Explaining Campaign News Coverage: How Medium, Time, and Context Explain Variation in the Media Framing of the 2009 European Parliamentary Elections

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Explaining Campaign News Coverage: How Medium, Time, and Context Explain Variation in the Media Framing of the 2009 European Parliamentary Elections

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It is an open question why news media cover political campaigns the way they do. Framing elections in terms of conflict or strategy or focusing on horse-race framing and the role media and journalists themselves play in elections is commonplace, but this study investigates the factors that explain the variation in campaign news coverage. The context of our study is the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, and we use a cross-national media content analysis (N = 52,009) conducted in all 27 European Union member states. Findings show that time, country, and media characteristics all matter in explaining the way news media frame elections, however, to different extents and with different emphasis. Especially the variation in conflict framing is contingent upon the medium, the electoral system, and public aversion against the EU. We conclude with a discussion of our findings in the light of the ongoing debate on the role and impact of media framing during election campaigns.

KEYWORDS conflict framing, election coverage, European Parliamentary elections, horse-race framing, media content analysis, media framing, metacoverage, strategy framing
Why do media frame elections the way they do? A news frame is “an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic” (de Vreese 2002), and previous research has demonstrated how the news report elections with a special emphasis on conflict between political parties and actors (e.g., McManus 1994), a focus on strategic considerations rather than actual substance (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001), election polls (e.g., Semetko 2000), or the role of the media themselves (Esser and D’Angelo 2006). Research has amply demonstrated the effects news frames have on political attitudes (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Schuck and de Vreese 2006), issue interpretations (e.g., Rhee 1997), policy proposals (e.g., Slothuus and de Vreese 2010), or evaluations (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

Along with the findings of these studies, there is a debate on the normative implications of the consequences of such media framing or on the quality and function of election coverage more generally. A lot of this research has focused on the presumed negative consequences of the way journalists frame elections merely as tactical games and conflict-laden contests between actors, such as increasing levels of public cynicism thought to be detrimental for electoral participation (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997). However, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the question of how such coverage takes shape in the first place. Why do news media frame elections the way they do? And, is it possible to explain, at least partially, which factors drive media content during election campaigns?

These are central questions to the current study, in which we focus on four distinct features of media coverage identified as characteristic for any election campaign: (1) framing elections in terms of conflict, (2) framing elections in terms of strategy, (3) framing elections in terms of “horse race,” and (4) metacoverage, i.e., focusing on the role of the media during election campaigns. More specifically, the way news media frame election news will be explained by time-, country-, and media-specific characteristics. We do so within the context of the 2009 European Parliamentary election campaign and based on an analysis of the media coverage within all 27 EU member states, as it gives us sufficient variety on both ends, that is, with regard to the way different media in different countries have covered the election as well as with regard to the contextual factors that can help explain such differences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict Framing

News about politics—both domestic and European—is in general framed in terms of conflict (McManus 1994; Patterson 1993). Previous research has pointed to the distinctively high news value of stories that focus on conflict.
between political actors (Price 1989). Thus, the presence of conflict is an essential criterion for a story to make it into the news, not only because it “sells,” but also to meet professional standards of balanced journalistic reporting (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; McManus 1994). Conflict is also inherent to politics. It is embodied in political reasoning (Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000) and in democratic theory conflict is seen as an essential part of democratic decision making (e.g., Sartori 1987). Schattschneider (1960, p. 135) defined democracy as “a competitive political system,” with elites defining policy options so that citizens can make a choice: “conflict, competition, organization, leadership, and responsibility are the ingredients of a working definition of democracy.” Indeed, recent research suggests that party contestation over political issues, such as EU integration, also contributes to higher visibility and thus the overall salience of the topic in news media coverage (Schuck et al., 2011).

Conflict results from the competition of different ideas, and if citizens realize that it is part of democratic decision making, conflict may, in principle, have positive effects on citizens’ political participation (de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007). Min (2004) adds an important nuance to this by spelling out the differential role of different types of conflict, whereby conflict about substantial issues has a positive impact on voter mobilization and conflict about persons can have the opposite effect. However, while conflict-driven news has the potential to engage and mobilize citizens, other studies have shown that conflict-driven news can negatively affect support for policies, including advances in European integration (Vliegenthart et al. 2008).

While a lot of research has focused on what impact conflict framing can have on political attitudes and political behavior, much less attention has been devoted to what factors explain variation in the degree to which news media apply this sort of framing. Considering European Parliamentary elections and with regard to country characteristics with the potential to affect the degree to which news media cover such an election campaign in terms of conflict, we expect that closer ties between a country and the European Union result in less focus on conflict in media coverage. More specifically, we expect that (1) in countries in which public support for EU membership is high, this is also reflected in less focus on conflict framing compared to countries in which public support for EU membership is lower. Along the same lines, we expect that (2) in countries that are net contributors to the EU budget (i.e., that pay more than they receive), focus on conflict in news coverage is higher as compared to countries that are net receivers and thus profit by and large from EU membership.

Another factor on the country level with the potential to matter is the difference in electoral systems across countries. We expect that (3) countries with proportional representation of political parties are more conducive to conflict because here more parties contest over political issues, such as EU integration, and such a higher degree of issue contestation should be reflected...
also in the way journalists cover current political events. Another factor on the country level we consider relevant is whether there are domestic (national/regional) elections concurrent to European elections. We know from the literature on the second-order nature of European elections (e.g., Reif and Schmitt 1980) that these elections are widely seen as less important and less relevant in the eyes of political actors as well as the general public. Thus, we expect that (4) when national elections are taking place at the same time, this is detrimental not only with regard to the overall attention paid to them by the news media but also regarding their level of contestation by political actors; thus, the level of focus on political conflict in media coverage is expected to decrease as well.

With regard to time aspects, and because of the inherent nature of a political campaign supposed to be increasingly contested over time, we expect that (5) the degree to which journalists cover an election in terms of conflict is increasing as election day approaches. Finally, with regard to media characteristics, little is known about differences between different types of media (TV vs. newspapers) or between different formats within the same type of medium (broadsheet vs. tabloid newspapers; public vs. private television). Given the absence of previous research focusing specifically on medium-specific differences with regard to conflict framing, we need to remain cautious and abstain from putting forward a clear expectation.

Strategy Framing

A second feature of campaign news coverage that received ample attention relates to mediated information about strategic behaviors of political actors. Developments toward increasing professionalization of election campaigns (e.g., Norris 2000) and the application of advanced political marketing strategies in political parties’ campaigning efforts (e.g., Kavanagh 1995) have led to increasing attention by journalists for what is going on “behind the campaign” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). News relying on such a strategy frame when covering election campaigns emphasizes considerations relating to how political actors present a certain issue or event and the style of such presentation. It furthermore relates to the description of specific actions of political actors to improve their position in the public eye. In sum, strategic news is described as stressing the strategies, performances, styles, and tactics of campaigning necessary to for a candidate or party to obtain and remain in a favorable position (Esser and D’Angelo 2006; Jamieson 1992).

Such strategic news framing appears to be a standard ingredient of election coverage nowadays, to the disadvantage of substantial issue news coverage (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004). This observation applies to the US context but has also been made in—among others—Germany (Esser and Hemmer 2008), the United Kingdom
(Scammell and Semetko 2008), and the Netherlands (Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008). For the 2004 European Parliamentary election, it was shown that the amount of strategy framing differed considerably between the member states, with Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, or Luxembourg showing very little and Greece, Poland, or Slovakia a substantial share of European Parliamentary election news framed in terms of strategy. Exposure to this strategy framing in the media significantly affected public cynicism toward politics and, among those with higher levels of education, led to stronger intentions to turn out to vote (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2008).

When it comes to explaining variation in European Parliamentary election campaign coverage, we expect media-related factors, aspects of the electoral system, and time to affect the amount of strategy news. Tabloid newspapers, leaning toward a more sensationalist coverage of politics, have been shown to feature less substantial issue news coverage to the advantage of aspects of the political game (e.g., Norris 2000). Although similar arguments can be made for the coverage of commercial television newscasts, the empirical evidence is less clear (e.g., Schulz and Zeh 2007). Furthermore, newspapers are less confined in the amount of coverage of elections (Druckman 2005) and therefore can devote space to strategic aspects of the campaign. Therefore, we expect that (1) tabloid newspapers and (2) commercial television newscasts devote more attention to strategy news than broadsheets and public broadcasting news and that (3) newspapers show more strategy framing than television news. We furthermore expect (4) a stronger emphasis on strategy frames closer to election day in line with a generally increasing attention for the campaign in the final days and weeks (see, however, Vliegenthart et al. 2010). Finally, we expect (5) that co-occurring national elections also lead to an increase in strategically framed coverage, since there arguably is more at stake in these elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) and therefore parties’ campaign conduct is more relevant which is expected to spill over also to European Parliamentary election news.

Horse-Race Framing

Related to strategic news is the notion of horse-race framing. Whereas such frames also put an emphasis on the political game, rather than on substantial news coverage, it particularly focuses on candidates’ and parties’ standing in public opinion. Although horse-race coverage is sometimes considered part of the strategy frame (Esser and Hemmer 2008), we treat the mentioning of public opinion polls as a separate category since it does not necessarily refer to the tactics of political actors. A horse-race frame therefore describes a reference to public opinion polls and parties’ standing in the polls, including whether they were winning or losing. In line with the strategy frame, however, studies have demonstrated that election news coverage increasingly incorporates references to the horse race (e.g., Darras 2008; Sheafer et al. 2008).
Such horse-race coverage also appears to be attractive to news audiences (Iyengar et al. 2004).

Again we formulate a number of expectations when it comes to factors influencing the degree of horse-race framing present in European Parliamentary election news coverage. In line with the above, we not only expect more sensationalist news outlets to make more use of strategy frames but also predict that they will show a stronger reliance on the horse-race aspect of the elections. Again, due to more space to cover the campaign, newspapers in general are also more likely to draw on horse-race frames. Furthermore, as election day approaches the relevance of opinion polls increases, since they might be a better indication of the actual election result than earlier on in the campaign (see also Domke, Shah, and Wackman 1997). This leads to the expectation that news will increasingly be framed in terms of the horse race when the election is approaching (Vliegenthart et al. 2010). Moreover, co-occurring national elections make the horse race more relevant, which is expected to increase the amount of horse-race coverage. Finally, the horse race is more clear-cut in majoritarian election systems than in proportional systems, which leads us to expect that there will be more horse-race coverage in such first-past-the-pole systems.

Metacoverage

More recently, various scholars have noted that, in addition to favoring strategy-oriented coverage in political campaign coverage, journalists increasingly emphasize another part of the political process, which is the news media’s own role in the campaign. This type of coverage, referred to as metacoverage, exposes the interactions between political actors and the press, as well as the ways in which politicians approach the media and publicity, among other reasons, for image and news management purposes. The development toward metacoverage, as documented by election campaign studies in America and Europe (e.g., Esser and D’Angelo 2006) affirms the widespread notion that the media are now an important, if not the most important, actor in politics and campaigns. As such, metacoverage can be considered an outcome of media politics: a modern and professionalized mode of (permanent) campaigning tailored to the logic of the media system (Esser and Spanier 2005; Zaller 1999).

Metacoverage, however, is a broad concept comprising an array of media-related themes and latent meanings (Esser and D’Angelo 2003). In the present study, we are specifically interested in press metacoverage, which focuses on the presence, behaviors, and influences of media in relation to politics, which stands out from the more strategy-based publicity coverage that bears considerable conceptual resemblance to the strategic news frame described above (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008).
In terms of the factors that shape metacoverage in the context of elections, we expect to find a significant influence of some of the structural variables also considered above, though on slightly different theoretical grounds. Specifically, we first expect more of such coverage in majoritarian election systems, since such systems spur the professionalization and mediatization of political campaigns more strongly than other systems (e.g., Esser and D’Angelo 2006; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). Further, we expect metacoverage most likely to arise in more sophisticated “quality” news outlets including public television and highbrow newspapers. This expectation is based on the assertion that metacoverage appeals to politically interested and sophisticated news audiences in particular, also in the light of the “insider” type of information typically conveyed through this coverage (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Esser and Spanier 2005).

METHODS

To empirically test our expectations and collect information about our dependent variables, we rely on a large-scale media content analysis. This content analysis was carried out within the framework of PIREDEU (www.piredieu.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).

Sample

The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in all 27 EU member states. 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. The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up to the election. The date of the election varied across countries. Depending on the date of the elections in a given country, the coding period ran from May 14 to June 4 or from May 17 to June 7.

Data Collection

All relevant news outlets were collected either digitally (TV and newspapers) or as hard copies (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 or the European Parliamentary elections on any other page of the newspaper have been coded (within the political news, opinion-editorial, and business-economy sections). In total, 52,009 news stories were coded (32,041 newspaper stories and 19,968 TV stories) in all 27 EU member countries combined: 19,996 of these news stories dealt specifically with the EU (16,749 newspaper stories and 3,247 TV stories), of which 10,978 news stories dealt specifically with the European Parliamentary election (8,718 newspaper stories and 2,260 TV stories). The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

Coding Procedure

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

Dependent Variables

CONFLICT FRAMING

A conflict frame was considered to be present in a given news story when the story mentioned either (1) two or more sides of a problem or issue; (2) any conflict or disagreement; (3) a personal attack between two or more actors; or (4) an actor’s reproaching or blaming another. To assess whether these items build a reliable scale, we applied Mokken scale analysis (MSA), which is a hierarchical scaling method that can be used for binary and ordered items (Mokken 1971). Results from the MSA show that the items form a strong and reliable scale ($H = 0.51$, $N = 19,935$). Krippendorff’s alpha’s for intercoder reliability was .57 on average.

STRATEGY FRAMING

A strategy frame was considered to be present in a given news story when the story mentioned either (1) an actor’s presentation and style of how it handled an issue; (2) an action by an actor that was taken in order to stabilize his position or in order to make him or her look better in public opinion or in the political arena; or (3) one or more metaphors from the language of games, sport, and or war. Results from the MSA show that the items form a reliable scale ($H = 0.37$, $N = 10,886$). Krippendorff’s alpha’s for intercoder reliability was .61 on average.
HORSE-RACE FRAMING

A horse-race frame was considered to be present when a given news story mentioned any opinion poll results predicting the outcome of the European Parliamentary elections. (Krippendorff’s alpha = .66).

METACOVERAGE

A metaframe was considered to be present when a given news story mentioned any aspect relating to the role of the media in—or media coverage of—the election campaign or political affairs in general (Krippendorff’s alpha = .85).

For each outlet, data are aggregated to a weekly level. For each dependent variable, we take the share of total news items per outlet per week that contains the frame under consideration. We ended up with a total of 427 observations for the conflict frame and 417 observations for the other frames (due to some missing values).³

Independent Variables

*Proximity to elections* captures the temporal aspect of the campaign coverage. This variable indicates the week number, starting with the value “1” for the first week of the research period and increasing by one point for each following week approaching the election.

Four variables capture key country characteristics as predictors of coverage. *EU membership evaluation* is measured as the aggregated country scores of the percentage of the population who answered affirmatively to the question: “Generally speaking, do you think that (YOUR COUNTRY’S) membership of the European Union is a good thing?” We rely on Eurobarometer data of Spring 2009 (EB 71) for this variable. *Net benefit* measures the yearly percentage of the gross national income (GNI) that is being paid to the European Union (negative score) or is being received from the European Union (positive score). Data are collected from the 2008 annual budget report from the European Commission.⁴ We consider a country’s *electoral system* by means of a dummy variable indicating whether the country in regular elections adhere to a system of closed-list proportional representation or to another electoral system. Data are retrieved from Carter and Farrell (2010). Our fourth and final country variable is *simultaneous elections*, a dummy variable indicating whether national or local elections were held at the same day as the European Parliamentary elections.

Finally, we account for three key characteristics of the media. *Medium (TV)* is a dummy variable indicating, for each case, whether the outlet was a television broadcast. *TV (private)* is a dummy variable indicating
whether the outlet was a commercial television broadcast. Newspaper (tabloid) is a dummy variable indicating whether the outlet was a newspaper tabloid.

Since our dependent variables are weekly shares of framing use in each outlet, we conduct four separate ordinary least squares regressions, with each of the frames as dependent variables and the variables listed above as independent variables as far as relationships with the framing variables have been hypothesized.\(^5\)

RESULTS

In the following, we will present the results of our analyses attempting to explain conflict framing, strategy framing, horse-race framing, and metaframing. First, however, we take a look at the absolute prominence of these different kinds of framing in actual campaign news coverage across countries. Therefore, we build index scales for each frame reaching from a minimum value of 0 (frame not present) to a maximum value of 1 (frame present; see, e.g., Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Our results show that the strategy frame was most prominent (\(M = .29, SD = .33\)) in campaign news coverage across countries, closely followed by the conflict frame (\(M = .28, SD = .29\)). Both these frames show to be of considerable importance in election news coverage. The horse-race frame was much less prominent (\(M = .11, SD = .31\)) but still slightly more prominent than the metaframe (\(M = .09, SD = .29\)). Figures 1 to 4 show the cross-national variation in the prominence of the different frames.

\[\text{FIGURE 1 Conflict framing in campaign news coverage in all 27 EU member states.}\]
Turning to our explanatory models, we first take a closer look at the factors that account for the degree of conflict framing in the news. As shown in Table 1, higher levels of support for EU membership in a country and being a net receiver from the EU budget both are associated with lower levels of conflict framing in media coverage of the election, as expected.

FIGURE 2 Strategy framing in campaign news coverage in all 27 EU member states.

FIGURE 3 Horse-race framing in campaign news coverage in all 27 EU member states.
Also in line with expectations, the occurrence of simultaneous other national/regional elections are linked to less conflict framing in European Parliamentary campaign coverage. Furthermore, countries that have a closed-list electoral system of proportional representation indeed show higher degrees of conflict framing. It could be that such electoral systems, in which more parties contest with one another, are more conducive to conflict and this is also reflected in media coverage. Finally, there is a negative effect for tabloid newspapers, meaning that conflict framing is more present in more serious broadsheet outlets. Overall, the above results confirm our expectations. Perceived profit from EU membership (either in the public eye or financially) is linked to lower levels of conflict framing. Concurrent other elections seem to draw

![FIGURE 4 Metacoverage in campaign news coverage in all 27 EU member states.](image)

### TABLE 1 Ordinary Least Squares Regression Explaining Conflict Framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU membership “good thing”</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net benefit</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous elections</td>
<td>-0.047(*)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity to elections</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (private)</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (tabloid)</td>
<td>-0.107**</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (TV)</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>427</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

(*) $p \leq .10$. *(*) $p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).
attention away from European Parliamentary elections and lead to lower levels of conflict framing in European Parliamentary campaign news. Interestingly, and in line with recent research (Vliegenthart et al. 2010), we find higher degrees of conflict framing in more serious quality outlets as compared to tabloid newspapers. Finally, we find no difference with regard to the type of medium (newspaper or TV) and also do not see that the proximity of the election matters for the degree of conflict framing in the news.

Next in our analysis, we turn to strategy framing. As Table 2 shows, none of the factors that could be expected to account for the degree to which news media frame European Parliamentary elections in terms of strategy has a significant impact. Strategy framing does not increase during the campaign and neither country nor media characteristics matter in explaining degrees of strategy framing in the news. For now, we have to conclude that none of the factors tested in the present study seem to account for any variance in the degree of strategy framing in the news.

We now turn to horse-race framing and see that as for strategy framing, media characteristics do not seem to have an influence (see Table 3). However, our other expectations are supported by our findings. As the election comes closer, horse-race framing increases and also the occurrence of other simultaneous elections is connected to higher degrees of horse-race framing. Furthermore, electoral systems with proportional representation show lower degrees of horse-race framing in election news, possibly because in other systems the question of who is in the lead and will ultimately win the election becomes more important.

As Table 4 shows, media characteristics do have an impact on the prominence of metacoverage. We find that more serious broadsheet newspapers and public television programs are more reflective of the role of the media with regard to the election campaign, as expected. The only other factor that has an impact on the degree of metacoverage is the electoral system. In countries with proportional representation news coverage is more reflective of the role of the media during the election campaign.

### Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares Regression Explaining Strategy Framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous elections</td>
<td>−.024</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity to elections</td>
<td>−.009</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (private)</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (tabloid)</td>
<td>−.017</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (TV)</td>
<td>−.049</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted $R^2 = .00$*

*\*\* Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).
\* $p \leq .10$, \* $p \leq .05$, \*\* $p \leq .01$, \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).
This paper set out to investigate the impact of medium, time, and context factors on variation in the way in which the media use some of the most frequently identified frames in election news coverage. The frames include the conflict frame, the strategy frame, the horse-race frame and the metacoverage frame. The analysis was conducted in the context of the European Parliamentary elections in 2009, which ensured 27 countries in which to study the variation of the framing of a single event. The article draws upon a comprehensive study of the election news coverage in the most prominent television news and newspapers in the 27 EU countries, totaling more than 50,000 stories.

A first conclusion concerns the use of the different news frames. The strategy and conflict frames were the most prominently used, and they were about three times more present than the horse-race frames and metaframes. While the first observation about the frequent use of conflict and strategy frames corroborates extant research, it is perhaps surprising that one of the generally most frequently recognized frames, horse race (see Patterson 1993), was used much less. One important caveat should be acknowledged here concerning the particular context of European Parliamentary elections. The absence of a clear formation of a government after such elections (which

**TABLE 3** Ordinary Least Squares Regression Explaining Horse-Race Framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
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<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>-.050***</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous elections</td>
<td>.029(*)</td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity to elections</td>
<td>.015(*)</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (private)</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (tabloid)</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (TV)</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>417</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

(*) p ≤ .10, *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001 (two-tailed).

**TABLE 4** Ordinary Least Squares Regression Explaining Metacoverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>.042*</td>
<td>.018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simultaneous elections</td>
<td>.009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proximity to elections</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
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<td>TV (private)</td>
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<td>.024</td>
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<td>Newspaper (tabloid)</td>
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<td>.008</td>
<td>.021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

(*) p ≤ .10, *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001 (two-tailed).
is usually the case) is likely to have depressed the use of the horse-race frame and the focus on who is leading in the polls. Regardless of the relative presence of the different frames, our study clearly shows that the use of these frames by the media varied significantly between the different countries, and this article took a step further to explicate the structural factors underlying this cross-national variation.

In terms of conflict framing, benefits from EU membership were related to lower levels of conflict framing. Concurrent elections depressed the emphasis on conflict framing, and quality news outlets tended to use the conflict frame more often than tabloid outlets. These findings are robust, support our a priori expectations, and are in line with other research on the news media framing of elections (Vliegenthart et al. 2010). For the remaining frames the results are less clear-cut. The variation in the use of the strategy frame was unrelated to the factors included in this study. For the horse-race frame, we see that as the actual election approaches, the use of the horse-race frame increased. In addition, the co-occurrence of other elections is connected to higher degrees of horse-race framing. Looking at the metacoverage frame, we find that more serious broadsheet newspapers and public television programs are more reflective of the role of the media with regard to the election campaign.

Our paper focused on some of the most prominent frames in the literature on election news (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). Some of these frames occur frequently in the news, also in relation to European Parliamentary elections. Our analyses covered some initial ground in understanding variation, but while the models perform well for understanding, for example, conflict news framing, the models of variation in the strategy news frame, for example, are underdeveloped. This can mean one of three things: Perhaps strategy framing has become such an unequivocal part of news coverage of elections that variation hardly exists, but in fact both this study and reviews of extant election news research (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008) suggest that there is plenty of variation in the use of the strategy frame, at least across countries. An alternative is to raise the question about which factors not included in this study can explain this variation. We focus on medium, time, and EU-related contextual factors, but these obviously fall short of explaining the differences. Our bet would be to establish comparable information about the nature of the political contest in a country or the political journalistic culture. Such research is emerging (e.g., Van Dalen, Albrek, and de Vreese 2010; Pfetsch 2001), but more of such research, collected in a systematic and comparable fashion, is needed. Finally, we also have to consider measurement issues, that is, the relatively weak scale the strategy items form in our analysis, which can affect the potential to detect any effects even in well-specified and theoretically sound models. The mediocre performance of our models in explaining some of the frames also points toward a general problem in research explaining variation in media content. Such studies are
often challenged by theoretically well-specified models, which empirically, however, suffer from low explained variance (e.g., Vliegenthart et al. 2010). This problem extends beyond the current research but asks for better explic- 
ation of features explaining news content pertaining both to the political system and the media system as well as journalistic practices.

In terms of research on the media and European integration, our study raises a number of important points. Conflict news comes out of the study as the most utilized news frame together with the strategy frame. This finding is pointing to political differences and disagreement as inherent to a political campaign which, on the one hand, can be seen as beneficial to the EU as it presents the electorate with the political choice on offer. Such information is mobilizing for an electorate, especially when the conflicts covered are substantive in nature (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007). The strategy news frame, on the other hand, is often seen as a “demo-
bilizer,” by increasing political cynicism and mistrust (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). However, other research has shown that strategic news framing does not demobilize per se (Adriaansen, van Praag, and de Vreese 2010; de Vreese 2005) and in the context of European Parliamentary elections a certain level of cynicism can even be conducive to turnout intention (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2008). At this stage, the EU should be happy with news reporting, also in a strategic fashion, as this contributes to the impression that the European Parliamentary elections are “real” elections, unlike what the second-order literature suggests (Franklin 2002) with a politi-
cal battle taking place and alternative options to choose from.

NOTES

1. MSA is applied to test whether a set of items that theoretically measure the same latent trait meet the criterions of unidimensionality and cumulativity (Mokken 1971). One of its main statistics is the \( H \) coefficient, which denotes the homogeneity of the items. The \( H \) coefficient for the overall scale, as reported in the text, is 0.51, indicating a strong and reliable scale. \( H \) coefficients for the single scale items were 0.44 (“two or more sides”), 0.60 (“conflict or disagreement”), 0.40 (“personal attack”), and 0.58 (“reproach or blame”). Given the dichotomous nature of our data, MSA is to be preferred over alternative but more conventional scale reliability measures (such as Cronbach’s alpha, which we also report and which was .63 for the four conflict items).

2. The \( H \) coefficient for the overall scale, as reported in the text, is 0.37, indicating a weak but sufficiently reliable scale. \( H \) coefficients for the single-scale items were 0.39 (“presentation and style”), 0.39 (“stabilize position”), and 0.34 (“metaphors”). As for the conflict frame items, we also report Cronbach’s alpha for the three strategy items (.59).

3. In general, the presence of the various frames correlated only moderately (correlations between conflict and strategy = .45, between conflict and horse race = .26, and between strategy and horse race = .27). Metacoverage did not correlate significantly with any of the other frames.


5. Our research might appear to call for multilevel models, since our units are hierarchically clustered (weeks that are nested in media outlets that are nested in countries). However, results might be unreliable when the number of cases at the different levels is limited, which is the case here (especially at the outlet and week-level). Additionally, we do not have a random sample of cases, but purposively selected the
most widely used outlets in countries where the European Parliamentary elections would be held. Finally, we are not interested in statistically generalizing our results to all countries, outlets or time periods; rather, we seek to establish the relative impact of various independent variables on our dependent variables, for which linear regression analyses are appropriate. See for a similar approach Snow et al. (2007).

6. For conflict framing, one could also expect a nonlinear relationship between attitudes and coverage, with conflict framing especially present in the countries were opinions are divided and overall support moderate. Adding the squared term of “membership good thing” gives a positive coefficient that is marginally significant ($p = .08$), which indicates that this expectation is not confirmed.

REFERENCES


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