

# WILL CONFLICT TEAR US APART? THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT AND VALENCED MEDIA MESSAGES ON POLARIZING ATTITUDES TOWARD EU IMMIGRATION AND BORDER CONTROL

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**Abstract** European migration and border control has occupied a prominent spot on the European political agenda. The news media present the topic in a polarized fashion and reports conflicting viewpoints on how the European Union (EU) and national governments should address the issue. We argue that this conflict in news messages can have a polarizing effect on public perceptions regarding the EU's performance on this topic, and that this effect can be moderated by the valence of news messages. A two-wave online panel survey experiment was conducted on a representative sample of the Dutch population ( $n = 376$ ). The results indicate that conflict reinforces and thus polarizes policy attitudes, whereas a message's valence can change people's attitudes, which reduces the attitudinal gap. The implications of these findings concerning European border control and migration are discussed in the final section of this paper.

## Introduction

European border security is a prominent topic on today's political and media agendas, having received increased political, media, and public attention, and is one of the most challenging issues that the European Union (EU) currently

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faces. To form European policy on border security and migration, the EU underwent a variety of processes that considered many facets, such as international stability and security, a border-free area, (labor) migration, and the human rights of migrants (Huysman 2000). However, among EU member states, a clear consensus has never been reached regarding this issue (Commission of European Communities 2004; Cerami 2011).

Several incidents show that there is disagreement among the different member states. For instance, in 2011 Denmark introduced custom controls on illegal immigration, which opposed the 1995 Schengen agreement (BBC News Europe 2011), and Italian President Berlusconi operated against EU regulations by providing temporary Schengen-visas to immigrants on the island of Lampedusa (Kreickenbaum 2011). More recently, a Dutch member of parliament proposed the closing of all EU borders to immigrants and the abandoning of its refugee policy altogether; in the fall of 2015, the topic of open borders and migration were at center stage on the media agenda due to the high number of refugees.

The debate is polarizing, which has potentially far-reaching implications. Leeper (2014) argued that polarization can threaten democratic well-being; although one of the core democratic purposes of the news media is to provide the audience with various viewpoints, if media exposure causes strong and magnifying disagreements among citizens, it presents a serious potential threat to this democracy. Therefore, it is important to know what causes the public to polarize over political issues in general and, given its prominence, European border control policies in particular. Increased polarization on this issue is likely to reflect on general EU attitudes and may influence voting behavior and policy outcomes; thus, polarization on European border control has consequences for overall European integration.

It is generally argued that mass media forms a counterforce to political polarization by exposing the audience to opposite viewpoints (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). We expect that exposure to viewpoints that oppose one's own political opinion can reduce polarization (Rucker, Petty, and Briñal 2008; Matthes and Valenzuela 2012). However, people are often exposed to messages that contain several, often conflicting viewpoints at the same time. We argue that this conflict in media messages has an attitude-reinforcing effect that can create more polarization. In addition to this theoretical novelty, we attempt to understand how the media affect the public debate on EU policies.

Because people consider the news media the most important source of information concerning EU topics (European Commission 2003; Vliegenthart et al. 2008), the media's effects on public opinion are frequently studied. However, few studies have considered the role of the media on specific EU policy areas (except, e.g., de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; de Vreese and Kandyla 2009). The current study contributes to this gap through a survey-embedded experiment that allows us to study the causal mechanisms between the news media and polarization in a controlled setting.

## CONFLICT IN NEWS MEDIA CAUSING ATTITUDE REINFORCEMENT

We are interested in investigating the effect on individual attitudes of exposure to conflict in media messages. For this purpose, we apply a conflict frame in our micro-level experimental study. This is a generic frame (de Vreese 2002) with an inherently conflictual character, which is particularly common in political news regarding European democracy (Bizer, Larsen, and Petty 2011) and has been used in past EU media messages (e.g., Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). The conflict frame emphasizes the disagreement among individuals, institutions or groups, mainly to capture the interest of the audience (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). In this study, the conflict frame represents disagreement between two actors on the issue of immigration and EU border control. Here, one actor argues the effectiveness and benefits (i.e., a more positive position) of certain EU policy regulations, whereas the other actor emphasizes their ineffectiveness and disadvantages (i.e., a more negative position).

The conflict frame is often applied during presidential election campaigns (Patterson 1993). Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) found, for example, that journalistic traditions in the United States lead to a relatively high emphasis on conflict because it offers an intriguing narrative. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that conflict was the second most visible news frame. However, little is known concerning the effects of conflict framing on citizens' attitudes toward specific policy areas (Niederdeppe, Collust, and Barry 2014).

Although frames are often said to have the ability to resolve confusion regarding an issue (Zaller 1992; Sniderman and Theriault 2004), this outcome is less likely when a frame shows opposing arguments. When these arguments are further apart, the guiding function of a frame is smaller (Chong and Druckman 2007a) and, arguably, people are less likely to adopt one of the presented arguments. Related to this idea, Rucker, Petty, and Briñal (2008) found that two-sided messages (i.e., messages that disclose both positive and negative information) tend to leave people better informed and thus more certain concerning their attitudes. This effect occurs because people gain access to arguments to reinforce their own attitudes, but they also become familiar with opposing arguments, which makes them feel informed. In a way, people are given ammunition to better defend their initial position.

Because a conflict frame presents two sides of an issue, we argue that this frame may elicit similar meta-cognitive processes that strengthen people's attitudes. It is also possible that due to motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990), people may ignore counter-attitudinal arguments (Matthes and Valenzuela 2012), whereas the arguments that are consistent with people's attitudes strengthen their initial position.

However, the extremity of the conflict (i.e., the level of disagreement between the actors) in a message can differ, and this difference may also affect the magnitude of the proposed effect. Arguably, in the case of high conflict, the fact that the two arguments are further apart makes it less likely for a

person to be drawn to an opposite, extreme standpoint. Additionally, it is likely easier to disregard more extreme counter-attitudinal statements because they are more clearly identifiable. Conversely, low conflict may present relatively more persuasive arguments because it represents more moderate positions. Thus, when the conflict in a message is greater, a person is more likely not to be persuaded by opposing viewpoints, but instead gets reinforced in their attitudes. Therefore, when exposed to a higher level of conflict, people with initially negative attitudes more often remain negative (H1a), whereas people balanced in their viewpoints more often remain balanced (H1b), and positive people remain positive (H1c).

#### OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS: ATTITUDE INCONGRUENCE CAUSING ATTITUDE CHANGE

Furthermore, we expect exposure to opposite viewpoints to reduce polarization. An opposing position in a message can create a clash between one's attitudes and the depicted image in the media and can cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). This dissonance creates pressure that people often wish to avoid or remove.

Recently, scholarship has paid increased attention to selective exposure theory (Stroud 2011; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013; Garrett et al. 2014). With a changing media landscape and a greater variety of choices, people are thought to more easily and, therefore, increasingly select ideologically congruent news (get selectively exposed) and avoid cognitive dissonance. Recent studies have questioned the scope of this theory and found that only a minority of the public is actually exposed to solely like-minded media (Stroud 2011; Prior 2013; Dvir-Gvirsman, Tsfati, and Menchen-Trevino 2014). This result means that people are regularly exposed to attitude incongruent messages, which causes dissonance that must be resolved.

Dissonance can be removed by ignoring or avoiding the opposing message: i.e., by disregarding it and saying it is not truthful, correct, or important or by resigning oneself to the alternative cognition (Festinger 1957). However, when one is given an alternative cognition, it is difficult to disregard or dismiss it. To successfully disregard an alternative cognition, people must envision opposing arguments to back up their own position, whereas the arguments for the alternative cognition are a given. These actions are difficult to accomplish for a random political issue. Therefore, we argue that most people will adapt their opinions at least to some extent, especially when the distance between one's own opinion and the arguments in the message is large. This contention translates into the following hypotheses. A higher level of incongruence will make people who are initially negative less negative (H2a) and people who are initially positive less positive (H2b). Among the people who are balanced, a higher level of incongruence will lead to more positive attitudes when exposed to a positive treatment (H2c) and to more negative attitudes when exposed to a negative treatment (H2d).

In this experiment, people are presented with a media message that has a certain valence: i.e., it emphasizes either more positive or negative evaluations<sup>1</sup> of EU policies regarding immigration and border control. Therefore, the level of incongruence depends on a person's attitude prior to exposure to this dominant valence in the message (see also [Nelson and Oxley 1999](#); [Barker 2005](#); [Chong and Druckman 2007b](#)).

The literature indicates that some frames are inherently valenced, whereas other frames are more neutral. [De Vreese and Boomgaarden \(2003\)](#) present the conflict frame as an example of a naturally nonvalenced frame because it presents at least two opposing positions. This nonvalence is true if the actors in conflict take comparably extreme positions. However, as we argued above, this balance may not necessarily be present. The positions that are taken by one or both actors can be less extreme, although the actors remain conflicted. The general valence of the conflict can then lean more distinctly towards the positive or negative side. We examine the effect of different degrees of conflict framing in news messages. Therefore, it is crucial to also investigate valence not only because of the likelihood that the two sides will appear together in a single message, but also because of the potential of valence to reduce the polarizing effect of conflict.

#### CONFLICT AND INCONGRUENCE: OPPOSITE EFFECTS

We expect an attitude-reinforcing effect of conflict and an attitude-changing effect of a counter-attitudinal valence. These two elements can be present in a single message but produce opposite effects; therefore, if ignored, they can cause an underestimation of these individual elements' effects.

For example, a person who generally feels positive regarding an issue can feel strengthened by a low-conflict frame that presents several sides, because this person is given ammunition to better defend their initial position. However, if this message is predominantly negative, it creates cognitive dissonance ([Festinger 1957](#)) because this person is no longer presented with sufficient arguments to reinforce their initial attitude, and it reduces the conflict framing effect. Therefore, for this individual, the attitude-reinforcing effect may only occur when presented with a congruent—i.e., positive—message. In contrast, someone's negative attitude may only be reinforced when presented with a conflict frame that contains a negative valence.

The attitude-reinforcing effect of conflict may be reduced when there is incongruence between a person's pre-existing attitude and the valence in the message. Therefore, conflict will only cause attitude reinforcement when the valence in the message is congruent, such that a negative valence reinforces negative attitudes (H3a), a balanced valence reinforces balanced attitudes (H3b), and a positive valence reinforces positive attitudes (H3c).

1. See also [Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen \(2000\)](#), [Martin \(2004\)](#), [de Vreese and Kandyla \(2009\)](#), and [Schuck and de Vreese \(2009\)](#) for research on valence effects and EU topics.

## Method, Design, and Analysis

A two-wave online panel survey experiment was conducted in the Netherlands. The field work was done by TNS-NIPO. The TNS-NIPO database includes over 200,000 Dutch people and is representative for the Dutch adult population.<sup>2</sup> This database is subject to regular attrition and therefore regular telephonic recruitment takes place among people above the age of 18 (an acceptance rate is 75% on average<sup>3</sup>). For our experiment, a non-probability sample was drawn from this TNS NIPO database; specific attention was paid to the drawing of a representative subsample of Dutch-reading respondents that was similar to the Dutch population with respect to age, gender, education, social class, and household income. Invitation to the experiment occurred via e-mail. To reduce noncompliance, financial incentives were given.

The first wave of the data was collected June 17–23, 2011; the second wave was collected July 11–19, 2011. To determine people's initial attitudes, we conducted a prestimulus questionnaire 2.5 weeks prior to manipulation. This time lapse ensured that the respondents would forget the questions and their answers from the first round.<sup>4</sup>

A total of 700 respondents were invited to participate in the first wave; of this total, 637 completed the first pre-manipulation questionnaire and were contacted again for the second questionnaire. The total response rate after the two waves was 74.4% ( $n = 521$ ). Of these 521 respondents, 376 (72.2%) gave a valid answer to our main attitudinal variables at  $t_1$  (item non-response of 25.1%; 131) and  $t_2$  (item non-response of 2.7%; 14).

### ATTRITION

Overall, with a slight overrepresentation of men, the nonresponse attrition showed random effects regarding gender. The nonresponse attrition also showed random effects concerning education, social class, and household income. These results indicate that the final sample remains representative of the Dutch population concerning these four background characteristics. Attrition was not random concerning age and showed a slight overrepresentation of people aged 65 to 80 years. Older people are generally more conservative, but there is no

2. We conducted our study in the Netherlands because the immigration issue has been politicized in this country for many decades, and we know that the public there has a clear perception of immigration and is divided on the matter (Van Klingeren et al. 2015). This setting was an important condition for our case selection.

3. From January 2011 to January 2016, 31,218 people were invited, of which 23,405 were added to the TNS NIPO database.

4. With repeated measures, there is always a risk of structural change because of memory or priming effects or unwanted effects because of issue-related events that occurred between the observations (de Vreese, 2004). In this time period, no related events actually occurred or were prominent in the news media that could have contributed to a structural change in people's attitudes. The results of the control group will indicate whether there are any non-stimuli-related effects.

reason to assume that this overrepresentation changes the effect of the manipulation. In addition, because this overrepresentation is negligible (see table A1), we do not think that it influences the outcome of our experiment.

#### DESIGN

The study is a mixed-factorial (between- and within-subject) online experiment. The between-subject factors combined two conditions to which respondents were randomly assigned (for more detailed information, see table A2 of the Online Appendix): namely, the degree of conflict (2) and the type of valence (3) in a manipulated newspaper article. The within-subject factor is the incongruence between the respondent's prior attitude towards the issue and the valence in the assigned condition. The design includes a control condition in which people were not exposed to a newspaper article.

#### ISSUE SELECTION

The issue under study has become one of the most prominent EU issues by mid-2015. However, it was much less prominent at the time of the study. At that time, we chose an EU issue that was important, but not more prominent in the public sphere or news media than other issues. Two considerations were important in selecting the issue. It should be an issue for which (1) people were less likely to have fully crystallized opinions so that there was potential for change, but (2) people did have some initial opinion to have variance at the outset. The issue should represent one of the many political issues that a respondent can encounter. We explicitly did not want the issue to dominate the news, as it did a few years later, because this would potentially affect the respondents' opinions, especially in the interim period between the waves. The European border control and immigration issue was, at the time, an appropriate issue to choose.

#### STIMULUS MATERIAL

The stimulus was given in the form of a fictitious newspaper article regarding European immigration and border control management (see Online Appendix figure A1 for an example). A high-conflict condition and three low-conflict conditions were created (see [Appendix](#) for a schematic overview). Each one of the four manipulated articles begins with an identical introduction that includes simple facts concerning current European immigration and border management policies (see Online Appendix figure A2 for a translation of the manipulations).

The manipulation shows two (fictitious) people who gave their opinions involving the way in which the EU is currently handling the issue; meanwhile, the factual information is maintained the same in all conditions. The degree of opposition between the opinions (conflict) and the general valence of the arguments differed in each condition. Both actors were supposed experts on

European politics. Only a common and neutral surname was given, and no further information regarding age, gender, or any other background characteristic was provided. Again, the final paragraph of each newspaper article was identical in all the manipulated articles.

As briefly discussed in the theory section, valence differs across conditions by discussing more of the benefits, effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and disadvantages of the EU measures. In the negative manipulation, the article predominantly discusses disadvantages and applies more negative arguments (condition C); in the positive manipulation, the article predominantly discusses the advantages and applies more positive arguments (condition D). In the manipulations with no distinct valence, the article contains an equal amount of positive and negative arguments (conditions A and B).

Furthermore, a high degree of conflict means that one actor exclusively argues how effective and beneficial the EU policies are, whereas the other actor only emphasizes how ineffective they are (condition A). To strengthen the disagreement, superlatives were added when stating how much one actor disagreed with the other actor. A lower degree of conflict was manipulated by having at least one of the actors be less optimistic or negative and through the use of fewer superlatives (conditions B, C, and D).

#### PROCEDURE

In the first questionnaire, at  $t_1$ , the respondents were asked to state their opinion concerning many political topics, including the issue of interest. At  $t_2$ , the respondents were randomly assigned to a condition. After exposure to the stimulus material, respondents were asked to complete a second questionnaire, which contained a condensed version of the first questionnaire, a manipulation check, and several control questions. The control group received a shorter version of the questionnaire without the questions that were related to the stimulus material.

#### MANIPULATION CHECK

To determine whether the respondents perceived conflict and valence in the message that they were exposed to, they were asked to answer the question "Please indicate whether you felt that the tone of the article with concern to the European Union was generally more positive, negative, both positive and negative, or neutral?" Respondents were asked to do so on an eleven-point scale ranging from negative (1) through positive (11).<sup>5</sup> The results show significant differences between the four stimulus groups [ $F(3, 293) = 29.32, p < .001$ ]. The respondents in conditions A (mean [ $M$ ] = 5.94, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 1.51)

5. Unlike the other questions, this scale included a mid-point because some respondents were exposed to a balanced article. Because of the possibility that people did not notice valence (13.8% of the sample), there was also a neutral category.

and B ( $M = 6.16$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) hovered around the middle category. As intended, the respondents in condition C indicated more negativity ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than the respondents in condition D ( $M = 6.88$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ). This result shows that the manipulation of valence was successful. Second, the respondents were asked “did you feel that there was any disagreement in the article?” with answer categories “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know.” If they did notice disagreement, they were asked to indicate on a ten-point scale (1 = very little disagreement; 10 = a lot of disagreement) “can you indicate the degree of disagreement in the article?” Approximately 66% of the people in the high-conflict condition noticed a conflict ( $M = 7.22$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) compared with 40.9% in the low-conflict conditions ( $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). The differences among the groups in conflict strength were significant [ $F(1, 296) = 47.64$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ], which indicated successful manipulation.

#### DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Our interest is to determine how media coverage influences polarization on EU migration and border control. These attitudes were measured by using two questions. The first item was “The European Union has not taken sufficient measures to handle immigration toward Europe.” The second item was “The European Union is adequately dealing with the immigration issue.” The responses were given on a scale that ranged from 1 (totally disagree) to 10 (totally agree). The first variable was recoded to also measure EU support, and the individual mean scores were calculated ( $M = 4.72$ ;  $SD = 1.62$ ).<sup>6</sup>

#### PRIOR ATTITUDES

Prior attitudes were measured by asking the same attitudinal questions as described in the previous section ( $M = 4.47$ ;  $SD = 1.59$ ). For analytical purposes and reasons of clarity, the respondents were divided into the following three categories: positive (attitudes that ranged from 6.1 to 10; 6.1% of the 376), negative (attitudes that ranged from 1 to 4.9; 47.3%) and balanced (attitudes between 5 and 6; 45.5%).<sup>7</sup>

#### INCONGRUENCE

Our hypotheses state that the level of incongruence matters to the degree of attitude change. Therefore, we created a continuous variable that ranged from 0

6. Four questions were asked on EU migration and border management policies. The two questions that were used in this study loaded high on the same factor (eigenvalue = 1.55) and were significantly correlated ( $r = 0.36$   $p = 0.00$ ); the other two questions loaded on a second factor (eigenvalue = 1.35). The two items were chosen on the premise that they best represented the attitudes toward the EU’s performance in this policy area.

7. The distribution of the attitudinal variable is unfortunate and unexpected. It appears that although the issue is fairly politicized, the population is rather negative. Because there is no sufficient analytical way to address the data, we only acknowledge the problem and reflect on its implications (see discussion).

(fully congruent) to 8 (fully incongruent). This variable is based on the distance between the valence in the manipulation (negative, both positive and negative, and positive) and people's baseline attitude on EU immigration policy that was given in the first wave of the panel survey. Because the relative distance to the valence in the article is the same for the two mid-categories of the original attitudinal scale (that ranged from 1 to 10), categories 5 and 6 were combined, which changed the range of this variable from 1 (negative) to 9 (positive). We continued by assigning numbers to the manipulated articles according to the scores on the attitudinal variable (1 for negative, 5 for no distinct valence, and 9 for positive). To create the incongruence measure, we calculated the distance between the respondent's score on the attitudinal variable and the manipulated article. For example, respondents who were exposed to a positive article and had very negative attitudes were given an 8 (9 minus 1) on the incongruence scale; people with very positive attitudes who were exposed to the same positive article were given a 0 (9 minus 9). As seen in table A3 in the Online Appendix, the calculation was reversed for the people who were exposed to a negative article.

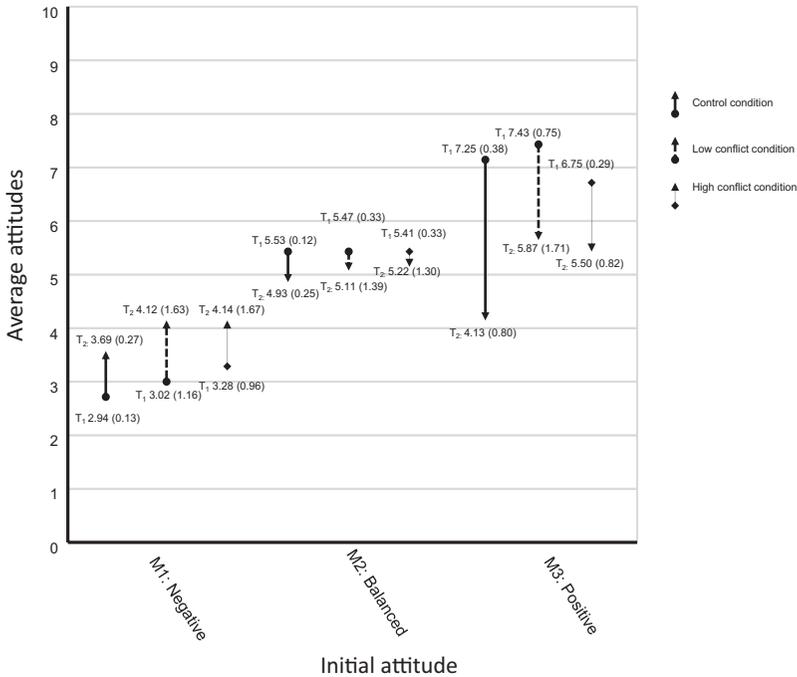
#### ANALYSIS

First, a simple means test was performed to compare the outcomes of the different conditions. Second, an OLS regression was used to investigate the effects of valence on people's attitudes. Third, repeated measures models were estimated to investigate attitude change.

## Results

The first set of hypotheses predicts that exposure to a high level of conflict strengthens existing attitudes more than exposure to a low level of conflict, which leads to increased polarization. To test these hypotheses, we compare the average degree of change in the attitudes in the low- and high-conflict conditions. Figure 1 and table 1 show the results of an ANOVA analysis that uses a Bonferroni post-hoc test. Figure 1 illustrates the average attitudes and the change at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  for the people who were exposed to a low level of conflict (conditions B, C, and D) and a high level of conflict (condition A). Table 1 shows the average attitude change between the two waves (see  $\mu_2 - \mu_1$ ) and whether the change is significant between the conditions. Because the reinforcement mechanism is expected to lead to different outcomes for people who were initially negative, balanced, or positive (see hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c), we have divided the table and figure into these three types of prior attitudes (M1, M2, and M3, respectively) and discuss each of the parts consecutively and in the order of the hypotheses.

First, we expected the people with initially negative attitudes to remain negative when exposed to a high level of conflict (H1a). In M1, we observe that the change in the high-conflict condition is significantly smaller (+0.86) than



**Figure 1. Attitude Change by Type of Prior Attitude and Level of Conflict.** Scale of 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). Dots and arrows indicate average attitudes and direction of change. Standard errors shown in parentheses.

**Table 1. Mean Change in Attitudes, by Prior Attitudes and the Level of Conflict in the Treatment**

Conditions	Prior attitudes			Total n
	M1: negative <sup>a</sup> (n = 178)	M2: balanced <sup>a</sup> (n = 175)	M3: positive <sup>a</sup> (n = 23)	
Control	+0.75	-0.60	-3.12 <sup>b</sup>	79
Low conflict	+1.10	-0.36	-1.56	227
High conflict	+0.86	-0.19	-1.25 <sup>b</sup>	70

NOTE. — Total n of analysis is 376. Low-conflict conditions are a combination of conditions B, C, and D; high-conflict is condition A. Cell entries are mean score changes on a 10-point scale (1 = very negative attitudes; 10 = very positive attitudes).

<sup>a</sup>Indicates that the change in the groups differs significantly across conditions at least at  $p < 0.05$  (one-tailed).

<sup>b</sup>Indicates that the outcome was based on 10 or fewer respondents.

in the low-conflict condition (+1.10), and the changes are larger than in the control group (+0.75). These results mean that we do not discern a reinforcing mechanism in the people who are negative, thereby not yielding support for hypothesis 1a. Second, in M2, we observe that the people who are balanced are more likely to remain balanced when the degree of conflict in the condition is high (-0.19) than when it is low (-0.36). The reinforcing mechanism becomes even clearer when we compare these figures with the control condition, where the average change is significantly larger (-0.60). This outcome supports hypothesis 1b, because the people who initially held balanced attitudes remained more balanced when exposed to a higher level of conflict.

Finally, in M3, we find the people with initially positive attitudes. Because this group is very small, the results of this group should be considered indicative rather than a strong test of the hypotheses. The people in the control group (-3.12) have changed significantly more than the people in the low (-1.56) and high-conflict conditions (-1.25). The results indicate that a high level of conflict keeps people closer to their initial attitudes than a low level of conflict, which is consistent with hypothesis 1c and indicates that conflict framing has the potential to at least maintain the same degree of polarization over the issue. Overall, the results are only partly consistent with our expectations and show rather mixed results regarding the main effect of conflict on polarization.

Concerning the incongruence effects, we hypothesized that incongruence between people's attitudes and the valence of the manipulated article pulls attitudes in the direction of the main valence of the stimulus material. To test the hypotheses (H2a to H2d), we ran an OLS regression analysis (see [table 2](#)) to test whether the changes run in the expected direction and are significant for each type of prior attitude. For the people who were negative, we expected that a higher level of incongruence would lead to less negative attitudes (H2a). Model

**Table 2. OLS Regression Showing the Degree of Change Due to Incongruence in the Message, for Each Type of Prior Attitude**

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	( <i>s.e.</i> )	<i>b</i>	( <i>s.e.</i> )
Intercept	-0.48**	(0.16)	-0.22	(0.19)
Prior attitude ( <i>balanced = ref.</i> )				
Negative	1.31**	(0.18)	0.73**	(0.29)
Positive	-1.23**	(0.37)	-1.68*	(0.71)
Incongruence ( <i>range 0 to 8</i> )	0.07	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.06)
Negative attitude * incongruence			0.23**	(0.09)
Positive attitude * incongruence			0.19	(0.21)

NOTE. —  $n = 297$  ( $n_{\text{negative}} = 143$ ,  $n_{\text{balanced}} = 135$ ,  $n_{\text{positive}} = 19$ )

Adj.  $R^2$  Model 1 = 0.22 & Model 2 = 0.23

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

1 shows the main effects of prior attitudes. Here, we see a positive significant effect of negative attitudes ( $b = 1.31$ ); therefore, the people who were initially negative have a greater chance of turning less negative at  $t_2$  than do the people who were initially balanced (i.e., the reference category). However, we are more interested in the interaction effect in Model 2. This model shows that with a higher level of incongruence, average attitudes become significantly more positive ( $b = 0.23$ ). This result supports hypothesis 2a and is a first indication that being exposed to attitude-incongruent information can reduce polarization.

We continue with hypothesis 2b, which indicates that the people with initially positive attitudes are expected to become less positive because of higher incongruence. Model 1 illustrates a negative main effect of positive attitudes. In this group, however, Model 2 shows no significant interaction effect with incongruence; therefore, H2b is not supported.

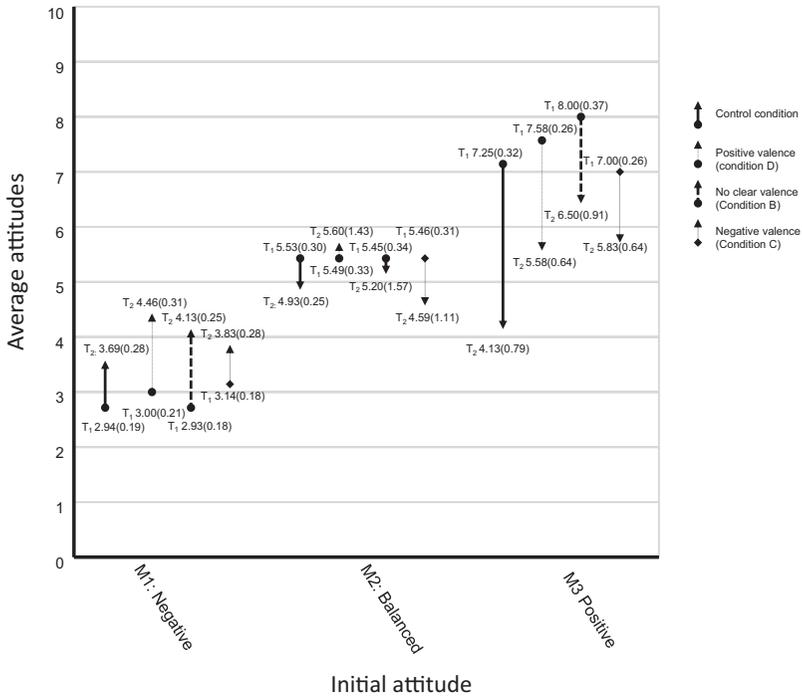
However, to fully uncover the full effect of incongruence, and learn whether those with initially balanced attitudes are also vulnerable to the valence effects (H2c and H2d), ANOVAs were executed. Attitude changes were significant [ $F(2, 103) = 3.95$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ]: people who read the positive message (i.e., positive incongruence) became more positive (mean change of 0.11), whereas the people who were exposed to a negative message (i.e., negative incongruence) became more negative (mean change of -0.87). Meanwhile, those exposed to a message with no distinct valence also became slightly more negative toward the issue (-0.22). These results are consistent with hypotheses H2c and H2d. To conclude, higher levels of incongruence lead to attitude change in the direction of the message among the people whose prior attitudes were negative and balanced.<sup>8</sup>

#### VALENCE AND CONFLICT FRAMING EFFECTS

Tests of the first seven hypotheses show that conflict framing sometimes reinforces attitudes and valence sometimes alters them. However, the equivocal evidence of reinforcement and alteration supports our argument that the two mechanisms may suppress one another. Specifically, we expected that the attitude-reinforcing effect of conflict is reduced when there is incongruence between a person's prior attitude and the valence of the frame (H3a to H3c). [Figure 2](#) and [table 3](#) present the results of a Bonferroni post-hoc test. [Figure 2](#) shows the mean attitude scores at both time points ( $\mu_{t_1}$  and  $\mu_{t_2}$ ), whereas [table 3](#) shows the change in average attitudes between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  ( $\mu_2 - \mu_1$ ) for each type of prior attitude (M1, M2, and M3). This time, however, conflict is held constant.<sup>9</sup> The respondents in the control condition were not exposed to an incongruent message and, similar to the respondents in the congruent condition, they did not experience any cognitive dissonance. Comparing the control group with the attitude-congruent conflict condition enables us to observe

8. These results were cross-validated using a repeated measures model.

9. This means that only low-conflict conditions are shown here,  $n = 306$ .



**Figure 2. Attitude Change by Type of Prior Attitude and Valence.** Scale of 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). Dots and arrows indicate average attitudes and direction of change. Standard errors shown in parentheses.

**Table 3. Mean Change in Attitudes, by Experimental Condition and Prior Attitude**

Conditions	Prior attitudes		M2: balanced		M3: positive	
	$\mu_2 - \mu_1$	<i>n</i>	$\mu_2 - \mu_1$	<i>n</i>	$\mu_2 - \mu_1$	<i>n</i>
Control	+0.75	35	-0.60	40	-3.12	4
D: Low conflict/positive valence	+1.46*	28	+0.11**	35	-2.00	6
B: Low conflict/ no distinct valence	+1.20 <sup>#</sup>	42	-0.25	32	-1.50	3
C: Low conflict/ negative valence	+0.69	36	-0.87	39	-1.17*	6

NOTE. — *n* = 306. Total *n* of the people with a negative attitude is 141; 146 are balanced, and 19 have a positive attitude. Cell entries are mean score changes on a 10-point scale (1 = very negative attitudes; 10 = very positive attitudes). Significance levels compared with the control group: <sup>#</sup>*p* < 0.1; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01 (one-tailed).

the main effect of conflict. Furthermore, by holding conflict constant in the manipulated conditions, we can determine whether incongruence moderates the expected conflict effect.

Starting with hypothesis 3a, we expect that attitude reinforcement because of conflict will only occur when people with a negative attitude are presented with a negative message. In M1 condition C, we observe the people who were exposed to a negatively-valenced conflict frame. Consistent with our expectation, we notice that attitude change is smaller in this condition (+0.69) than in the control group (+0.75). In M1 condition B, negative people were exposed to an equal amount of positive and negative arguments, which means, on average, greater incongruence between people's attitudes and valence and, in this case, produces a significantly larger attitude change (+1.20). Condition (D) exposed people to a positive valence and, thus, to a high level of incongruence, and the attitude change in this group was again significantly larger (+1.46). This result indicates that valence negatively moderates the reinforcing effect of conflict frames among people with negative views, which supports hypothesis 3a.

Concerning hypothesis 3b and M2 in the model, we expected conflict effects to occur among the balanced people who were presented with a balanced message. In condition C (negative valence), people become more negative (-0.87) than in the control group (-0.60). The people in condition D (positive valence) become significantly more positive (0.11; difference of +0.71) than the control group, whereas the change in the attitude-congruent condition (condition B) is smaller than the control group (-0.25; difference of +0.35). This outcome supports hypothesis 3b and strengthens the idea that conflict framing leads to attitude reinforcement unless there is incongruence.

Finally, regarding the results for the people with an initially positive attitude (M3), it remains difficult to determine the real effects because of the low power in this group. Overall, the change in the control group is the largest, and the change in condition C significantly differs from the change in the control group. However, these results are based on a very small subsample. We cannot state with great certainty that a low-conflict, positive message leads to more attitude reinforcement than a low-conflict, negative message. This effect means that hypothesis 3c is not supported.

In sum, our findings show evidence of an attitude-reinforcing effect of conflict that is moderated by valence in the message when it is incongruent with a person's attitude. The implications of these findings are discussed in the next section.

## **Discussion**

The EU is often criticized for not taking responsibility regarding the problems that occur at the European borders. However, it is not always clear how the EU should act because there are many EU countries with different interests,

a patchwork of immigrant policies, and many different political views. There is no consensus on the matter, and this is reflected in media coverage. In this study, we argued that conflict in media messages has the potential to divide attitudes on issues through an attitude-reinforcing mechanism. In addition, we argued that being exposed to opposite viewpoints (i.e., an incongruent valence) can create attitude change. Therefore, valence has the potential to reduce the polarizing dynamics that are caused by conflict. Our empirical evidence lends support for these expectations.

Our study finds limited support for the attitude-reinforcing effect of conflict when incongruence was not considered. Moreover, congruence between an individual's initial opinion and the valence in the messages causes the people who are balanced and negative to become less negative and balanced; i.e., people changed according to the valence in the message. Most importantly, valence, when incongruent with one's attitude, suppresses the reinforcing effect of conflict framing in the people with initially negative and balanced attitudes. In these groups, the conflict effects show when the valence in the message is congruent with people's initial attitudes.

Our findings show that if a message contains conflict and leans predominantly towards one valence, valence overrules the effect of conflict. If we extrapolate this finding to the macro level, one-sided (i.e., single-valence) news environments potentially lead attitudes in a single direction and decrease polarization (see Zaller 1992, 1996). In a two-sided media environment, conflict can cause increased polarization through motivated reasoning mechanisms (Kunda 1990).

Conflict, which is one of the most prominent news values and thus appears in many political news messages, does not help much in terms of contributing to finding common solutions. In a way, maintaining conflict contributes to attitude reinforcement and increased polarization. From a democratic point of view, it may be better to have media cover opposing arguments with as little emphasis on conflict as possible, at least when it comes to attitude change.

Furthermore, as selective-exposure researchers have argued, people tend to select attitude-congruent news media, which would mean conflict has the potential to continuously magnify polarization. However, because there is also ample evidence for a substantial amount of crosscutting exposure (see Stroud 2011; Prior 2013; Dvir-Gvirsman, Tsfati, and Menchen-Trevino 2014) and because incongruence effects tend to overrule conflict effects, polarization is unlikely to simply magnify, even in a two-sided media environment.

Concerning the EU migration and border control issue, we found that people were mostly negative and balanced, and conflict in this case has the potential to create clearer attitudinal differences and increase issue polarization. Assuming that most news on the topic is not only strongly conflictual but also rather negative (see Peter, Semetko, and de Vreese 2003), very little attitude change should occur. The few people who are explicitly positive are more

likely to be exposed to counter-attitudinal media and, overall, this promises limited media-induced future support for these EU policies.

The limited issue support is not only potentially problematic for the EU but also caused problems regarding the analytical power and had severe consequences in terms of drawing substantive conclusions among this group of people. Issue-attitude distribution is therefore something that must be considered carefully in subsequent research.

For us, this limited issue support means that we are unable to generalize the results to all types of prior attitudes, but how generalizable are our findings in other respects? First, it is plausible that context matters in how people perceive and process media messages. We outline a basic theoretical framework for which we have no reason to believe contextual interference. However, the literature shows that information context can matter, and when news is predominantly one-sided, individual exposure effects can differ (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2015). Although our representative sample enables us to generalize the findings to the Dutch population, the fact that context can matter is something to consider before generalizing these results to other countries. However, are these results generalizable to the real-world: i.e., are they ecologically valid? We believe that these results are valid first, because we know from a pilot study that the majority of people thought the article was a real article; second, because we also know from another experimental study (Trilling, van Klingerden and Tsfati, 2016) that people are exposed to similar news messages in real life.

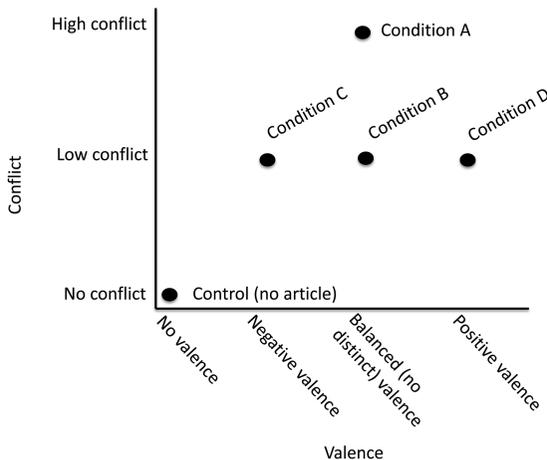
Regarding the generalization of our results to other issues, as discussed in the method section, we selected our issue based on the level of societal prominence at the time. Zaller (1992, 1996) argues that attitudes are generally flexible and can change because of, for instance, media exposure. We have no reason to assume that our findings should occur only regarding the issue that is under study here. We believe that these results are generalizable at least to issues with a similar level of salience. However, a more salient issue means more frequent exposure to issue-related media, which may impact attitudinal flexibility. But this is beyond the scope of our study and a question to be answered by subsequent research.

Although conducting a repeated-measures experiment to test media effects provides us with important new insights, there are also some definite downsides. For instance, how does one decide on the ideal time lag so that people forget their initial answers while limiting the risk of some issue-related occurrences affecting the observations? We argue that one to two weeks is ideal in this regard (see also Baden and Lecheler 2012; Lecheler and de Vreese 2011); unlike repeated measures in a single survey, people have time to forget their answers. However, repeated measures were not only an advantage but also an absolute necessity, because the expected effects were conditional on people's prior attitude. This approach also allowed us to measure incongruence by comparing the valence in the treatment to people's attitudes and measuring the

relative distance. To our knowledge, this measurement is new and we recommend it for subsequent research.

In this study, we examined the mechanisms of public opinion formation and the role of the media in a very salient European issue. Because there is often a strong reciprocal relation among politics, the media, and the public, the way that the media report on an issue and how it affects the public debate is likely to influence politicians and political decisions and is therefore an important piece of the puzzle. We investigated the effects of two prominent features that are found in political media messages through a unique two-wave experiment. Therefore, this study contributes to the academic debate on European integration, news media effects, and polarization. Most importantly, we showed that the two processes occur simultaneously while producing the opposite effects. This finding demonstrates the importance of investigating the combined media effects, especially concerning the issues on which the media send conflicting messages, which include many, if not all, political issues.

## Appendix



**Figure A1. The Different Arguments and Levels of Conflict in the Four Conditions**

### QUESTION WORDING

#### *Demographic characteristics:*

*Age* — What is your age in years? range 18–91

*Sex* — Are you male or female? 1 = male, 2 = female

*Household income* — What is the gross yearly household income of your household? (in Euros \*1000)

1 = < 4.6; 2 = 4.6 to 6.3; 3 = 6.3 to 8.0; 5 = 9.1 to 10.8; 6 = 10.8 to 12.5;

7 = 12.5 to 14.3; 8 = 14.3 to 15.4; 9 = 15.4 to 17.1; 10 = 17.1 to 20.0; 11 = 20.0

to 23.4; 12 = 23.4 to 26.2; 13 = 26.2 to 32.5; 14 = 32.5 to 38.8; 15 = 38.8 to 51.300; 16 = 51.3 to 65.0; 17 = 65.0 to 77.5; 18 = 77.5 to 103.8; 19 = 103.8 to 129.4; 21 = 155.1 to 181.3; 23 = 206.4 to 232.6; 28 = don't know; 29 = do not want to say

*Education* — What is your highest obtained degree?

1 = no education; 2 = primary school; 3 = secondary school – low (LBO \ VBO \ VMBO (kader- en beroepsgerichte leerweg)); 4 = secondary school – middle (MAVO \ eerste 3 jaar HAVO en VWO \ VMBO (theoretische en gemengde leerweg)); 5 = college – low (MBO); 6 = secondary school – high (HAVO en VWO bovenbouw \ WO en HBO propedeuse); 7 = bachelors degree; 8 = masters degree or higher; 9 = don't know/ don't want to say

*Profession*. 1 = own company (more than 10 employees); 2 = own company (less than 10 employees); 3 = farmer; 4 = free occupation; 5 = high-level profession (managing); 6 = high-level profession (non-managing); 7 = mid-level profession (managing); 8 = mid-level profession (non-managing); 9 = elementary, low-level profession; 10 = pensioned; 11 = unemployed/ social welfare; 12 = student/ other

*Social class* — (based on education and profession): 1 = A (high); 2 = B1; 3 = B2; 4 = C; 5 = D (low)

*Manipulation check:*

\* Please indicate whether you felt that the tone of the article you read with concern to the European Union was generally more positive, negative, both positive and negative or neutral?

Range 1–11: 1 = negative; 6 = balanced; 11 = positive

\* Did you feel that there was any disagreement in the article? 1 = yes; 2 = no; 3 = don't know.

\* Can you indicate the degree of disagreement in the article? Range 1–10: 1 = very little disagreement; 10 = a lot of disagreement

*Dependent variable & prior attitudes:*

\* The European Union has not taken sufficient measures to handle immigration toward Europe. Range 1–10: 1 = totally disagree; 10 = totally agree

\* The European Union is adequately dealing with the immigration issue. Range 1–10: 1 = totally disagree; 10 = totally agree

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available online at <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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