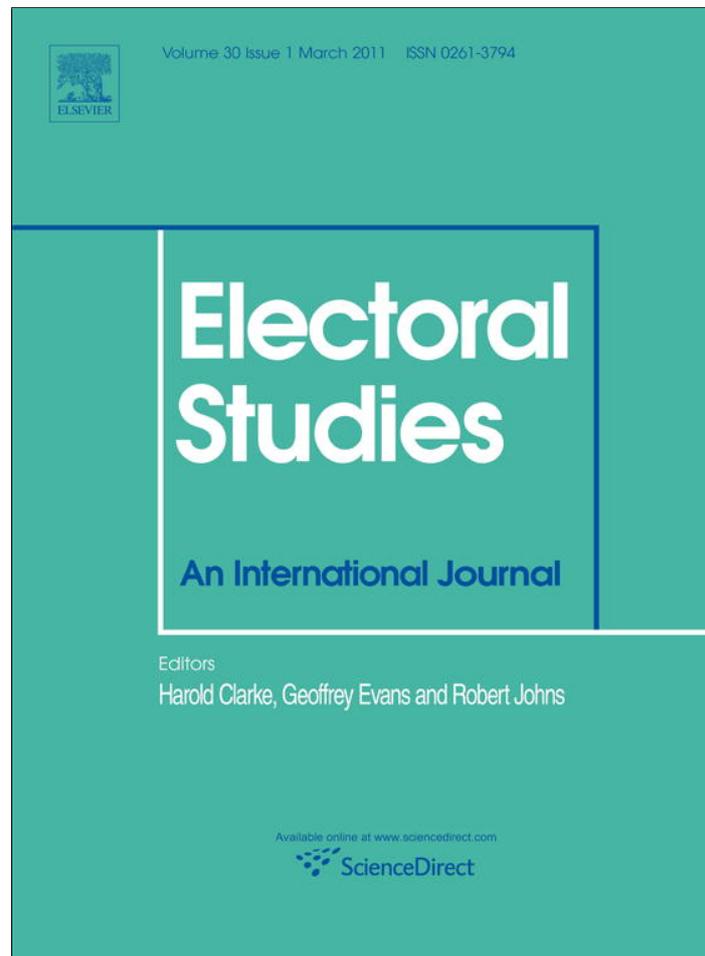


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Party contestation and Europe on the news agenda: The 2009 European Parliamentary Elections

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ABSTRACT

In this article we analyse the news coverage of the 2009 EP elections in all 27 EU member states (N = 52,009). We propose that the extent to which these second-order elections are salient to the media depends on political parties contesting the elections. Consistent with expectations, the findings suggest that the saliency of EP elections is increasing and that the degree of political contestation over Europe contributes to this development in a non-linear fashion so that only when contestation develops beyond a certain point, does media coverage increase.

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1. Introduction

More than 500 million people in 27 countries had the opportunity to vote in the 2009 European Parliamentary (EP) elections. While objectively an unparalleled exercise in democracy, the EP elections are generally regarded as second-order elections (Hix and Marsh, 2011; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011), and the saliency of these elections in the media is typically rather low (de Vreese et al., 2006). The vast majority of European citizens receive most of their information about the EU and EP elections from traditional news media such as television news and newspapers (e.g., Eurobarometer, 55–64). Given that most of what citizens learn about the election and the campaign must by and large stem from the media (Bennett and Entman, 2001), previous research has shown that the extent to which the EU is present in the news can affect public opinion formation and electoral behaviour (Banducci and Semetko, 2003; de

Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006a). Conversely, a lack of attention towards the elections by the media can be problematic for the legitimate functioning of EU democracy.

The importance of understanding what contributes to variation in news media coverage of elections is particularly important in second-order elections given that a main feature of these elections is the perception that they matter less to political parties and the news media than national elections. In terms of assessing the functioning of electoral democracy, the nature of news media coverage has important implications for electoral behaviour. Media environments containing high levels of news and information about the EP could strengthen democracy in Europe; either directly, by mobilizing citizens to participate in the elections, or indirectly, by stimulating interpersonal discussions or boosting public knowledge about the elections. Furthermore, information-rich news environments might dampen the influence of contextual factors such as the popularity of the government or the state of the economy. When the intensity of coverage on EU-related matters during elections is high, voters are expected to rely more on their attitudes towards EU-related issues rather than on contextual factors.

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This is because the information-rich news environments in such intense campaigns serve to crystallize these attitudes more effectively, which would make it less likely that an EP election turns into a second-order election (see [Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011](#); [de Vries et al., 2011](#)). Thus, the present study is especially concerned with the *saliency* of the elections as it can be assessed for example by the visibility of the elections as well as by the focus on European actors and issues in the news.

To date, little attention has focused on the political factors that shape how the news media cover EP election campaigns (for exceptions, see [Peter et al., 2004](#); [de Vreese et al., 2007](#)). We suggest that the antecedents of the EP campaign coverage are important to examine so that the impact of the media in electoral democracy at the European level can be better understood. We particularly focus on the role of *political contestation* in affecting the saliency of EP elections. A large amount of scholarly attention has focused on how political institutions, mostly political parties, shape electoral behaviour. However, little attention has focused on how these same factors might influence an important mediating variable – the news media coverage of a campaign. We thus ask how the party system, specifically whether consensus exists on the scope of European integration or not, influences media coverage and how this political factor compares with other explanations, for example based on differences in media systems across countries.

In the following, we outline the concept of *saliency* of European Parliamentary Elections and how it is operationalized in the current study. This is followed by a discussion of how political factors shape news coverage and from this literature we develop how specific EU-related characteristics of the political party system are expected to influence campaign news coverage. Next, in our empirical analysis, we examine the coverage of the 2009 EP elections in the news media of all 27 member states of the EU and the context that shapes this campaign news coverage. More specifically, we compare the visibility of EU-level politicians vis-à-vis national-level actors, and identify the key campaign issues on the media's agenda and assess how party contestation over the issue of Europe influences general visibility of the election in the news media. Finally, we discuss our findings in the light of extant empirical and theoretical literature about the EU's legitimacy and communication deficit.¹

2. Saliency of European elections and news media coverage

In exploring how the 2009 EP elections have been covered in the news, i.e. the saliency attached to them, and how political factors shape news coverage of such an election, we focus on two aspects of campaign news coverage: (1) the visibility of the election in the news, and (2) the Europeaness of the election in the news, i.e. the existence of a common European issue agenda and the focus on

European actors. In terms of media coverage, saliency is usually measured in terms of the media agenda. Issues which are high on the media's agenda, meaning that the issue gains a lot of attention, are thought to be more salient and to also influence the saliency of the issue in the minds of voters ([McCombs and Shaw, 1972](#); [Scheufele, 2000](#)).

Saliency has often been used in the discussion of the relationship between the issue of European integration and party politics. Drawing on literature on political parties, [Netjes and Binnema \(2007\)](#) describe saliency theory in which parties compete by emphasizing or de-emphasizing the issue of European integration depending on electoral advantage (pp. 40–41). [Netjes and Binnema \(2007\)](#) demonstrate that the saliency individual parties attach to the European issue is linked to the mean saliency score across all parties though not necessarily linked to dissensus. Our measure of saliency in the media, as we test later in the paper, is an indicator of the saliency of the issue vis-à-vis the media and is linked to party contestation.

2.1. Visibility

Generally, the EU is only marginally covered in the media ([Machill et al., 2006](#); [de Vreese, 2003](#)) and the news usually centers around key events such as EU Council summits, EP elections or referendums ([Boomgaarden et al., 2010](#); [Semetko et al., 2000](#)). Comparing news coverage around the introduction of the euro, the 1999 EP elections and the Nice summit in 2000, [de Vreese \(2003\)](#) reports that the visibility of the EU in the news was peaking during the event, but almost non-existent before and after.

A range of studies concentrates on media coverage during national and EP election campaigns (e.g., [Leroy and Siune, 1994](#); [Reiser, 1994](#)). It has been shown, for example, that the visibility of EU news during the campaign period overall increased from 1999 to 2004 ([de Vreese et al., 2006](#)) and that EP elections in particular lead to an increase in visibility of EU news coverage also compared to other key events such as summits or plenary sessions of the European Parliament ([Boomgaarden et al., 2010](#)). With regard to medium-specific differences in the visibility of EU news coverage, other research has shown that the EU usually receives more attention in newspaper than in television news coverage ([Trenz, 2004](#)). Previous research also reported considerable cross-country variation in the degree to which the EU is covered in the news ([de Vreese et al., 2006](#)). Overall, more recent studies have shown that EU visibility in the news is increasing over time ([Vliegthart et al., 2008](#)) and we expect this trend – *ceteris paribus* – to also apply to news about the EP elections.

2.2. Issues

As a second indicator of the saliency of EP elections we consider the *Europeaness* of the election, i.e. the existence of a common public debate carried out through a shared European news agenda and a focus in the coverage on *European* actors (see below). A common European news agenda would imply that, during the campaign, the issue debates in the various member states correspond with one

¹ This study is based on the PIREDEU project (www.piredeu.eu): Providing an Infrastructure on Electoral Democracy in the European Union.

another by means of shared points of reference, or “a common discourse that frames the particular issues as common European problems” (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003, p. 21). As such, a discussion of similar European issues in the media can sustain democracy in the EU and develop it further (Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2008).

Previous empirical research has found few indications of a present European discourse that transcends the agenda of domestic politics (Peter and de Vreese, 2004). A meta-analytical study of 17 media content analyses on EU topics concluded, “national interests and debates often exert a very strong influence on the reporting related to EU topics” (Machill et al., 2006, p. 75). Accordingly, a cautious expectation regarding a cross-nationally shared EU issue agenda would be tenable. That is, in most member states, we would expect at best the existence of a so-called “Europeanized” national public issue discourse, in which EU issues are discussed in accordance with their perceived national relevance and importance (see e.g., van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

2.3. Actors

As a second indicator for the Europeaness of the election we consider the focus on European vs. domestic actors in campaign news coverage. Effective political representation and accountability is the primary function of elections (Powell, 2000). The question here is whether EU representatives receive the attention in the news that would facilitate dissemination of information about policy proposals, performance and personalities and therefore make vote choices more meaningful (see also Giebler and Wüst, 2011).

Previous research has argued that EU actors are largely absent from news coverage. Even in EU stories EU representatives are often less prominent than other political actors, e.g. in EU coverage in Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, UK, Spain, or Italy (see Peter and de Vreese, 2004). The EU thus remains a faceless institution. The main problem with this, according to Meyer (1999), is that: “Without the personalization of political debate and decisions, political accountability remains invisible” (p.633). Furthermore, results from previous European Election Media Studies suggest that news coverage focuses disproportionately on domestic political actors (Peter et al., 2004). However, and as is the case with overall visibility, there was some increase from 1999 to 2004 in the visibility of EU-level actors (de Vreese et al., 2006), and in line with our expectation above, we, all else equal, expect the share of European actors in the news to be increasing.

3. Party contestation and its effects on saliency of EU elections

In light of extant knowledge regarding the potential implications of EU news coverage for public opinion about the EU (see e.g., Meyer, 1999; Risse et al., 1999) it is imperative to engage in an investigation of the factors that serve to explain the saliency of EP elections. Some studies have shown how news media coverage about the EU can have an impact on public support for future European integration

efforts (e.g., Maier and Rittberger, 2008; Schuck and de Vreese, 2006) or have an impact on vote choice in EU-integration related referendums (Schuck and de Vreese, 2008). Others have shown how EU news can affect public knowledge about, attitude towards, and support for European enlargement, specific EU policies or the EU as such (e.g., Brettschneider et al., 2003; de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006b). Thus, news coverage about Europe matters – but what factors influence the saliency of the EU in news media coverage, and coverage of European Parliamentary Elections in particular? That we turn to political factors to explain cross-national variation in how salient a topic is in the news is consistent with research on how the nature of the political system and the media system play a significant role in the amount and nature of news coverage (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Esser and Pfetsch, 2004; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008; Sheafer and Wolfsfeld, 2009).

Our argument is that political parties serve as important cues as to whether Europe is an important issue. A pragmatic approach to covering elections suggests that elections are not necessarily important events *per se*, but rather have to compete with other events according to well-established news criteria of newsworthiness (Semetko et al., 1991). Therefore the emphasis political parties place or do not place on Europe as a campaign issue will be reflected in the news media coverage. *Saliency theory* suggests that parties behave strategically to control the agenda and emphasizing particular issues in order to win elections, hold office and maintain party cohesion (see Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 1994). Despite the second-order nature of European elections, parties should still act strategically in emphasizing certain issues. Consequently, the nature of party contestation, as regards conflict and competition, over Europe might play a role in determining the way “news rooms” evaluate the importance of this event and therefore the space and air time they will devote to it.

Research has suggested that, by now, European integration is an issue which is salient to the voters (Franklin and van der Eijk, 2004), it influences national electoral outcomes (Evans, 1999; de Vries, 2007) and cuts across existing socio economic cleavages (Kriesi et al., 2006). Parties' responses to European integration do need to factor in this increasing saliency. In terms of party behaviour we know that politicisation of the European issue is used strategically. Mainstream parties will try to keep the issue of the agenda fearing either internal party dissent or a hostile public opinion; on the other hand minor parties on the far left and far right will attempt to tap into the public sentiment and in these circumstances politicisation of the issue will be more pronounced (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Ladrech, 2007). Therefore, a de-politicisation equilibrium is likely to be disrupted depending on (a) the electorate preferences on the issue and (b) the structure and form of party competition on the issue especially as regards the existence of eurosceptic parties. News media tend to focus on stories where there is conflict – where two sides can be pitted against one another (Neuman et al., 1992). Therefore, if politicisation of the issue European integration, by the parties, reaches a critical point it is more likely that it will emerge on the news media radar.

Based on saliency theory (see [Steenbergen and Scott, 2004](#)) and further considerations about the structure of the party system ([Hooghe and Marks, 2009](#); [Ladrech, 2007](#)), we expect a curvilinear relationship between campaign news coverage in European elections and party contestation. When there is little variation in party positions on Europe (or low levels of contestation), parties may emphasise the issue as one that may either mobilise voters in European elections or emphasise as an issue that will not cost them votes. Large parties or incumbent parties may adopt this strategy as a way to deflect attention from poor performance evaluations. However, as contestation on the EU issue increases from low to moderate, political parties will attempt increasingly to keep it off the campaign agenda or not emphasise the issue as no party is likely to gain an electoral advantage ([Steenbergen and Scott, 2004, 170](#)). Therefore media coverage, or more specifically the visibility of Europe in the news, is expected to decline initially as contestation increases. However, as contestation increases beyond a certain point, political parties will be unable to keep it off the agenda, such as when a eurosceptic party enters the parliament or at least contest elections, therefore media coverage is expected to increase at this point. [Steenbergen and Scott \(2004\)](#) hypothesise a similar relationship at the party level. When parties are deeply divided over Europe they cannot suppress the issue so that “the relationship between salience of European integration and internal dissent is expected to be non-linear” (p.171).

4. Data and methods

The media content analysis was carried out within the framework of PIREDEU (www.piredeu.eu), Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union. PIREDEU is funded by the European Union's FP 7 program (for more details see data documentation report in [Schuck et al., 2010](#)). Additional data from the European Election Manifesto Study ([Braun et al., 2010](#)) is used to construct the measure of party contestation.

4.1. Media content analysis

4.1.1. Sample

The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in all 27 EU member states.² In each country 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 from each country. Our overall television sample consists of 58 TV networks and our overall newspaper sample consists of 84 different newspapers.

4.1.2. Period of study

The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up

to the election. Since election days varied across countries also the coding period varied from e.g. May 14th – June 4th for some countries up to May 17th – June 7th for others.

4.1.3. Data collection

All relevant news outlets were collected either digitally (TV and newspapers) or as hardcopies (newspapers). 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 (within the Political/News; Editorial/Opinion/Comment; and Business/Economy sections).³ In total, 52,009 news stories have been coded (32,041 newspaper stories and 19,968 TV stories) in all 27 EU member countries. 19,996 of these news stories dealt specifically with the EU (16,749 newspaper stories and 3247 TV stories) of which 10,978 news stories dealt specifically with the EU election (8718 newspaper stories and 2260 TV stories).⁴ The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

4.1.4. Coding procedure

Coding was conducted by a total of 58 coders at two locations, the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and University of Exeter (UK). Coders were trained and supervised and the coder training included repeated tests of intercoder reliability which yielded satisfactory results (reported below).⁵ The study coordinators not only attended but also performed as trainers in all training sessions at both locations.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Visibility

For newspapers, visibility was assessed as the percentage of EU- and EU election-related coverage of the total coverage on newspaper front-pages (story-based). In the codebook, two variables indicated if a news story was about the EU, and if it was, whether it was about the EU elections and/or the campaign in particular. Intercoder reliability for both these measurements yielded satisfactory results (Krippendorff's alpha = .80 and .88 respectively). For television, visibility was assessed as the percentage of EU- and EU election-related coverage of the total coverage (time-based).

4.2.2. Issues

The coding of EU-level topics was based on a list of EU topics consisting of more than 40 substantive topic

² We focus on national television programs and newspapers because these media are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe ([Eurobarometer, 54–62](#))

³ Sport, Travel, Housing, Culture, Motor/Auto, Fashion or Entertainment sections have not been coded.

⁴ In order to be classified as EU story, the EU or any sort of EU institution, policy or synonym had to be mentioned at least once in a story. In order to be classified as EU election story, the EP election or the campaign had to be mentioned explicitly at least once in the story.

⁵ The intercoder reliability scores reported below are based on a combined test including all 58 coders from both locations and is based on a sub-sample of 35 randomly selected news items, including both TV and newspaper items and including EU, EU election as well as non-EU stories (for more detailed information on intercoder reliability see the documentation report, [Schuck et al., 2010](#)).

categories. Coders were instructed to code up to five EU-specific topics per news story, in order of appearance. In order to be counted in a news story, topics had to be referred to at least twice, and in two separate sentences, rather than just mentioned in passing. The results presented in the subsequent sections are based on the total number of reference counts that were coded per EU topic, thus without weighing in the order in which topics appeared in the news (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .58$).

4.2.3. Actors

The coding of actors was based on an extensive list that covered political (EU, domestic and transnational) and non-political actors (such as banks, courts, police, etc.). At the country level separate codes were assigned to heads of state, government ministers, party leaders and candidates standing for the EP elections. At the EU-level members of the European Commission (EC), European party groupings (e.g., PES- Party of European Socialists), EU institutions (such as the EC or EP) and their respective chairs or presidents (e.g., Jose Manuel Barroso for EC) all were assigned individual codes. Coders were asked to code up to six actors per story. In the case of multiple actors in a story the most prominent actor (i.e. mentionings, appearances, etc.) was considered to be the 'main' actor, all other actors were coded in order of appearance (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .65$).

4.2.4. Party contestation

According to the expectations outlined above we consider the visibility of the EU in the press to be a function of party contestation on the issue of Europe. In order to test this claim a measure that reflects the variation of party proposals on the European policy dimension is necessary. This measure is based on two pieces of information: party position on the EU dimension and size of the party. The first is the position that parties adopt regarding the EU and the issue of European integration, that is, whether they tend to support the current status quo and/or are in favour of further expansion of the EU or whether they are critical of the EU as an institution and/or propose to put a halt to further expansion. For party positions on European integration we rely on data from the Euromanifestos Project. Much like the Comparative Manifestos Project (Klingemann et al., 2006) the Euromanifestos team has been tracing the saliency (and direction) of various policy dimensions in election party manifestos.

In the present study we make use of an additional measure provided for some of the policy dimensions. More precisely, we rely on the expert coders' ratings of each party on a 10 point scale ranging from 1 (Pro-EU) to 10 (Anti-EU). Previous analysis of Euromanifestos have shown that this measure correlates highly with the measure that uses the balance between positive and negative mentions of the EU or European Unification in the manifesto's text (Wüst and Schmitt, 2007). Moreover, the use of expert placements in order to gauge a party's policy position is a well-established alternative to scores that come directly from the analysis of the actual text (see e.g., Benoit and Laver, 2006).

The second piece of information that is needed is the size of the party (at the most recent national election). Many scholars have argued that in constructing a measure

of dispersion it is important to weigh each party's position by their share of the vote (Alvarez and Nagler, 2004; Dow, 2001; Ezrow, 2007). According to these studies, weighting accounts for cases where an extreme positioning by a party with no political influence might overestimate "true" dispersion on that policy dimension. On the other hand, the same scholars take into account the possibility that a party's political influence might not be necessarily reflected in its share of the vote and therefore an unweighted measure of dispersion is an acceptable measure. In the analyses reported below we use both an unweighted (UWD) and a weighted (WED) measure of party contestation.

Equations (1) and (2) demonstrate the way the two measures are constructed. The weighted measure (Eq.(1)) of dispersion essentially sums up the distance of each party's position - weighted by its vote share - on the EU dimension, from the party system average. This measure is based on Alvarez and Nagler's (2004) measure of party system compactness (see also Ezrow, 2007).

Weighted Party System Dispersion

$$= \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^n VS_{jk} (P_{jk} - \bar{P}_k)^2} \quad (1)$$

where, P_k = the weighted mean of the positions of all the parties in EU dimension in country k , P_{jk} = the EU position of party j in country k , VS_{jk} = vote share for party j in country k .

The unweighted measure (Eq. (2)) is essentially a standard deviation of all party positions on the European issue dimension (the only difference from a "normal" standard deviation is that we use the weighted mean of the party system in the calculation of each party's deviation from the mean).

$$\text{Unweighted Party System Dispersion} = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^n \frac{(P_{jk} - \bar{P}_k)^2}{n}} \quad (2)$$

4.3. Dependent variables

From the content analysis of the media it is possible to classify each news story according to whether the story is about the EU and/or the EP election campaign. In the models presented below we employ the percentage of those stories (from all stories reported in each outlet) as the dependent variable.

4.3.1. Controls

Characteristics of the media agenda, in this case EU visibility, can be determined by media outlet characteristics as well (de Vreese et al., 2006). For example, studies have shown that public television outlets and broadsheet newspapers tend to report more stories related to the EP elections as compared to private TV channels and tabloid newspapers. Thus, in the models below we control for such possibilities including measures for public TV and another dummy variable separating TV from print media. Additionally, we have employed a media system measure which is based on an evaluation of the degree that a country's media system is

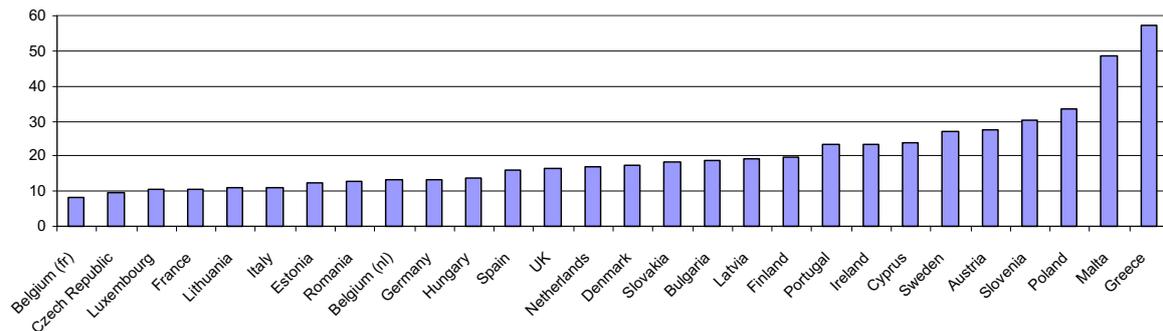


Fig. 1. Visibility of EU news in television newscasts. Note: Percentage of EU and EU election news of overall TV news in all 27 EU member countries (time-based).

driven by partisan considerations (see Norris, 2000). The expectation here is that the reporting of events such as elections will be driven to some extent by the existence or non-existence of ties between certain media outlets and political parties (see also van Kempen, 2007).

Thus, our full model is expressed by the following equation: $EU\ Visibility = B_0 - B_1 [Party\ System\ Dispersion\ on\ EU] + B_2 [Party\ System\ Dispersion\ on\ EU^2] + B_3 [Public\ TV] + B_4 [TV\ vs\ Newspapers] + B_5 [Partisan\ Media\ System] + e$

The squared term on dispersion is included in order to capture the hypothesized curvilinear effect. The signs for both dispersion variables also reflect the hypothesized shape of that curve.

5. Results

Our presentation of the results is as follows: First, we describe the overall saliency of Europe in the campaign news coverage. We demonstrate the variation in saliency across national contexts and, by drawing comparisons with results published in regard to the 2004 elections (de Vreese et al., 2006), we examine the change in saliency over time. We next turn to examining the impact of party contestation on the saliency in the campaign coverage.

5.1. Visibility

Overall, more than 1/5 (20.16%) of all TV news coverage across countries in the three weeks leading up to the election was dealing with the EU or the EP election specifically (see Fig. 1 above).⁶ Comparing this finding with available data regarding previous EP elections (de Vreese et al., 2006) we can state that, clearly, visibility has been increasing. Visibility was highest in Greece and Malta, followed by Poland, Slovenia, Austria and Sweden. It was lowest in Belgium (Wallonia) and the Czech Republic, followed by Luxembourg, France and Lithuania. Again comparing our findings with those regarding previous EP

elections (de Vreese et al., 2006), visibility only decreased in three of the 27 member states: Denmark, Slovakia and Lithuania – in all other member states visibility increased. Notable increases in visibility can be observed with regard to Greece, Sweden, Austria, Portugal, Malta, Poland, Latvia, and Slovenia (all more than +10%), and to some extent also in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK (increase <10% and >8%). In the two latest EU member states, Romania and Bulgaria, visibility was below average. Overall, comparing visibility across countries, the overall picture looks similar to 2004 in relative terms, however, with the striking difference that visibility generally is on a higher level with only few exceptions. There is considerable cross-country variation, even more than in previous elections, with visibility ranging from 8.5% in Belgium (Wallonia) up to 57.1% in Greece. Thus, both visibility overall as well as cross-country variation in visibility, have been increasing over time (see de Vreese et al., 2006).

As Fig. 2 illustrates below, visibility of the EU and/or EP election in newspapers is also highest in Malta and Greece.⁷ Compared to 2004 (see de Vreese et al., 2006), visibility in the Netherlands, Belgium and Lithuania in 2009 again remains comparatively low, however, it is lowest in Portugal, followed by Italy, Romania and Slovakia. Especially the case of Portugal is striking, here the EU and/or EP election has been covered comparatively prominently in television news but was least visible of all countries in print coverage. The reversed is true for France, here news coverage about the EU and/or EP election was much more prominent in newspapers than in TV news.

Thus, overall our findings show that visibility has been increasing compared to previous elections and also the

⁶ Visibility (TV): Belgium (fr): 8.47%; Czech Republic: 9.75%; Luxembourg: 10.37%; France: 10.48%; Lithuania: 11.10%; Italy: 11.21%; Estonia: 12.47%; Romania: 12.66%; Belgium (nl): 13.07%; Germany: 13.25%; Hungary: 13.96%; Spain: 16.20%; UK: 16.34%; Netherlands: 16.91%; Denmark: 17.31%; Slovakia: 18.39%; Bulgaria: 18.93%; Latvia: 19.11%; Finland: 19.62%; Portugal: 23.25%; Ireland: 23.44%; Cyprus: 23.86%; Sweden: 27.07%; Austria: 27.58%; Slovenia: 30.37%; Poland: 33.38%; Malta: 48.72%; Greece: 57.09%.

⁷ Looking at the extraordinarily outlying status of Malta with regard to news visibility in our media content analysis, we note that there are only two political parties in this country, one of which was in favour of joining the EU and the other against, and the country's application was made or withdrawn and then remade depending on which party won successive national elections. Thus, the Maltese population is very well aware of where each party stands on the issue, providing anecdotal evidence in favour of our expectations regarding the impact of party contestation on visibility. Visibility (newspapers): Portugal: 2.88%; Belgium (nl): 3.74%; Italy: 5.93%; Romania: 6.22%; Slovakia: 6.27%; Lithuania: 7.08%; Finland: 7.82%; Netherlands: 7.96%; Belgium (fr): 8.94%; Ireland: 9.03%; Luxembourg: 9.60%; Estonia: 10.14%; Sweden: 10.54%; Czech Republic: 10.65%; Germany: 11.04%; Hungary: 12.84%; UK: 12.96%; Bulgaria: 13.23%; Denmark: 14.19%; Spain: 14.29%; Latvia: 14.37%; Cyprus: 15.69%; Austria: 15.93%; Poland: 17.24%; France: 17.37%; Slovenia: 18.96%; Greece: 20.77%; Malta: 42.28%.

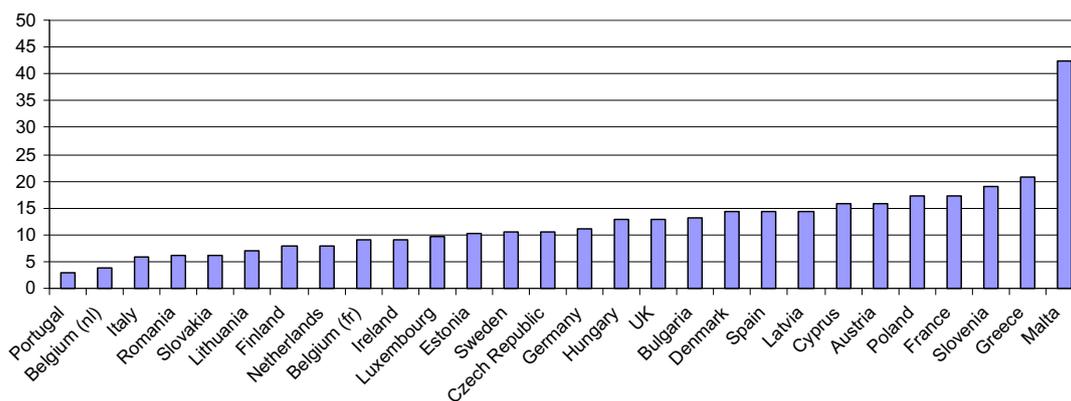


Fig. 2. Visibility of EU news on newspaper front-pages. Note: Percentage of EU and EU election news of overall news on newspaper front-pages in all 27 EU member countries (story-based).

variation in visibility across countries has been increasing (see de Vreese et al., 2006). Furthermore, differences in visibility appear to be more country-specific than indicative of any East-West or North-South divide.

5.2. Issues

A second indicator for the saliency of the EP elections, the Europeaness of the campaign, is first of all characterized by a shared set of ‘reference points’ that, taken together, might be thought of as a harmonized European issue agenda (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003). Before we examine the similarities and differences in issue coverage among the member states, we briefly consider the substantive issues that dominated the news of the 2009 elections in general (see Table 1). The European economy was evidently perceived by the media as the most important issue, with stories on the EU’s economy and economic policy far outnumbering any other category of EU-level issues. Other issues that received considerable levels of media attention included the EU’s external relations, potential Turkish membership, power and reform of EU institutions, financial and monetary issues, and EU policy in the domains of environmental protection and climate action, agriculture, and immigration.

Table 1
Most frequently covered EU topics in the news media (all 27 countries combined), total number and percentages of references in EU news stories.

Topic	References (n)	References (%)
1 EU economy (state of the economy, EU economic policy)	1435	15.6
2 EU external relations and foreign affairs	722	7.8
3 EU enlargement with Turkey	479	5.2
4 Political system of the EU	471	5.1
5 Power and competences of the European Parliament	390	4.2
6 EU environmental policy	390	4.2
7 EU agricultural policy	364	3.9
8 EU immigration policy	332	3.6
9 EU budget and spending	291	3.2
10 Euro interest rates, European Central Bank	290	3.1

Note: Percentages represent individual topics’ share of total substantive topic references (N = 9220).

Importantly, this pattern of findings in part also appeared when we looked at each of the national news environments separately. That is, the majority of these topics also took up high positions on the EU news agendas of the 27 individual member states. The economy, in particular, was an unmistakable ‘killer’ issue everywhere, although there was considerable cross-national variation in terms of the intensity of media focus on the issue. Media in countries that were hit particularly hard by the economic crisis, such as Greece, Spain, and Estonia, devoted above-average levels of attention to the EU economy. However, in the UK, only a fraction of its economy-related news stories were covered with a European angle.

The UK was not the only country where a substantial share of substantive issue coverage appeared to be constrained by national or regional boundaries. In particular, some issues that dominated the news in some countries were completely absent in others, suggesting that the intensity of issue coverage was driven by location-specific factors or national idiosyncrasies. For example, the EU’s immigration policy emerged as a salient issue in Mediterranean countries coping with North-African ‘boat immigrants’ (Italy, Malta) or, as with the issue of future Turkish membership, in countries with relatively well-established populist right-wing political parties (Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands). ‘Turkey’ was also an important issue in Bulgaria, a country with a sizable Turkish minority, and it was the top issue in Greek Cyprus, which can be explained by its proximity to Turkey and the conflict-laden historical relationship between the two entities. Other findings additionally point to country-specific factors as driving forces of coverage. For example, the future accession of Croatia to the EU was a dominant issue in neighboring Slovenia. Euro interest rates and the role of the ECB, based in Frankfurt, received a particularly high level of coverage in Germany. Dutch media focused heavily on competition, the policy portfolio of Dutch Commissioner Kroes. Finally, the Treaty of Lisbon was a key EU issue in Ireland (a country which had held a referendum on the issue and would later hold another) and the UK – where the Conservative Party indicated it wanted to renegotiate the contents of the Treaty.

Thus, overall, the substantive EU issue coverage, and especially its economic coverage, was characterized by

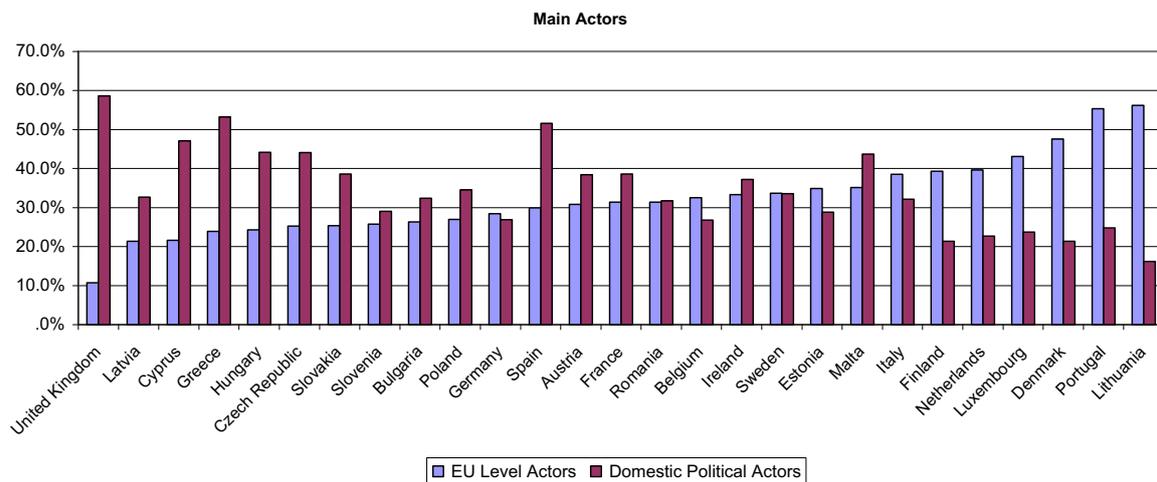


Fig. 3. EU and domestic actors in EU and EP election stories in all 27 EU member states.

a common issue discourse consisting of a handful of core EU issues that were relatively salient across the bloc. Most of the coverage, however, maintained a strong focus on national politics, conceivably as a result of country-specific factors, which confirms our expectation at the outset.

5.3. Actors

Fig. 3 above reports visibility percentages of the main actors in stories about the EU or the EP elections. One would expect that in these stories EU-level political actors would be especially prominent. However, it appears that in 16 of the 27 EU member states domestic political actors dominate the news. The highest percentage for EU-level actors is recorded in Lithuania where about 55% of the main actors are EU-level actors. This high figure is probably partly related to the fact that prominent members of the government and party leaders were in the candidate lists standing for seats as MEPs. The highest percentage of domestic political actors is recorded in the UK. This is in line with the UK's consistently low attention devoted to EU matters (see also Figs. 1 and 2). Furthermore, in 2009, the EP elections coincided with the UK's national parliamentarians' expenses scandal which had received a very large amount of coverage in the news probably at the expense of higher visibility for EU affairs.

Again comparing Figs. 1 and 2 with Fig. 3 we notice why tracking actor visibility itself is important. For example, Greece has recorded the highest percentage of EU and EP elections stories for TV and the second highest for newspaper stories. However, more than half of the actors appearing in these stories are domestic political actors suggesting that the news agenda relates to the EP election with a focus on the domestic national political arena.

Considering the countries where EU-level actors seem to dominate more clearly, these appear to be (with the exception of Lithuania) mainly older member states such as Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark and Portugal where compared to previous elections (1999 and 2004) visibility of EU actors has been higher in 2009 (see de Vreese et al., 2006). Overall, as it has been suggested by previous research on EP elections (Peter and de Vreese, 2004; de

Vreese et al., 2006), visibility of EU-level political actors still remains rather low, especially considering that the results are based on stories that are actually about the EU or the EP elections in particular. As expected, variation in the visibility of EU actors seems to be influenced by contextual factors (e.g., UK) and is again related to domestic party politics (e.g., Lithuania). While many of the countries reporting comparably high percentages of EU main actors are old member states there does not seem to be a clear divide into old and new member states in terms of actor visibility, which is in line with our findings on general visibility (see above).

5.4. Party contestation

In order to test the models reported above we have constructed an 'outlet level' dataset, where each case represents one of the 143 outlets included in the 2009 media study for the EP elections. In that dataset the main dependent variable, as reported in Table 2, is the percentage of stories about the EU from all the stories that were coded for that outlet during the 3 weeks lead-up to the election.

Table 2 below reports the results for these models. As mentioned before, each model has been run twice using each of the two measures of dispersion, unweighted (UWD) and weighted (WED). We have run the models using random effects estimation with robust standard errors.⁸ Since, the structure of the data are units (i.e. media outlets) 'nested' in countries, we opted for a model estimation that takes into account the clustered structure of our data. This was done to make sure that unobserved differences between countries do not drive our results (as it could have been the case had we run a pooled regression model). Since the outlets from each cluster are part of the same media environment it is likely that observations within clusters are not independent. A random effects estimation does deal with some of the potential problems

⁸ All the models were run again using robust clustering by country, pooled OLS and a specification using country dummies and the results remain unchanged.

Table 2
Explaining EU Visibility (Total Visibility).

	Random Effects Simple Model (Percentage of EU and EP election Stories)		Random Effects Full Model (Percentage of EU and EP election Stories)	
	UWD	WED	UWD	WED
Dispersion	-11.43**(4.88)	-12.13*(6.80)	-12.40***(3.37)	-12.96***(3.18)
Dispersion Squared	3.44***(1.07)	4.16**(1.940)	3.09***(.81)	3.18**(1.42)
Public Outlets (Dummy 1 = Public)			3.51**(1.64)	3.80**(1.60)
Newspapers (Dummy 1 = Newspapers)			34.80*** (2.71)	35.04*** (2.71)
Partisan Press/TV (Dummy 1 = Partisan)			11.16*** (3.25)	12.94*** (2.99)
Effective Number of Parties			-1.85*(.96)	-2.02**(.85)
Intercept	39.87*** (5.490)	41.33*** (5.24)	35.50*** (3.25)	38.66 (7.52)
N	143	143	143	143
R ² Within country	.000	.26	.69	.69
R ² Between country	.28	.42	.51	.43
R ² Overall	.07	.37	.64	.62

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, two-tailed test; Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered by country in the RE specifications. Calculations were made using the 'xtreg' option in Stata 11. "UWD" and "WED" refer to the weighted and unweighted measures of party dispersion. These measures are presented in Equations (1) and (2) in the text.

with clustered data (see Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009). The question of whether 27 clusters are enough in order to run random effects estimation is an open one. The amount of clusters needed to efficiently estimate standard errors is part of an ongoing debate. Among political scientists (and indeed in medical research where clustered structures are very common) the rule of thumb is that 20 clusters or above is acceptable (see Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009). We are therefore confident about the estimates we are reporting below as part of our analysis.

In Table 2, columns 2 and 3 report the results from a simple curvilinear specification using the 'full' visibility as dependent variable. Both the unweighted and the weighted measure of dispersion perform as hypothesized. The dispersion terms in the unweighted and weighted specifications are significant and in the hypothesized direction. The minus sign for the non-squared term suggests that the relationship between visibility and dispersion is negative for lower values of dispersion. However, as dispersion increases from a certain point this relation becomes positive.

Fig. 4 provides a visual representation of this curvilinear relationship. As dispersion increases beyond about two points, the negative relationship turns strongly positive.

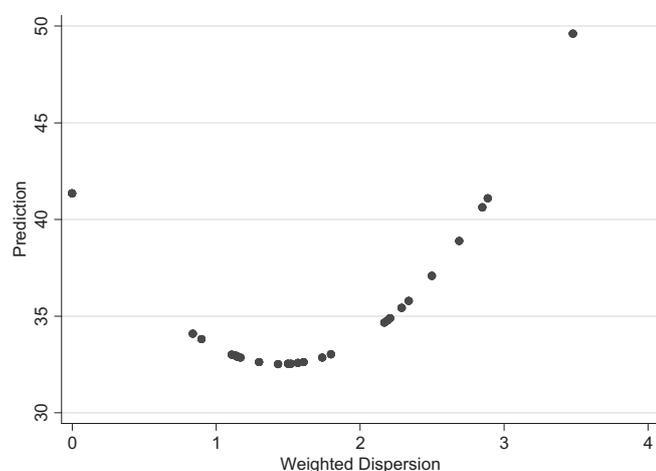


Fig. 4. Plotting the curvilinear relationship between dispersion and visibility. Note: Graph is based on the simple model from Table 2 using the weighted measure of dispersion (WED).

Columns 4 and 5 in Table 2 report the full model specification including all the controls that were described in the methods section above. Three more dummy variables are included into this model. We have also included an additional control variable in this model which measures the effective number of parties (vote share) as measured by Gallagher and Mitchell (2008), as an added party system control. The inclusion of a dummy variable for public media outlets and press (newspapers) means that private media outlets are the reference category. Both public outlets and newspapers report higher percentages of EU visibility as compared to private outlets, as expected. Additionally, the partisan media system dummy suggests that ties between political parties and the media increase the visibility of EU news. The negative (and significant) relationship between the effective number of parties suggests that visibility of the EU decreases as that indicator goes up. Since this indicator is at its lower values 'geared' towards larger parties this finding does hint towards our argument that parties will try to keep the issue of the agenda.⁹ The relationship between dispersion and visibility remains significant and in the hypothesized direction and the respective R-square values suggest that the models perform well in explaining a considerable degree of variance.

The same models (full specification) were run with two additional dependent variables as reported in the previous section on model specification. These were (a) the percentage of each outlet's stories that are only about the EU (its institution, its policies or its actors) but not about the actual campaign itself and (b) the percentage of stories that are about the actual campaign for the EP elections specifically. The hypothesized and observed relation between party contestation and visibility was further supported in these four models (results not presented here but available from the authors upon request).

Overall, the party contestation effect seems to be rather robust across all specifications. Additionally, this effect

⁹ Indeed a specification adding the squared term for the effective number of parties reveals a similar relationship to that between visibility and dispersion for the unweighted dispersion models, without changing the signs or the significance of the dispersion variables.

remains curvilinear suggesting that the media agenda regarding European issues might be restricted in cases of limited contestation on the European dimension but that it will expand following increased party system polarisation on the issue of Europe.

6. Discussion

This article draws on a unique pan-European analysis of the news media coverage of the 2009 European Parliament elections, involving more than 50,000 news stories, to study the saliency of EP elections. We define saliency as the visibility of the EP elections in the news and the European nature of the coverage. Visibility in the news and a shared news agenda, with a substantial proportion of European actors are important prerequisites for a functioning political debate ahead of elections. The analysis of the 2009 elections in the news, within the larger PIREDEU framework, showed significant cross-national variation in the visibility of the elections and the degree of Europeaness of the coverage. These cross-national differences notwithstanding, our results show – compared to extant research (de Vreese et al., 2006) – a clear increase in the saliency of the elections; both in terms of their visibility in the national news outlets and in terms of the Europeaness of the coverage.

Our results are important in light of the discussion regarding the EU's so-called 'public communication deficit' (Meyer, 1999). The low levels of news provision in general and in some instances virtual absence of news about European institutions and actors as well as a poorly developed pan-European public debate have been noted as serious obstacles in the past (Scharpf, 1999; Schlesinger, 1999). It was previously concluded that there were modest signs of an emerging European public sphere and more visibility of the elections in relation to the 2004 elections (de Vreese et al., 2009) and it is clear that the 2009 elections continued the trend of increasing prominence. Moreover, there were indications of a partially shared substantive EU issue coverage. This extended beyond the issue of the economy, which was highly present in almost all countries, to a handful of core EU issues that were relatively salient across the bloc. The increased visibility and Europeaness do not disqualify the qualification of the election coverage as dominated by domestic issues and actors, but it does suggest a development in these areas, something that has been pointed out as a necessity for a legitimate and well functioning European system of governance (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003).

Our analysis also highlights a dynamic in the news coverage of EP elections with regard to a potential East vs. West divide that has previously been pointed out by Franklin (2001) with respect to turnout in the EP elections. During the 2004 elections the visibility of the elections in the news was slightly higher in the then 10 new EU member states (de Vreese et al., 2006). However, by 2009 this pattern has vanished. This suggests that the higher level of attention to the elections in 2004 was probably more driven by the fact that these countries were new to the EU than the fact that they were from the East. This development in the news coverage, a kind of regression to the mean, has also been documented in turnout levels

(Franklin, 2001) where the first peak, given the newness of the polity and it being first time election, wears off so that the level of turnout quickly adjusts to the level of long standing member states.

In the current article we extended our knowledge by also investigating one of the key antecedents of variation in the news coverage. We took our starting points in two observations: on the one hand, cross-national studies of news media coverage have shown that party contestation along an ideological dimension is important in determining the diversity in news (e.g., Sheaffer and Wolfsfeld, 2009). We extrapolated this observation to the case of political contestation on Europe and EU news coverage in European elections (see also McElroy and Kritzing, 2010). Our argument was that political parties serve as important cues as to whether Europe is an important issue. On the other hand, we also relied on research about how news organizations approach elections and expected that the by now prevailing pragmatic approach to selecting events for the news (see Gurevitch and Blumler, 2001; Semetko et al., 1991) would imply that European elections only make it into the news when the news selection criteria such as elite disagreement are met.

Our central analysis corroborated the expectations of a curvilinear relationship between campaign news coverage and party contestation. As contestation increases, political parties may attempt to keep it off the agenda and therefore media coverage was expected to decline initially as contestation increases. However, as contestation increases beyond a certain point, political parties will be unable to keep it off the agenda, such as when a eurosceptic party enters the campaign, therefore media coverage is expected to increase at this point. The substantive implication of this finding is that when political parties articulate divergent positions at opposite ends of the scale, then media are to give it a more prominent role on the agenda. This is an important conclusion for any future debate about the communication deficit of the EU, the attempts towards politicisation, and the impact of the news media on public attitudes and electoral behaviour vis-à-vis European politics.

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