe, *The Times*, 18 May 1999. Criticism was made of the closed list system suggesting that this contributed to the lack of identification people felt with the process: from UK report.

22. *The Guardian*, 17 May 1999.

23. European Parliament office representative, UK, from UK interviews.

24. *FAZ*, 7 to 10 June 1999, cited in German report.

25. *SZ*, 10 June 1999.

26. *FAZ*, 7 June 1999, cited in German report.

27. *FAZ*, 10 June 1999, cited in German report.

28. *Irish Times*, 11 June 1999, cited in Irish report.

29. Irish European editor, interviewed for Irish report.

30. Dutch press journalist, interviewed for Dutch report.

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