

**Talking about politics: effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU
evaluations**

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Talking about politics:

Effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations

“At the heart of a strong democracy is talk” (Barber, 1984, p. 174). Within theories of democracy, interpersonal communication has consistently been viewed as a central concept (Scheufele, 2002; Schudson, 1998). However, most research on the effect of interpersonal communication has focused on the composition and characteristics of the interpersonal networks, not on the content of these conversations (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Due to the complexity of everyday conversational behavior (topics, conversational partners), scholars who include interpersonal conversation in their study have been reluctant to account for tone and direction of the conversations (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). “Nonetheless, it may well be that investigation of content-related contingencies is where we need to go next” (Southwell & Yzer, p. 6). Our focus on the content of media and interpersonal communication is an attempt to take that next step.

Furthermore, there has been an urge to combine media messages and interpersonal communication in effects studies. In a recent attempt to investigate the relationship between interpersonal communication and media exposure, Schmitt-Beck (2003) found an indirect effect of political discussion. Depending on the political preferences of one’s network, and its concordance to the media message, the media message will be reinforced or rejected by the interpersonal communication. Through this indirect effect of political discussion, the ‘meta-communicative’ function, interpersonal communication supplements the mass media (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). The more concordant media messages are to the preferences of the interpersonal network, the more likely it is that they will be taken into account.

Inconsistent findings regarding the relation between interpersonal discussion and media exposure has led some scholars to believe that additional variables might be at play. Although described by some scholars as “essential for a successful democracy” (Barber,

1984, Habermas, 1989; Fishkin, 1991), the effects of the presence of disagreement in networks of political discussion on political opinions has rarely been empirically studied (Feldman & Price, 2008). In this article, we add the presence of disagreement between discussants within interpersonal communication as a potential moderator for the effect of interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations.

Both interpersonal communication and mass media communication play a central role in the development of political opinions and attitudes. For this study, we conducted an experiment to explore the interplay between interpersonal and mass communication in the context of European Union (EU) evaluations. This study wishes to contribute to the research field in three ways: first, we will explore the potential effect of tone of both media message and interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations. Secondly, this article explores whether tone congruence between media message and interpersonal communication moderates the effect of political discussion and media exposure on EU-evaluations. Finally, we will add disagreement as a potential moderator of the effect of political discussion on EU-evaluations.

Tone effects

Previous research has shown that the coverage of political actors plays an important role in shaping citizens' opinions about political issues (Druckman & Parkin 2005). A more negative tone has often been associated with more negative opinions and even cynicism about politics (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). 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 scholars who did reported evidence of the tone of EU coverage affecting people's opinion on EU matters (Norris, 2000; Banducci, Karp, & Lauf, 2001; Peter, 2003). Peter (2003) found that the tone of coverage affected attitudes towards European integration positively in a consonant context and de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b) showed that a one sided media message flow affects public support for EU enlargement.

H1: The tone of media messages has an effect on EU-evaluations

Interpersonal communication exposes people to a different set of politically-relevant information and stimuli than they possess individually (Huckfeldt, 2001; Mutz, 2002). It plays a significant role in shaping (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Pattie & Johnston, 2001; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003) and changing (Mondak, 1995) individuals' opinions and political attitudes. According to Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), networks of social relations are primarily responsible for the communication of political information and expertise among and between groups and individuals. Most studies examining the effect of interpersonal communication on political attitudes focused on the composition of the social networks surrounding the individual citizens (for an overview, see Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Instead of focusing on the composition of the social networks, this study looks at the tone of the conversation. We expect that the tone of interpersonal conversations, in a very similar way as the tone of media messages, will have a direct effect on EU-evaluations.

H2: The tone of interpersonal communication has an effect on EU-evaluations

One-sided vs two-sided message flows

According to Zaller (1992, 1996), attitude change occurs for some individuals as a result of the composition of messages and ideas to which they are exposed. In his model, he distinguishes a one-sided information flow from a two-sided message flow. In the first scenario, the content of messages provides a consistent directional bias, whereas in the second scenario, the messages contain information with a mixed evaluative content (Zaller, 1992, 1996). Zaller's model initially focused on the role of political elites (1992), which he reframed later in terms of the effects of mass communication (1996). In this study, we extend this model to the effects of interpersonal communication. Schmitt-Beck (2003) found that while media and interpersonal communication can be similarly influential on vote choice, yet an indirect effect can be traced as well. When voters receive cues from the mass media, they

frequently talk about them with peers. Depending on the political preferences of those peers, and its concordance to the media message, the latter will be reinforced or rejected by the former (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). Schmitt-Beck uses the political preferences of the discussants to measure concordance with the media message. In this study, we focus on the content of the conversation, not on the preferences of the discussant. By manipulating the tone of both the media article and the interpersonal conversation, we create situations where people are exposed to concordant (both EU-positive or both EU-negative) or discordant message flows.

When we translate this to a potential effect on democratic performance evaluations, we expect that the tone of the media message should be concordant to the tone of interpersonal communication, in order to stimulate a reinforcement effect. When the tone of the evaluative message from the media differs from the tone of interpersonal conversations, this should then lead to a diminished effect. We expect to find a moderation effect between exposure to media content and interpersonal discussion in addition to the main effects of both types of communication.

H3: When the tone of interpersonal communication and media messages is congruent, the effect of both will be reinforced. When the tone of interpersonal communication and media messages is incongruent, the effect of the one will be diminished by the other.

The role of disagreement

The effects of the presence of disagreement in networks of political discussion on political opinions has rarely¹ been empirically studied (Feldman & Price, 2008). Eveland and Scheufele (2005) speculated that, while discussions with similar others might produce differential gains, and as such reinforce the learning benefits from mass media, discussions with dissimilar others might diminish the positive effects of media use (the “communication confusion model”). Feldman & Price (2008) used political networks data to examine the

¹ (Mutz, 2002; Price et al., 2002; Huckfeldt et al, 2004)

moderating effect of exposure to disagreement on the effect of political discussion and media use on political knowledge within the context of the 2000 presidential primary campaign in the US. They reported a negative interaction between political discussion and disagreement in predicting issue knowledge. In this study, however, the focus is not on the network of political discussion, but on the content of those political discussions. Aside from measuring the content of every conversation, we also asked the respondents whether they perceived disagreement within the discussion, and if so, how strong they disagreed with their discussant. We expect that disagreement with the discussant will diminish the effect of the tone of the interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations.

H4: The effect of the tone of interpersonal communication on EU-evaluations is moderated by presence of disagreement within the conversations. The more disagreement one encounters, the less effect the tone of interpersonal communication will have on EU-evaluations

Design

This article experimentally explores the interplay between interpersonal and mass communication in the context of European Union (EU) evaluations. Two weeks after measuring their evaluations of the EU democratic performance, 230 participants were assigned to the conditions of a 3 (positive EU message, negative EU message, no EU message) x 3 (EU-positive discussant, EU-negative discussant, no discussant) design, after which their democratic performance evaluations of the EU were again assessed. Each participant received a set of two articles, which they were supposed to read. Every respondent received an article which had nothing to do with the experiment, to ensure that the participants did not realize immediately that the experiment dealt with the European Union. The second article was either the stimulus material or the control article, depending on the condition. Half of the respondents read the control article, half of the respondents read the article about the democratic performance of the European Union. Within this group, half of

the respondents were exposed to an article about the positive assets of the functioning of the EU, the other half were exposed to an article highlighting the negative characteristics of the EU. The control article was about a natural phenomenon. After reading the articles, the respondents were asked to participate in an online conversation. The participants were told that they were talking with another participant; however, they were actually talking to a research assistant. Half of the participants were asked in advance to talk about the EU, the other half were asked to talk about the other article. In half of the conversations about the EU, the research assistant took a pronounced positive EU perspective, in the other half, the research assistant was pronounced negative about the EU. After five minutes of discussion, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire, which was very similar to the first questionnaire, except for the inclusion of four knowledge questions about the articles.

Questionnaire T=0

Two weeks before the experiment took place, participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire, distributed via email. We incorporated our democratic performance evaluation scale (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. d) How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?), along with a variety of other questions, some of which had nothing to do with the purpose of the current study (for an overview, see Appendix A). After the questionnaire, the participants could make an appointment for the actual online experiment, two weeks later.

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 as their variable of interest (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Karp, Banducci, & Bowler, 2003; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). Attitudes towards European governance are structured along related but distinct dimensions (Rohrschneider, 2002; Scheuer, 2005). To fully capture the multi-dimensionality of EU attitudes, studies of public opinion about the EU should reflect on these different types of support. Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas and de Vreese (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.

Message exposure

Each participant received an article, which they were supposed to read. One third of the respondents read the control article, which was about the movie "Twilight", two third of the respondents read an article about the European Union. Within that group, half of the respondents were exposed to an article about the positive assets of the functioning of the EU, the other half were exposed to an article highlighting the negative characteristics of the EU.

Interpersonal communication

After reading the article, the respondents were asked to participate in an online chat conversation. The participants were told that they were chatting with another participant; however, they were actually talking to a research assistant. Two third of the participants were asked in advance to chat about the EU, one third were instructed to chat about life after death. In half of the conversations about the EU, the research assistant took a pronounced positive EU perspective, in the other half, the research assistant was pronounced negative about the EU. After five minutes of discussion, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire (T=1), which was very similar to the first questionnaire, except the inclusion of four knowledge questions about the articles.

Disagreement

After the online chat conversation, respondents were asked whether they perceived disagreement or not within their conversation.

Control variables

To check for other potential influences on our dependent variables, respondents were asked a number of control questions. Firstly, they were asked about their chat behavior (In a normal week, how often do you chat?). Second, we asked them whether they recently had read or seen something about the European Union in the media. Third, they were asked whether they trust the media. Finally, they were asked whether they had talked about the European Union recently with friends, family or colleagues. None of the above control measures had an effect on the analysis.

Analysis

A univariate analysis of variance was deployed to check whether the manipulation had a significant effect on the differences between respondents.

Results

To get an idea of the effect of our manipulation on the respondents, we first compared the estimated means of each of the nine conditions. Figure 1 shows us that evaluations of EU democratic performance tend to be higher in the conditions where at least one of the messages (media or interpersonal communication) is EU positive. The online condition that differs significantly from all other conditions is the condition where a control article (not about the EU) was followed by a EU-positive chat (see Table 1). The three most negative conditions (negative and neutral, neutral and negative, and negative and negative) differ significantly from the three most positive conditions (positive and neutral, neutral and positive, and positive and positive).

The univariate analysis of variance shows us the effect of the manipulations on the differences between respondents (see Table 2). The direct effect of both the tone of media and interpersonal communication appears to be significant, which confirms hypothesis 1 and 2. However, the moderated effect of the tone of interpersonal communication on the effect of the tone of the media message on EU-evaluations is not significant. When disagreement within the interpersonal communication is added to the model (see Table 3), we find significant effects of both the moderation effect of disagreement on the effects of interpersonal communication, and on the moderation effect of interpersonal communication on the effect of the tone of the media message. As such, we can also confirm hypothesis 4.

Conclusion

In this study, we experimentally tested the importance of tone congruence between media messages and interpersonal communication about the EU. Previous studies already showed the importance of combining media exposure and interpersonal communication in public opinion effect studies. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the important role of tone and directional bias in these studies. Due to the complexity of everyday conversational behavior (topics, conversational partners), scholars who include interpersonal conversation in their

study have been reluctant to account for tone and direction of the conversations (Southwell & Yzer, 2009).

We also confirmed the claim made by some scholars that disagreement within interpersonal communication moderates the effect of interpersonal communication. When disagreement with the discussant is perceived, interpersonal communication has a less extreme effect on evaluations of European democratic performance. Disagreement also moderates the moderation of interpersonal communication on the effect of media messages on EU-evaluations. As such, one might conclude that disagreement could be an essential determining factor in explaining the combined effect of media and interpersonal messages.

Figure 1:

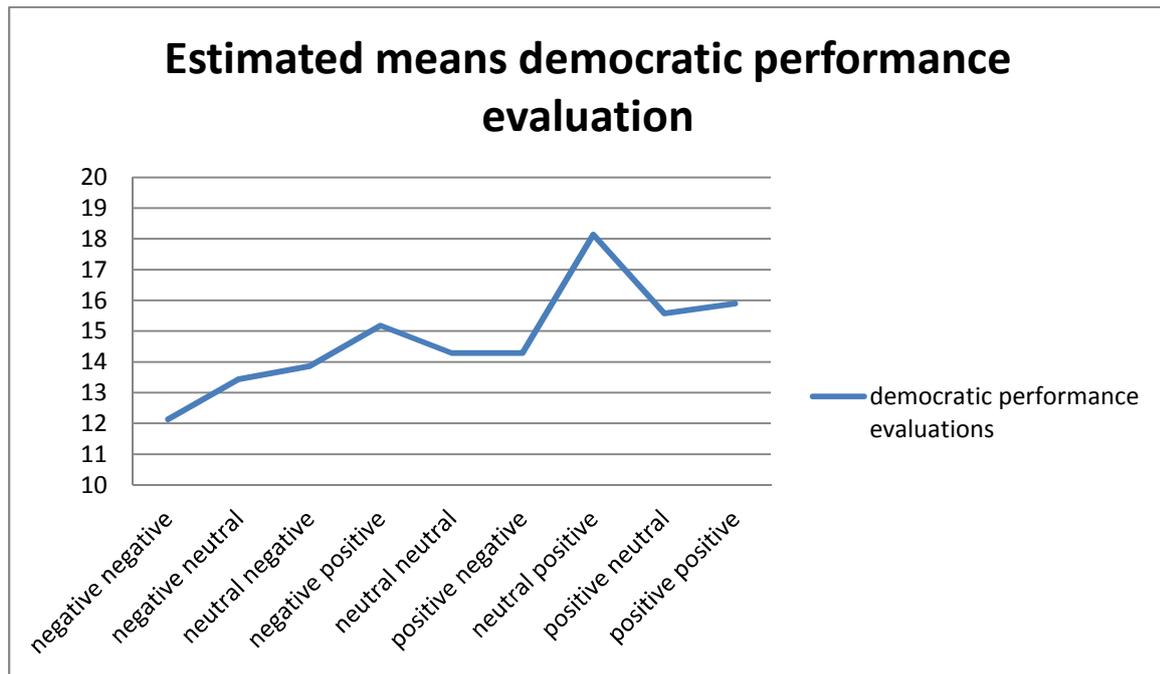


Table 1: Level of significance of difference between groups in effect on democratic performance evaluations

Article Chat	- -	- 0	0 -	- +	0 0	+ -	0 +	+ 0	+ +
- -		.135	.049	.001	.015	.013	.000	.000	.000
- 0	.135		.628	.051	.340	.325	.000	.013	.005
0 -	.049	.628		.145	.638	.626	.000	.048	.022
- +	.001	.051	.145		.326	.317	.001	.649	.419
0 0	.015	.340	.638	.326		.996	.000	.140	.072
+ -	.013	.325	.626	.317	.996		.000	.131	.065
0 +	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000		.003	.012
+ 0	.000	.013	.048	.649	.140	.131	.003		.705
+ +	.000	.005	.022	.419	.072	.065	.012	.705	

Table 2: Univariate Analysis of Variance: Effects of Article and Chat

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable:democraticperformancw2

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	700,585 ^a	8	87,573	7,598	,000
Intercept	58413,656	1	58413,656	5068,064	,000
chats	406,422	2	203,211	17,631	,000
article	185,093	2	92,547	8,029	,000
chats * article	102,380	4	25,595	2,221	,067
Error	2996,716	260	11,526		
Total	62170,000	269			
Corrected Total	3697,301	268			

a. R Squared = ,189 (Adjusted R Squared = ,165)

Table 3: Univariate Analysis of Variance with Disagreement

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable:democraticperformancw2

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1045,856 ^a	16	65,366	6,730	,000
Intercept	24504,349	1	24504,349	2522,954	,000
article	11,696	2	5,848	,602	,549
chats	392,955	2	196,478	20,229	,000
disagreementCAT	16,885	1	16,885	1,738	,189
article * chats	193,650	4	48,413	4,985	,001
article * disagreementCAT	138,207	2	69,103	7,115	,001
chats * disagreementCAT	261,328	2	130,664	13,453	,000
article * chats * disagreementCAT	81,569	3	27,190	2,799	,041
Error	1874,525	193	9,713		
Total	48978,000	210			
Corrected Total	2920,381	209			

a. R Squared = ,358 (Adjusted R Squared = ,305)

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