

Paper presented at the Elecdem conference, 20-23 March 2011, Amsterdam

Toning it down:

Effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations

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Citizens' approval with the institutional design is essential for a successful democracy and positive evaluations about democratic quality, efficacy and transparency are vital for its legitimacy. The lack of knowledge about the European institutions among citizens is considered as an important impediment for higher legitimacy (e.g. the 'communication deficit', Meyer, 1999). European institutions are fairly unknown among European citizens, and the elections for the European Parliament are still considered second-order (Schmitt, 2005). People gather their information about EU-institutions mainly through the media. Research has shown that media coverage on issues involving the EU are centered around big events, such as the European Council, and the EP-elections. Evaluations about EU institutions are based on the information gathered through these short periods. The EP-elections are the most obvious incentive for people to think about their supranational institutions, therefore, changes in EU-evaluations are most likely to appear within the campaign period. In modern campaigns, mass media and interpersonal discussion are the principal sources of information (Beck et al 2002). Political communication within these periods is therefore an essential tool for the European institutions to influence the public.

The role of the media as an information provider is an essential aspect of the democratic process in the EU. Apart from its role as an information provider, the media has also the potential for persuasion. The direct persuasive effect of media content has been somewhat neglected in political communication research (Dalton, Beck and Huckfeld, 1998). In spite of the primary focus in the literature on the cognitive effects of news media, via agenda setting, priming and framing, some researchers have continued to explore the persuasive influence of media on political

preferences. Several studies have provided empirical evidence of a direct relationship between newspaper endorsements and voting behavior (Robinson, 1974; Erikson, 1976; Coombs, 1981; Stempel and Windhauser, 1991; Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt, 1998). Zaller (1996) has shown that media content can affect political evaluations. Similar claims have been made about the effect of television news on political attitudes and opinions (Robinson, 1976).

Interpersonal communication exposes people to a different set of politically-relevant information and stimuli than they possess individually (Huckfeldt 2001; Mutz 2002). This exchange of information plays a significant role in shaping individuals' opinions and political attitudes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Pattie & Johnston, 2001). According to MacKuen & Brown (1987), political discussions influence citizens' evaluations of parties and candidates. Previous research that combined both types of communication has focused on the mediating role of interpersonal communication, within the two step-flow paradigm, instead of considering its direct persuasive potential.

In this study, the focus will be on the content and tone of both types of communication. Therefore, we combine data from a two wave panel with data from a content analysis, both gathered in 21 European countries. The first wave survey was executed three weeks before the European Parliamentary election, the second wave was done the day after the EP-elections. Data for the content analysis were gathered during those three weeks. This combined dataset allows us not only to measure change in institutional evaluations and to determine individual media consumption, it enhances us with information about the specific content of the most important news media during the campaign. It will offer an insight on the content of interpersonal communication as well. It enables us to address our specific research questions: does

the content of mass media and interpersonal communication affect citizens' evaluations of European institutions?

Persuasive potential of media content

News media are the primary source for information about the democratic performance of the EU. This media attention is confined to major events. During the three weeks preceding the EP elections, the EU is exceptionally often in the news, and a larger proportion of the citizens is (at least slightly) more attentive to EU news, motivated by the upcoming election day and the imposed voting duty. Because of the EU's distant and unknown character, the tone of evaluative news content could have more persuasive potential on the audience. The reception of a larger number of evaluative messages can cumulate into an exposure effect, through which media can influence gradually citizens' predispositions (Zaller 1992). If exposure to those evaluative messages changes EU evaluations during the campaign, the tone of those messages will be essential to determine the direction of those changes. Few attempts have been made by scholars to examine whether the tone of the coverage has an effect on attitudes towards the EU. The few studies who did reported evidence of the tone of EU coverage affecting people's opinion on EU matters (Norris, 2000; Banducci, Karp and Lauf, 2001). Peter (2003) found that the tone of coverage affected attitudes towards European integration positively in a consonant context.

The more positive the tone of the evaluative news content people are exposed to during the campaign, the more positive people will be about the democratic performance of the EU.

The tone of interpersonal communication

Aside from media exposure, social interactions provide people with political information as well. This is particularly true during election campaigns, because both

increased media coverage and political mobilization by political elites motivate citizens to engage in personal discussion about politics (Beck, 1991). The role of interpersonal communication has been studied mainly as a mediator for mass media effects. Since Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) introduced their ‘filter hypothesis’, maintaining that personal communication mediates the influence of mass communication on individual voters, many studies have repeated this logic when combining personal and mass communication in effect studies on election campaigns (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). According to this branch of literature, political conversation is more than an alternative channel for receiving political information; it also mediates the information gathered through the media by telling the individual which media message is valid and which is not (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, both interpersonal and mass communication have changed fundamentally since the heydays of the two step-flow paradigm. *“The combination of social isolation, communication channel fragmentation and message targeting technologies have produced a very different information recipient than the audience members of the Eisenhower era”* (Bennet and Manheim, 215). Individuals nowadays have greater command of their own information environments, and the social interaction component of the two-step flow has been replaced. Individuals in fragmented late modern societies are responsible for their own realities, and less reliant on interpersonal influence (Giddens, 1991; Mutz 1998).

The mediating role of interpersonal communication might have been diminished due to societal and technological evolutions, political conversations within social networks still can have persuasive potential. Aside from the news media, people turn towards their peers and social networks to acquire information about EU-politics. As such, personal conversation still has a central role in the democratic

process (Kim, Wyatt and Katz, 1999). Individuals develop and reinforce their pre-existing political dispositions through social experiences such as political discussion (Dawson, 2001; Cho, 2005). They are confronted with a different set of information and dispositions than they acquire through the media (Huckfeldt 2001). Furthermore, the persuasive potential of those conversations increases when levels of personal attachment and trust are higher.

As with the evaluative media content, the tone of the conversation is essentially guiding the direction of the potential effect. If the tone of interpersonal communication is rather negative, people engaging in these conversations will probably be as negative or even more negative than they were before. If the tone of the conversation is EU-positive, the discussants will be as positive or even more positive about the EU after the campaign.

People engaging in EU-positive personal conversations are more likely to be more positive about the EU after the campaign than people who engage in EU-negative personal conversations.

Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, testing the expectations described in the theoretical part requires a combination of a two wave panel survey and a media content analysis within the same time slot. Both studies were part of the European Election Campaign Study.¹

Two wave panel survey

A two-wave panel survey was carried out in 21 European Union member states.² Respondents were interviewed about one month prior to the June 4-7 2009

¹ The study was funded by the Dutch National Science Foundations (VICI grant # xxx.xxx.xxxx) and additional grants from the Danish Science Foundation, the University of Amsterdam, and the Swedish Riksbanken Foundation

² The countries were Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Hungary,

elections for the European Parliament and immediately after the elections. Fieldwork dates were 6-18th of May³ and 8-19th of June⁴ 2009. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS Opinion in Brussels and involved TNS subsidiaries in each country. All subsidiaries comply with ESOMAR guidelines for survey research. A total of 32,411 18 years old respondents participated in wave one and 22,806 respondents participated in wave two.⁵ On average, 1,086 respondents per country completed the questionnaires of both waves, varying from 1,001 in Austria to 2,000 in Belgium.⁶ In each country, a sample was drawn from a TNS database. These databases rely on multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age and education. As we are mostly interested in the underlying relationships between variables, we consider the deviations in the sample vis-à-vis the adult population less problematic and we exert appropriate caution when making inferences about absolute values. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into the original languages. It was then back translated into English. The translation was supervised by the research team and it was carried out by TNS (which also executes and translated the Eurobarometer surveys). Irregularities and problems arising from this process were resolved by deliberation.

Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia & Bulgaria. The country selection includes larger and smaller member states, countries from North, South, East and West, and long term and new members to the Union. The country selection was finalized based on feasibility.

³ In Britain and Ireland data collection finished on May 11, in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Czech Republic, Austria, Portugal, Netherlands, Finland and Slovakia on May 12, in Hungary, Poland and Latvia on May 13, in Denmark and Belgium on May 14, in Lithuania on May 15 and in Bulgaria on May 18.

⁴ In Slovakia and Bulgaria data collection finished on June 11, in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and the Netherlands on June 12, in Ireland and Britain on June 13, in France, Poland and Austria on June 14, in Spain, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Finland, and Latvia on June 15 and Belgium on June 19.

⁵ The age limit in Austria was 16 as voting age in Austria is 16 whereas it is 18 in other countries.

⁶ In Belgium, 1,000 Flemish respondents and 1,000 Walloon respondents completed both waves of the survey.

Content analysis

The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in the same 21 EU member states. We focus on national television and newspapers because these media are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe. We include the main national evening news broadcasts of the most widely watched public and commercial television stations. We also include two ‘quality’ (i.e. broadsheet) and one tabloid newspaper (or the most sensationalist-oriented other daily newspaper) from each country. These media outlets were selected to provide a comprehensive idea about the news coverage in each country⁷. The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up to the election. All relevant news outlets were collected either digitally or as hardcopies. With regard to story selection, for television, all news items have been coded; for newspapers, all news items on the title page and on one randomly selected page as well as all stories pertaining particularly to the EU and/or the EU election on any other page of the newspaper have been coded. In total, 36881 news stories have been coded in all 21 EU-member states of which 13866 stories dealt specifically with the EU, its institutions, policies or the election campaign. Coding was conducted by a total of 42 coders at two locations, the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and University of Exeter (UK), using an online survey tool. All coders were native speakers of the respective languages, and received extensive training during a two-week intensive coder training course. The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

⁷ Belgium was treated as two media systems (one Dutch and one French speaking). Therefore in total ten outlets were coded, four television news outlets (two Dutch speaking, two French speaking), and six newspapers (three Dutch language and three French language). For Germany, four news outlets were coded (two public and two commercial). For Spain, three television news outlets were coded.

Combining the two wave panel data and the content analysis data

To connect both datasets, we determined for each medium the percentage of news items (about the EU) which were evaluative, and within this categorization, whether the evaluative tone was positive, negative or mixed, based on the content analysis. We merged these news content variables with the level of news media exposure (based on the panel data). For each medium, we connected the level of evaluative EU news to the extent to which the individual actually used it during the campaign. First, the percentage of evaluative news was determined, ranging from 0 to 1. For every respondent, the exposure to each medium was registered, ranging from 0 to 7 days a week. The percentage of evaluative news was then multiplied by the use, which yielded the evaluative news content exposure per medium per respondent. By summing the different exposure scores per respondent, and dividing it by the total media exposure, we calculated an average percentage of evaluative news content exposure per respondent.

Measures

Dependent variable. In the extant literature, democratic performance evaluations of the EU have been operationalized in several ways. Some scholars used support for integration (Janssen, 1991; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) to test citizens' attitudes towards the EU. Other scholars used satisfaction with (European) democracy (SWD) as their variable of interest (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Karp et al., 2003; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). Boomgaarden et al. (2011) distinguished the democratic performance dimension from four other dimensions of EU-attitudes. This resulted in a scale of four items (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.828; Explained variance = 66.047 %; Eigen value = 2.642), which will serve as our dependent variable, measuring evaluation of the EU's democratic performance. The first item measures the satisfaction with

European democracy: *How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?* Respondents could choose between seven categories, ranging from ‘not at all satisfied’ (1) to ‘very satisfied’ (7). For the other three items, respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following statements: (a) *The European Union functions according to democratic principles.* (b) *The decision making process in the European Union is transparent.* (c) *The European Union functions well as it is.* Again, respondents could choose between seven answer categories, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) till ‘strongly agree’ (7). By averaging the responses to these items, we created a democratic performance scale, ranging from 1 to 7.

Independent variables.

Exposure to evaluative content. Within the content analysis, we coded articles with explicit mentioning of EU evaluations (v26), EP evaluations (v27), and evaluations of the democratic state of the EU (v31). We coded both the mentioning and the tone of the evaluation in the news item. As such, every media outlet was given a score indicating the mentioning and the tone of these evaluations. By combining these scores with data on individual exposure per media outlet, we were able to provide every respondent with an individual score of the probability of being confronted with (positive or negative) evaluations of the EU (v26), the EP (v27) and the state of democracy within the EU (v31). We use the latter one (v31), but the same analysis could have been done with either one of the variables, generating similar results.

Eurocritical versus europositive discussions. Respondents were asked whether they took a positive or negative position in the discussions they had during the campaign about EU-politics: *When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues*

about European issues, do you more often take a positive or a negative position towards the European Union? Answering categories ranged from 1, ‘very negative’ towards 7, ‘very positive’.

Furthermore, they were asked to indicate whether the opinions they encountered in personal discussions about EU-politics were similar to their own or not: *When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues about the EU, do you generally encounter opinions that are close to your own or far from your own opinion?* Seven answering categories were possible, ranging from 1 ‘very close’, towards 7, ‘very far’. Both measures were rescaled, ranging from -3 (formally 1) towards +3 (formally 7). These numbers were multiplied, forming one scale ranging from -9 (very negative about EU) towards +9 (very positive about EU).

Control variables.

Wave 1 democratic performance evaluation. In this study, we want to examine the impact of evaluative media content on the *change* in EU-evaluations. The democratic performance scale we use as a dependent variable has been measured in the second wave, immediately after the EP-elections. If we want to measure the potential effect of the election campaign on EU-evaluations, we need to control for the same democratic performance scale, measured in the first wave, three weeks before the EP-elections.

Socio-economic background. Three variables were included to control for other potentially confounding factors: age, gender and education. We used a dummy for education dividing the respondents in three groups: low education, middle education and high education, which generally boils down to the completion of basic school (low), high school (middle) and university/college (high).

Results

Our first figure informs us about the difference between EU evaluations in wave 1 (three weeks before the EP election) and wave 2 (one day after the elections). We see that only 14,8 % of the population did not change at all between both waves. They evaluated the European democratic functioning in exactly the same way as they did three weeks earlier. 41,7 % became more positive in wave 2, 43,5 % became more negative in their EU evaluation. This change, however, is not spectacular. Only 17,7 % has a value change bigger than one (on a scale from 1 to 7).

-- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE --

These results confirm the existence of a (mild) change between wave 1 and wave 2 in the evaluation of EU-democracy. Within the three weeks of election campaign that separate both points in time, citizens are confronted with factors that make them alter their opinion of EU institutions lightly. Can we attribute this change to direct media effects or to interpersonal communication effects?

As we can see on Table 1, exposure to media messages with evaluative content has a significant ($p= 0.001$) positive effect on the change in EU evaluations (0.038). Citizens are more positive about the democratic quality of EU-institutions when the evaluative tone of the message is more positive. This supports our expectation in hypothesis 1. A similar conclusion can be drawn for the second main effect: the tone of interpersonal communication. Engaging in EU-positive discussions has a significant ($p= 0.001$) effect on the change in EU-evaluations (0.105).

-- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

If we look at the control variables, we find a significant ($p= 0.001$) effect for both education and age. People with higher education are more likely to change their opinion about the democratic quality of EU-institutions during the election campaign

in a positive way (0.033). Age also generates a significant campaign effect (-0.045). Older citizens appear to become more negative about EU-institutions during the election campaign. We did not find any significant gender effect.

Discussion

Central in this study was the potential effect of tone and content of both media and interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations within the EP-election campaign. Due to societal and technological evolutions, the two step-flow paradigm that dominated communication research for decades has lost its explanatory potential. Media fragmentation, social isolation and message targeting technologies have altered the former mass audience into a self-selecting recipient (Bennet, 2006). Interpersonal communication is still of central importance for the democratic process, because it exposes people to a different set of information and cues than they possess themselves (Huckfeldt, 2001).

Building on the premise that mass media and political discussion are the principal sources of information for modern campaigns, we expected two separate main effects for news media content and personal conversations about the EU on potentially changing EU-evaluations. By combining a two-wave panel study with a content analysis, developed during the three final weeks of the EP-election campaign, we were able to link content and tone to exposure to media and interpersonal communication.

Our first step, however, was to check whether EU-evaluations did change during the election campaign. The individual change in democratic performance evaluations of the EU during the election campaign is modest, but apparent. We were interested in the effect of evaluative news content on citizens' evaluations. Our results show that exposure to positive EU-evaluations in the media has a positive effect on

individual EU-evaluations. Aside from the news media, people increasingly seek for political information and opinions within their own social network. In doing so, citizens are exposed to a different set of politically-relevant information. Similar to the tone of news media content, the tone of interpersonal communication has an effect on EU-evaluations. Having positive conversations about the EU makes people even more positive about the democratic performance of European institutions. The effect we found is even bigger than the media effect. However, we only focused on direct persuasive effects of tone and content. These effects might be accompanied by cognitive effects. In sum, this paper has demonstrated that the tone and content of media and interpersonal communication have a separate direct effect on individual EU-evaluations.

Figure 1

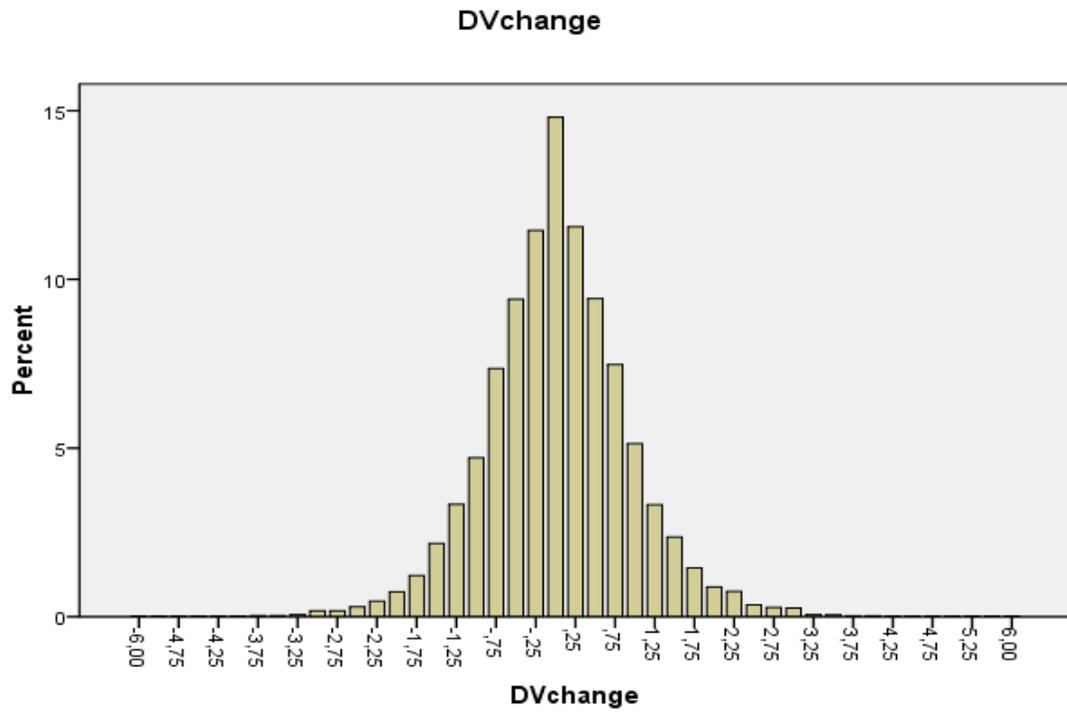


Table 1

Independent variable	Beta (sign)
<u>Main effects:</u>	
exposure to evaluative content	.038 (.000)
evaluative interpersonal comm	.105 (.000)
<u>Control:</u>	
Wave 1	.684 (.000)
Education	.031 (.000)
Gender	-.006 (.191)
Age	-.034 (.000)
R Square = .535; N=22806;	

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