

Actors, issues and conflict-lines in the 2009 European Parliament election campaigns. A comparison of campaign strategies of national parties in 10 countries.

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Theoretical considerations

The integration of the European Union (EU) has long been regarded as a process that takes place at the supranational and transnational level, without triggering substantial changes in national political spaces and national societies (for a critique see Steenbergen/Marks 2004: 1). In line with this perspective, research has repeatedly shown that even those events, where citizens in Europe are directly asked to cast a vote, the elections for the European Parliament (EP), are “second-order” national contests (Reif/Schmitt 1980) focusing on national politicians, national issues, and national conflicts. This “second-order” character of European Parliament elections has been studied in the campaigns of the parties, in mass media’s reporting and commentating as well as with regards to citizens’ voting behaviour.

The second-order character of European Parliament contests is all the more striking as the EP has increasingly gained power and is now in at least two thirds of all laws stemming from Brussels an equal legislator to the nation-state power base in the EU, the Council. Its veto power stretches to many policy areas – among them areas like the internal market, environment and consumer protection. So, what might be the reasons for this lack of articulation of European issues, actors and conflicts – in short the second-order character of European Parliament elections? Two causes have been discussed when searching for an explanation of the lack of a European contest in the nation states in the context of EP elections. A first possible reason could be the *national political actors, i.e. the national parties*. It is national political actors who play an important role in shaping the contestation on EU politics within the national realm. If these actors pick up EU issues, the EU’s relevance, prominence, and personalization increases within a country. This makes it also more likely that the mass media pick up the issue (Adam 2007; Hix 2005; Kevin 2003). Consequently, if these important national transmitters remain silent, Europe lacks visibility for the average citizens. Yet, why should these national transmitters avoid placing Europe on the election agenda? Political scientists have pointed out the reason why mainstream (Western European) parties avoid discussing EU issues. For them it is a strategic decision to keep Europe off the agenda (Mair 2005; Thomassen et al. 2004) as these parties officially advance a moderate pro-European position (Eijk/Franklin 2004; Hix 1999; Hooghe/Marks 2002; Kriesi 2007) but struggle with internal inconsistencies plus fear losing traditional voters if they clearly articulate their positions regarding Europe (Hix 2005).

This silencing-strategy of national parties works best as long as *citizens* in Europe – often named as the second reason for the lack of EU articulation in EP elections – are not aware or do not care about EU integration. This is what many surveys shortly before the EP elections or the low turnout rate at these elections suggest. However, researchers studying citizens’ attitudes towards EU integration see a conflict potential regarding EU integration (Eijk/Franklin 2004) emerging recently at the side of the public. This conflict potential has so far hardly affected political behaviour. Yet it might turn into what Hooghe and Marks (Hooghe/Marks 2008: 5) call a “constraining dissensus” which could be seen in the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland or the rejection of the constitu-

¹ This paper is based on data collected within a 11-country comparative project on the strategies and effects of party campaigns in the context of the 2009 EP elections, steered by Silke Adam (FU Berlin) and Michaela Maier (Universität Landau). Without our cooperation partners this endeavour would not have been possible: Rosa Berganza (Spain), Claes De Vreese and Andreas Schuck (Netherlands), Boguslava Dobek, Michal Jacunski and Robert Wiszniowski (Poland), Carlos Jalali (Portugal), Jolán Róka (Hungary), Ralph Negrine (UK), Jesper Strömbäck, Lars Nord and Marie Grusell (Sweden), Lilia Raycheva (Bulgaria), Gilg Seeber (Austria), Vaclav Stetka (Czech Republic), Jesper Strömbäck (Sweden). In addition we want to thank the Research College “The Transformative Power of Europe” (Freie Universität Berlin) sponsored by the German Science Foundation for the financial support of this project.

tional treaty in France and the Netherlands. This conflict potential is bound to citizens' stable and structured opinions towards EU integration (Eijk/Franklin 2004) and to the large gap between citizens' and elites' attitudes on EU integration in all countries (e.g. Hix 2005). Eijk and Franklin (Eijk/Franklin 2004: 39) claim that "the ingredients for contestation over EU integration are even more powerful than over the more traditional issues that are subsumed under the left-right divide." The authors therefore describe citizens' EU attitudes as a "sleeping giant, that has the potential, if awakened, to impel voters to political behaviour that (...) undercuts the bases for contemporary party mobilization in many, if not most, European polities" (Eijk/Franklin 2004: 32f.). Kriesi et al. (Kriesi et al. 2006) give an explanation why these attitudes might evolve: EU integration, they claim, generates domestic winners and losers as they bring about economic, cultural, and political competition. Consequently, losers seek to protect themselves by stressing demarcation, whereas winners might call for further integration.

Research questions and research project

If it is true that a conflict potential regarding EU integration has emerged on the side of the public, we might assume that political party strategists start exploiting it in elections and thereby turn a conflict potential into a societal conflict. This conflict potential might therefore turn second-order elections into first-order contests as parties publicly articulate EU issues, actors and conflicts (see for the necessity of public articulation by political organizations Bartolini/Mair 1990). We therefore ask whether national parties discuss European issues, present their candidates for the European Parliament and refer to European conflicts in their 2009 European Parliament election campaigns.

To answer this question we draw on a research project that analyses the strategies and effects of party campaigns in eleven countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, UK)² in the context of the 2009 European Parliament elections. For understanding parties' strategies, we analyse the campaign posters and televised campaign ads of national parties that have received more than 3% of the votes in the last national and / or European elections or which are newcomers with realistic chances of winning a substantial share of the votes in this year's elections. We draw on this campaign material instead of studying party manifestos or media's reporting as this material offers the clearest indicator whether and how national parties publicly articulate European or national issues, actors or conflicts. In addition, we conduct experimental research on the effects of selected campaign materials on citizens' EU attitudes, mobilisation and knowledge. In this paper, we concentrate on data from the content analysis of the campaign posters and TV spots. Before we present some first preliminary results, we need to formulate a grain of salt regarding the data: the results we present are based on all campaign material that our cooperation partners have collected, coded and sent to us one / one and a half weeks prior to the European elections. Yet, we know that in some countries more material has been released in the hot and concluding phase of the campaign which is coded at the moment and thus not included here. In addition, we have studied core variables regarding the issues, actors and conflicts made visible in the content analysis so far. At the moment all partners are working on a more detailed content analysis of the campaign material.

First empirical findings

In the following we study the degree to which national parties (a) discuss European or national issues, (b) present their candidates / members of the EP instead of relying on prominent national political figures and (c) frame conflicts in a national or European way.

(a) European or national issues?

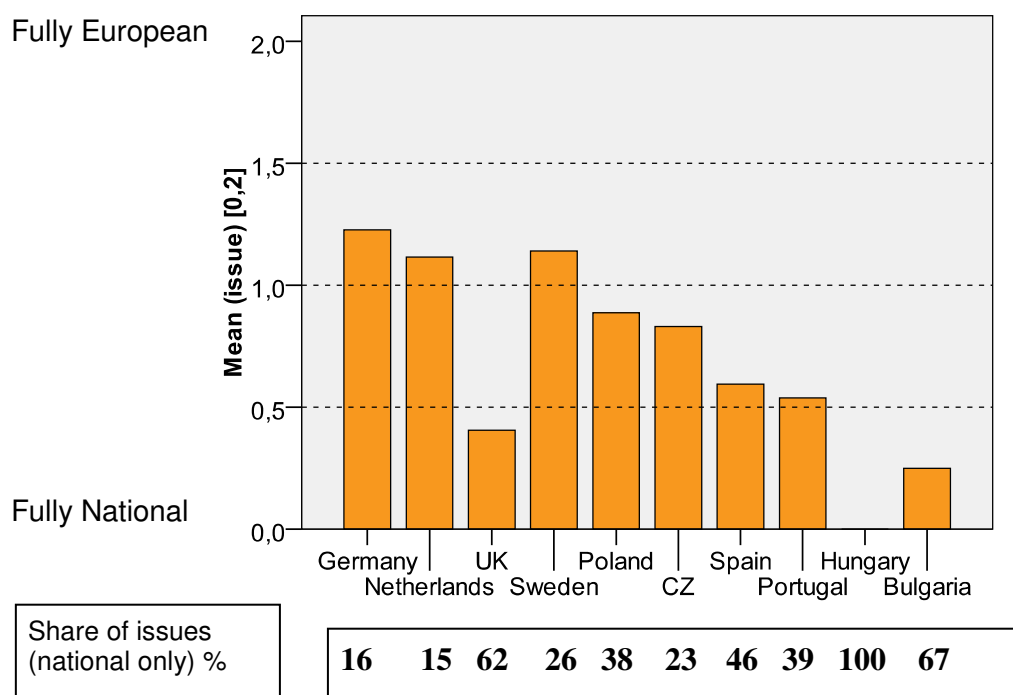
Regarding the issues discussed, our results do not allow an easy judgment on whether the analysed campaigns had more first- or second-order character. On average in the 10 countries under study, around 38% of all posters / TV spots that contain issue information only focused on issues tied to the nation state. This is a first indicator, that there is not a clear farewell from second-order

² For this analysis we had to omit Austria as a case as in this country the data collection is not yet finished.

campaigns. Yet, around 17% of spots / posters that contain issue information at all, only looked at issues with a European scope. So there is a smaller, yet significant share of campaign material that can be rated first-order regarding the issue scope. The rest (around 45%) of issue-focused spots / posters combine national and European perspectives. An example for such a combined issue scope would be a poster that calls for a “stronger regulation of markets in Germany and the EU”. So in total, campaigns are not only second-order – but also not fully fledged first-order regarding the issues.

Further on, we find sharp differences between countries (see figure 1). The mean calculated indicates the degree of Europeanization of issues discussed. A value of 0 shows that only national issues are discussed, 2 indicates only EU issues and the values in-between allow to differentiate between degrees of Europeanization. In addition, we added the information in figure 1 on the percentage of spots / posters that only discuss national issues. We can conclude that the campaigns in Hungary, Bulgaria, the UK and to a lesser degree also in the two Southern European countries, Spain and Portugal, can be classified as second-order whereas the campaigns in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and to a lesser degree in Poland and the Czech Republic are not fully, but more strongly first-order.

Figure 1: The scope of campaign issues



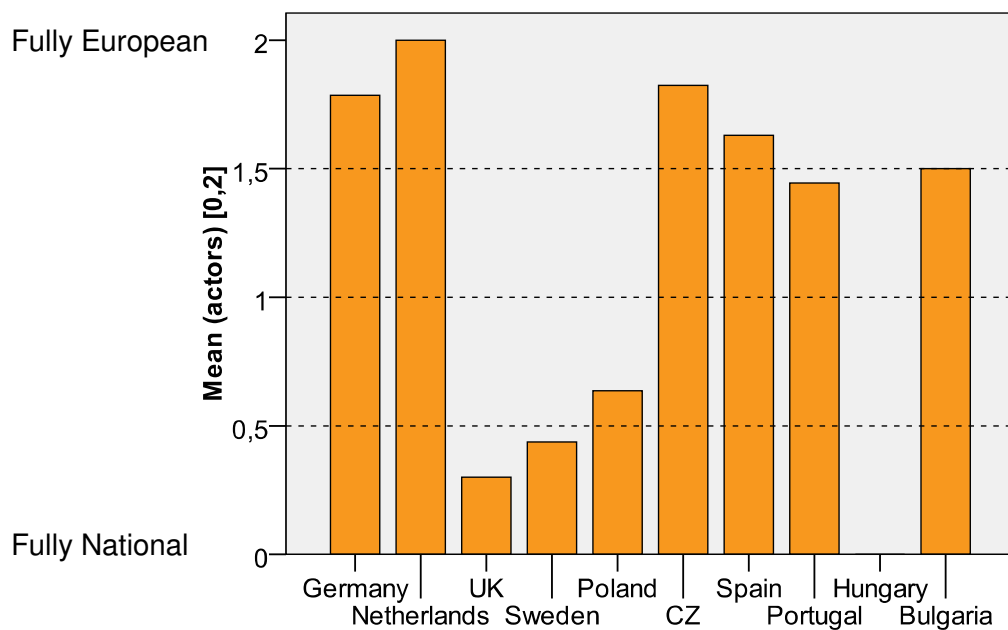
Basis: all spots / posters that contain issue information. N (Germany) = 58; N (NL) = 27; N (UK) = 13; N (Sweden) = 39; N (Poland) = 24, N (CZ) = 26; N (Spain) = 37, N (Portugal) = 39; N (Hungary) = 27, N (Bulgaria) = 15.

(b) European or national actors?

Regarding actors, we can detect stronger elements of first-order campaigns in the 10 countries analysed. On average, 65% of all posters / TV spots that present political actors, used the candidate for, a current member of the EP or another prominent European politician as the main transmitter of the campaign message. Another 8% referred to such an EU actor standing at the side of a more prominent national politician. This means that only around a quarter of the posters / TV spots solely featured national politicians.

Once again, we find sharp differences between countries (see figure 2). A value 0 of the mean presented in figure 2 indicates that only national politicians are featured, whereas a value of 2 shows that only EU actors are made prominent. The values in-between show the degree as to how Europeanized the campaign was. On this indicator, three of the countries that were tied to their national issues (Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria) show tendencies for first-order campaigns regarding the actors. Another three countries that already were classified more strongly Europeanized regarding issues, also do so regarding actors (Germany, Netherlands, Czech Republic). Finally, also here, we find countries with clear second-order campaign characteristics: the UK and Hungary focused on national politicians as well as national issues; Sweden and Poland finally also had a more parochial type of campaign regarding the actors made visible.

Figure 2: The scope of the actors in the campaigns



Basis: all TV spots / posters that present a political actor. N (Germany) = 28; N (Netherlands) = 29; N (UK) = 10; N (Sweden) = 16; N (Poland) = 22; N (CZ) = 34; N (Spain) = 27; N (Portugal) = 36; N (Hungary) = 9, N (Bulgaria) = 18

(c) Framing conflicts in a European way?

To measure how conflicts are framed in the context of election campaigns is a challenging task. Following Kriesi et al. (Kriesi et al. 2006) we assume that EU integration can be used as a new frame of interpretation for cleavages that have for decades structured contestation within the nation states: this is the socio-economic cleavage that refers to the classical divide between left (pro-state, protectionism) and right (free-market) as well as the cultural cleavage who divides those standing for green / alternative / liberal values from those who call for the dominance of authoritarian / traditional / national values (GAL-TAN). To judge whether the socio-economic conflict-line is discussed with a European or national frame, we ask whether economic ideas regarding regulation etc. are connected to the nation state or to the EU. For the cultural conflict-line we concentrate on the question of group membership respectively the community definition: Who is one of us? Is this question posed for the national or for a European community? An example of the cultural cleavage with a national scope would be a poster or spot claiming that ‘enlargement to Turkey is a threat to the own nation state’s culture and heritage’.

Once again, the results paint a differentiated picture. Overall in the 10 countries under study, around 35% of all campaign material does not feature a classical left-right question nor a question regarding our community definition. Yet more than half of all campaign materials refers to the socio-economic cleavage. A result that is not surprising in times of the economic and financial crisis. Around 12% finally, deal with the cultural question regarding the community. For both cleavages, conflicts discussed only in light of the own nation state are less frequent than conflicts that *also* refer to the EU.³

Also here, we find differences between countries (see table 1). It is the Eastern European countries – mainly Poland and the Czech Republic that more strongly struggle with the cultural cleavage than the Western European countries in which socio-economic questions strongly dominate. Whether these cleavages are discussed in relation to a common European economic or cultural community also differs strongly: in Germany, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic we find such Europeanized conflicts. In the UK, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Portugal we find more nationally confined campaign regarding the scope of the conflicts.

Table 1: Type and scope of conflicts

%	GER	NL	UK	SW	PO	CZ	Spain	PO	HUN	BUL	Total
Nat – socio-eco	11,8	0	42,9	13,6	23,3	7,7	4,4	40	63	28	19,2
EU – socio-eco	56,6	28,9	14,3	72,7	6,7	12,8	42,2	24,4	0	12	33,3
Nat – community	0	0	7,1	0	23,3	0	8,9	6,7	14,8	12	5,6
EU – community	0	6,7	7,1	0	3,3	25,6	2,2	15,6	0	4	6,2
No reference	31,6	64,4	28,6	13,6	43,3	53,8	42,2	13,3	22,2	44	35,6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	76	45	14	44	30	39	45	45	27	25	390

Basis: all spots / posters.

Note: national = national only; EU = reference also to EU (only EU + national/ EU)

Conclusion

So how Europeanized were national parties' campaigns in the 2009 European Parliament elections? Did parties put Europe on the agenda regarding issues, actors and conflict-lines and thereby exploit the mobilisation potential on the side of the public that researchers have identified? Our analysis has shown that there is no easy answer to this question. Overall the campaigns were Europeanized regarding actors, less so regarding issues. If conflict-lines were referred to they were often at least partly interpreted in a European manner. Summing up, for most countries this year's campaigns were not completely second-order, yet they also did not fulfil the criteria for fully-fledged first-order campaigns. The binary distinction between first- and second-order thus seems inadequate to capture what is actually happening: gradual changes in the form of elections that need to be described according to the degree of Europeanization.

To improve our understanding of what national parties publicly articulate in EP elections, we need to study parties' campaign strategies in more detail – a task we are working on at the moment: Did parties use national or EU symbols, did they put forward national or common interests, did they solely use the EU as a scapegoat, did they also take a clear-cut position on a cleavage and present a vision about the future paths the EU should take? Beyond, we need to work on explaining cross-country differences. Is there an East-West divide regarding the cleavages? Which coun-

³ for the socio-economic cleavage: 19,2% only national; 33,3% also EU; for the community cleavage: 5,6% only national; 6,2% also EU; rest = no reference to cleavages analysed

try-specific variables help us explain different levels of Europeanized election campaigning? And what about commonalities within the party families?

To avoid misunderstandings, we are concerned with the content of the campaigns and also with their possible effects if citizens are exposed to them (experimental research). Yet we have not studied how likely it is that citizens have actually been confronted with the campaign messages depending on the frequency of broadcasting, the visibility of the campaign on the street or the duration of the campaign.⁴ However, such an analysis would be necessary if one seeks to judge how likely it is that parties' ideas are diffused and therefore that campaigns also effect turn-out rates, etc.

So why should we care? We should care as even a tendency towards first-order campaigns would indicate strong socio-political changes in Europe. If we were to find signs that EU integration becomes (at least from time to time) a publicly visible, contested and politicized issue, we then could expect substantial changes to EU democracy, to national and EU party systems and to EU governance adding a politics dimension to today's policy-making without contestation (Schmidt 2006).

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⁴ The campaigns in Spain and Portugal for example lasted only for 2 weeks.

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