Evaluating the EU: the influence of national institutional quality, media and interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations

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Citation for published version (APA):
Desmet, P. B. L. (2013). Evaluating the EU: the influence of national institutional quality, media and interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations.

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Chapter 2

The content of the message, and the role of disagreement: Effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations
One of the major conclusions of Chapter 1 was that political knowledge moderates the impact of national institutional quality on EU evaluations: the more people know about politics, the more they use national institutional quality as a yardstick for the evaluation of European institutions. In this chapter, I will further explore the crucial role of political information in the context of the European Union: where do European citizens get their political knowledge from?

In modern politics, mass media and interpersonal communication are the principal sources of information (Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002). They are important types of collective experiences, which, together with personal experiences, are crucial in the development of (political) attitudes and opinions (Mutz, 1998). The impact of media and interpersonal communication is an ‘old theme’ but there is renewed interest in the persuasive potential of both types of communication (see Southwell & Yzer, 2009). Only few scholars have studied the effects of mass and interpersonal communication simultaneously (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). For many decades, scholars have treated mass and interpersonal communication as unrelated and distinct channels of information, a separation which has, according to Reardon and Rogers (1988), little theoretical justification. There is an urge to further the understanding of the intersection of conversation and campaigns (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). Morley (1990) suggested that scholars should “reframe the study of political communication in the media within the broader context of domestic communication (involving the interdiscursive connections of broadcast and other media, family dynamics, and gossip networks)” (p. 123).

Some scholars have started systematically exploring the intersection between interpersonal and mass media communication, and how this affects political attitudes and behavior. Mixed results have given rise to a divergence between two seemingly contradictory theoretical perspectives: a model of competition and a model of reinforcement of the effects of media and interpersonal communication (Lenart, 1994). Other scholars, confronted with these mixed results, studied whether different variables might be at play, such as the existence of disagreement within the interpersonal communication. Networks of political discussion are assumed to be homogeneous. Exposure to contrasting views may weaken the existing effect of political discussion. The effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations might differ when discussants disagree on the matter. Therefore, I add disagreement within interpersonal communication to the model as a potential moderator of the effects of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

**Democratic performance evaluations in a European context**

Recent research on the nature of this interaction effect between mass media and interpersonal communication has been mainly done in the context of political knowledge (Beaudoin, 2004; Eveland & Scheufele, 2005; Lenart 1994; Scheufele, 2002) and political participation (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Beck et al., 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2003; Eliasoph, 1998; Scheufele 2000). But research thus far has not investigated the effects on political evaluations including public assessments of the democratic performance of a polity. The dependent variable will be evaluations of democratic performance, which concerns the evaluation of the actual functioning of a democratic political system. It contains judgments about the quality of institutions and democratic procedures. I focus in particular on the European Union (EU) where democratic performance evaluations dig more specifically
into the domain of the communication and democratic deficit of the Union, often described as one of the most problematic issues for further European cooperation (Anderson & McLeod, 2004; Katz, 2001; Meyer 1999). These evaluations serve as building blocks towards future support, and are as such crucial considerations in the process of opinion formation (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Rohrschneider, 2002).

The democratic quality of the EU has been one of the central issues in the EU during the last decades. As European citizens do not experience the democratic performance of the EU firsthand, evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU completely depend on collective experiences, and therefore on information gathered through interpersonal and mass media communication. It is perhaps surprising that few studies have examined the effect of media and interpersonal communication within the context of the European elections (Peter, 2003). Research has shown that media coverage on issues involving the EU is centered on big events, such as the European Council meetings, and the elections for the European Parliament (EP) (de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese, Lauf, & Peter, 2007). At the same time, conversational timing is related to the conversation's potential to impact the effect of campaign messages (Hardy & Scheufele, 2009). A conversation the day after or before a major debate/campaign event might be more likely to influence citizens who are less involved than conversations held at any random other point in time. Evaluations about EU institutions are likely to be based on the information gathered through these short periods. The EP-elections are the most obvious incentive for people to think about their supranational institutions, therefore, changes in EU evaluations are most likely to appear within the campaign period.

I will focus on the direct persuasive effect of evaluative messages from both mass media and interpersonal communication, in the context of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. I combine data from a two-wave panel with data from a content analysis, both gathered in 21 European countries. The first wave of the survey was executed three weeks before the European Parliamentary election, the second wave was done immediately after the EP elections. Data for the content analysis were gathered during those three weeks. This combined dataset allows us to not only measure change in institutional evaluations and to determine individual media consumption, it provides us with information about the specific content of the most important news media during the campaign. Furthermore, it grants us more information about the content of interpersonal communication as well. It enables us to address specific research questions: how does the content of mass media and interpersonal communication affect citizens’ evaluations of European democratic performance? What role does disagreement between discussants play in this process?

Mass media effects on EU democratic performance evaluations

In the context of European democratic performance evaluations, the media are likely to be important as they are the primary source for information about the democratic performance of the EU. During the three weeks preceding the EP elections, the EU is more often in the news, and a larger proportion of the citizens is (at least slightly) more attentive to EU news, motivated by the upcoming election day and the imposed voting duty. Previous research has shown that the coverage of political actors plays an important role in shaping citizens’ opinions about political issues (Druckman
& Parkin 2005). Zaller (1996) has shown that slanted message flows in the media can affect political evaluations. A more negative tone has often been associated with more negative opinions and even cynicism about politics (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). When the subject is rather distant and unknown (e.g. the EU) the tone of evaluative news content has more persuasive potential on the audience (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

Several scholars reported evidence of the tone of EU coverage affecting people’s opinion on EU matters (Norris, 2000; Banducci, Karp, & Lauf, 2001; Peter, 2003). Peter (2003) found that the tone of coverage affected attitudes towards European integration positively in a consonant context and de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b) showed that a one-sided media message flow affects public support for EU enlargement. Norris (2000) pointed at the systematically negative tone in media coverage of EU related issues as a plausible contributor to “a growing disconnect between European leaders and the public” (p. 184). She emphasized that the effects depend on sufficient visibility of EU issues in the news, a condition which is almost uniquely fulfilled during the election campaign. The reception of a larger number of evaluative messages can cumulate into an exposure effect, through which media can gradually influence citizens’ predispositions (Zaller, 1992). If exposure to those evaluative messages changes EU evaluations during the campaign, the tone of those messages will be essential to determine the direction of those changes. I expect a positive effect of EU positive media messages on EU evaluations, and a negative effect of EU negative media messages on EU evaluations.

**Hypothesis 1:** The more positive (or negative) the evaluative tone of the EU news a citizen is exposed to, the more positive (or negative) citizens’ EU evaluations will become.

**Interpersonal communication within homogenous networks**

Another important source for relevant political information is interpersonal communication. According to Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe and Shapiro (1999), most studies on the effects of political communication leave out interpersonal conversation. It may, however, have a substantial impact on public opinion. People engage in interpersonal conversations far more often than they watch television news or read newspapers (Kirchler, 1989). Interpersonal communication may expose people to a different set of politically-relevant information and stimuli than they possess individually (Huckfeldt, 2001; Mutz, 2002). This exchange of information plays a significant role in shaping individuals’ opinions and political attitudes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Pattie & Johnston, 2001; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003). According to MacKuen and Brown (1987), political discussions influence citizens’ evaluations of parties and candidates. This is particularly the case during election campaigns, because both increased media coverage and political mobilization by political elites motivate citizens to engage in personal discussion about politics (Beck, 1991). Individuals develop and reinforce their pre-existing political dispositions through social experiences such as political discussion (Dawson, 2001; Cho, 2005). It is considered by some scholars as the most influential source of attitude change (Mondak, 1995). In the context of European integration, de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006a) found that interpersonal discussions affect EU enlargement support. I expect that the content of interpersonal communication affects democratic performance evaluations. Being exposed to positive interpersonal messages will change these EU evaluations positively.
However, not only the content of the message affects the effect of interpersonal communication. According to Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), networks of social relations are primarily responsible for the communication of political information and expertise among and between groups and individuals. Furthermore, people have the tendency to create homogenous interpersonal discussion networks, by selecting people with similar political viewpoints (Beck, 1991; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995). “Given this homogenous nature of political discussion, it is plausible to expect that individuals develop and reinforce their pre-existing political dispositions through political discussion.” (Cho, 2005, p. 300). These politically homogeneous personal environments then serve as social anchors for opinions and attitudes (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p.44).

**Hypothesis 2:** The more one engages in interpersonal discussions about EU politics, and the more positive (negative) one is in those conversations, the more positive (negative) one’s EU evaluations will become.

**Media + IPC: reinforcement or rejection?**

The conceptualization of this relation between mass media and interpersonal conversation has instigated a division between two seemingly contradictory theoretical perspectives (Mutz, 1998). The most accepted relationship is one of *competition* between media and interpersonal information (Lenart, 1994). The results of the Erie County study (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) are illustrative for this model, where media and interpersonal sources are independent main effects that compete for influence over the individual. Most studies following this competitive model find that, whatever the potential effects of the media, interpersonal conversation usually overrides the influence of the media (for an overview, see Lenart, 1994). “In short, the source competition argument posits substantively disjunctive main effects, with interpersonal processes being stronger and more important for the individual. Moreover, a possible interaction exists between the two sources of information, such that increased interpersonal communication should serve to weaken the impact of the media” (Lenart, 1994, p.40). The second theoretical perspective on media versus interpersonal sources uses a model of *reinforcement* (for an overview, see Lenart, 1994). More interpersonal conversation about media information will increase the total media impact (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Scheufele, 2002). Mass media stimulate interpersonal discussions about politics that might otherwise not take place (Katz & Feldman, 1962). Instead of being neutralized by the influence of interpersonal conversation, as in the competitive model, here media effects are reinforced by those interpersonal conversations which tend to revolve around media-generated content (Scheufele, 2002). In this model of “differential gains”, put forward by Scheufele (2001), interpersonal communication compensates the shortcomings of media coverage, which can be overly complex and ambiguous.

Schmitt-Beck (2003) found that while media and interpersonal communication can be similarly influential on vote choice, yet an indirect effect can be traced as well. When voters receive cues from the mass media, they frequently talk about them with peers. Depending on the political preferences of those peers, and its concordance to the media message, the latter will be reinforced or rejected by the former (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). I believe that the content of the message and its congruence to the dominating political preference within the interpersonal network determines whether political
discussion reinforces or rejects the media message.

**Hypothesis 3:** When the directional bias of the media message is congruent with the dominant political values within the social network, interpersonal discussion will reinforce the effect of the media message.

**The role of disagreement**

As mentioned before, I expect a positive effect of positive EU messages from media and interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations. When messages from media and interpersonal communication are similar (both EU positive or both EU negative), interpersonal communication will reinforce the effect of media messages. I assumed that most interpersonal discussion networks were homogenous, due to the tendency of people to select equal-minded discussants within their networks (Beck, 1991; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995). This rather strong assumption excludes the possibility of heterogeneous networks. Therefore, it is essential to control for disagreement within those conversations. When people tend to disagree on EU evaluations within their conversations, a different effect might occur. Several scholars have shown that disagreement within interpersonal conversations has a negative effect on participation (Belanger & Eagles, 2007; McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2006). According to Mutz (2006), exposure to disagreement leads to awareness of the rationales behind the opposing view, which, in turn, makes people’s cognitions about specific objects less one-sided (Huckfeldt, Johnson & Sprague, 2004; Parsons, 2010). This ambivalence, or confusion (Eveland & Scheufele, 2005), reduces opinion certainty and attitude strength (McGraw & Bartels, 2005). Similarly, Lee (2012) found that disagreement with the discussant to mitigate the effect of tone of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

**Hypothesis 4:** The more disagreement within interpersonal discussions, the less effect interpersonal discussions will have on EU evaluations.

**Method**

**Data Collection**

I test the hypothesis on the basis of data from a two-wave panel survey, in combination with data from an analysis of media content between the two waves.

**Two wave panel survey.** A two-wave panel survey was carried out in 21 European Union member states. Respondents were interviewed about one month prior to the June 4-7 2009 elections for the European Parliament and immediately after the elections. Fieldwork dates were 6-18th of May and 8-19th of June 2009. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS Opinion in Brussels and involved TNS subsidiaries in each country. All subsidiaries comply with ESOMAR guidelines for survey research. A total of
32,411 respondents participated in wave one and 22,806 respondents participated in wave two. On average, 1,086 respondents per country completed the questionnaires of both waves, varying from 1,001 in Austria to 2,000 in Belgium. In each country, a sample was drawn from a TNS database. These databases rely on multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age and education. As I am mostly interested in the underlying relationships between variables, I consider the deviations in the sample vis-à-vis the adult population less problematic and I exert appropriate caution when making inferences about absolute values. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into the original languages. It was then back translated into English. The translation was supervised by the research team and it was carried out by TNS (which also executes and translates the Eurobarometer surveys). Irregularities and problems arising from this process were resolved by deliberation.

**Content analysis.** The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in the same 21 EU member states. I focus on national television and newspapers because these media are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe. I include the main national evening news broadcasts of the most widely watched public and commercial television stations. I also include two ‘quality’ (i.e. broadsheet) and one tabloid newspaper (or the most sensationalist-oriented other daily newspaper) from each country. These media outlets were selected to provide a comprehensive idea about the news coverage in each country.

The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up to the election. All relevant news outlets were collected either digitally or as hardcopies. With regard to story selection, for television, all news items have been coded; for newspapers, all news items on the title page and on one randomly selected page as well as all stories pertaining particularly to the EU and/or the EU election on any other page of the newspaper have been coded. In total, 36,881 news stories have been coded in all 21 EU member states of which 13,866 stories dealt specifically with the EU, its institutions, policies or the election campaign. Coding was conducted by a total of 42 coders at two locations, the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and University of Exeter (UK), using an online survey tool. All coders were native speakers of the respective languages, and received extensive training during a two-week intensive coder training course. The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

**Combining the two wave panel data and the content analysis data.** A crucial aspect of the design is to link the panel survey with a media content analysis. Following the recommendations and examples by Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder (1998), Slater (2007) and de Vreese and Semetko (2004), I determined for each medium the percentage of news items (about the EU) which were evaluative, and within this categorization, whether the evaluative tone was positive, negative or mixed, based on the content analysis. I merged these news content variables with the level of news media exposure (based on the panel data). For each medium, I connected the level of evaluative EU news to the extent to which the individual actually used it during the campaign. For each item where the democratic state of the EU was evaluated, a rate was given based on the content, ranging from very negative (-3), via balanced (0), to very positive (+3). From this, the mean evaluation of the democratic state of the EU in each media outlet could be inferred (see de Vreese & Semetko, 2004), by subtracting the negative
scores from the positive scores per outlet. For every respondent, the exposure to each medium was registered, ranging from 0 to 7 days a week. The tone of evaluative news was then multiplied by the individual exposure, which yielded the evaluative news content exposure per medium per respondent. By summing the different exposure scores per respondent, and dividing it by the total media exposure, I calculated an average percentage of evaluative news content exposure per respondent.

Measures

**Dependent variable.** In the extant literature, democratic performance evaluations of the EU have been operationalized in several ways. Some scholars used support for integration (Janssen, 1991; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) to test citizens’ attitudes towards the EU. Other scholars used satisfaction with (European) democracy as their variable of interest (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Karp, Banducci, & Bowler, 2003; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). Attitudes towards European governance are structured along related but distinct dimensions (Rohrschneider, 2002; Scheuer, 2005). To fully capture the multi-dimensionality of EU attitudes, studies of public opinion about the EU should reflect on these different types of support. Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas and de Vreese (2011) distinguished the democratic performance dimension from four other dimensions of EU attitudes. This resulted in a scale of four items (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.828; Explained variance = 66.047 %; Eigen value = 2.642), which will serve as the dependent variable, measuring evaluation of the EU’s democratic performance (see also Desmet, van Spanje & de Vreese 2012/Chapter 1). The first item measures the satisfaction with European democracy: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union? Respondents could choose between seven categories, ranging from ‘not at all satisfied’ (1) to ‘very satisfied’ (7). For the other three items, respondents had to indicate to what extent they agree with the following statements: (a) The European Union functions according to democratic principles. (b) The decision making process in the European Union is transparent. (c) The European Union functions well as it is. Again, respondents could choose between seven answer categories, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) till ‘strongly agree’ (7). By averaging the responses to these items per individual, I created a democratic performance scale, ranging from 1 to 7.

**Evaluative media.** Within the content analysis, articles with explicit mentioning of evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU were coded. The mentioning and the tone of the evaluation in the news item were both coded. Every media outlet was given a score indicating the frequency and the tone (negative versus positive) of these evaluations. By combining these scores with data on individual exposure per media outlet, we were able to calculate an individual score of the probability for every respondent of being confronted with (positive or negative) evaluations of the EU. I refer to this variable as ‘evaluative media content’ in the tables.

**Interpersonal communication (IPC).** Respondents were asked whether they had discussions during the campaign about EU politics, and if so, whether they took a positive or negative position in those discussions: When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues about European issues, do you more often take a positive or a negative position towards the European Union? Answering categories ranged from -3, ‘very negative’, to 3, ‘very positive’.

Furthermore, they were asked to indicate how many interpersonal conversations they had dur-
ing the three weeks preceding the EP-elections: *How often do you discuss EU politics with your family, friends or colleagues?* Answering categories ranged from 1, ‘never’ towards 7, ‘very often’. By multiplying these two, I acquired a variable containing information about the content and the frequency of these conversations, ranging from frequent negative towards frequent positive conversations about the EU.

**Disagreement within IPC.** Respondents were asked whether they encountered disagreement within their interpersonal conversations about the EU: *When you talk to your family, friends or colleagues about the EU, do you generally encounter opinions that are close to your own or far from your own opinion?* Answering categories ranged from 1, ‘never’, towards 7, ‘very often’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II.1: Descriptives of the variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU evaluations wave 2 (DV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU evaluations wave 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis**

In order to test the hypotheses, I combined the individual media content exposure measure and the interpersonal conversation measure in one OLS regression model, with democratic performance evaluations from wave 2 as the dependent variable, and controlling for democratic performance evaluations from wave 1.

**Results**

First, I look at the effect of evaluative media content. As displayed in Table II.2, there is a significant (p<0.001) effect of evaluative media messages on democratic performance evaluations (a change of tone [of media coverage that a respondent is exposed to] of one unit is associated with a change of 0.072 on the 1-7 democratic performance scale). Citizens are more positive about the democratic quality of EU institutions when the evaluative tone of the message is more positive. This supports hypothesis 1. Similarly, I found confirmation in the second model that frequent political discussion within homogenous networks has an effect on EU evaluations. The more one talks about politics, the more (0.051 on a scale from 1 to 7) positive one tends to be about the EU (p<0.001). This supports hypothesis 2. Apart from these main findings, the results report a change in N between the first and the second model. When I incorporate interpersonal communication in the model, I lose about 1/7 of the respondents. These were
the respondents who reported not to talk about the EU at all. Therefore, the findings about the effect of interpersonal communication are not applicable for those who reported not to have any interpersonal conversations about the EU. Second, R Square changes 0.056 when interpersonal communication is added to the model, while R Square only changes 0.002 when the media variable is added to the model. The direct influence of interpersonal communication appears to be much more substantial than the direct influence of evaluative media messages.

Table II.2: Effect of evaluative media and IPC on EU evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Empty model</th>
<th>Model 2.1</th>
<th>Model 2.2</th>
<th>Model 2.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>B (St. E)</td>
<td>B (St. E)</td>
<td>B (St. E)</td>
<td>B (St. E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>.981 (.018)**</td>
<td>1.021 (.018)**</td>
<td>1.389 (.020)**</td>
<td>1.426 (.020)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.719 (.005)**</td>
<td>.712 (.005)**</td>
<td>.596 (.005)**</td>
<td>.589 (.005)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main Effects
Evaluative media          .072 (.007)**
IPC                        .052 (.002)**

Model Summary
R Square (adjusted) .513 | .515 | .571 | .573
N                         22,806 | 22,806 | 19,829 | 19,829

Note: levels of significance: *** = p<.001; ** = p<.01; *=p<.05.

I assumed, however, that interpersonal communication moderates the effect of evaluative media messages, depending on the concordance of those messages with the political values within the network. The results in Model 3.1 (Table II.3) did not confirm the hypothesis: the effect I found was not significant (p=.071). One could explain this lack of significant effects to the measurement: the direct effect of evaluative media messages I found was quite small.

Table II.3: Effect of the interaction between evaluative media and IPC on EU evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 3.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>B (St. E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>1.425 (.020)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.589 (.005)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main Effects
Evaluative media          .066 (.007)**
IPC                        .051 (.001)**

Interaction Effects
Media x IPC                .002 (.001)

Model Summary
R Square (adjusted) .573 | .573
N                         19,829 | 19,829

Note: levels of significance: *** = p<.001; ** = p<.01; *=p<.05
The content of the message, and the role of disagreement: Effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations

However, as mentioned, I assumed that these interpersonal networks are homogenous. To control for potential heterogeneity within the interpersonal networks, I add disagreement to the model (Table II.4). I expected that disagreement within interpersonal discussion would moderate the direct effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations, in a negative direction. Having EU conversations with dissimilar others would have a different effect on EU evaluations than having EU conversations with similar others: the more similar the discussant, the stronger the effect of interpersonal communication. I found confirmation for hypothesis 4 (Model 4.2): the more one disagrees within interpersonal communication, the smaller (-0.003) the effect of frequent interpersonal communication on EU evaluations (p<0.001) 15.

### Table II.4: Effect of evaluative media, IPC and disagreement on EU evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 4.1</th>
<th>Model 4.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.390 (.026)***</td>
<td>1.386 (.026)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>.589 (.005)***</td>
<td>.587 (.005)***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Main Effects**
- Evaluative media: .066 (.007)***
- IPC: .051 (.001)***
- Disagreement: .010 (.005)*

**Interaction Effects**
- IPC x Disagreement: -.003 (.001)***

**Model Summary**
- R Square (adjusted): .573 .574
- N: 19,829 19,829

Note: levels of significance: *** = p<.001; ** = p<.01; *=p<.05

### Discussion

In this study, I explored the effect of media and interpersonal communication messages on EU democratic performance evaluations. An increasing number of scholars has studied mass media and interpersonal communication simultaneously during the last decade, however, due to ambiguous results, the nature of this interaction between mass and interpersonal communication is still rather unclear.

First, I tested the direct effect of evaluative news content on citizens’ evaluations, during an EP election campaign. The results show that exposure to positive EU evaluations in the media has a positive effect on individual EU evaluations (H1). The more citizens are exposed to positive EU evaluations through the news media, the more positive they become about the democratic performance of the EU and its institutions. In this study, I only focused on direct persuasive effects of tone and content. The effects might be accompanied by cognitive effects. These results confirm the central position of news media in the European common space (Kantner, 2004; de Vreese, 2007), and can have important implications for the communication policy of the EU and its institutions. Mass media still have a certain influence on the public opinion, and the tone of news can have an impact on popular evaluations of European institutions and policies. By engaging actively with the media, the EU might
benefit from positive media attention. This requires a pro-active media policy and PR strategy from
the EU, especially around the big events. Aside from the news media, people are exposed to politi-
cal information and opinions within their own social network. In doing so, citizens are exposed to a
different set of politically-relevant information. Having positive conversations about the EU makes
people more positive about the democratic performance of European institutions (H2). Similar to
media strategy, the EU could be more pro-active towards its citizens via social media. Furthermore,
existing EU youth organizations could be included as well in this ‘interpersonal strategy’.

Having established this basic idea that evaluative tone has an effect on political evaluations, I
focused on the combined effect of media and interpersonal communication. How do they interact?
Does the conversation weaken the media effect, or is there a surplus value of the combination of
the two influences? Scholars have established a clear link between both (Lenart, 1994; Mutz, 1998;
Schmitt-Beck, 2003). People have the tendency to talk about what they received from the media
(Schmitt-Beck, 2003). No consensus has been reached about the effect of this combination (for an
overview, see Lenart 1994). Some scholars follow the competitive model, where media and interper-
sonal sources are independent main effects that compete for influence over the individual, while others
state that media effects are reinforced by interpersonal conversations which tend to revolve around
media-generated content (Lenart, 1994; Scheufele, 2002). My expectation that tone congruence be-
tween media and interpersonal communication determines whether the effect of the media message
is reinforced or neutralized by interpersonal communication, was not supported by the results (H3).
This could be explained by the methodological design. I was not able to measure the exact content of
the interpersonal conversation. A content analysis of interpersonal communication would offer better
information.

I also expected disagreement to moderate the effect of interpersonal communication on EU
evaluations. I found evidence for this expectation. The influence of interpersonal communication is
weakened when the discussants perceive disagreement between one another (H4). When people are
confronted with deviating opinions on the EU, their cognitions on the EU become less one-sided, and
more ambivalent (Huckfeldt, Johnson & Sprague, 2004; Parsons, 2010). This ambivalence reduces
their opinion certainty (McGraw & Bartels, 2005). As such, disagreement tends to mitigate (Lee,
2012) the effects of interpersonal communication.

This study demonstrates the importance of investigating the combined effect of media and in-
The results from Chapter 1 demonstrated that national institutional quality functions as a yardstick
for EU evaluations, depending on the level of political knowledge. In this chapter, I showed empiri-
cally that the information context is crucial as well. Evaluative media messages and interpersonal com-
munication do have a direct effect on EU evaluations. Furthermore, I found evidence for the impact
of disagreement within those interpersonal conversations. The more one disagrees with the discussant,
the weaker the effect of interpersonal communication will become on EU evaluations. I was not able
to confirm the expectation that tone congruence between media and interpersonal communication
determines whether they reinforce one another. Gathering more information about the content of
interpersonal conversation would be the next step forward.
In the next chapter, I will study the same research questions from a different methodological perspective, while increasing the control of the message. By conducting an experiment, I will be able to manipulate the tone of both the media and the interpersonal message. This will allow me to account for the effect of tone congruence between both forms of communication. Furthermore, I want to validate and further challenge the findings from the real world in this experimental setting.
Footnotes

1  The study was funded by the Dutch National Science Foundations (VICI grant) and additional grants from the Danish Science Foundation, the University of Amsterdam, and the Swedish Riksbanken Foundation.

2  The countries were Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia & Bulgaria. The country selection includes larger and smaller member states, countries from North, South, East and West, and long term and new members to the Union. The country selection was finalized based on feasibility.

3  In Britain and Ireland data collection finished on May 11, in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Czech Republic, Austria, Portugal, Netherlands, Finland and Slovakia on May 12, in Hungary, Poland and Latvia on May 13, in Denmark and Belgium on May 14, in Lithuania on May 15 and in Bulgaria on May 18.

4  In Slovakia and Bulgaria data collection finished on June 11, in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and the Netherlands on June 12, in Ireland and Britain on June 13, in France, Poland and Austria on June 14, in Spain, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Finland, and Latvia on June 15 and Belgium on June 19.

5  The age limit in Austria was 16 as voting age in Austria is 16 whereas it is 18 in other countries.

6  In Belgium, 1,000 Flemish respondents and 1,000 Walloon respondents completed both waves of the survey.


8  Belgium was treated as having two media systems (one Dutch and one French speaking). Therefore in total ten outlets were coded, four television news outlets (two Dutch speaking, two French speaking), and six newspapers (three Dutch language and three French language). For Germany, four news outlets were coded (two public and two commercial). For Spain, three television news outlets were coded.

9  Intercoder reliability for the evaluative media measure: Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.60 (based on 35 randomly selected newstories which were coded by 53 coders at both locations (Amsterdam and Exeter)

10  Two other variables could have been used as well: EU evaluations and EP-evaluations. Using these did not change the results, neither in the first nor in the second model. Interaction with interpersonal communication generated the same outcome (main effect and level of significance)

11  The results confirm the existence of a (modest) change between wave 1 and wave 2 in the evaluation of EU democracy. 15.02% became more than one point more positive (one a scale from 1 to 7) between wave 1 and wave 2, 13.48 % became more negative in their EU evaluation.

12  In all models, I controlled for age, education and gender. In none of the models, the results changed significantly by adding these variables.

13  In the survey, people who answered “not at all” (0) on the question: How often do you discuss EU politics with your family, friends or colleagues? did not have to answer the next item (When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues about European issues, do you more often take a positive or a negative position towards the European Union?), and are therefore excluded from the IPC measure.

14  The comparison between the R Square of Model 2.1 and Model 2.2 was done with the same N (19829).

15  The R Square Change when adding this interaction to the model is significant, but very modest (.001). This could be due to the measurement of interpersonal communication. I will seek confirmation for this result in an experimental setting in Chapter 3.