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## **Discussing the Democratic Deficit: Effects of Media and Interpersonal Communication on Satisfaction with Democracy in the European Union**

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The perception of a democratic deficit in the European Union (EU) is widespread. In which circumstances is this perception affected by mass media and interpersonal communication? To answer this question, we analyze data from representative samples of citizens in 21 EU member states ( $N = 22,806$ ) and linked to news items ( $N = 36,881$ ) these citizens were exposed to in the 2009 European election campaign. Our results indicate that theoretically expected interpersonal communication effects exist in all countries. We find media effects in countries with a one-sided message flow that is positive about EU democratic performance. In these countries, the media have a positive effect on EU democratic performance perceptions, and the effect is larger among less sophisticated citizens. Negative interpersonal communication effects are stronger among sophisticated citizens. Furthermore, among less sophisticated citizens, we find a positive reinforcement effect of mass media and interpersonal communication. These findings suggest that the EU has more possibilities to positively affect public opinion than has been assumed.

*Keywords: democratic deficit, media effects, interpersonal communication, reinforcement, satisfaction with democracy*

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The European Union (EU) is often criticized for a democratic deficit. Citizens' perceptions and evaluations depend on mass media messages. This is because, in EU politics, the truism applies that media and interpersonal communication are the principal sources of political information (Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Esser & Strömback, 2014). However, little is known about how political attitude formation is affected by media, interpersonal communication, and their combination.

Few scholars have studied the effects of mass and interpersonal communication simultaneously (e.g., Schmitt-Beck, 2003). Although studies concerning political news (e.g., Ho, Scheufele, & Corley, 2013; Sommer, 2013) and health communication (e.g., Chandler et al., 2013; Hendriks, Putte, De Bruijn, & de Vreese, 2014) have been conducted in recent years, for a long time scholars treated mass and interpersonal communication as unrelated and distinct channels of information. This separation has, according to Reardon and Rogers (1988), little theoretical justification. Southwell and Yzer (2009) stress that there is a need to further our understanding of "the intersection of conversation and campaigns" (p. 1). Already in 1990, Morley 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). In this article, we follow up on these and other suggestions.

We contribute to the systematic exploration of the intersection between interpersonal and mass media communication, and how this affects political attitudes. In the past, 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 (e.g., Lenart, 1994). Because we find no evidence for competition (results available on request), we concentrate on reinforcement. We investigate the impact of media and interpersonal communication and their reinforcement of change in a particular type of attitude: satisfaction with EU democracy. We are interested in how both media and interpersonal communication affects *change* in attitudes, because most studies have been confined to examining correlational relationships. We assess this dynamic among two types of citizens in two different contexts. The two citizen types are highly politically sophisticated citizens and less sophisticated ones; the two context types are one-sided mass media message flow contexts and two-sided ones. We follow Schmitt-Beck (2003) in simultaneously studying several countries, which allows us to determine to what extent we can generalize our findings to other countries at other times. The simultaneous study in 21 countries is a substantial contribution to the existing literature, given the lack of cross-national studies of interpersonal communication about politics (Nir, 2012) and its effects.

### **Democratic Performance Evaluations in a European Context**

Recent research on the interaction effects of mass media and interpersonal communication has been done mainly in an effort to explain either political knowledge (e.g., Beaudoin, 2004; Hardy & Scheufele, 2009; Scheufele, 2002) or political participation (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Gamson, 1992; Scheufele, 2000; Schmitt-Beck, 2003). But research has thus far largely ignored the effects on political evaluations, including public assessments of the democratic performance of a polity (for notable exceptions, see Banducci & Karp, 2003; McLeod, Brown, Becker, & Ziemke, 1977).

In this article, we aim to explain 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. We focus in particular on the European Union, where democratic performance evaluations delve more specifically into the domain of the communication and the EU's perceived "democratic deficit," often described as one of the most problematic issues for further European cooperation (Anderson & McLeod, 2004; Hix, 2008; Katz, 2001; Meyer 1999). These evaluations serve as building blocks toward future support and are, as such, crucial considerations in the process of opinion formation (Rohrschneider, 2002; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000).

The quality of EU democracy has been one of the central issues in EU politics in recent decades (Hobolt, 2012). Because European citizens do not experience the democratic performance of the EU firsthand, evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU depend on collective experiences, and therefore on information gathered through interpersonal and mass media communication. Media attention to issues involving the EU is mainly concentrated around EU-related political events such as European Council meetings and European Parliament (EP) elections (de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese, Lauf, & Peter, 2007). It is perhaps surprising that few studies have examined the effect of media and interpersonal communication in the context of such elections (for an exception, see Peter, 2003)—especially because interpersonal communication about politics is likely to peak right before or just after such events (cf. Hardy & Scheufele, 2009), and it is plausible to assume that conversations the day after or before a major campaign event influence citizens more than conversations held at any other point in time. Evaluations about EU institutions are likely to be based on the information gathered during these short periods. EP elections offer the most obvious incentive for people to make up their minds about how the EU institutions perform. Therefore, changes in EU evaluations are most likely to occur within an EP election campaign period, and it is such a campaign period that we study in this article.

Our study focuses on the direct persuasive effect of evaluative messages from both mass media and interpersonal communication in the context of the 2009 EP elections. We combine data from a two-wave panel survey with data from a content analysis, both collected in 21 EU member states. The first survey wave was executed three weeks before the EP election, and the second wave was done immediately after the election. We coded the content of several media outlets in the three weeks between the two waves in each country. We merged the panel survey data and the media content analysis data. The resulting combined data set allows us to measure change in EU evaluations and to relate such change to individual media consumption during the campaign. Furthermore, it facilitates tests of how the frequency and tone of interpersonal communication impinges on this relationship. This allows us to assess the extent to which exposure to mass media and interpersonal communication, and their combinations, affect citizens' evaluations of European democratic performance.

### **Media Effects on EU Democratic Performance Evaluations**

In the context of European democratic performance evaluations, the media are likely to be important, because they are citizens' primary source of information about EU politics. During the three weeks preceding the EP elections, the EU is in the news more than usual. In addition, the citizenry is, on average, more attentive to EU news, motivated by the upcoming election and the (social or legal)

obligation to vote. Previous research has shown that the media coverage of political actors plays an important role in shaping citizens' political opinions (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Zaller (1996) has shown that slanted message flows in the media can affect political evaluations. A negative tone has been associated with negative opinions and even political alienation and demobilization (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). When the topic is abstract and relatively unknown, as is the case with the EU, the tone of evaluative news content has more persuasive potential on the audience than news concerning more obtrusive issues (Page & Shapiro, 1992). Examples of more obtrusive issues include certain economic issues concerning wages, taxes or inflation, and particular security issues associated with terrorist attacks, rights to bear arms, or domestic wars.

Several scholars have reported evidence that the tone of EU coverage affects people's opinion on EU matters (e.g., Norris, 2000; Peter, 2003). Peter (2003) found that the tone of coverage affected citizens' attitudes toward European integration positively in a consonant context. Norris (2000) pointed to 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 that is almost exclusively fulfilled during an EP election campaign. Citizens' exposure to more evaluative messages may add up to a considerable effect, through which media can gradually influence citizens' predispositions (Zaller, 1992). The tone of those messages will be essential to determine the (positive or negative) nature of the effect on EU evaluations.

*H1: The more positive (or negative) the evaluative tone of the EU news one is exposed to, the more positive (or negative) one's EU evaluations will become.*

### **Interpersonal Communication**

Another important source for relevant political information is interpersonal communication. In 1999, Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe, and Shapiro pointed out that most studies on the effects of political communication leave out interpersonal conversation. This is problematic, because it may have a substantial impact on public opinion. Citizens likely engage in interpersonal conversations at least as often as they watch television news or read newspapers. 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 (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Pattie & Johnston, 2001). 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 preexisting political dispositions through social experiences such as political discussion (Cho, 2005). Political discussion among individuals is considered by some scholars to be the most influential source of attitude change (for an overview, see Chaffee & Mutz, 1988). In the context of European integration, de Vreese and Boomgaarden found that interpersonal discussions affect knowledge and voter turnout (2006a) as well as EU

enlargement support (2006b). We expect that being exposed to positive interpersonal messages will positively change EU democratic performance evaluations.

*H2: The more positive (negative) about the EU a citizen's interpersonal discussions are according to him- or herself, the more positive (negative) one's EU evaluations will become.*

### **Media and Interpersonal Communication: Reinforcement or Rejection?**

The conceptualization of how mass media and interpersonal conversation are linked has instigated a division between two seemingly contradictory theoretical models (Mutz, 1998). Most take the perspective of *competition* between media and interpersonal information (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Studies following this competitive model find that effects of interpersonal conversation are larger than the influence of the media (for overviews, see Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Lenart, 1994).

A second theoretical perspective on media versus interpersonal sources is a model of *reinforcement*. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) noted that media effects gain strength in case media messages are supplemented with interpersonal communication. Drawing on examples from the 1930s, they convincingly argue that mass media effects can be reinforced by interpersonal talk. Other scholars have followed up on this argument by theorizing about, and providing empirical support for, the notion that more interpersonal conversation about media information increases media impact (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Scheufele, 2002). Mass media stimulate interpersonal discussion about politics (Mondak, 1995) that might otherwise not take place. 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, although media and interpersonal communication both can have an effect (on vote choice), a third factor is at play here. When voters receive cues from the mass media, they may discuss these cues with peers (and, more generally, the media system may influence political discussion frequency; see Nir, 2012). Partly depending on the political preferences of those peers, the discussion will—or will not—be congruent with the media message. If the media message and the ensuing discussion have a similar evaluative tone, interpersonal communication will reinforce the media effect. If not, citizens may reject the media message (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). We thus hypothesize that the content of the message and its degree of congruence with the dominant political preference within the interpersonal network have an impact on whether political discussion reinforces or weakens the media effect.

*H3: The effect of positive (or negative) EU news on one's EU evaluations is reinforced by positive (or negative) perceptions of interpersonal discussions about EU politics.*

### The Role of Political Sophistication

In his landmark studies, Zaller (1992, 1996) argued and empirically demonstrated that media effects vary from citizen to citizen. A key factor that influences the occurrence and size of these effects is a citizen's political sophistication. Political sophistication involves both political knowledge and political interest. Although politically sophisticated citizens have more access to mass media and discuss politics more often, they are less easily swayed than less politically sophisticated citizens by new information they may encounter (Zaller, 1992). It is therefore not surprising that the effects of slanted media content are often found to be stronger on less politically sophisticated citizens (e.g., de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006b)—although the arguments made are often more nuanced, involving also a middle group. A prime example is given by Beck et al. (2002), who find for almost all the media and interpersonal communication factors under study stronger effects among the less politically sophisticated. They “conclude that the social context is more important for less politicized than for more politicized members of the American electorate” (p. 67). Acknowledging that more nuanced versions of this argument exist (already articulated by Zaller, 1992), this leads us to specify the following hypothesis.

*H4: The effects of mass and interpersonal communications stated in H1–H3 are stronger among less politically sophisticated citizens.*

### One-Sided and Two-Sided Message Flows

In addition to the four general hypotheses, we put forth three specific hypotheses that concern a part of the country sample. Support for these hypotheses is independent from the verdicts on the first four hypotheses. We follow Peter (2003) and de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b) by taking into account Zaller's (1996) distinction between one-sided and two-sided mass media message flows. We have theoretical reasons to expect that direct media effects and interpersonal communication effects do not occur across the EU but only in countries with a one-sided message flow. Our argument follows Zaller (1996) and builds on Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1948) argument about “monopolization.” The intuition here is that media effects are particularly strong in the absence of “counterpropaganda” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). Finding positive media effects in one-sided positive contexts also would be in line with empirical findings—for example, with conclusions in a study about coverage of EU news in EU member states carried out by Peter (2003). We thus formulate a specification of the first hypothesis.

*H5: The effect of mass communications stated in H1 is stronger in one-sided message flow contexts.*

Building on Zaller's distinction, de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b) empirically demonstrate that media and interpersonal communication effects vary according to not only political sophistication but message flow context. In a one-sided message flow country, less politically sophisticated citizens are affected by media content, and more politically sophisticated citizens are not. This is different from a two-sided context, in which neither is influenced in any detectable way as media effects cancel out (de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2006b). Thus, in one-sided message flow contexts, we expect stronger media effects among citizens who are less politically sophisticated than among citizens who are more politically

sophisticated—effects that may be easier to trace than in two-sided message flow situations. This is because politically sophisticated citizens are expected to look for cues outside of what the media offer them, escaping the monopolization and therefore the effects of mass propaganda (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006b; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). By contrast, interpersonal communication effects are expected to occur to a greater extent among politically sophisticated citizens in one-sided contexts (see H6). This is because politically sophisticated citizens are less affected by the media flow and are better able to develop their opinions and communicate their ideas than less politically sophisticated citizens in these contexts (cf. de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006b).

*H6: The effects of mass communications are stronger among less politically sophisticated citizens in one-sided message flow contexts, whereas the effects of interpersonal communications are stronger among more politically sophisticated citizens in one-sided message flow contexts.*

Finally, because those who are not sophisticated politically have less prior knowledge to draw from, they have more difficulties coming up with counterarguments. This means that, in practice, less politically sophisticated citizens are less able to resist mass media argumentation, which leaves them more easily swayed by it. As a result, when exposed to both one-sided media content and congruent political talk, the effect on their evaluations is expected to be above and beyond the effect of media content and the effect of political talk combined (see H7). Just as in other contexts, we predict that reinforcement, if anywhere, occurs in one-sided message flow contexts among less politically sophisticated citizens.

*H7: The reinforcement effect of mass and interpersonal communications among less politically sophisticated citizens is stronger in one-sided message flow contexts.*

## **Method**

### ***Data Collection***

*Two-wave panel survey.* To test our hypotheses, we need a design that ensures variation in media coverage, interpersonal communication, and participants' individual characteristics. To this end, a two-wave panel survey was carried out in 21 European Union member states.<sup>1</sup> Participants were interviewed about one month prior to the June 4–7, 2009, elections for the European Parliament and immediately after the elections (de Vreese et al., 2009). Fieldwork dates were May 6–18 and June 8–19, 2009. The survey was conducted using computer-assisted Web interviewing. The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS Opinion in Brussels and involved TNS subsidiaries in each country. All subsidiaries comply with ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) guidelines for survey

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<sup>1</sup> The countries were Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Belgium, Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. The country selection includes larger and smaller member states, from all areas of Europe, and long-term and new members to the Union. The country selection was finalized based on feasibility.



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. The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age, and education. Because we are mostly interested in the underlying relationships between variables, we consider the deviations in the sample vis-à-vis the adult population less problematic and we exert appropriate caution when making inferences about absolute values.

*Content analysis.* The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in the same 21 EU member states within the PIREDEU (Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union) framework (Schuck, Xezonakis, Banducci, & de Vreese, 2010). We 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. We include the main national evening news broadcasts of the most watched public and commercial television stations. We 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 picture of the news coverage in each country.<sup>2</sup> The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up to the election. 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, or policies or the election campaign. All coders were native speakers of the respective languages and received extensive training during a two-week coder training course. The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.<sup>3</sup>

### **Combining the Two-Wave Panel Data and the Content Analysis Data**

A crucial aspect of the study design is to link the panel survey with a media content analysis. Following the recommendations by Slater (2007) and an empirical example by de Vreese and Semetko (2004), we determined for each medium the percentage of news items (about the EU) that were evaluative, and within this categorization, whether the evaluative tone was positive, negative, or mixed, based on the content analysis. We merged these news content variables with the level of news media exposure (based on the panel data). For each medium, we 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 rating was given based on the content, ranging from very negative (-3), via balanced (0), to very positive (+3). From this rating, the mean evaluation of the

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<sup>2</sup> 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 (3 Dutch language and 3 French language). For Germany, four news outlets were coded (two public and two commercial). For Spain, three television news outlets were coded.

<sup>3</sup> Intercoder reliability for the evaluative media measure: Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.60$  (based on 35 randomly selected news stories that were coded by 53 coders at both locations). Admittedly, this is quite low, so the results should be interpreted with caution.

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 participant, the exposure to each medium was registered, ranging from 0 to 7 days per week. The tone of evaluative news was then multiplied by the individual exposure, which yielded the evaluative news content exposure per medium per participant. By summing the different exposure scores per participant and dividing the sum by the total media exposure, we calculated an average percentage of evaluative news content exposure per participant.

### Measurement

*Dependent variable.* Attitudes toward European governance are structured along related but distinct dimensions (Rohrschneider, 2002; Scheuer, 2005). To fully capture the multidimensionality 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%; eigenvalue = 2.642), which will serve as the dependent variable, measuring evaluation of the EU's democratic performance (see also Desmet, Spanje, & de Vreese, 2012).

The first item measures the satisfaction with European democracy: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?" Participants could choose between seven categories, ranging from *not at all satisfied* (0) to *very satisfied* (6). For the other three items, participants 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, participants could choose between seven answer categories, ranging from *strongly disagree* (0) to *strongly agree* (6). By averaging the responses to these items per individual, we created a democratic performance scale, ranging from 0 to 6.

*Evaluative media.* Within the content analysis, articles were coded that explicitly mention evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU.<sup>4</sup> The mentioning and the tone of the evaluation in the news item were both coded. The coders were instructed to code a news item only if it explicitly mentions any aspect related to the state of democracy in the EU. They also had to code how it was evaluated. Does the story mention whether the European Union is transparent or undemocratic? For example, if the story suggests that most political matters discussed during an EU summit were decided in advance, or that the EU does not respect the will of the citizens, this should count as a negative evaluation. If, by contrast, the item emphasizes the transparency and democratic nature of the European Union, this is to be coded as a positive evaluation. The coding options were *not applicable/not mentioned* (1); *mentioned but not evaluated* (2); *negative* (3); *rather negative* (4); *balanced/mixed* (5); *rather positive* (6); and *positive* (7).

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<sup>4</sup> Two other variables could have been used as well: EU evaluations and EP evaluations. Using these did not change the results in the first or second model. Interaction with interpersonal communication generated the same outcome (main effect and level of significance).

In a next step, 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 participant of being confronted with (positive or negative) evaluations of the EU. For instance, imagine newscast A, critical of EU democratic performance, with an average score of  $-1$ , and newspaper B, which had a positive attitude toward EU democratic performance, scoring  $+1$  on average. For someone who watches newscast A every day and reads newspaper B three out of six days per week, we assign a score of  $-1 + 0.5 = -0.5$ . We refer to this variable as "evaluative media content." We make two variables, splitting the participants into groups, for our assessment of the reinforcement hypothesis. These variables measure the extent to which a participant scores below zero and the degree to which a participant has a value higher than zero, respectively.

*Interpersonal communication.* The two variables measuring interpersonal communication were computed on the basis of three questions. First, participants were asked whether they took a positive or negative position in interpersonal conversations they had during the three weeks preceding the EP elections: "When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues about European issues, do you more often take a positive or a negative position toward the European Union?" Answering categories ranged from  $-3$  (*very negative*) to  $3$  (*very positive*). Second, participants 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  $0$  (*very close*) to  $6$  (*very far*). Third, participants were asked to indicate how many discussions they had: "How often do you discuss EU politics with your family, friends or colleagues?" Answering categories ranged from  $0$  (*never*) to  $6$  (*very often*).

Based on answers to these three questions, we calculated a variable containing information about the content and frequency of the conversations participants had had, ranging from *frequent negative* to *frequent positive* conversations about the EU. We did so by attributing a score between  $0$  and  $6$  for the content of the interpersonal discussion (based on the first and second variables mentioned above), and then multiplying it by the  $0$ – $6$  frequency score (the third variable). Again, for a test of the reinforcement hypothesis, we divided the participants into groups and calculated two variables. One variable captures negative talk, ranging from  $0$  (*no negative talk*) to  $36$  (*maximum negative talk with maximum frequency*). Another variable taps positive talk and varies between  $0$  (*no positive talk*) and  $36$  (*maximum positive talk with maximum frequency*). Participants who had only neutral conversations, or none at all, scored zero on both variables.

*Political sophistication.* Following de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b), political sophistication was measured on the basis of interest in EU politics and knowledge questions about EU politics. Participants were asked to indicate their interest on a scale from  $0$  (*not at all interested*) to  $6$  (*very interested*). In addition, they had to answer two knowledge questions with six answering options, including a *don't know* option. These questions were how many member states are in the EU ( $27$ ) and how many seats the EP was going to have after the elections ( $736$ ). Respondents who had at least a mean

interest (i.e., a value of 3, 4, 5, or 6) and answered at least one of the two questions correctly were labeled *politically sophisticated*. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the variables.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables.**

|   | <b>N</b> | <b>Min</b> | <b>Max</b> | <b>M</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|---|----------|------------|------------|----------|-----------|
| EU evaluations wave 2<br>(dependent variable) | 22,806   | 0          | 6          | 2.57     | 1.22      |
| EU evaluations wave 1                         | 22,806   | 0          | 6          | 2.59     | 1.21      |
| Media: positive                               | 22,806   | 0          | 3.24       | 0.14     | 0.29      |
| Media: negative                               | 22,806   | 0          | 5.09       | 0.34     | 0.64      |
| Talk: positive                                | 22,806   | 0          | 36         | 2.07     | 4.67      |
| Talk: negative                                | 22,806   | 0          | 36         | 1.62     | 4.25      |
| Sophisticated                                 | 22,806   | 0          | 1          | 0.36     | 0.48      |

### Analysis

To test the hypotheses, we combined the individual media content exposure measures and the interpersonal conversation measures in one regression model, with democratic performance evaluations from wave 2 as the dependent variable, and controlling for democratic performance evaluations from wave 1.

Our analysis consists of two steps. First, we assess H1 to H4, and we include all 22,806 participants from all 21 EU member states. In the second step, we assess H5 to H7. We focus on countries that have a one-sided mass media message flow. These are Germany, Ireland, Latvia, and Lithuania. In these countries, less than 1% of participants were exposed to negative media content about EU democratic performance evaluations. In all other countries, this was at least 11%. The countries with a positive message flow are thus clearly distinct from the other countries. On average, 49% of the participants were exposed to negative media content in these 17 countries.<sup>6</sup>

To account for the fact that the EU evaluations vary from country to country, we use ordinary least squares regression analysis with cluster robust standard errors. Because a significant portion (10.8%) of the variation in the EU evaluations is at the country level, we also estimated multilevel regression models for H1 to H4. The results, available on request, lead to the same conclusions for each of the hypotheses. Multilevel models are not recommended for an analysis with only four countries (H5 to H7). To prevent having differences in model specification seeming to produce differences in our results in

<sup>5</sup> In the survey, individuals who answered *not at all* (0) to: "How often do you discuss EU politics with your family, friends or colleagues?" did not have to answer the question "When you talk to your family, friends, or colleagues about European issues . . .", and therefore received a zero value on the interpersonal communication variables.

<sup>6</sup> There were also countries with a negative one-sided message flow. We did not find empirical evidence for similar media and interpersonal communication effects patterns in these countries, however.

step 1 and step 2, we use the same models for H1 to H4 and for H5 to H7 and present for all hypotheses the results of ordinary least squares regression analyses using cluster robust standard errors.

## Results

Let us now turn to the results. First, we look at the effect of evaluative media content. As can be concluded from the data shown in Table 2, there is a significant (at the  $p = .05$  level, two-tailed) effect of positive media messages on democratic performance evaluations. A change of positive tone of media coverage that a participant is exposed to of one unit (e.g., from +1 to +2) is associated with a change of 0.103 on the 0–6 EU democratic performance evaluation scale in Model 1. Citizens are more positive about the democratic quality of EU institutions when the evaluative tone of the message is more positive. However, robustness checks (not shown) indicate that this result is entirely due to the inclusion of countries that have a positive one-sided message flow. This does not hold for the negative effect. The negative media effect is substantially smaller than the positive media impact in absolute terms (0.064 in Model 1). The effect in the negative direction reaches the  $p = .01$  level of statistical significance (two-tailed). This effect depends on a single country: Austria. Some Austrians' more negative views following their excessive exposure to negative evaluations of the EU democratic performance drive this impact. Although not consistent across countries, this can be seen as evidence in support of H1 (see Model 1 in Table 2).

We find considerably more consistent support for H2, which predicts that frequent political discussion has an effect on EU evaluations (Model 2). This effect goes in both the positive and the negative direction. The more one engages in positive discussion about EU politics, the more (0.031 per extra unit on a scale from 0 to 6) positive one tends to be about EU democratic performance. In the negative direction, this effect is about the same size in absolute terms (0.036 in Model 2). These effects are significant at the  $p = .01$  level (two-tailed) and can be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of the 21 countries under study.

Although the evaluative media message effects retain most of their strength and significance when included in one model jointly with them, the direct influence of the interpersonal communication variables appears more consistent and more substantial, given the scale these variables are measured on. This is in line with previous findings that interpersonal communication trumps media influence on attitude change.

As a next step, we test whether interpersonal communication moderates the effect of evaluative media messages. See Model 3 in Table 2 for our findings on this point. The results do not confirm the reinforcement hypothesis. The inclusion of the relevant interaction effects does not significantly improve the model (compare the model fit of Models 2 and 3). Neither interaction effect yields a significant effect in the predicted direction. The evidence thus does not support H3.

We expect that political sophistication moderates the direct effects of media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. However, our results do not corroborate H4 (Models 4 and 5). The null findings pertaining to the interactions indicate that political sophistication does not play the role we predicted. We find no empirical evidence in support of the idea that people who are less politically

sophisticated are affected more by media or conversation than those who are more politically sophisticated. These effects are not significant, and the model fit does not significantly improve.

The last test on the entire sample involves two three-way interactions (still H4). The results of our analysis (Model 6) suggest that politically sophisticated citizens are less susceptible to the positive reinforcement effect. Again, however, sensitivity analyses demonstrate that this effect depends entirely on the countries with one-sided positive message flow. Because we also do not see any results from negative reinforcement, we conclude that the third part of H4 should be rejected as well. This leaves us with the unimpressive score of only two out of four hypotheses confirmed. Besides the (inconsistent) influence of media and the (consistent) impact of interpersonal communication, no effects seem to be present in the sample as a whole.

Turning to the four one-sided message flow countries (Table 3), a different picture emerges. We see the same media and interpersonal communication findings as based on our entire sample. Because the positive media effect pertains only to these four countries, H5 is confirmed. In addition, we see a reinforcement effect of positive media and positive talk in the four countries. This reinforcement effect is smaller among those who are politically sophisticated. As with H5, because this impact depends on only the four countries with one-sided message flow, H7 is confirmed. The media effect is absent among the politically sophisticated, as Model 10 indicates (H6). We also find, in Model 11, that the effect of negative talk is slightly stronger among citizens who are more politically sophisticated (still H6).<sup>7</sup> In sum, the analysis of the four one-sided message flow countries results in evidence for all three hypotheses—although the evidence is stronger for some stronger than for others.

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<sup>7</sup> The tiny increases in model fit point in the direction of problems associated with multicollinearity. However, the mean variance inflation factor is only 2.69 with a minimum of 1.16 and a maximum of 5.42. The effects are small (besides the effects of talk) but not unimportant.

**Table 2. Models Explaining EU Democratic Performance Evaluations in 21 EU Member States, 2009.**

|   | <b>Model 1</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b>         | <b>Model 2</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 3</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 4</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 5</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 6</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> |
|---|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|   | All the twenty-one countries under study |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  |
| <b>Constant</b>                                 | .726**<br>(.052)                         | .909**<br>(.048)                 | .916**<br>(.049)                 | .902**<br>(.046)                 | .898**<br>(.045)                 | .900**<br>(.045)                 |
| <b>EU democratic evaluations before</b>         | .712**<br>(.011)                         | .637**<br>(.010)                 | .637**<br>(.010)                 | .635**<br>(.010)                 | .635**<br>(.010)                 | .635**<br>(.010)                 |
| <b>Media: positive (H1/5)</b>                   | .103*<br>(.043)                          | .102*<br>(.038)                  | .098+<br>(.047)                  | .116**<br>(.038)                 | .114**<br>(.032)                 | .097*<br>(.040)                  |
| <b>Media: negative (H1)</b>                     | -.064**<br>(.021)                        | -.051*<br>(.019)                 | -.066*<br>(.024)                 | -.061*<br>(.022)                 | -.062*<br>(.022)                 | -.061*<br>(.022)                 |
| <b>Talk: positive (H2)</b>                      |  | .031**<br>(.002)                 | .031**<br>(.002)                 | .030**<br>(.002)                 | .032**<br>(.002)                 | .031**<br>(.003)                 |
| <b>Talk: negative (H2)</b>                      |  | -.036**<br>(.003)                | -.039**<br>(.003)                | -.039**<br>(.003)                | -.038**<br>(.003)                | -.038**<br>(.004)                |
| <b>Media: positive* Talk: positive (H3)</b>     |  |                                  | .001<br>(.006)                   | .001<br>(.006)                   | .001<br>(.006)                   | .008<br>(.007)                   |
| <b>Media: negative* Talk: negative (H3)</b>     |  |                                  | .005<br>(.003)                   | .005<br>(.003)                   | .005+<br>(.003)                  | .004<br>(.003)                   |
| <b>Sophisticated</b>                            |  |                                  |                                  | .062**<br>(.021)                 | .076**<br>(.022)                 | .068**<br>(.021)                 |
| <b>Media: positive* Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>    |  |                                  |                                  | -.058<br>(.059)                  | -.055<br>(.059)                  | -.000<br>(.044)                  |
| <b>Media: negative* Sophisticated (H4)</b>      |  |                                  |                                  | -.015<br>(.021)                  | -.014<br>(.022)                  | -.016<br>(.024)                  |
| <b>Talk: positive* Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>     |  |                                  |                                  |                                  | -.005<br>(.003)                  | -.001<br>(.003)                  |
| <b>Talk: negative* Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>     |  |                                  |                                  |                                  | -.002<br>(.003)                  | -.003<br>(.003)                  |
| <b>Media pos*talk pos* Sophisticated (H4/7)</b> |  |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  | -.019*<br>(.009)                 |
| <b>Media neg*talk neg* Sophisticated (H4)</b>   |  |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  | .001<br>(.002)                   |
| <b>N respondents</b>                            | 22,806                                   |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  |
| <b>R-squared</b>                                | .515                                     | .545                             | .545                             | .545                             | .545                             | .545                             |

+ $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed); RSE = cluster robust standard errors.

**Table 3. Models Explaining EU Democratic Performance Evaluations in 4 EU Member States, 2009.**

|   | <b>Model 7</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 8</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 9</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 10</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 11</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> | <b>Model 12</b><br><b>b (RSE)</b> |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Four one-sided positive mass media message flow countries |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>Constant</b>   | .850**<br>(.046)                 | 1.029**<br>(.051)                | 1.043**<br>(.054)                | 1.015**<br>(.055)                 | 1.005**<br>(.052)                 | 1.011**<br>(.053)                 |
| <b>EU democratic evaluations before</b>                   | .674**<br>(.020)                 | .610**<br>(.020)                 | .611**<br>(.020)                 | .609**<br>(.019)                  | .609**<br>(.019)                  | .610**<br>(.019)                  |
| <b>Media: positive (H1/5)</b>                             | .091<br>(.039)                   | .076+<br>(.027)                  | .045<br>(.028)                   | .091*<br>(.025)                   | .088*<br>(.025)                   | .074+<br>(.027)                   |
| <b>Media: negative (H1)</b>                               |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>Talk: positive (H2)</b>                                |                                  | .030**<br>(.005)                 | .022*<br>(.004)                  | .021*<br>(.004)                   | .027+<br>(.009)                   | .024+<br>(.008)                   |
| <b>Talk: negative (H2)</b>                                |                                  | -.036*<br>(.008)                 | -.036*<br>(.008)                 | -.036*<br>(.008)                  | -.035*<br>(.008)                  | -.035*<br>(.008)                  |
| <b>Media: positive*<br/>Talk: positive (H3)</b>           |                                  |                                  | .012+<br>(.004)                  | .013*<br>(.004)                   | .012+<br>(.004)                   | .018**<br>(.003)                  |
| <b>Media: negative*<br/>Talk: negative (H3)</b>           |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>Sophisticated</b>                                      |                                  |                                  |                                  | .110**<br>(.011)                  | .137**<br>(.015)                  | .105**<br>(.004)                  |
| <b>Media: positive*<br/>Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>          |                                  |                                  |                                  | -.149**<br>(.024)                 | -.143**<br>(.022)                 | -.085+<br>(.029)                  |
| <b>Media: negative*<br/>Sophisticated (H4)</b>            |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>Talk: positive*<br/>Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>           |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   | -.011<br>(.010)                   | .002<br>(.004)                    |
| <b>Talk: negative*<br/>Sophisticated (H4/6)</b>           |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   | -.003*<br>(.001)                  | -.003*<br>(.001)                  |
| <b>Media pos*talk pos*<br/>Sophisticated (H4/7)</b>       |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   | -.021*<br>(.006)                  |
| <b>Media neg*talk neg*<br/>Sophisticated (H4)</b>         |                                  |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>N respondents</b>                                      | 4,415                            |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| <b>R-squared</b>  | .478                             | .509                             | .509                             | .510                              | .511                              | .511                              |

+ $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed); RSE = cluster robust standard errors.



### Conclusion

This study explores effects of media and interpersonal communication messages on change in EU democratic performance evaluations. An increasing number of scholars have studied mass media effects and interpersonal communication effects simultaneously during the last decade. However, due to ambiguous results, more work is needed to unravel the relationship between mass media and interpersonal communication, and we still have only limited knowledge about the conditionality of the dynamic.

We tested the direct effect of evaluative news content on citizens' evaluations during an EP election campaign. Exposure to *negative* EU evaluations in the media was found to have a *negative* effect on individual EU evaluations (H1). The more citizens are exposed to negative EU evaluations through the news media, the more negative they become about the democratic performance of the EU and its institutions. In one-sided positive message flow contexts, we find a *positive* effect for *positive* EU evaluations in the media (H5). This is in accordance with results from a study by Peter (2003). Interestingly, the effects of positive tone are stronger than the effects of negative tone. Moreover, the positive impact occurs in four contexts, whereas the negative one can be traced to only one country. This runs counter to earlier findings that negative messages exert a stronger influence on the audience than positive ones (e.g., Nannestad & Paldam, 1997; Soroka, 2006). It also opens up possibilities for the EU to improve its democratic image among the citizenry.

We emphasize that we focused only 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 (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006) and can have important implications for the communication policy of the EU and its institutions. Mass media still influence 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 proactive media policy and public relations strategy from the EU, especially around events such as EP elections and EU summits.

In addition to the news media, people are exposed to political information and opinions within their own social networks. In conversations, citizens are exposed to a different set of politically relevant information. Having positive conversations about the EU makes citizens feel more positive about the democratic performance of European institutions; negative talk makes them feel more negative (H2). This holds across all contexts, including one-sided message flow ones. Similar to media strategy, the EU could be more proactive toward its citizens via social media. Furthermore, existing EU youth organizations could be included as well in this interpersonal strategy.

Having established the basic idea that evaluative tone has an effect on political evaluations, we focused on the combined effect of media and interpersonal communication. Our expectation that tone congruence between 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), except in one-sided message flow contexts (H5). However, we measured the content of interpersonal conversation by combining the information from three separate questions, which is a particularly error-prone procedure. A content analysis of interpersonal communication would offer better information.

We expected that political sophistication would moderate the effects of media, talk, and reinforcement. We found evidence for all these expectations in the four countries with one-sided message flow (H6–H7) and for none of these expectations in the 17 other countries (H4). In the four countries mentioned, political sophistication moderated the influence of media and negative interpersonal communication, which is in accordance with findings by de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b).

This study demonstrates the importance of investigating the combined effect of media and interpersonal messages (Beck et al., 2002; Morley, 1990; Robinson & Levy, 1986; Schmitt-Beck, 2003). We have demonstrated empirically that the information context is crucial as well. Even though the strength of the evidence varies among our hypotheses, it is clear that more effects are found in countries where the media offer a merely positive picture of EU democracy. Especially among citizens who are less politically sophisticated, we find consistent effects. The evaluations of these citizens are affected by media, by talk, and by the combination of media and talk.

It is unlikely that the situation of 2009 has remained unchanged. Whether Germany, Ireland, Latvia, and Lithuania are still one-sided positive message flow countries is questionable. For example, Germany has seen the rise of the Alternative for Germany, a political party that aims to abolish the euro. As these and other EU countries develop into two-sided mass media message flow contexts, media effects can be expected to dwindle and interpersonal communication effects will probably persist—making it even more difficult for the EU to manage its reputation.

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