The literature on professionalization of political campaigns is strongly biased toward first-order (national) elections and the U.S. and U.K. contexts. This study expands that scope. Based on a survey of candidates for the 2004 European elections in eight European Union countries, we tested whether campaign efforts to mobilize voters were larger in countries with elite consensus on the issue of European integration than in countries with elite polarization. The results showed that campaigns in consensual electoral contexts in which political parties differ marginally on most issues of European integration were longer and involved more public meetings, more canvassing, and a more active use of Internet. The article concludes with a discussion of the campaign professionalization literature that does not apply universally.

KEYWORDS campaigns, candidate survey, European elections, Internet, professionalization

Research in the past decade has emphasized the increasing professionalization of politics. Campaign expenditure levels have risen, voter research and feedback mechanisms have been refined (e.g., Farrell and Webb, 2000), and media have become more central to campaigns (Plasser and Plasser, 2002). Some observers even suggest that governing has become campaigning, as the campaign has become permanent. The vast majority of research emphasizing
these developments, however, pertains to first-order national elections, and most examples come from the United States, which is the foremost example of professional campaigning. In other parts of the world, the study of political campaigning is less developed (Plasser and Plasser, 2002), and we have even less knowledge about campaigns in second-order elections such as the European Parliamentary elections (for exceptions, see Brants, van Praag, and Noël-Aranda, 1983; Bicchi, Blondel, and Svensson, 2003).

In this study, we investigate election campaigning in European elections. We do so with particular attention to the fact that European elections are low-salience, “second-order” elections. This has implications for the level and intensity of campaign activities, which can be expected to be lower than in national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1981). Other research has demonstrated that European elections are more salient in the news media in countries in which political elites are divided over European Union (EU) politics (de Vreese, Lauf, and Peter, 2007). However, while elite disagreement is a predictor for news attention, we, more specifically, expect that the level of campaigning by political parties is likely to be more intense in countries in which there is political elite consensus. In a consensual political context, campaigns need to start earlier and be more elaborate to engage and mobilize the electorate, compared with competitive and polarized political contexts in which campaigns serve mostly to reestablish known differences and cleavages.¹

THE NOT-SO-PERVASIVE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CAMPAIGNS

Extant research from national political contexts suggests that the professionalization of politics has increased. In short, a transition has taken place from campaigns being short, decentralized, and dependent on physical manpower to a stage of permanent campaigning in which campaign professionals such as pollsters, marketing consultants, and spin doctors play key roles (Farrell, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Norris, 1997, 2000). Current campaigning, which according to the literature is still being defined, is characterized by an increase in the use of new information and communication technologies, more sophisticated targeting of key voters, increased expenditure on publicity, and growing (conscious) use of campaign techniques in government. These are implemented both internally in the party organizations and as a means of external communication with party members and potential voters. The time horizon of campaigning is redefined toward some level of permanent campaigning. Campaign professionals become increasingly important, and the electorate is conceived of as existing of segments that can be targeted individually.²

However, the broad changes described above largely stem from either literature based on the U.S. example or theoretical contributions about the
(assumed) negative effects of “Americanization” of campaigns and the relationship between politics and media. In some cases, the U.S. example and a European example are comparatively addressed (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001), but in general there are very few empirical examples from Europe, and the existing ones are based on national accounts (Esser, Reinemann, and Fan, 2000; Gunther and Mughan, 2000; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). This is striking, since there are structural trends in Europe that indicate that campaigns matter. In the context of EU politics, a majority of European citizens repeatedly reports using the news media as their most important source of information (Eurobarometer, reports 51–56), and the importance of party loyalty is decreasing (van der Eijk and Franklin, 2006). Yet hardly any studies have been conducted on the components of political campaigning (except Bicchi et al., 2003 and Brants et al., 1983).

THE EFFECTS OF ELITE CONSENSUS VERSUS POLARIZATION ON CAMPAIGNING

Political campaigns in Europe, also for European elections, primarily take place in individual countries (Mair, 2000). Within each country, the political elites across the members of the EU can be classified as countries in which the elite opinion is consensual and countries in which the elite opinion is polarized. The nature of elite opinion may influence how and how prominently candidates for the European elections campaign. In particular, the presence of anti-EU parties in a country contributes to polarized elite opinion. Looking at research about journalism and the EU, we know that European elections are often considered to be a “nonissue” (de Vreese, 2001, p. 168). The (alleged) nonissue character of European elections and thus its missing newsworthiness is associated with the lack of one of the core news values: conflict (de Vreese, 2002). Because conflict plays a crucial role in news selection in general and in EU coverage in particular (de Vreese, Peter, and Semetko, 2001; de Vreese, 2002), conflict and disagreement may be assumed to increase the amount of European election coverage. Polarized elite opinion, then, may introduce conflict into EU politics, which journalists typically perceive as inaccessible, overly bureaucratic, and abstract (Meyer, 1999). As a result, there tends to be more EU news coverage in countries with polarized elite opinion as compared to countries with consensual elite opinion (de Vreese et al., 2006).

When applied to the situation of election campaigning, we expect the opposite dynamics. Campaign efforts are inversely related to polarization, so that campaigns in countries with elite consensus on issues of European integration are more vigorous than in countries with elite polarization, since mobilizing voters is harder in consensual electoral contexts. In a consensual context, political parties (at large) need to invest more in the campaign to
make it relevant and to present a political choice to the electorate than in a polarized context, in which cleavages and disagreement are more known to the electorate.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Turning to research on campaigns for the European Parliament, we have very little knowledge on which to draw. Recent research has started to give us an idea of how “Europe” is reported in the news. Coverage of European affairs tends to be cyclical in nature, with coverage of the EU being virtually absent from the news agenda and then peaking around important EU events, only to vanish off the agenda again (de Vreese et al., 2001; Norris, 2000). The news coverage of the European elections shows similar patterns. Analysis of the television coverage in the nine European Community (EC) member countries in 1979 showed that the elections were virtually absent from the media agenda until the final weeks before the elections (Siune, 1983). The 1999 European Parliament elections were not covered extensively in news across Europe. In the 2 weeks leading up to the 1999 European elections, the average time spent on the elections in the main evening television news programs in all EU member states was about 7 percent (de Vreese et al., 2006; Peter, Lauf, and Semetko, 2004). In 2004, there was an increase in the visibility of the European elections on television news (compared with 1999). In the “old” 15 EU member states, the elections took up, on average, more than 9 percent of the time in the main evening television news programs in the 2 weeks leading up to the elections, while in the “new” countries the portion was more than 10 percent (de Vreese et al., 2006). Campaign activity on the side of political parties and candidates is a key precondition for generating news, but while voters have treated these elections as second-order elections, so too have many political parties, who have been reluctant to invest huge amounts of money in campaigns (Bicchi et al., 2003; Brants et al., 1983; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2006).

EXPECTATIONS

Given the lack of literature about campaigns in European elections, we can only cautiously formulate our expectations. Based on the extant general campaign literature, however, we should expect political campaigns by 2004 to be characterized by an advanced use of new information and communication technologies, strongly television-focused campaigns, sophisticated targeting of key voters, high levels of expenditure, and a central role for campaign professionals. We first of all expect these elements to feature modestly compared with first-order elections, given the general second-order nature of European Parliament elections. We more specifically expect that these general patterns
are moderated by the important contextual factor of elite opinion so that campaigns in nonpolarized electoral contexts are longer and involve more public meetings, more street canvassing, and a more active use of the Internet as a communication tool than in campaigns in polarized electoral contexts.

METHODS

We rely on a survey of candidates for the European Parliament in 2004. The survey investigates the parameters of the campaigns. The study extends previous research on candidates and members of the European Parliament. Previous elite surveys have dealt with the composition of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (Franklin and Scarrow, 1999), MEPs’ role orientations (Katz, 1999), the recruitment of candidates to the European Parliament (Norris, 1999), and political representation and party policy positions (Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997). This research, however, has not investigated the campaigning and campaign strategies for the European Parliament.

We subsampled eight countries for this study: Britain, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. The country sample reflects countries that have been members of the EU for a shorter (Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden) and a longer period of time (Germany, Netherlands, Britain, and Denmark) (and should thus have a longer-standing tradition for European Parliament campaigns) and in particular countries in which elite opinion varies, as the existence of polarized elite opinion about EU matters may affect the media’s interest in EU affairs (Peter and de Vreese, 2004). For the classification of countries with elite consensus or elite polarization, we rely on Ray (1999). Using this classification, Britain, Denmark, and Poland represent the group of “polarized” countries.

Candidates were sampled following a sampling scheme based on the European Parliament’s official party lists, provided in advance of the elections by the Parliament’s external relations office. The 2004 top candidates were sampled by using the size of a party (defined as the number of seats in the 1999 European Parliament) \times 3. This means that from a party that had three seats in 1999, the top nine candidates on the 2004 list were sampled. A maximum of 10 candidates from one party was sampled. From parties either not elected in 1999 or running for the first time in 2004 (including all parties in new member states), the top four candidates from each party were sampled.

The fieldwork was completed in May and June 2004. An invitation to participate in the study was e-mailed in late May. The actual questionnaire was sent out on June 2. The mode of data collection was a questionnaire attached to an e-mail. Respondents could return the questionnaire by e-mail,
print it and send it by regular mail, or print it and fax it. Three reminders were sent to each candidate who had not returned the questionnaire (following recommendations by Sheehan and Hoy, 1997). The last questionnaire included in the study was returned on June 30. Given the focus on self-reported campaign activities, it was essential to field the study in the immediate aftermath of the elections to reduce the risk of inaccurate responses due to time lag. A total of 660 candidates were invited to participate in the study. A total of 204 questionnaires are included in the study, which represents a response rate of 30 percent, which is acceptable for elite surveys and e-mail surveys (Sheehan, 2001).5

In this study, we specifically draw on measures of campaign duration, campaign intensity, participation in campaign activities such as public meetings and canvassing, the application of different communication strategies (party and candidate websites, e-mail newsletters, and press releases), and the use of professional campaign staff (such as spokespersons and personal and political advisors). Given the limited number of respondents, some percentages should be interpreted with caution.

RESULTS

In the figures below, we report the distributions per country on each of the key measures of campaign activities and strategies. For each analysis, we report the comparison between the group of consensus and the group of polarized countries.

Figure 1 shows the length of the candidates’ campaign and the average amount of hours spent on campaigning in the final 4 weeks leading up to the elections. Candidates from Denmark started campaign preparations the earliest (with almost 50 percent of the candidates reporting starting campaign preparations more than 6 months in advance of the elections). Candidates from Poland and Sweden reported the shortest campaigns, with about 80 percent spending less than a total of 3 months on the campaign. The

![FIGURE 1 Length of campaigning.](image-url)
campaigns were, on average, longer in consensual countries than in polarized countries \( (t(199) = 1.66, p < .05) \).

The most intense campaigns were found in Spain, Sweden, and Denmark, where between 60 and 70 percent of the candidates campaigned for more than 25 hours a week on average in the final 4 weeks (Figure 2). The least intense campaigns were in the Netherlands and Britain. There were no significant differences between consensual and polarized countries in terms of the number of hours candidates campaigned.

Candidates from consensual countries participated in more public meetings \( (t(199) = 3.21, p < .01) \) and canvassed more frequently \( (t(199) = 3.27, p < .001) \) than candidates from polarized countries (Figure 3). Candidates
from Denmark and Sweden participated most in public meetings on average, while canvassing was most vigorous by British, Spanish, and Swedish candidates (Figure 4). British and Dutch candidates participated least in public meetings during the campaign, while the Dutch and Slovenian candidates canvassed the least intensively.

In terms of the use of communication strategies (Figure 5), there was only a significant difference between consensus and polarized countries in the use of personal Web sites. Personal Web sites were significantly more often used in consensus countries than in polarized countries ($t(199) = 1.88, p < .05$). While the political parties of virtually all candidates had a party Web site, between 40 percent (Britain) and 89 percent (Denmark) of the candidates reported having a personal Web site. Electronically distributed
mailings were used by a majority of candidates. Press releases were used by on average two thirds of the candidates, with a low of 59 percent in the Netherlands and a high of 100 percent in Spain.

There were no significant differences between consensus and polarized countries in terms of the use of professional campaign staff (Figure 6). In all countries, fewer than 20 percent of the candidates had a spokesperson. The use of different advisors varied considerably across the countries. Slovenian, Polish, and Spanish candidates reported the most frequent use of external campaign staff, while external campaign staff was least frequently used in Britain and Sweden.

DISCUSSION

The study provides cross-national comparative evidence of political campaigns for the European Parliament elections. It shows how political campaigns vary by country, type of election, and the nature of the composition of the political elite. Three points are particularly interesting to consider: (1) the study demonstrates that the degree of campaign professionalization varies cross-nationally; (2) it confirms that campaigning in second-order types of elections, such as the European Parliament elections, is less extensive than in first-order elections; and finally (3) it provides evidence that in second-order elections, political campaigns in consensual contexts are longer and more active than campaigns in polarized political contexts.

Starting with the latter, the candidate survey showed that campaigns in consensus/nonpolarized countries were longer and involved more public meetings, more canvassing, and a more personalized use of Internet. These findings confirm our expectations. Campaigns in nonpolarized contexts not only start earlier but also involve more “direct” campaigning (including meetings and canvassing) so that interest in the campaign can be mobilized. In polarized contexts, clashing viewpoints and political cleavages are typically known, and the campaign may be less aimed at engaging
citizens and more at reestablishing and highlighting differences between parties and candidates.

This finding is potentially different from a national first-order election in which strong party polarization may imply vigorous political campaigning. The finding also illustrates that a different dynamic is at work for campaigning than for media attention. While polarized elite opinion is a positive predictor for news and media attention to EU politics (de Vreese, Lauf, and Peter, 2006; Peter et al., 2004), parties in consensual contexts campaign more. However, in terms of “getting into the news,” these efforts seem in vain since there is more news coverage in polarized countries. The absence of news about EU politics in consensual contexts is explained by interviews with news editors and journalists who openly admit that without a political conflict and clear domestic implications, EU news will only rarely make it on to the news agenda (de Vreese, 2003).

The final comparisons showed no significant differences in the campaigns in polarized and consensus countries in terms of the use of campaign professionals and the hours spent campaigning per week in the final 4 weeks. The latter suggests that once the campaigns are running, the intensity is similar across different contexts. In terms of cross-national differences, interestingly the “new” EU member states Poland and Slovenia made the most extensive use of campaign personnel and the least use of “traditional” meetings and canvassing. In the “old” 15 EU countries, Danish and Swedish campaigns were both longer and more active than, for example, the campaigns of Dutch candidates.

Previous studies of candidates for the European Parliament have looked at, for example, MEPs’ role orientations (Katz, 1999) and recruitment processes (Norris, 1999), but little attention has been devoted to campaign activities and strategies. The current study provides some cross-national comparative evidence on this in the context. It is clear that the campaigns for the European Parliament are dominated by both traditional elements of campaigning (such as public meetings and canvassing) and elements of “third phase” campaigning (Norris, 2000), such as the strategic use of online resources. It is, however, highly inappropriate to classify the campaigns as representative of the third era of campaigning. The expenditure levels are minimal, the time horizon of the campaign is far from being permanent, and campaign professionals are neither frequently used nor structurally employed. These empirical observations are important in light of the campaign literature, which is rather general in nature. The processes and developments in campaigning are not across the board, and this study has demonstrated that second-order election campaigns vary significantly among countries but cannot be said to be highly professionalized.

What is the relevance of studying the campaigns of candidates for the European Parliament? Previously, it was argued that public opinion has hardly mattered for the development of the institutions of the EU (Meyer,
1999), and therefore it was merely interesting to study the attitudes and preferences of political elites, including members of the European Parliament (Marsh and Norris, 1997). However, as concerns about the legitimacy of European integration have increased and the necessity for public support has been highlighted, we indeed need to know more about not only the attitudes of political elites but also how these elites try to convey their message to the public during pivotal democratic moments through political campaigning.

NOTES

1. The influence of other factors on the level and intensity of political campaigning is acknowledged. System-level characteristics, including regulatory regimes, differences in media systems, electoral systems, and political culture, may all exert an influence on campaigning. In addition, in particular reference to European elections, the electoral cycle and duration of EU membership have been found to be of importance in understanding electoral behavior (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). In the current study, however, we focus on the role of political elites.

2. Other research has identified five macro trends with respect to changes in campaigning (Plasser and Plasser, 2002, pp. 241–243): (1) TV-centered campaign communication, (2) increased importance of paid television advertising, (3) increased importance of leaders’ debates, (4) increased candidate-centered campaigning, and (5) increased use of campaign managers and external political consultants. Each of these trends applies to campaigns in Europe, though relatively more to Western Europe compared with Central and Eastern European countries.

3. Ray (1999) classified political parties on a 1–7 scale of being opposed versus in favor of European integration based on expert judgments. For this study, we defined the presence of elite polarization as the presence of a party in each country that received a score of 2 or less on this scale.

4. We sampled candidates for the European Parliament because another objective of the study (not reported in this article) was to know more about the perceptions and attitudes of European Parliament candidates with respect to European integration and media.

5. The following number of completed questionnaires are included in the study: Britain, 56; Denmark, 19; Germany, 29; Netherlands, 27; Poland, 42; Slovenia, 5; Spain, 7; and Sweden, 19. Given the low response rates, in some cases caution should be exerted when interpreting results from those cases.

REFERENCES


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