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Joost Van Spanje \textsuperscript{a}, Hajo G. Boomgaarden \textsuperscript{a}, Matthijs Elenbaas \textsuperscript{a}, Rens Vliegenthart \textsuperscript{a}, Rachid Azrout \textsuperscript{a}, Andreas R. T. Schuck \textsuperscript{a} & Claes H. de Vreese \textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Getting the Message Across: Perceived Effectiveness of Political Campaign Communication

JOOST VAN SPANJE, HAJO G. BOOMGAARDEN, MATTHIJS ELENBAAS, RENS VLEEGENTHART, RACHID AZROUT, ANDREAS R. T. SCHUCK, and CLAES H. DE VREESE

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Do political actors communicate effectively during electoral campaigns? We introduce a novel concept in electoral research, the “perceived effectiveness of political parties’ election campaigns.” This evaluation concentrates on the extent to which a party is seen as getting its message across to the voter. Empirical analyses using survey data and a media content analysis during the 2009 European Parliamentary elections show that the more exposed to news about a particular party, the more a voter feels that this party gets its message across. A party’s perceived campaign effectiveness is greater when one or two other parties are also mentioned in a particular news item, which may make the party’s profile more pronounced. Furthermore, the greater a voter’s interest in the campaign, the larger the effect of exposure on party evaluations. The article concludes by discussing party evaluations and campaign effectiveness in the light of our findings.

KEYWORDS election campaigns, political parties, Europe

How effective are election campaigns? To some extent they are as effective as voters perceive them to be. The question is crucial to political parties, their strategists, and campaigners, as the primary goal of candidates and parties is to do well at the polls (e.g., Strom and Muller 1999). Conventional attempts to measure campaign effectiveness have not focused on the...
perceived effectiveness, which we introduce in this article, but have rather been either concerned with aggregated comparisons between the (financial) efforts invested in a campaign and the outcome or with interpreting the actual election result as a de facto measure of campaign effectiveness.

Previous research also suggests other ways to—more or less objectively—assess the effectiveness of election campaigns. For instance, it has been shown that parties’ campaign spending and campaign activities such as canvassing relate to the share of votes they receive in the ballot box (e.g., Pattie et al. 1994; Pattie, Johnston, and Fieldhouse 1995; Gerber 1998). Another approach uses parties’ campaign communication output and compares this to actual media output or relates it to public perceptions of parties and candidates (Jacobsen 2006). Yet again, others have looked at the internal conduct of campaigns and have evaluated how effective they were planned (Ramirez 2005). These studies to some degree allow objectively assessing the effectiveness of election campaigns. As most studies are conducted at the aggregate level and not at the individual level, not much is known about how voters actually perceive the success of election campaigns, thus a subjective, individual approach to measure campaign effectiveness. This approach is at the core of this study. We are not interested in objectively assessing campaign effectiveness but in understanding and explaining voters’ perceptions of the effectiveness of parties’ campaign efforts.

The present study presents a first step in introducing the concept of perceived campaign effectiveness by focusing on the factors explaining such perceptions. These factors may be related to some kind of objective campaign effectiveness. It is reasonable to assume that a campaign’s objective success (e.g., in terms of money available for campaigning or in terms of communication output) affects perceptions of its effectiveness. At the heart of this study is mass-mediated communication output as an explanatory factor of perceived campaign effectiveness. To what degree does the coverage of political parties and their actors in the media contribute to the perceived effectiveness of these parties’ campaigns? Investigating the antecedents of perceived campaign effectiveness presents a first step in a more thorough recognition and understanding of this concept in research on electoral behavior. What also makes our analyses new is that they involve comparative research across four countries. This comparative setting gives us additional variation mileage, as it allows us to compare across countries and, within countries, across parties.¹

The article proceeds as follows. We first define our core concept, perceived campaign effectiveness, and we delineate this concept from other measures of campaign effectiveness by emphasizing the important, potentially distorting role of perceptions. We continue to analyze empirically various ways in which media content affects perceived campaign effectiveness. In a final step we discuss, on the basis of results from our empirical analyses, the potential ingredients of perceived campaign effectiveness with a focus on the role of mass media messages in influencing perceptions of parties’ campaign efforts.
CAMPAIGN EFFECTIVENESS AND PERCEIVED CAMPAIGN EFFECTIVENESS

A political party's election campaign is objectively effective if a higher share of the vote is cast for that particular party in elections compared to what would have been the case without the campaign. Practically it is close to impossible, however, to empirically assess the individual contribution of a party's campaign to vote share dynamics. Other parties campaign as well and events do take place in the real world that also may, and often do, influence voting behavior. In addition, campaigns are increasingly seen as permanent (Norris 2000) or at least campaign activities taking off long before the official start of an election campaign (if that is defined at all).

Objective campaign effectiveness, regardless of the extent to which it can be measured, should lead to people also perceiving a party doing well in the campaign. It is well known, however, that several types of distortion are possible here. In general, people often perceive reality incorrectly. Perceptions of the outside world are sometimes biased by perceptions of oneself, of one's personal opinions, and of others. Such wrong perceptions include overestimations of the impact of mass media content on others (Perloff 1999) and the false perception of one's own traits, attitudes, and behavior as relatively common (Ross, Greene, and House 1977) or as relatively uncommon (Bosveld et al. 1995).

These distortions make it unclear whether voters consider effective campaigns effective and ineffective campaigns ineffective. Perceptions, however, are based on information. Thus, it should be possible to explain perceptions to some extent on the basis of this information. So, whereas campaign effectiveness as such would ask whether politicians and parties succeed in getting their message across to the electorate, perceived campaign effectiveness asks whether parties are seen to get their message across to the voters. What is lacking in the literature on campaign effects is a measure of substantive considerations in relation to a political campaign.

In a campaign, the greatest challenge a political actor faces, at least in terms of the substance of his or her campaign, is to get “the message” across. As Norris et al. point out, “successful strategic communications depends upon parties fighting professional campaigns with clear objectives which identify target voters, consistent themes and images which touch a chord with their supporters, and coordinated messages across all party publicity. Parties which achieve these aims can be assumed to stay ‘on message,’ rather than being deflected by the attacks and counter-attacks of their opponents” (Norris et al. 1999, p. 67). This is all the more important in multiparty settings, where ideological, policy, and style differences between parties are relatively small and it is crucial for parties to stand out with their message.

Perceived campaign effectiveness therefore is defined as an individual's reading of how well different parties conduct their campaigns. This question
is relevant, as several scholars have pointed out that this is a core function of electoral campaigns: In order for democracy to function well, voters should be enabled to make not just a choice but an informed one (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In a context of increasing voter volatility in contemporary Western Europe (as becomes clear from, e.g., Caramani 2006), the perceived effectiveness of campaigns is potentially more important than in other contexts, since voters switch more often. And also the campaigns may matter more, since voters tend to make up their mind during the campaigns instead of beforehand. They may also matter differently, as voters tend to decide later in the campaigns about who to vote for. The perceived effectiveness of a party in getting its message across is more important in a multi-party system (as are common in contemporary Western Europe), where differences between parties is minimal at times, than in the commonly studied U.S. two-party context.2

There are plenty of good reasons to argue why campaigns need to be effective, the core goal of political marketing activity, and therefore their effectiveness indeed needs to be assessed objectively. We, however, argue that in addition it is also important for campaigns to be perceived to be effective by the electorate. Perceptions of how a party's campaign is going may affect perceptions of that party as such and, more importantly, may lead to changes in voting behavior. The notion of the third-person effect describes a belief that communication exerts a stronger effect on others than on oneself (e.g., Davison 1983; Perloff 1999). If we perceive campaigns as largely transmitting information to the electorate, and if someone believes that a certain party's campaign is very successful, it follows that he or she will think that this successful campaign will have a strong effect on others (if not on himself or herself). Such a third-person effect can elicit behavioral consequences. As Davison (1983) argues, communication effects are not due to direct effects of persuasive contents of a message, but “to the behavior of those who anticipate, or think they perceive, some reaction on the part of others” (p. 3). In our case, perceiving a party’s campaign to be effective may make people believe that such effectiveness will influence others to vote for that party.

This, in turn, may translate into electoral behavior. This may be due to bandwagon or underdog effects (McAllister and Studlar 1991; Faas, Mackenroth, and Schmitt-Beck 2008; Simon 1954). This may also be due to party size effects. To the extent that voters are interested in having their preferred policies enacted, they will take party size into account when casting their vote. That is, they will vote for a party that can be expected to be larger, and thus more efficacious, after the election (e.g., Tillie 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Van der Brug and Fennema 2003). Where perceptions of effectiveness of the campaign affect expectations about the size of the parties, they may also influence voting behavior. Finally, even direct effects of perceiving a party to have a good campaign on voting for that party are plausible. Therefore, we believe it is important to take into...
account subjective perceptions of campaign effectiveness in research on election campaigns and electoral behavior.

We thus add to and at the same time go beyond the extant literature on generic candidate and campaign evaluations to address specific judgments regarding the strategic quality, clarity, and persuasiveness of political campaign messages by those who are targeted by these messages.

MEDIA INFLUENCES ON PERCEIVED CAMPAIGN EFFECTIVENESS

Media matter during election campaigns, as they (still) form the main source of political information for the majority of citizens in Europe. Several U.S.-based studies suggest that electoral campaigns affect candidate evaluations. A “judgment formed when the information was encountered best predicts candidate evaluation” (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Voters do learn about politics during a campaign (Weaver and Drew 1993; Eveland, Shah, and Kwak 2003), and even though acquired information may decay over time, this does not preclude that campaigns have effects. “Over time people forget most of the campaign information they are exposed to but are nonetheless able to later recollect their summary affective evaluation of candidates which they then use to inform their preferences and vote choice” (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995, p. 309). Lodge et al. convincingly show that campaign information impacts electoral behavior. Campaign influences may not be the same for every voter. Such effects have been found to be conditional upon political sophistication. “As races become more competitive, novices begin to rely more heavily on issues, sociotropic assessments, party identification, and presidential approval, whereas political experts are less affected by changes in the campaign environment” (Kahn and Kenney 1997, p. 1173).

So, whereas we can assume media effects on candidate perceptions, we know virtually nothing about the potential of media coverage to influence perceptions of parties’ campaign efforts. This is an important gap in the body of knowledge that we set out to fill in this paper. Since we are using a novel measure of parties’ campaign effectiveness, we cannot base expectations on much literature. We expect such perceptions to primarily depend on the degree to which a party was covered in the news media. The news is the primary source for citizens when it comes to political and campaign events (Zaller 1999), so any assessment of whether a party is successful in communicating its message to the voters should depend on the degree to which it is visible in the media. This effect, however, should not occur in a linear fashion. It is unlikely that whether a party is visible in the news just once as opposed to not at all will have the same effect as a party being covered, for example, 9 or 10 times in the news. Therefore, we expect decreasing marginal returns of higher news visibility for campaign effectiveness perceptions.
H1a: The more a voter is exposed to media coverage of a particular party, the more positive his or her perception of that party’s campaign effectiveness will be.

H1b: The effect of media exposure on perceived campaign effectiveness (as specified in H1a) shows decreasing marginal returns as media exposure increases.

The perception of one party’s campaign effectiveness does not take place in a vacuum, and the absolute evaluation is likely to be relative to party competition. In this vein, it is important to take into account the informational context in which a party’s campaign communication is covered in the media. Not only should it matter how often a party is covered in the news, but it should be equally important to consider whether and how often its competitors are mentioned in the same news items. We suspect that voters are inclined to judge a party’s campaign communication in relation to the party’s share of the limelight in comparison with other parties. The presence of another party in the news item may make the contrast between the parties sharper, making the party’s profile more likely to stick. In line with this argument, it is argued that a political party may benefit from being verbally attacked by rival political parties. This is because the distinctiveness of a party’s profile increases as a result of criticism from its traditional enemies (Shah et al. 2002; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007). Although when two parties are mentioned in the same news story we do not know whether there was actual criticism or whether the parties involved are traditional enemies of one another, we still expect a party’s profile to be more pronounced when—implicitly or explicitly—compared to other parties. If we translate this to the context of the study at hand, we hypothesize that exposure to a news item that features more than one party will elicit more favorable campaign assessments for each of the parties that are contrasted with another.

We furthermore argue that this relationship is unlikely to be linear. A news item that mentions two or three parties may actually help to accentuate the parties’ messages by contrasting them with other parties’ messages and therefore contribute to higher perceived campaign effectiveness. If a great number of parties, however, compete for attention within a single news item the likelihood is high that the messages of the different parties get lost and the advantage of having more than one party in the news item over being the only party covered disappears. Therefore, the competitiveness of the media environment is expected to matter in the following way.

H2: If a voter is exposed to media coverage of a particular party contrasted with one or two other parties, his or her perception of that party’s campaign effectiveness will be more positive than when he or she is exposed to media coverage of that party in isolation.
In line with the studies on the contingency of media effects mentioned above, we expect that campaign messages do not affect all citizens to a similar degree. Interest in the European Parliamentary election campaign is a potentially important factor that may spark stronger media effects. It has been shown that more interested citizens are more likely to pick up cues in the media during political campaigns (Zaller 1992). Moreover, recent research underscores that politically interested individuals process new information differently and are affected more by such information (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Following extant work (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007), we expect general political interest to capture both citizens’ motivation and ability to process information about political parties’ campaigns. Consequently, people who are interested in the campaign are expected to be more likely to formulate their assessments of parties’ campaign effectiveness on impressions gained in the mass media. Therefore, we think that the more citizens are interested in the campaign, the stronger the positive effect of visibility of a party in the media on assessments of whether that party gets its message across. Similarly, the decreasing marginal returns effect is hypothesized to be more pronounced among voters who are very interested in the campaign and are hence more likely to notice how many times a particular party is mentioned.

H3a: The more interested a voter is in the campaign, the stronger the effect of media exposure on perceived campaign effectiveness (as specified under H1a).

H3b: The more interested a voter is in the campaign, the stronger the decreasing marginal returns effect of media exposure on perceived campaign effectiveness (as specified under H1b).

DATA AND METHOD

To test these expectations, we draw on two data sources collected in the context of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in four countries: the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and the UK. The first is a content analysis of news media in these countries, the second a voter survey. We integrate media content data with reported exposure measures to the outlets subject to the content analysis. This analysis strategy allows for conservatively modeling individuals’ likelihood to have come across a certain type of news coverage (visibility and competitiveness); this exposure is expected to affect their perceptions of a party’s campaign effectiveness.

Rolling Cross-Section

A voter survey was conducted in the four countries during the three weeks before election day (Germany and Denmark: May 17 to June 6, 2009,
Netherlands and UK: May 14 to June 3, 2009). The survey was Web-administered. The design was so-called “rolling cross-sectional” (Brady and Johnston 2006), meaning that respondents are not invited at the same time but according to a procedure of carefully chosen time points of invitations so as to create a daily random sample of the population. In our study, respondents were invited to participate in wave 1 at any of 20 different days during the 20 days prior to the 2009 European election and were all invited as soon as possible after the elections to take part in the second wave. Following the recommendations by Brady and Johnston (2006), each individual was reinvited three times if the individual did not participate on the day of the initial invitation. A total of 22,504 respondents aged 18 and older participated in the survey on one of the days leading up to the elections (Germany: 5477, Netherlands: 6632, Denmark: 5086, UK: 5309). The average response rate was 37%. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into the original languages. It was then translated back into English as a check of the accuracy of the translations (for more information on recruitment and the daily samples see De Vreese et al. 2010).

Our dependent variable is a measure of whether respondents thought that different parties got their message across in the campaign, our indicator of perceived campaign effectiveness. The question wording for this variable was “We continue with a question about the European Parliamentary election campaign. In your opinion, to what extent do the following parties get their message across in this campaign?” with answers ranging from “not at all” to “to a great extent” on a 7-point scale. This question was asked for a range of parties participating in the European Parliamentary election in each of the countries. As Weisberg and Rusk (1970, p. 1167) rightly point out, “more scholarly attention should be given to popular attitudes toward the full spectrum of possible candidates” in any election. Thus, we examine no fewer than 32 different parties in our four-country sample: Germany: 5, Netherlands: 12, UK: 6, and Denmark: 9.

The main independent variable is news exposure. For three national newspapers and two (four in Germany) television newscasts per country, we asked respondents: “Which of the following news media have you used either today or yesterday? Please think back and try to make sure you click all the ones that you used today or yesterday,” with answer options to affirm or not the use of each outlet. These data were then integrated with the relevant content characteristics of each of the different outlets (see below). The moderator variable campaign interest was assessed by asking “How interested are you in the campaign for the European Parliamentary elections?”, with answers ranging from “not at all interested” to “very interested” on a 7-point scale. Note that campaign interest was only moderately correlated with campaign news exposure. Finally, our models control for a number of sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education). The descriptive statistics for all variables are given in Table 1. In addition, we constructed a
dummy variable indicating whether the party that was evaluated by a respondent was also the party that he or she intended to vote (score 1) at the upcoming European Parliamentary elections. Here one would expect respondents to rate their preferred party higher on its campaign effectiveness. Vote intention was assessed by asking respondents the following question: “Which party would you vote for if European Parliamentary elections were held tomorrow?”

Content Analysis

We content-analyzed two evening television newscasts and three national newspapers in each of the four countries (four TV newscasts in Germany) as part of the PIREDEU project (Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union; www.piredeu.eu). These include the most widely watched/read news outlets and both commercial and public broadcasting news as well as tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (Germany: ARD Tagesschau, ZDF heute, RTL aktuell, Sat. 1 Nachrichten, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Bild; Netherlands: NOS Journaal, RTL nieuws, Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, Telegraaf; UK: BBC news, ITV news, Guardian, Times, Sun; Denmark: DR 1 TV-Avisen, TV2 Nyhederne, Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Ekstra Bladet). During the three weeks leading up to election day, we analyzed all TV news items and all items appearing on the front page of the selected newspapers. Furthermore, all items within the newspaper that would refer to the EU or the European Parliamentary elections were coded (for more information about the coding procedure, see Schuck et al. 2010). For the analyses presented here we used all items that mentioned the European Parliamentary
election or the European Parliamentary election campaign in both television news and newspapers.

Our two content analytical indicators relate to the sheer media visibility of the different parties campaigning for the European Parliamentary election and the competitiveness of this media visibility in terms of competing party references within the same news story. Per news item, up to five actors appearing in that item could be coded. A person, party, or institution was coded as an actor if it was mentioned at least twice in the item. For all parties campaigning for the European Parliamentary election, we counted the number of news stories that referred to any of the parties themselves or to party actors. This generates a measure of a party’s news visibility. Furthermore, for each party we counted the number of (actors from) or other political parties mentioned within the same news item. This measure we use as an indicator of parties’ news competitiveness.

Integrating these content analytical indicators per news outlet with individuals’ exposure to the different outlets allows for a concise assessment of the news information diet that respondents received. To do so we multiply the outlet- and day-specific means of the content indicators with reported exposure to the respective news outlets. To test the first hypothesis we add this news visibility measure to our model as well as its squared term. For a test of the second hypothesis we use dummy variables indicating exposure to news items covering one, two, and three or more other parties (with a single party coverage as the reference category). We also include a counter of the day of the campaign, ranging from day 3 (17 days before the election) to day 18 (2 days before). As we use moving three-day averages of news exposure (so as to reduce white noise in the data), we cannot take into account data on the first two and last two days of the campaign. Note that when using rolling cross-sectional designs, the use of the first two days is not recommended anyway, because it takes approximately two days for the sample to become representative for the population in such designs (Brady and Johnston 2006).

Descriptive Statistics of the Dependent Variables

We report descriptive statistics regarding the news coverage of different parties in the four countries, our dependent variables. Table 2 shows the number of news items per country and within country per party that included the different political parties as actors.

As expected, in all countries we see clear visibility advantages of the major political players. Especially in Denmark, the picture looks as expected in terms of party size. In the other three countries, however, we also see some particularities of the campaigns. The UK majoritarian system shows a strong media bias in favor of the two biggest parties, Labour and Conservatives, disadvantaging the smaller parties competing in the campaign. Note that the
British National Party (BNP) is mentioned more often in the media than the third party, the Liberal Democrats. In Germany we see a clear visibility bonus for the governing parties Christian Democratic Union (CDU-CSU) and Liberals (FDP) vis-à-vis their main competitors. In the Netherlands, by contrast, news items on the governing parties Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Labour (PvdA), and Christian Union (CU) are relatively scarce. Interestingly, not the largest opposition party in the national parliament, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>News Party Visibility (Total Number of News Story References to the Party)</th>
<th>News Party Competitiveness (Average Number of Other Parties Mentioned in the Same News Story)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denmark:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialdemokraterne</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venstre</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialistisk Folkeparti</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dansk Folkeparti</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konservative Folkeparti</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radikale Venstre</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juni Bevægelsen</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folkebevægelsen</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Alliance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU/CSU</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDP</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Grünen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Die Linke</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.67</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Netherlands:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVD</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVV</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
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<tr>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>53</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
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<tr>
<td>D66</td>
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<td>GroenLinks</td>
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<td>CU/SGP</td>
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<tr>
<td>PvdD</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>NewEuropeans</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TROTS*</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td><strong>United Kingdom:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The party Proud of the Netherlands (abbreviated “TROTS”) did not participate in the European elections but nonetheless tried to be visible in the campaign. It is therefore included in these analyses.
Socialist Party (SP), is mentioned most, but the second largest, the Liberals (VVD). The Freedom Party (PVV) is the second most visible Dutch party, perhaps due to their strong anti-European message, which was unprecedented in the Netherlands.

The second indicator relates to parties’ competition from other parties within news items. Here we consider the number of other parties that were mentioned as actors in the item with reference to each party. Overall, the mean scores per party shown in Table 2 provide a more even picture when it comes to the competitiveness of news coverage. It appears, however, that in particular the smaller parties have to try to get their message across in a more competitive environment, especially in Germany and the UK. In Denmark and the Netherlands we see a more balanced picture. We now turn to the question of whether exposure to media visibility and competitiveness did affect whether citizens thought that parties were getting their message across.

Analysis

We stack the data (for details of this procedure, see Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) so that the unit of analysis is the individual * party combination. In other words, the level at which the analysis is done is the level of individuals’ assessment of a particular party’s campaign effectiveness. This means that we have a data structure in which party assessments are nested within individuals. We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, regressing individual*party assessments on our independent variables of interest and controls. However, the interdependencies between observations (belonging to the same respondent) imply that we cannot report just the results of OLS regression analyses. Instead, we adjust the standard errors accordingly. We add a dummy for each party to the analysis, indicating that some parties are generally perceived to perform better than others (dummies are not shown in the tables). These dichotomous variables tap idiosyncratic features of the campaign that are constant for all voters within a specific country. Additionally, we conducted several multilevel analyses, in which we considered party evaluations to be nested within individuals. Since these analyses result in largely similar results to the ones from the OLS regressions, we decided to only report the results from the latter, also because they are more easily interpretable.9

RESULTS

The first model in Table 3 (model A) includes the effects of news visibility and of news competitiveness alongside the control variables. We find significant effects of news visibility in both its linear and quadratic form. Exposure to news that gives more attention to a certain party leads to a more positive
perception of that particular party getting its message across (H1a supported). But, in addition to this, the effect of the squared term shows that the relationship between visibility and perceptions does occur with diminishing returns (H1b supported). In particular, it matters that a certain threshold of visibility in the news is reached to increase perceived campaign effectiveness. The effects found are small. The seven-digit coefficients are .0065024 for the linear term and –.0000334 for the quadratic term. Thus, if news exposure is at its minimum (1 news item), the increase in campaign effectiveness is $1 \times .0065024 + 1 \times –.0000334 = 0.006$ on a 1-to-7 scale. If news exposure reaches its mean (12 news items), the increase is $12 \times .0065024 + 12 \times –.0000334 = 0.078$, and if it is one standard deviation above its mean (26 news items), its increase is $26 \times .0065024 + 26 \times –.0000334 = 0.168$.

Media competitiveness also affects such perceptions. It is shown that competing with one other party in the news leads to a .075 more positive perceived campaign effectiveness (1-to-7 scale) as opposed to being the sole subject of a news item. Competition with two other parties has a slightly smaller effect of .069 on the 1-to-7 campaign effectiveness scale. Co-occurrence with more than two parties does not have a significant effect. There is no

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<td>News party competitiveness: 1 other party mentioned</td>
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<td>News party visibility * Campaign interest</td>
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<td>News party visibility squared * Campaign interest</td>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
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Note. Linear regression with clustered robust standard errors. Party dummies added to the model (not shown).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).
significant difference in the effects of having exclusive visibility versus being covered together with three or more parties (supporting H2), suggesting a nonlinear relationship. Thus, perceived campaign effectiveness is a function of how visible parties are in the news and of how many other parties are mentioned in the same article.

Especially vote intention is a strong predictor for perceived effectiveness: Respondents score their preferred party considerably higher than other parties. Interest in the European Parliamentary election campaign also turns out to be a positive predictor of whether one thinks that parties are getting their messages across. Furthermore, the further in the campaign, the greater the extent to which parties get their message across in voters’ eyes. Finally, older people and women are more likely to think that parties get their message across. The model explains some 17% of the variance in the dependent variable.

The second model also includes the interaction term between news visibility and campaign interest (model B). Being more interested in the European Parliamentary election campaign combined with exposure to higher news visibility for a certain party leads to more positive assessments of that party’s campaign effectiveness (H3a supported), again with decreasing marginal returns (H3b supported). Thus, interest in the campaign indeed makes people more likely to pick up media cues when formulating their perceptions of parties’ campaigns. The effects of the control variables remain by and large unaltered. The direct effect of news visibility vanishes after including the interaction terms, but this merely indicates the projected effect of news visibility if campaign interest is zero. We proceed to discuss these findings in the following section.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have introduced the notion of perceived campaign effectiveness. We consider this an important addition to the current literature on how citizens evaluate campaigns and political actors. We think it is relevant because getting a message across in a campaign is important to a party, especially in multi-party systems and especially with voters behaving in less stable ways and making decisions later in the campaign. To what extent do parties succeed, in voters’ eyes, in conveying their message?

We addressed this question by looking at European Parliamentary elections, held simultaneously in EU member states in June 2009. We found empirical evidence in four countries where these elections took place—Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK—and concerning 32 parties. The evidence suggests that exposure to news about a political party actually increases the perceived effectiveness of that party’s campaign. So, the more Labour coverage a voter sees, the more he or she feels that the party gets its message across (H1a). In addition, there is a small effect of decreasing marginal returns
indicating that, as expected, the added value of yet another news item about a party that is a lot in the news is smaller for that party than the added value of one of the few news items for a less visible party.

A second finding is that the effect of media visibility was expected to be stronger the more interested the voter actually is (H3a). So, voters who are very interested and who see lots of Labour coverage will, on average, indicate more that the party gets its message across than that it does not and vice versa, whereas for voters who are uninterested it does not matter how much Labour coverage they are exposed to, their perception of the party’s effectiveness hardly changes, if at all. On the other hand, however, may uninterested voters be more likely to follow a simple cue such as visibility (“I saw Labour several times so they should be good at getting their message across although I did not read it”), whereas interested voters are more likely to deviate from this cue (“Labour was in the media all the time and I read them all but I still do not know what the party stands for because they were not really given the opportunity/unable/unwilling to formulate their message; the United Kingdom Independence Party, on the contrary, was not in there much but it was abundantly clear what their message was”). If such effects exist, this makes our estimate of this effect more conservative, which boosts confidence in our findings. As expected, we also see a decreasing marginal returns impact here that is more pronounced among those voters who are highly interested in the campaign (H3b).

As a third result, we find that how many other parties are mentioned in a particular news item matters for perceived campaign effectiveness (H2). We find evidence in support of our expectation that if a voter sees, for example, Labour in a news story, he or she feels that the party gets its message across but if, for example, Conservatives are in there as well, he or she feels that Labour gets its message across even better. One or two extra parties in the news item helps Labour because it benefits from the accentuation of its profile vis-à-vis the other party. But, being cramped in a single news story with, for example, five other parties does not help a party at all, on average, as compared to being mentioned as the only party in the news item.

In sum, our study brings a novel idea to the literature: perceived campaign effectiveness. We demonstrate how variation in these evaluations is driven by media appearances and the competition between parties. The effects are not consistent across the board but pertain in particular to politically interested citizens (corroborating Chong and Druckman 2007). We should mention a few caveats here. First, while the novel concept of perceived effectiveness of political parties’ election campaigns is introduced to electoral research, the consequences are only speculated about. We posed that perceptions of campaign effectiveness may contribute to voting behavior via the third-person effect, and we have argued that there may even be a direct link between perceived campaign effectiveness and vote choice. However, future studies need to empirically establish such theoretical claims. We perceive this study to be a
first step in a thorough investigation of the usefulness of perceived campaign effectiveness in research on elections and election campaigns.

Second, we have to note that quite a share of the electorate indicated “don’t know” when asked about a party’s campaign effectiveness. To some extent this is logical, since the assessment of some, often smaller parties, may indeed be harder for citizens to make. This proportion ranges from 16% (SPD, Germany) to 38% (Party of the Animals, Netherlands). This means that our dependent variable has a substantial number of missing values, influencing our significance tests and the representativeness of our samples. Replication of our findings in settings with hard-fought clear first-order elections (which would arguably reduce missing values) would be recommended in order to see whether our results hold.

Third, replication in such settings would also be important, as we have substantiated our media effects in a European Parliamentary election context, which is characterized by low campaign intensity (e.g., Banducci and Semetko 2003; Peter, Lauf, and Semetko 2004; De Vreese et al. 2006; Wilke and Reinemann 2007). This is important to consider since the intensity of campaigns may moderate media effects. “As campaigns become more hard-fought, people are more likely to consider policy and ideology as well as partisanship and retrospective evaluations of the president and the economy” (Kahn and Kenney 1997, p. 1173). This said, by concentrating on European Parliamentary elections, we have loaded the dice against us in the sense that it reduces our chances of finding empirical support for our expectations. This increases our confidence in the findings.

Fourth, once confronted with our “Getting their message across” question, citizens are likely to look for cues. A major cue is performance in opinion polls. How a party fares in the polls may tell us something about the extent to which it effectively communicates its message, a voter may think. Scholars may want to control for this in future research by looking at actual poll results and exposure to them or by examining perceived poll results. However, this is unlikely to be a strong confounding factor, as we happen to know from our data (we have asked our respondents) that the percentage of voters reporting to having seen such polls is only about 8% to 10% in the countries under study.

What do our findings tell us in terms of effective political communication? From the perspective of political parties, our results suggest that visibility is key. Parties should be as visible in the media as possible, although the additional effect of yet another news story on a party becomes substantially smaller beyond a high number of news items. Furthermore, voters who are interested in the campaign are especially susceptible to party cues. Parties have no a priori reason to decline cooperation with a news story in which competitors are mentioned as well. Indeed, it actually helps a party if there are one or two other parties they have to share the attention with. In sum, it does not hurt a party if it is only briefly mentioned with one or two of their rivals—as long as they are mentioned.
NOTES

1. Furthermore, we introduce methodological innovations in this research area. First of all, we link media exposure to media content in order to test our hypotheses (see De Vreese and Semetko 2002, 2004; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). Second, we use the procedure of stacking data in order to better estimate the effects of interest (see Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Van der Brug and Penninx 2003).

2. In addition, the effectiveness of a campaign might be particularly important in European elections, which are cognitive “second-order” elections (Hix and Marsh 2007; Reif and Schmitt 1980) in the sense that many voters are less involved, as opposed to “first-order” national elections.

3. Several scholars found that campaign effects on candidate evaluations and voting behavior differ not only among voters but also among media coverage items. During electoral campaigns, the media attribute success or failure to particular political actors. This in itself has a substantial impact on change in party preferences (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007, p. 378). Also the tone of media coverage of candidates is important here (Shaw 1999, p. 183). It is therefore no surprise that the slant of the media is found to influence candidate evaluations (Druckman and Parkin 2005, p. 1047; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998, p. 124). The effect of evaluations of political actors in the news is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

4. However, our case, the 2009 European elections, may still not yield any effects, as they were not very intensive and interest in these elections is generally low, as illustrated by the low turnout compared to national elections (e.g., van der Eijk and van Egmond 2007).

5. Note that the decreasing marginal returns effect could actually (also) be a ceiling effect, as the independent variable is not bound, whereas the dependent variable is bound between 1 and 7 (see Methods section). In other words, while the number of news items on a particular party is (in principle) infinite, the party evaluation is finite, as it cannot become more positive than 7. A ceiling effect would pose a measurement problem that would produce results that looked like our theoretically expected outcome: that of the marginal returns impact. However, as more than 94% of party ratings are not at the maximum of 7, it is unlikely that a ceiling effect drives our results. We therefore do not expect that there is such a ceiling effect that is problematic to our analyses.

6. The daily response rates varied from 33% to 52% in Denmark (M = 42%, SD = 6%), from 11% to 42% in Germany (M = 22%, SD = 8%), from 39% to 54% in the Netherlands (M = 46%, SD = 5%), and from 12% to 32% in the United Kingdom (M = 20%, SD = 5%).

7. We split our education variable categories (14 in Denmark, 8 in Germany, 9 in the Netherlands, 11 in the UK) into two categories (higher and lower educated) so as to keep the results easy to interpret.

8. A related question is whether the respondent is also more likely to rate the preferred party at all. This turns out to be the case, but only to a very limited extent.

9. Multilevel modeling offers the opportunity to also include party-level variables as additional independent variables. The results show that, for example, the current size of the party in the national parliament has a positive effect on perceived effectiveness. Since we are not interested in absolute party differences, the dummy variables included in our OLS regressions, removing all inter-party variance, suffice here.

10. This is a mere hypothetical situation, as campaign interest cannot be zero, because it is bound between 1 and 7 (see Table 1).

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR NOTES**

Joost van Spanje is assistant professor of Political Communication and Quantitative Methodology, University of Amsterdam. He won the 2010 Dutch Political Science Association (NKWP) Dissertation Award and a 2012 Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) three-year ‘Veni’ research grant. His research interests include political behavior, electoral studies, and political communication. His work has been published in eighteen articles in ISI-ranked international journals, among which two in West European Politics, two in European Union Politics, and three in the European Journal of Political Research.
Hajo G. Boomgaarden (PhD University of Amsterdam) is associate professor of Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research and the Department of Communication at the University of Amsterdam. He also serves as board member of the Centre for Politics and Communication (www.polcomm.org). His research interests focus on media portrayals of politics and on media effects on political attitudes and behavior, specifically media and European integration, media election campaign and issue coverage, media effects on economic perceptions, immigration attitudes and extreme-right voting and on framing effects (www.hajoboomgaarden.com).

Matthijs Elenbaas is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. His recent research examines how media coverage informs public opinion about politics in general, and European politics in particular. His work has been published in *Journal of Communication, Communication Research, Political Communication, European Journal of Political Research,* and *The International Journal of Press/Politics,* among other journals.

Rens Vliegenthart is associate professor in Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research and in the Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam. His research interests include media-politics interactions, social movements and time series analysis. More info:www.rensvliegenthart.com.

Rachid Azrout is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on public opinion about the EU, with special interest for EU enlargement and Turkey’s potential accession, and the role of the media in opinion formation.

Andreas R. T. Schuck is assistant professor of Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) and in the Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on public opinion dynamics during election campaigns, media effects on political attitudes and behavior, public support for EU integration and direct democracy. For his PhD dissertation he won the NESCOR dissertation award and recently he received a VENI grant by the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) for a three-year project investigating the (de-) mobilizing role of emotions in political communication. His work has been published in international peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Communication, Electoral Studies, European Union Politics, European Journal of Political Research, West European Politics,* and *International Journal of Press/Politics.*

Claes H. de Vreese is professor and chair of Political Communication, University of Amsterdam. He has published over 100 articles in academic journals and his research is funded by several national and international grants. His research focuses on political communication, journalism, direct democracy and public opinion. For more information www.claesdevreese.com.