National or European?
EP Election Campaign Themes in the News Media

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Abstract
According to the dominant framework, European Parliament (EP) elections are second-order elections, in essence national contests “by other means”. They are not about the personalities and parties at the European level, or the direction of the EU policy agenda; instead, they are fought over domestic rather than European issues and topics, and the political parties collude to keep the issue of Europe off the domestic agenda. This paper aims to analyse one aspect of the second-order election (SOE) model, namely the fact that national political issues and concerns dominate SOE campaigns. We focus on EP election campaigns as portrayed in the news media based on a premise that large proportion of election campaigns consists of media coverage. Based on a content and thematic analysis (N = 434), the article integrates the second-order election model with media behaviours. The results show that, indeed, national political themes and domestic geographic scope dominate the EP election campaign in the media. The findings and their implications are discussed in the light of relevant literature.

Keywords
European Parliament elections, second-order elections, media, campaign, Europeanisation

Note
We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions which contributed to the quality of the text. Obviously, the remaining errors and shortcomings in what follows are ours alone.

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Introduction

In a representative democracy, elections serve as an “instrument of democracy” (Powell, 2000), connecting the policy preferences of the voters to public policy. In democratic theory, for democratic elections to create the electoral link and fulfill their other crucial functions, the electorate needs to deliver a political verdict “emanating from the political preferences of voters, preferences that are relevant to the decision making arena concerned” (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996, p. 6). In other words, voters must have some awareness of political parties’ stances and be offered a real choice in order to cast their votes on the basis of their preferences (Schattschneider, 1942). In this process, political parties play a key role (McDonald and Budge, 2005, p. 3). Many commentators and scholars alike assert that European Parliament (EP) elections fail to fulfill these conditions given that they have been labelled second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Accordingly, it is suggested that EP elections are failing as an instrument of democracy in that they fail to express the will of the European people on European issues (Hobolt et al., 2009, p. 112; Lord, 2010; Mair and Thomassen, 2010, p. 21).

This paper aims to analyse one aspect of the second-order election (SOE) model during the Czech and Slovak 2004 EP elections, namely the fact that SOE campaigns are influenced by the constellation of national political arena and are dominated by national political concerns (Norris and Reif, 1997, p. 117). To this aim, content and thematic analysis of the news media coverage of EP election campaigns is conducted and the question is asked to what extent is the campaign Europeanised or, on the other hand, domesticised? The structure of the paper is as follows. The second section, before unveiling the expectations, outlines the theoretical and conceptual background. The third section clarifies methodological issues, operationalises concepts, and presents the data. The fourth section presents the results of the analysis, and the final section concludes by summarising the findings and discussing their implications in the light of relevant literature.

Theoretical Background

In their immediate aftermath, elections to the EP have been labelled second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). The defining features of SOEs are (1) that, relative to first-order elections (FOEs), there is less at stake in SOEs since they do not determine the composition of government (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) and voter behaviour is thus different from what it is in FOEs; and (2) that SOE results and campaigns are influenced by the political constellation of national political arena and are characterised by the dominance of the first-order arena national political issues (Reif, 1984, p. 247).1 After more than three decades and six more sets of EP elections, the SOE model has, by and large, become one of the most widely tested and supported theories of voting behaviour in elections to the EP (e.g. Ferrara and Weißhaupt, 2004; Freire and Tepérogloú, 2007; Havlík and Jogheeová, 2010; Hix and Marsh, 2007; Marsh, 1998; Reif, 1984; Schmitt, 2005).

Most of the work on SOEs has focused on election results and election-related survey data. However, recent research focuses on the context surrounding actual voting choices and thus integrates the SOE model with the behaviours of the rest of actors that are at the center during the election time: the media and the political parties (cf. Adam and Maier, 2011; Tóka, 2007; Weber, 2007). These contributions suggest that the behaviour of parties and the media is crucial in shaping the nature of electoral choices and levels of turnout in second-order EP elections (Hobolt and Spoon, 2010). In other words, one cannot blame voters for their electoral behaviour without taking the behaviour of political parties and the media into account, and hence it is advised to integrate the SOE theory with behaviours of political parties and the media (Strømbøck et al., 2011, p. 13). The findings of studies in this area teach us about the second-order character of EP election campaigns (de Vreese, 2009; Maier and Tenschler, 2009) that are highly domesticised in terms of contested political issues (Fiala, 2004; Irwin, 1995; Raycheva and Róka, 2011), low parties’ budgets (Hertner, 2011; Negrine et al., 2011), and low levels of (nationally framed) coverage that EP elections enjoy in the media (de Vreese et al., 2006; Kovář, 2010).

1Note that the SOE model does not preclude a potential influence of European issues on national elections but it does suggest a strong role for non-European issues.
Since the aim of the paper is to analyse the degree of Europeanisation of EP election campaigns in the news media, it is also necessary to clarify our understanding of the concept of Europeanisation (Börzel and Risse, 2003; Cowles et al., 2001; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Ladrech, 2010). There is considerable debate about how to define Europeanisation, but the literature generally uses the concept as shorthand for “domestic impact of the EU” or “influence of/on the EU”. For our purposes, Europeanisation is understood as a process by which domestic actors and institutions adapt to the institutional framework and logic of the EU or, in other words, as the responses of national actors to the impact of European integration (Ladrech, 2002, p. 392–393; Radaelli, 2000). Our research interest is thus restricted to the top-down, as opposed to the bottom-up and bottom-up-down (Exadaktylos and Radaelli, 2009; Havlík and Pšejš, 2007), approach to the Europeanisation of media coverage of EP election campaigns. Hence, we focus on the adaptation of individual actors, namely the media, rooted in the activities of the EU.

Expectations

National political parties stand for EP elections, put together the lists of candidates, and establish the procedures governing EP elections; they also formulate election manifestos and control the content of and funding for the campaigns (Hix and Lord, 1997, p. 84). Moreover, the elections are held under national electoral laws and are covered by national media systems. Moreover, national political competition remains crucial for structuring vote choice (Thorlakson, 2005). Given the highly “national” structuring of the context of EP elections, and following the characterisation of EP elections as SOEs, where the national political arena provides the dominant frame of reference, it is hardly surprising that the campaigns should be nationally differentiated. Keeping this in mind, I expect the campaigns for EP elections, as portrayed in the news media, to be more nationally framed and dominated by national political issues (de Vreese et al., 2007). In addition, prior research on media coverage of EP elections suggests that, given the novelty of the event, predominantly domestic appeals have played a greater role in campaigns in subsequent EP elections, as compared to the first elections that took place in a given country (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Siune et al., 1984). Hence, I expect the subsequent campaigns for EP elections, as portrayed in the news media, to be more nationally framed and more dominated by national political issues than the country’s first EP elections.

Methods and Data

The logic for this research project stems from the idea that, next to an analysis of the ways political parties wage EP election campaigns, the media represents a good platform for an analysis of political actors deal with issues associated with European integration during EP elections (Kriesi, 2007, p. 90). The driving engine of this approach is also built on the premise that a large proportion of EP election campaigns consists of media coverage (Leroy and Siune, 1994). In addition, the media constitutes the most important source of political information and channel of communication between the governors and the governed (European Commission, 1999–2007; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2010), particularly in relation to a remote and abstract issue such as European Union (EU) politics (Blumler, 1983; Koopmans, 2007), and in the case of second-order, EP elections (see Bennett and Entman, 2001; European Commission, 2004, p. 162).

The two weeks prior to Election Day became the subject of analysis because prior research has demonstrated that election coverage tends to cluster around the period shortly before Election Day (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Siune et al., 1984). Two new EU member states, namely the Czech Republic and Slovakia, were chosen as case studies. Since election days varied across both countries, the coding

Footnotes:
1For an approach that does not limit Europeanisation only to the processes related to European integration see Flockhart (2010).
2The two countries were chosen for two interrelated reasons. First, there is comparatively less knowledge about EP election campaign portrayal in the media in the “new” EU member states in contrast to “old” member states. Since we want to analyse
period also varied. For the purposes of this study, I focus on all the main national PSB and private TV stations, and all the main newspapers. Together, I include three TV stations and five newspapers in the Czech Republic and four TV stations and four newspapers in Slovakia (Table 1). Specifically, I focus on the main evening television newscasts of each outlet, because out of all the news programmes these usually have the largest audiences. For newspapers, I focus on and code the title page, along with one randomly selected inside page, as well as all stories pertaining to EP elections on any other page (Schuck et al., 2011). In practice, all stories related to EP elections in the News sections were coded, excluding Commentary/Opinion sections of newspapers.

### Table 1: Summary of the Analysed TV Stations and Newspapers by the Type of Outlet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>Česká Televize (ČT 1/ČT 24)</td>
<td>Slovenská Televízia (STV 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>TV Nova, Prima TV</td>
<td>Joj TV, TV Markíza, TA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Lidové Noviny, Mladá Fronta Dnes, Právo, Hospodářské Noviny</td>
<td>Pravda, SME, Hospodárske Noviny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>Blesk</td>
<td>Nový Čas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A media content analysis was carried out in order to identify news stories related to the 2004 and 2009 EP election campaigns in both countries. *EP election stories* were operationalised as stories in which the EP election campaign (e.g. candidates, parties, polls, and policy areas) was mentioned in at least two complete, independent sentences or, in the case of newspaper articles, once in the heading and once in the text (Peter and de Vreese, 2004). Overall, the content analysis yielded 156 television and 278 newspaper stories related to EP election campaigns. These 434 *EP election stories* comprise our data set. The method chosen to analyse the data and to test our expectation is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis seeks to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006), themes that emerge as important to the description of a phenomenon (Daly et al., 1997). A theme refers to a specific pattern found in the data in which one is interested (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). The process involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes then become the categories for the analysis (Parker and Burman, 1993).

Since the method of analysis should be driven by one’s research question and broader theoretical assumptions, the advantages of thematic analysis, namely flexibility and theoretical freedom, offer a well-suited approach for the summarisation of key features of a body of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), given that it allows the researcher to identify themes in a manner appropriate to her specific theoretical interests (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 395). Themes within data can be identified in one of two primary methods in thematic analysis: an inductive method, from the raw information itself, or in a theoretical/deductive method, using existing theoretical ideas that the researcher brings to the data (Boytatzis, 1998; Joffe and Yardley, 2004). In this paper, I use the latter method as it allows me to approach the data set with specific, theoretically informed questions in mind.

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5Only national TV stations and newspapers are included, as opposed to stations or papers with regional or sub-national coverage.

6Only newspaper articles within the News sections were coded. Articles in Commentary/Opinion sections were not analysed.

7The inter-coder reliability for this measure was Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.90. For more detailed discussion of the methodology used, see Kovar (2010).

8Disaggregated according to election year, there were 198 EP election stories in 2004 and 236 EP election stories in 2009.
Lastly, thematic analysis offers several alternative ways of operationalising themes. One of the most frequently used methods, and the one I use here, is operationalisation based on keywords. Keywords are structured according a thematic area/network and then based on a degree of abstraction to a higher unit (cf. Hynek and Štritecký, 2010). Before turning to the presentation of the results, it is necessary to outline how I operationalise the Europeanisation/domesticisation of EP election campaigns. We ask whether the story/theme is focused on a national perspective, a European perspective, or is mixed. The themes identified are coded according to their geographical scope—European, domestic, or mixed.9 If a topic is mentioned without making explicitly clear whether it is bound to the nation state, to the EU, or to something else, we code ‘not specified’. The measurement thus seeks to understand the geographical scope of the themes referred to in EP Elections Stories, whether they are predominantly European, national, or mixed. To determine European or national character of information during the analysis, we used the Codebook of Content Coding: Strategies of Party Campaigns in the Context of the EP Elections (for more details, see Adam et al., 2009).

Results

Was the 2004 and the 2009 EP election campaign news media coverage in the Czech Republic and Slovakia dominated by national political concerns? Was the campaign Europeanised or domesticised in terms of campaign issues presented in the media? The 2004 and 2009 EP election campaigns in both countries were predominantly presented as national contests, with an emphasis on domestic themes and with a prevailing national geographical perspective. In other words, EP election campaigns portrayed in the news media can hardly be labelled Europeanised but instead were domesticised. As a first step, we present a list of thematic areas emerging out of the thematic analysis (Tables 2 and 3). The tables clearly show that themes with national political focus prevailed over themes with focus to the EU. During the 2004 EP elections, stories with a thematic domestic focus, such as Election Technicalities, Political Parties’ Campaigns, Presentation of Parties, Candidates and Programmes and stories related to Election Preferences, Results and Turnout, clearly dominated news media coverage of the campaigns in both countries. EP election stories with a focus on the EU, such as EP Elections in Other EU Member States, EU Constitutional and Institutional Issues, and EU Level Campaigns, were covered rather minimally in both countries in 2004.

For the 2009 EP elections, the results reflect the same trend. Among the most frequently reported themes were themes with national focus such as Campaign Scandals, Election Technicalities, Political Parties’ Campaigns, Election Preferences, Results and Turnout, and Presentation of Parties, Candidates, and Programmes. In contrast, themes with a prevailing European focus were covered less frequently. The most frequently EU-focused thematic areas were again EP Elections in Other EU Member States, EU Constitutional and Institutional Issues, and EU Level Campaigns. Moreover, a thematic area with notable EU focus is the category of Slovakia-Hungary Dispute.

Yet it is not sufficient to look at the general nature—EU or domestic—of the thematic areas resulting from the thematic analysis, since nationally focused stories might be Europeanised and EU-focused ones domesticised. Therefore, we present, as a second step, the analysis of the level of Europeanisation operationalised as the geographical scope of EP election stories. Tables 4 and 5 show that national geographical scope prevailed in both election years, regardless of the type of outlet analysed; the news media coverage of EP election campaigns can hence be characterised as domesticised. In the Czech Republic, national geographical scope ranges from 59.5% in newspapers (2004) to 87.5% in TV news (2004). The case of Slovakia indicates a lower prevalence of national geographical scope, ranging from 63.2% in TV news (2004) to 76.5% in newspapers (2009). On the other hand, the proportion taken by EU geographical scope was the lowest (8.3%) in the case of Czech TV news (2004) and highest (34.2%) in Czech newspapers (2004) and Slovakian TV news (2004).

Lastly, we also expected that predominantly domestic appeals would play a greater role in the campaigns in subsequent EP elections, as compared to the first elections taking place in a given country.

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9The inter-coder reliability tests for the geographical scope and for the framing yielded satisfactory results (Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.91).
Figure 1 shows that out of four election dyads, the expectation is verified in three cases. Overall, the expected result was thus verified. Only the Czech TV news stories were more Europanised in subsequent EP elections than in the first ones. On the other hand, the deepest decline in stories with EU geographical scope is observable in Czech newspapers, going down from 34.2% in 2004 to 14.3% in 2009, and in Slovakian newspapers, dropping from 28.3% in 2004 to 15.7% in 2009.

Table 2: Themes Discussed in 2004 EP Election Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>CZ</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>CZ</th>
<th>SK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV newscasts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Scandals</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Technicalities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP Elections in Other EU MS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Constitutional and Institutional Issues</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU level Campaigns</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intra-party Issues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties’ Campaigns</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences, Turnout, Results</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Parties, Candidates, Programmes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 198. The row ‘Total’ does not necessarily equal the N since the N represents the number of EP election stories analysed some of which clearly related to more thematic areas/networks. The numbers in columns represent the number of stories by which each thematic area was made up by.

Table 3: Themes Discussed in 2009 EP Election Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>CZ</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>CZ</th>
<th>SK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV newscasts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Scandals</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Technicalities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP Elections in Other EU MS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Constitutional and Institutional Issues</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Level Campaigns</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties’ Campaigns</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences, Turnout, Results</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Parties, Candidates, Programmes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia-Hungary Dispute</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 236. The row ‘Total’ does not necessarily equal the N since the N represents the number of EP election stories analysed some of which clearly related to more thematic areas/networks. The numbers in columns represent the number of stories by which each thematic area was made up by.
Conclusion

Regarding news media portrayals of EP election campaigns, the analysis of the results supports the aspect of the SOE model that argues that SOE campaigns are dominated by national political themes and concerns. The results suggest domestication rather than Europeanisation of EP election campaigns in the media in both countries. Similar results have been reported in terms of actors featured in news stories about EP elections (de Vreese et al., 2006; Kovář, 2010). How does this conclusion fit into the wider scholarly discussion of EP elections? From a general point of view, the introduction of direct elections to the EP was intended to establish a direct link between citizens and decision-making at the EU level; EP elections would thus legitimise EU policy through the normal electoral processes (for discussion, see Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010, p. 5–8). Moreover, Article 10 of the Lisbon Treaty now stipulates that
the “functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy” and “citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament”. Thus, a representative link between the citizens and decision-making is now seen as crucial from the formal point of view as well.

At the outset of the paper, it was argued that according to democratic theory for elections to create the electoral, representative link, the political verdict of the electorate needs to be based on the preferences of voters, preferences that are relevant to the decision-making arena concerned in elections (Franklin and van der Eijk, 1996, p. 6). Therefore, unless the political parties campaign on EU-related issues and offer alternative positions, and the media pay attention to these issues, public preferences can be hardly expressed in an effective manner (Thomassen, 2009, p. 9–11). Yet, as argued by the SOE model, during EP elections most campaigns continue to be dominated by national politics and domestic political issues. The result is that it is difficult for the EP to claim to represent voter preferences on EU policies (Pavlović, 2003), and “the party politics of the EU do not provide much of a link between voting in European elections and the exercise of the powers of the EP” (Lord, 2010, p. 16). Rather, EP elections, given their domination by national politics and domestic issues, and the fact that voters base their vote choice on these national issues, have become a key element of the EU’s alleged democratic deficit (Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Mair and Thomassen, 2010).

Looking through the specific lens of the SOE model, recent studies demonstrate that voters are most inclined to vote upon their EU-specific preferences (EU-issue voting) when casting votes if: (1) the media politicise EP elections by extensively covering European issues and providing a high level of EU-specific political information (de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt et al., 2009), and (2) political parties politicise EP elections and offer clear choices when it comes to EU issues (Hobolt and Franklin, 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2010, p. 23). One of the ways EP elections may become politicised is through the increased attentiveness of the media’s coverage (de Wilde, 2011, p. 562). Yet another study argues that should citizens be fully informed at the time of EP elections, it would result in roughly a 30% increase in turnout (Bhatti, 2010). Moreover, others argue that the extent to which SOEs are salient to the media depends on political parties articulating divergent positions when contesting the elections (Jalali and Silva, 2011; Schuck et al., 2011).

Put differently, it is advisable to integrate the SOE model, primarily focused on voting behaviour, with the behaviours of “intermediary instances”, namely the political parties and the media, since the reason citizens are too little involved in EU politics is often seen in the lack of cues regarding EU integration from these communicative actors (Hooghe and Marks, 2005). In other words, a key reason EU-related preferences matter less to voting behaviour in EP elections is that voters receive limited information about such issues from the media and the political parties, and as such it is crucial to link the SOE model to the behaviour of parties and the media. Executing this task in this paper, I nonetheless show that the news media coverage of EP election campaigns supports the expectations derived from the SOE model, in that they were predominantly domesticised and not Europeanised. From this point of view, the media does not help to break the “vicious” cycle of second-order voting by offering domesticised themes during the campaign. In that sense, EP elections are failing as an instrument of democracy in that they fail to express the will of the European people on European issues (Mair and Thomassen, 2010) and do not help to redress the EU’s democratic deficit but rather intensify it.

Bibliography


