Why European tv news matters: a cross-nationally comparative analysis of tv news about the European Union and its effects

Peter, J.

Citation for published version (APA):
Television coverage of the EU in the 1999 European election campaign

Although several studies have investigated the television coverage of European election campaigns (Blumler, 1983; Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994), two aspects of that type of coverage have largely been ignored. The first concerns two simple, yet important formal characteristics – the relative amount and the relative prominence of EU coverage. Without exception, existing studies on the television coverage of the European election campaign have limited the analysis to the coverage of the EU (Blumler, 1983; Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994). Although at first sight plausible, this implies that EU stories (or communicator speeches) can only be compared to other EU stories (or communicator speeches). As a result, analyses are precluded which center upon the relative amount of EU coverage, i.e., on the share of EU coverage in the entire coverage, or on the relative prominence of EU coverage, i.e., the average prominence of EU coverage as compared to the average prominence of the entire coverage. Ultimately, the reduced form of analysis employed in previous research disables broader views on the importance of European election campaign coverage and renders it difficult to put EU coverage into perspective.

A second shortcoming of existing research on the coverage of European election campaigns revolves around the coverage of EU representatives. In this chapter, the category EU representatives does not only encompass members of EU institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament, but also persons who are clearly associated with EU institutions or EU parties. Whereas, at the national level, researchers have paid great attention to the television coverage of politicians, no study to date has addressed how EU representatives are covered in television news. This lack of knowledge about the coverage of EU representatives seems even more puzzling because it is the candidates who are at the heart of every democratic election. More specifically, although research on national general elections has increasingly focused on questions of personalization and candidate images (e.g., for France and the US: Kaid, Gerstlé, & Sanders, 1991; for Germany: Kindelmann, 1994; Schönbach, 1993; for Italy: Mazzoleni, 1996; Mazzoleni & Roper, 1995), we do not even know to what extent EU representatives are visible in television news. Apart from that, several studies have demonstrated the importance of soundbites and quotes in elections (Hallin, 1992; Russomano & Everett, 1995). However, little is known about the

---


16 Reiser (1994) is the only one who deals with the coverage of politicians, but focuses on German top politicians rather than on EU representatives.
audibility of EU representatives. Similarly, it is unclear whether and how EU representatives are evaluated in television coverage. This is striking given that evaluations of politicians have become an important aspect in content analyses of the television coverage of national politicians (e.g., for Germany: Kepplinger & Rettich, 1996; for Germany and the Netherlands: Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001; for Spain: McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000).

The two research lacunae identified in the two preceding paragraphs define the two goals pursued in this chapter. First, the formal characteristics of the television coverage of the European election campaign are investigated in relation to the remaining coverage. Only such a relative view can enhance our understanding of the importance of European election coverage. Second, the coverage of EU representatives will be studied with respect to more substantive characteristics. The focus lies on the visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives.

2.1 Previous research on the television coverage of European election campaigns

The coverage of European election campaigns has not yet attracted great attention among scholars. With the exception of the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, researchers have only selectively attempted to study how European elections are covered in the news (for the 1989 campaign in Belgium and Denmark, see Leroy & Siune, 1994; for the 1989 campaign in Germany, see Reiser, 1994; for the 1999 campaign, see Kevin, 2001). Moreover, the studies are, to some extent, very much tied to the special period they investigate and, hence, hard to compare. The political context of 1979 European elections when only nine European countries belonged to the then European Economic Community was very much different from the 1999 election when 15 European Union member states elected their representatives for the European Parliament. Moreover, not only has the EU undergone enormous changes since 1979, but so have the media systems in the various countries (Semetko, de Vreese, & Peter, 2000). While, for example, commercial television did not exist in many European countries in 1979, Leroy and Siune (1994) and Reiser (1994) included commercial program providers along with public broadcasters in their analysis of the 1989 European elections. As a result of the lack of comparability of the studies, lengthy discussions of their findings would be digressing in this chapter. Instead, I will use the studies to sketch the broader picture in which the following analyses are located.


\[\text{18} \] For two reasons, I do not compare the findings in this chapter with the results found by Kevin (2001). First, Kevin's study is more concerned with narrative structures of news texts and as such difficult to align with the quantitative approach chosen in this chapter. Second, Kevin's reasoning originates, to some extent, in Habermas' notion of a European public sphere. This puts a very different spin on how the coverage of European elections is approached.
2.1.1 Formal characteristics – amount and prominence of EU coverage

The first goal of the chapter is to describe the formal characteristics of the television coverage of the European election campaign in comparison to the remaining coverage. The key terms are defined as follows. European election campaign coverage encompasses news stories whose main topic is the European election campaign (e.g., candidates, parties, polls). European election campaign coverage is to be distinguished from EU-related coverage. EU-related coverage comprises both coverage of EU topics other than the European election (e.g., EU enlargement) and coverage with some reference to the EU. Finally, both European election coverage and EU-related coverage have to be distinguished from the remaining political coverage, i.e., the coverage dealing with political topics which lack any reference to the EU. By formal characteristics, I mean the amount and the prominence of the European election campaign coverage. The prominence of a story is defined by its length, placement, and presentational effort put in it (Watt & van den Berg, 1981). The differentiation of the political coverage into three types of coverage permits to locate European election coverage on the broader canvas of political coverage. The prominence concept permits, due to its integrative character, a more parsimonious approach to the study of formal characteristics than the separate treatment of its components would do. This seems especially useful in a cross-nationally comparative setting with a lot of different countries.

As to the amount of election campaign coverage, previous research consistently found the coverage to peak only in the week before the election day (Leroy & Siune, 1994; Siune, 1983; Reiser, 1994). This finding held in all of the countries. Because previous studies were limited to EU- or European election-related content items, the results of these studies are inconclusive as to how visible the campaign was in comparison to other political coverage. Thus, it is difficult to specify clear expectations of the results. As a consequence, the first set of research questions has to be kept more general. It focuses, first, on whether television coverage of the European election campaign peaks in the week prior to the election day (referred to as research question 1a) and, second, on how visible the coverage of the European election campaign is in comparison to EU-related and other political coverage (research question 1b).

The prominence of European election coverage has not been investigated yet. This also goes for measures such as length, placement, or visualization of news stories. Only Leroy and Siune (1994) and Reiser (1994) reported that news stories on the election campaign virtually never became top stories in Belgian, Danish, and German television news outlets. Given that the position of a story is to some extent correlated with its length, this finding tentatively suggests that election campaign stories may be less prominent in television news coverage than other political stories, at least in the three countries mentioned. However, because further evidence is lacking, the second research question, too, is kept open and reads:

---

19 Political coverage is used as summarizing term and may also comprise economic stories if they have political implications (e.g., stories about taxes, unemployment, welfare policy). This is an appropriate comparison standard for EU coverage that typically has political or political-economic implications due to the political-economic nature of the EU.
20 This is not explicitly stated by Siune (1983) but can be concluded from table 1 in Siune (1983, p. 226).
How prominent is the coverage of the European election campaign in comparison with EU-related and other political coverage?

**Potential influences**

The research questions about the amount and the prominence of European election campaign coverage will be addressed in a cross-nationally comparative fashion. Although there may be comparable overall trends in news coverage of most or all EU countries, it seems unlikely that the amount and prominence of the coverage will be identical in all EU member countries. For example, although the overall amount of coverage of the 1979 European election was rather low in all countries, there were notable country differences as, for example, table 1 in Siune's study (1983, p. 226) suggests. This raises the question why such differences emerge. Previous research has only described the differences (e.g., McQuail & Bergsma, 1983; Schulz, 1983a) or attempted to identify the overall similarities in the broader picture of election coverage (Siune, 1983). Undoubtedly, for such an under-researched issue as coverage of the EU, descriptive accounts are indispensable. However, merely descriptive cross-national accounts occasionally run the risk of increasing confusion instead of reducing complexity. Moreover, they ignore one of the big advantages of cross-national research – the increased explanatory power compared to single-country studies. What is also needed, then, is an initially explanatory approach to European election coverage as already outlined in the first chapter.21

Because the research field is small and tends to be exclusively descriptive, potential explanations of country differences in European election coverage can be derived only indirectly from existing content analyses. However, related research from communication and political science has also formulated valuable suggestions on what may impinge on the coverage of the EU. These two sources will be used to specify potential influences on the amount and prominence of European election coverage on television. For the coverage of the 1989 European election campaign, Leroy and Siune (1994) found that, both in Belgium and Denmark, public broadcasting channels devoted three times as much time to the European election campaign than did their private counterparts. Although Leroy and Siune's study is confined to only two European countries, their result suggests that the public or commercial nature of a television channel affects the amount of coverage. Single-country studies have found a similar pattern for the amount of political coverage (e.g., for Germany: Pfetsch, 1996; for the Netherlands: Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; as tentative overview: Heinderyckx, 1993). Hence, it can be expected that public broadcasting channels will present more news on the European election campaign than private channels. With respect to the placement of European election campaign news, Leroy and Siune (1994) provided evidence that both public broadcasting and private channels virtually never presented stories about the European election as top news. For Germany, Reiser (1994) obtained the same result. Assuming that the findings concerning the placement of an European election story can be transferred to the more encompassing prominence concept, the available evidence thus tentatively suggests that

---

21 Given the rudimentary state of research on EU coverage, the terms explanation or explanatory do not refer to law-like causal relationships that compellingly preclude any other influence on EU coverage. Rather, they refer to the detection of patterns underlying the coverage.
public broadcasting and private channels may not differ in terms of how prominently they present a news story about the European election campaign.

A second potential impact on the amount and prominence of European election campaign coverage may come from the novelty of European elections in a particular country. The studies of the first European election in 1979 (Blumler, 1983) could not take this factor into account, but since 1979 four more European elections have taken place and the 15 EU member states vary in how often they have participated in such an election. The rationale why the novelty of European elections may affect the amount and prominence of European election coverage comes from research on news values. News value research has suggested that the novelty or surprising character of an event influences news selection (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976; for general discussions of the news value of novelty, see: Bennett, 1996; Gamson, 1992). A European election campaign is not a surprising event. Nevertheless, journalists may judge European elections very differently depending on whether the electorate of a particular country has acquired the possibility to vote only recently (e.g., Austria, Finland, and Sweden) or two decades ago (e.g., France, Italy, or the Netherlands). As a result, the novel character of the European elections might lead to more media attention in the newer member states of the EU than in the original member countries. Thus, it can be expected that the television outlets in newer EU member states will cover the European election campaign with more and more prominent stories than television outlets in long-term member countries.

A third influence on how much and how prominently a European election campaign is covered may derive from whether elite opinion about the EU is polarized or consensual in a particular country. By elites the political elites in terms of political parties are meant. It can be assumed that anti-EU parties contribute to polarized elite opinion. Based on more general reflections on the Europeanization of national public spheres, Gerhards (2000) has formulated a similar assumption. Due to the lack of research on the subject, however, a more specific reasoning seems necessary. Results of communicator research in particular seem relevant in this respect. In-depth interviews with journalists have revealed that European elections are occasionally considered to be a "non-issue" (de Vreese, 2001, p. 168). The (alleged) non-issue character of European elections and, thus, its missing newsworthiness may be associated with the lack of one of the core news values – conflict (de Vreese, 2002). Because the news values of conflict plays a crucial role in news selection in general (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976) and in EU coverage in particular (de Vreese et al., 2001; de Vreese, 2002), conflict and disagreement may be assumed to increase the amount of European election coverage. Particularly during an election campaign, the candidates and their parties (i.e., national political elites) can be considered the originators of potential disagreement and conflict. The ones who are most likely to stir up conflict are candidates and parties that are explicitly opposed to the EU. Consequently, I expect that outlets in countries with polarized elite opinion about the EU will display more stories about the European election campaign than outlets in countries where elite opinion is consensual. Existing research is silent about the relationship between conflict and the prominence of a particular story. However, just

---

22 At the fringes of a party spectrum, there may be small parties that oppose the EU, but remain largely unnoticed by the public. These parties are not meant here.
Coverage of the 1999 European election campaign

because of the occasionally criticized non-issue, abstract, and inaccessible character of EU policy and events (Meyer, 1999; de Vreese, 2001, 2002), polarized elite opinion and, thus, conflict may also lead to more prominent coverage. Therefore, I expect that stories on the European election campaign will be more prominent in outlets of countries where elite opinion is polarized than in outlets of countries where elite opinion is consensual.

A fourth factor impinging upon the amount and prominence of European election campaign coverage may be satisfaction with domestic democracy. This clearly requires some more elaborate reasoning. One may immediately ask which role satisfaction with democracy plays in this context. Satisfaction with domestic democracy refers to general attitudes towards democratic governance and has been connected to the well-functioning and maintenance of democratic systems (e.g., Lipset, 1959; Powell, 1982, 1986). In line with this, scholars have established close relationships between citizens' (dis)satisfaction with democracy and apparent weaknesses of democratic institutions (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Dalton, 1996; Huntington, 1974; Jennings & van Deth, 1989). More specifically, Anderson and Guillory (1997) have shown the link between election outcomes and citizen's satisfaction with democracy. Thus, one may tentatively conclude that satisfaction with democracy plays a role when it comes to deciding about democratic institutions or, more general, when it comes to elections.

Even if one accepts this, one may question why an attitude towards domestic democracy may be relevant here. First, there is a large body of research that has demonstrated the domestic foundations of EU-related matters. For example, scholars have established that European elections are, as "second-order elections" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), driven by domestic concerns (e.g., Marsh & Franklin, 1996; Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, Franklin, 1996; Reif, 1984). Similarly, studies on referenda held over the Maastricht treaty showed a link between domestic political considerations and vote choice (e.g., Franklin, Marsh, & McLaren, 1994; Franklin, van der Eijk, Marsh, 1995). Second, attitudes towards the European Union have been found to be considerably affected by citizens' experiences with domestic political reality (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000). What is more, even satisfaction with democracy at the EU level is very much driven by people's satisfaction with domestic democracy (e.g., Rohrschneider, 2002). If, then, judgments about domestic democracy build important foundations of EU-related attitudes, satisfaction with domestic democracy may be relevant to EU-related matters.

Even if the preceding line of argument may seem plausible, the question arises why satisfaction with domestic democracy should be specifically related to the European Parliament and European election campaigns. Judgments about one's satisfaction with certain things always result from comparisons with other things (e.g., Sulls & Wills, 1991). The decline of satisfaction with democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War (Kaase & Newton, 1995) has been associated with the missing opportunity of downward comparisons with communist regimes and their institutions (Kaase, 1995). Nowadays, other political systems and their institutions may serve as comparison standard, for example the EU and the European Parliament (for a similar argument, see Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993). This may be especially true during the election campaign for the European Parliament. Put differently, because
satisfaction with domestic democracy is inherently comparative, the European Parliament may become particularly salient as a comparison standard during election campaigns. Depending on how great the satisfaction with domestic democracy is, the European Parliament may be a projection place for hopes of a better functioning democracy.

Even if one accepts the reasoning in all previous paragraphs, the question remains why European election coverage should be affected by satisfaction with domestic democracy. Media coverage in general does not operate in a virtual space, but responds – to some extent – to real-world developments. This may also apply to coverage of EU affairs and European election campaigns in particular. If democracy in a country does not function well, high hopes may be connected with the EU and especially its democratic core institution, the European Parliament – and this will be reflected in the overall coverage in terms of more attention devoted to the EU. Conversely, if democracy in a country works well, the EU and the European Parliament lack their promising character – and this will be reflected in less attention devoted to the EU. In other words, the political relevance of the European Parliament varies across countries according to satisfaction with domestic democracy: the higher the dissatisfaction with domestic democracy in a country, the greater the political relevance of the European Parliament. The relevance aspect of events or issues has been identified in basically all research on news values (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976; Staab 1990). The more relevant events or issues are to a country and its citizens, the more frequently and the more prominently they are reported about in the television outlets. Consequently and finally, if satisfaction with domestic democracy defines the political relevance of the European Parliament and the pertinent elections, one can expect that the amount and the prominence of the European election campaign increases as levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy decrease.

To summarize, the basic model to initially explain the amount and prominence of European election campaign coverage consists of four variables: the public broadcasting or private nature of television outlets, the novelty of European elections, the nature of elite opinion, and the degree of satisfaction with domestic democracy in a particular country. Because this is the first analysis of its kind done in EU-related research, a parsimonious, but theoretically grounded model is favored over a more exploratory inclusion of let's-see-what-happens variables. Moreover, it will become clear later why this approach is also statistically necessary.

However, two aspects of this analysis should be noted. First, as briefly mentioned above, the analysis is based on the assumption that EU coverage – to some extent – responds to events and developments outside the media system. Several studies have demonstrated that factors external to the media system may affect media coverage, for example social and economic factors (e.g., Gross & Merritt, 1981; Sparkes, 1978). Moreover, theories of news selection at least partly assume that there is a 'world out there' which affects coverage (see for reviews, Shoemaker, 1987; 1991; Staab, 1990). This is not to reject the notion of media coverage constructing reality, but at the present stage of research on influences on EU coverage, it seems justified to keep initial structuring attempts simple and parsimonious.23

---

23 There is plenty of research from diverse intellectual traditions pointing out to what extent media coverage
A second aspect of the above proposed analysis concerns the fact that outlet- or journalist-related variables (e.g., money spent on foreign/EU coverage, used news agencies, journalists' opinions about the EU) will not be investigated. On the one hand, there is a practical reason for this. Either such data are not available from (all of) the various outlets investigated in this chapter because the outlets consider this important strategic information or such data simply do not exist. For example, there are no comparable surveys among journalists in all 15 EU countries about their opinions on the EU and its coverage. On the other hand, it is not necessarily the task of cross-national studies to investigate potential influences based on differences of TV outlets or journalists. Such influences can, in the first place, more efficiently be investigated in single-country studies and subsequently be transferred to the cross-national level. However, such single-country studies have not been undertaken yet.

2.1.2 Substantive characteristics – visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives

The second goal of this chapter deals with the coverage of EU representatives. To recall, by EU representatives, not only members of EU institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament are meant, but also persons who are clearly associated with EU institutions or EU parties. This is, a candidate running for the European Parliament is defined as an EU-representative, which seems a useful extension for European election campaigns. The analysis of EU representatives will be based upon the coverage of the European election campaign. To be able to put the coverage of EU representatives into perspective, it is paramount to compare it to the coverage of non-EU representatives. Consequently, the following analyses are always conducted in a relative manner, i.e., as comparison between EU representatives and non-EU representatives.

The main focus of the analysis of EU representatives lies on their visibility, audibility, and evaluation. Although the visibility of political actors is routinely investigated in single-country content analyses (e.g., Kepplinger, 1998; Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994), research on previous European elections has not devoted much attention to the coverage of EU representatives. For example, the study of the 1979 European parliamentary elections was mainly concerned with actors as originators of speech acts (Blumler, 1983). Because one actor can be the originator of multiple speech acts, the occurrence of particular actors within a particular news item cannot be reconstructed from the publications. What is more, the

---

modified or even creates reality, see for example: Baudrillard (1978, 1994), Kepplinger (1992), Lippmann (1965, first published 1922), Merten, Schmidt, & Weischenberg (1994). Moreover, the notion of coverage responding to real-world influences is not without its epistemological problems and ideological implications (e.g., Shoemaker, 1987; Kepplinger 1989c; Schulz, 1976). However, to adequately discuss this issue is far beyond the scope and purpose of this book.

It would also be possible to study the occurrence of EU representatives in EU-related coverage. However, because the focus in an election study lies on the election coverage, such an analysis seems digressing in this chapter. Moreover, given that only the election period was investigated, the generalizability of results referring to EU-related coverage (i.e., non-election coverage) is limited.
publications do not distinguish between EU representatives and non-EU representatives (e.g., Siune, 1983; for the 1989 election campaign Leroy & Siune, 1994).

The latter aspect also affects the reinterpretation of existing research in terms of the *audibility* of EU representatives. Whereas one may argue that the number of 'communicator speeches' to some extent indicates how often EU representatives were quoted and, thus, audible, such a reconstruction is not possible because of the lacking distinction between EU representatives and non-EU representatives. What existing research does tell is that "the only legitimate speakers for European matters seemed to be journalists and politicians of national origin" (Leroy & Siune, 1994, p. 60; for a similar finding, see McQuail & Bergsma, 1983). Given, however, that citizens in the various EU countries elect their national representatives for the European Parliament, this finding is rather unsurprising. Apart from that, the finding does not help to specify expectations as to whether EU representatives are more or less visible and audible than non-EU representatives because, in this chapter, national candidates for the European Parliament can represent the EU. Due to the inconclusive character of existing research, the third set of research questions, too, is kept open. The focus lies, first, on the question of how visible EU representatives are compared to non-EU representatives (research question 3a). Second, it is asked how audible EU representatives are compared to non-EU representatives (research question 3b).

What is true for matters of visibility and audibility of EU representatives, also applies to the *evaluation* of EU representatives in European election campaign coverage: there is a striking scarcity of research. This may be related to the general lack of research on the valence of EU coverage. The few existing studies have found EU news coverage to be predominantly neutral (Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994; Siune, 1983). However, when evaluations occurred, a negative slant was reported (Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994). This dovetails with Norris' (2000) results based on a secondary analysis of the EU coverage in the period from 1995 to 1997. With respect to the general trend in evaluations of national politicians, various studies have provided evidence that the depiction of political representatives in the news is mostly neutral. However, when evaluations occurred, they tended to be predominantly negative (e.g., Kepplinger, 1998; Kepplinger & Rettich, 1996; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Due to its emergence in both EU coverage and the coverage of national politicians, I expect this pattern also for the coverage of EU representatives. To check whether a certain tendency in the evaluation of EU representatives is the result of a general evaluative tendency of (political) actors within a particular country, the evaluation of EU representatives is compared with the evaluation of other actors within a particular country. The fourth set of research questions comprises two questions: first, do negative evaluations prevail when EU representatives are evaluated (research question 4a)? And, second, is the evaluative direction the same for EU representatives and non-EU representatives (research question 4b)?
Potential influences

What drives potential country differences in the coverage of EU representatives? It has been repeated several times in the course of this chapter that existing research does not provide much guidance. To some extent, this is not so much of a problem as far as explanations of the visibility and audibility of EU representatives are concerned. Visibility and audibility of EU representatives are conceptually comparable (and probably empirically related) to the general amount of European election coverage. As a result, largely the same explanatory model will be applied. Only the more general variable satisfaction with domestic democracy will be replaced with the more specific variable trust in political parties.

It has been described in detail in section 2.1.1 why the public broadcasting or commercial nature of outlets, the novelty of an election campaign, and the polarization of elite opinion about the EU may impinge upon the amount and prominence of European election coverage. Given the comparability of the concepts amount of coverage on the one hand and visibility and audibility of EU representatives on the other, the rationale for including the three just mentioned independent variables is largely the same. Only the expectations concerning their specific impact will hence be outlined briefly. Next, the presumed influence of trust in political parties will be explicated thoroughly.

- Because public broadcasting television outlets devote more space to European election coverage than private outlets (Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994), it may be assumed that both the visibility and audibility of EU representatives is higher in public broadcasting than in private outlets. This results from the fact that more and longer stories also mean more space for the coverage of EU representatives.

- If European elections campaigns generally constitute a novel scenario, then EU representatives may constitute novel actors at the political stage. Consequently, it can be expected that EU representatives will be more visible and more audible, the less often a particular country has participated in European elections.

- It is most probably the members of anti-EU parties who articulate controversial opinions about the EU. If the existence of anti-EU parties and, thus, polarized elite opinion about the EU can be assumed to increase the potential of conflict and controversy during European elections, then members of such parties will play a crucial role during European elections. As a result, I expect that EU representatives will be more visible and more audible in outlets from countries with polarized elite opinion than in outlets from countries without consensual elite opinion.

Whereas the amount and prominence of coverage may be affected by the level of satisfaction with democracy in a particular country, potential influences on the visibility and audibility of EU representatives relate probably more to attitudes towards politicians or parties. Research has shown that dissatisfaction with politicians and parties is one of the components of broader notions of distrust in government (Citrin, 1974; Citrin & Green, 1986; Erber & Lau, 1990). Distrust in government, in turn, has been particularly linked to television coverage (yet with mixed results, e.g., Becker & Whitney, 1980; Holtz-Bacha, 1990a,b; Miller & Reese, 1982; Pinkleton, Weintraub Austin, Fortman, 1998; Robinson, 1976). Interestingly, scholars have
conceptualized television coverage exclusively as cause of distrust in government and, thus, in politicians and parties. However, no study has elaborated upon the possibility that television coverage to some extent reflects already existing distrust in politicians and political parties. Generally, distrust in parties has been found to slow down or even paralyze political activities (e.g., Howitt & Wintrobe, 1995; Rose, 1995) and it may be assumed that distrust in politicians and parties (as a widespread negative feeling) also reduces the extent to which politicians and parties are covered.

The paralyzing effects of distrust in political parties may also extend to the visibility and audibility of EU representatives. The domestic foundations of EU-related judgments and behavior have been empirically demonstrated in different contexts (e.g., Anderson, 1998; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996; Franklin, van der Eijk, Marsh, 1995). More importantly, European election campaigns are heavily dominated by domestic parties (e.g., Leroy & Siune, 1994; McQuail & Bergsma, 1983) because a truly European party system does not exist (Mair, 2000) and because EU citizens elect candidates of domestic parties for the European Parliament. Thus, distrust in (domestic) parties may also be influential in European election campaigns. If, then, distrust in domestic parties may generally reduce the amount of coverage of parties and pertinent politicians and if domestic parties and pertinent candidates for the European Parliament play an important role in European election campaigns, then it can be expected that distrust in domestic parties reduces the visibility and audibility of candidates for the European Parliament or, more generally, of EU representatives.

Provided the above factors affected the visibility and audibility of EU representatives, the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables might yet be more intricate. To some extent, the visibility of EU representatives may also be shaped by the number of EU stories. The more election stories there are, the higher the chance of EU representatives to be covered. Put differently, even if one or more of the aforementioned four factors impinges upon the visibility of EU representatives, it might be that they influence the visibility of EU representatives only indirectly through the number of election stories. In this case, the impact of one or more of the factors would be mediated by the number of election stories. The same applies to the potential influence of the factors on audibility. As to audibility, however, it may be the visibility of EU representatives, which directly affects the audibility of EU representatives. The more often EU representatives are depicted, the higher the chance that they are quoted. Again, one would expect a mediating influence. The above factors affect in the first place the visibility of EU representatives and subsequently make an impact, via the visibility of EU representatives, upon audibility.

Baron and Kenny (1986) formulated three conditions that must be met if a particular variable (i.e., number of election stories/visibility EU representatives) mediates the effect of independent variables (i.e., the explanatory factors) on a dependent variable (i.e., visibility/audibility). I formulate the three conditions with respect to mediated effects on audibility. 

Baron and Kenny (1986) formulated three conditions that must be met if a particular variable (i.e., number of election stories/visibility EU representatives) mediates the effect of independent variables (i.e., the explanatory factors) on a dependent variable (i.e., visibility/audibility). I formulate the three conditions with respect to mediated effects on audibility. 

25 The influence of the factors on audibility is potentially also mediated by the number of election stories. This would logically follow from a mediated influence of the factors on the visibility of EU representatives. However, because it needs to be tested first whether the mediating impact of election stories on EU representatives exists, the model for mediated effects on audibility is limited to the visibility of EU representatives.
Coverage of the 1999 European election campaign

visibility/audibility of EU representatives. First, one or more explanatory factors have to affect visibility (audibility) of EU representatives. Second, the explanatory factor(s) that affected visibility (audibility) must also influence the number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives), i.e., the presumed mediating variable. Third, when the impact of both the explanatory factors and number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives) on the visibility of EU representatives (audibility of EU representatives) is investigated simultaneously, an effect of the number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives) has to be found, while the original effect of the explanatory variable(s) has to disappear (or, at least, has to diminish considerably).

Evaluation of EU representatives

The identification of potential influences on the evaluation of EU representatives requires a different reasoning and cannot so easily follow the line of argument developed for the explanation of the amount/prominence of coverage. In his study of the German television coverage of the 1989 European elections, Reiser (1994) found that public broadcasting television outlets were more negative than commercial television outlets. Given that Reiser also included references to political actors, this finding can be interpreted as initial evidence that the difference between publicly or commercially funded outlets may matter in terms of the evaluation of EU representatives. More generally, there has been concern about crucial differences between the political news reporting in public broadcasting and commercial television (Blumler, 1997, 1999). The political coverage of private channels is assumed to be trivialized, shallow, and more concerned with entertainment than with information (see, however, also Brants, 1998, 1999; Bruns & Marcinkowski, 1996; Schatz, Immer, & Marcinkowski, 1989). This suggests that also European election coverage and the evaluation of EU representatives may look differently depending on whether the coverage is broadcast in a public broadcasting or a private outlet. Based upon Reiser's (1994) specific finding and assuming that this result reflects the coverage of other EU member states as well, I expect that EU representatives will be more negatively covered in public broadcasting channels than in private channels.

I have argued above that the polarization of elite opinion about the EU introduces controversy and conflict to the European election campaign of a particular country. Because controversy and conflict are linked to positive or negative evaluations of issues or persons, the number of evaluations of EU representatives will probably be higher in countries with polarized elite opinion about the EU. Research has shown that evaluations do not necessarily come from the journalists, but from other sources in a news story, for example opposing politicians whose evaluative remarks are quoted (Hagen, 1993). Thus, candidates of anti-EU parties may introduce a more controversial, criticizing tone in the campaign and, thereby, the number of negative evaluations of EU representatives increases. Consequently, I expect that EU representatives are more negatively evaluated when elite opinion is polarized than when elite opinion is consensual.
As trust in domestic parties may influence the visibility and audibility of EU representatives, it may also affect the evaluation of EU representatives. In various analyses, Kepplinger (1998) has demonstrated the relationship between negative evaluations of politicians in news and people's negative perceptions of politicians and political parties. Although there was no clear evidence of the causal direction, Kepplinger interpreted his findings in terms of the media causing public distrust of politicians and parties among the population. However, assuming again, first, that news coverage is to some extent responsive to widespread (dis)trust in parties, second, that this response materializes in the news coverage, and, third, that distrust in domestic parties matters in European election campaigns, I expect that the evaluation of EU representatives will be more negative, the more distrust there is in political parties.

With respect to evaluations of EU representatives, one may argue that general support for or opposition to the EU may be influential beyond and despite the domestic foundations of such judgments. It appears plausible to investigate whether outlets in EU-skeptic countries depict EU representatives more critically than do outlets in EU-supportive countries. However, given that the election campaign for one particular EU institution, the European Parliament, is investigated, general judgments of the EU might not sufficiently overlap with evaluations of the European Parliament. Therefore, a more specific potential impact is to be identified. Previous research has reported that distrust in democratic institutions is, amongst others, related to negative evaluations of politicians (Citrin, 1974; Citrin & Green, 1986; Erber & Lau, 1990). Unfortunately, research is silent about whether trust in EU institutions in general or trust in the European Parliament in particular is associated with evaluations of EU representatives. For the purpose of this analysis, I therefore assume that the relationship between evaluations of politicians and trust in institutions generalizes to the relationship between the evaluation of EU representatives and trust in the European Parliament. Further, if this relationship is reflected in the media coverage of EU representatives, one can expect that distrust in the European Parliament is associated with more negative coverage of EU representatives.

In sum, as potential influences on the visibility and audibility of EU representatives, I will investigate the public broadcasting or private character of television outlets, the number of elections in which a country has participated, the polarization of elite opinion about the EU, and trust in political parties. As to factors impinging upon the evaluation of EU representatives, I will use a similar model in which the variable of number of elections will be replaced with the more specific variable of trust in the European Parliament.
2.2 Method

2.2.1 Procedure and measures

This chapter draws on a content analysis of the television news coverage conducted for the two weeks prior to the June 1999 European Elections. In contrast to previous content analyses of European election campaigns (e.g., Blumler, 1983), only the two weeks prior to the election day were analyzed because existing research has shown that the election coverage clusters shortly before the election day (Leroy & Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994; Siune, 1983). Per country, the main evening news outlet of both the most widely watched public broadcasting and private channel were selected. Because Belgium is divided into Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, evening news of the two most widely watched Dutch- and French-speaking channels were included. As an acknowledgment of the bicultural nature of Belgium, the Dutch- and French-speaking channels are analyzed separately throughout this chapter. Given that no private channels exist in Austria or were of no importance in Ireland in 1999, only the public broadcasting channel with the largest reach was included in these two countries. Because only a minority watches the Greek public broadcasting channel, ET1, (Seri, 2002), a second private channel was analyzed in Greece. Due to its limited reach in comparison to networks in other countries, the Luxemburger channel was not part of the analysis. For further information on the outlets investigated see Table Bl in Technical Appendix B.

The single news story (defined as semantic entity with at least one topic delimited from another story by a change of topic) presented the unit of analysis. Overall, 5,477 stories were coded. 2,747 of them were political stories (defined as stories explicitly mentioning politics and/or sufficiently depicting political actors). Of the political stories, 1,808 stories were analyzed with respect to the visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives. Detailed information about the number of stories coded in the various countries can be found in Technical Appendix B in Table B1.

The news stories were coded by 37 native speakers who were trained during six weeks before coding, tested for inter-coder reliability, and supervised throughout the whole coding period. For each country, the stories were randomly assigned to the coders. Because in cross-national comparative content analyses, differences between the countries can be the unintended result of lacking coordination of the various country groups (Peter & Lauf, 2002), the coder trainers of the country groups were in daily contact to coordinate the coding in the country groups and to resolve problems. Moreover, the majority of the coding was centrally done at the University of Amsterdam to keep the coding process as comparable as possible.

26 Because the period of investigation was heavily dominated by stories about the Kosovo war and because the focus of the study lay on the coverage of the European election campaign, Kosovo stories were only coded if they clearly referred to the EU. This explains the difference between the total sum of political stories (n = 2,747), which includes all Kosovo stories, and the reduced sample of 1,808 stories, which includes Kosovo stories only if they clearly referred to the EU.

27 The Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish coders worked at their home institutions in Genoa, Athens, Lisbon, and Madrid. However, coder trainers had visited all country groups and intensively trained the coders at
For the reliability test, coders of all country groups had to code at least 18 randomly selected television stories per channel. The reliabilities are reported when discussing the relevant measures.

Levels of analysis

Three different levels of analysis have to be distinguished in order to understand the operationalization of the concepts below. The story level constituted the level of analysis for the study of the formal characteristics of election coverage. For the analysis of the coverage of EU representatives, the data file was disaggregated so that the single actor constitutes the unit of analysis instead of the single story (where up to six actors could be coded). Because of irregularities in the coding of an essential actor-related category, Portugal had to be excluded from this analysis, resulting in 6,533 actors overall. For the analysis of potential impacts on the coverage, the data were aggregated such that each outlet constituted the unit of analysis and, thus, one case in the analysis. The outlet level was chosen as level of analysis because the influence of public broadcasting vs. private channels is to be investigated. Moreover, the outlet seems to be the most appropriate unit of analysis when trying to detect the patterns underlying the coverage because it seems questionable how the single news story as unit of analysis may be affected by country characteristics. The particular country, in turn, may not be an appropriate unit of analysis for the research questions. The research questions center upon patterns of television coverage, which in the first place is located at the outlet and not at the country level. Overall, 29 television outlets were included in the analysis (see Table B1 in Technical Appendix B for a detailed listing of the outlets). The two private Greek outlets had to be collapsed to keep the analysis with the remaining countries comparable which eventually resulted in 28 outlets for analysis.

Measures – formal characteristics

Stories about the election campaign were operationalized as stories whose main topic dealt with the election (e.g., potential outcome, turnout) or the election campaign (e.g., profiles of candidates, party strategies) and explicitly referred to the EU. A story was classified as EU-related story if the topic centered upon EU events or EU issues other than the European elections (e.g., EU enlargement, euro) or if the topic was explicitly linked to the EU. All remaining political stories that did not meet these criteria constituted the remaining political coverage. The inter-coder reliabilities were measured as the average agreement between the coders (e.g., Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). The average inter-coder agreement was 98% for story topic and 92% for link to the EU.

---

28 For Germany, only 12 stories were coded. No reliabilities were assessed for Spain but the coding was carefully monitored throughout the coding process. Danish news was coded by one coder only. The coding was, however, closely checked by the coder trainer.

29 This modification is also necessary because of missing bulletins within the Greek outlets.

30 The reliability score for story topic refers to the recoded topic as it is used in this chapter.
The prominence of the stories was operationalized by drawing upon a formula, which Watt and van den Berg developed and validated in 1981 and which Watt, Mazza and Snyder modified in 1993. The formula is:

\[
P = \frac{TL_{bulletin} - ST_{story}}{TL_{bulletin}} + \frac{L_{story}}{AL_{story/bulletin}} + (A \times F \times 0.5)
\]

where

- \( P \): Prominence of particular news story
- \( TL_{bulletin} \): Total length of the particular bulletin coded (in seconds)
- \( ST_{story} \): Starting time, i.e., time from the start of the bulletin to the beginning of the particular story (in seconds)
- \( L_{story} \): Length of the particular story coded (in seconds)
- \( AL_{story/bulletin} \): Average length of the stories in the bulletin coded (in seconds)
- \( A \): Anchor present (coded 1, if yes)
- \( F \): Film material/Video material present (coded 1, if yes)

Note that the presence of an anchor has been added to the formula by Watt et al. (1993). This is an acknowledgement of the fact that some outlets (e.g., the German ones) present short news blocks in which no anchor introduces the story. In the formula used by Watt et al. (1993), this has not been taken into account and would lead to an overestimation of the prominence of such short news stories. The first term of the right hand side of the formula taps the position of a particular news story. For the first story in a bulletin, \( ST_{story} \) equals zero so that the first term becomes one. The less well a news story is placed in a bulletin, i.e., the more time passes before the beginning of the particular news story, the smaller the numerator and, consequently, the first term becomes. The second term of the right hand side of the formula describes the length of a particular story relative to the average length of all stories within the particular bulletin. The longer a story is compared to the average story, the greater the second terms becomes. The third term of the right hand side of the formula captures the effort with which a story is presented. Only stories that are introduced by an anchor and are visualized with film/video material (i.e., no stills) receive the full score. In line with Watt's formula, this term is multiplied by 0.5 in order not to overrepresent the visual component in the overall prominence measure. In sum, stories are the more prominent, the earlier they begin in a bulletin, the longer they are, and if they are introduced by an anchor and visualized by film material. Because of its relative nature, the measure also permits comparisons between different television outlets.

In the content analysis, the length of each story in a particular bulletin was measured in seconds. The sum of the length of all stories represents the total length of a particular bulletin (\( TL_{bulletin} \)) and by cumulating the length of stories within a particular bulletin the starting time of a particular story within a bulletin (\( ST_{story} \)) was computed. The average story length within a bulletin is simply the mean of the stories broadcast within that bulletin. The
presence of an actor and of film material were coded as dichotomous categories. The reliabilities were for length (metric variable) $r = .98$ and 95% for both the anchor category and the film material category.

**Measures – coverage of EU representatives**

*Visibility* of EU representatives and other actors was measured as the number of appearances of story actors in different stories. Up to six actors could be coded per story, but the same actor was coded only once per story. To qualify as a story actor, a person, group, or institution had to be either depicted and mentioned at least once, or quoted and verbally mentioned, or mentioned verbally at least twice. If more than six actors in a news story qualified as potential actors, the actors to be coded were selected in terms of their importance for the story (operationalized as amount of information given about a particular actor, frequency of being mentioned, and visual presence). For each actor, it was coded whether the actor was, as an individual or group, related to the EU or to any other level than the EU (e.g. regional, domestic, or world level). For the analysis, the individual and the group code for both EU-related and EU-unrelated actors were collapsed. For the coding of the actors as EU-related or EU-unrelated, the average inter-coder agreement was 99%. The *audibility* of EU and other political representatives was assessed by counting the number of times they were directly quoted within a story. The average inter-coder agreement for this category was Pearson’s $r = .89$ (metric variable).

*Evaluation* of EU representatives and other actors was assessed by coding explicit judgments of story actors. The coding categories were 0 (neutral), 1 (unfavorable), 2 (mixed), and 3 (favorable). To address the fourth set of research questions and to operationalize the dependent variable for the explanatory analyses, I computed per country the difference between the number of favorable and the number of unfavorable evaluations of both EU representatives and other actors (further referred to as evaluation differential). The evaluation differential is based upon absolute figures because, as will become clear later, the absolute number of evaluations was very low and percentages would grossly distort the outcomes. The evaluation differential was also preferred to the mean evaluation. Kepplinger and Maurer (2001) have recently demonstrated that the evaluation differential is more comparable to people’s perceptions of evaluative tendencies in the media than the mean evaluation and seem, thus, in effect-oriented studies more appropriate. The inter-coder reliabilities measured as the average agreement between the coders was 80%.

**Measures – explanatory analysis**

As described above, the outlet level was chosen for the explanatory analysis. This implies that the dependent variables are aggregated to the level of the particular outlet. The aggregation of measures such as the number of election stories, the visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives raises certain problems because the outlets vary considerably in their length and in the number of stories broadcast. For example, the fact that fewer election stories are broadcast in outlet A than in outlet B may partly result from the fact that outlet B lasts
three times as long as outlet A and broadcasts nearly twice as many stories per bulletin. To account for such differences, one may compute percentages, for example the share of election stories in the political coverage. This, however, entails two serious problems. First, as will become clear later, the absolute figures are very low in certain analyses so that percentages become not only meaningless, but also lead to enormous distortions. Second, computing percentages introduces an upper boundary to a measure that may not have an upper boundary when based on absolute figures. This transformation may have serious consequences for the dependent variable, which may no longer be predictable with linear functions as it approaches the floor or the ceiling. Logistic transformations could solve this problem, yet are usually difficult to interpret. Moreover, the distortion problem with low absolute figures would still not be solved.

Consequently, the dependent variables number of election stories, visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives have to be based on absolute figures while the differences between the outlets have to be accounted for differently. To emphasize, when using these absolute figures (i.e., the sum of election stories, the sum of EU actors, the sum of their quotes, and the above describe evaluation differential), a large number of, for example, election stories could result rather from the fact that a particular outlet generally broadcasts a lot of stories than from more substantive reasons. Likewise, a large number of EU representatives may be the consequence of an outlet generally covering more actors (or from more election stories, but this problem is tackled below). A higher number of quotes of EU representatives could be the result of generally more quotes in an outlet (or of more EU representatives covered, see below) and a large evaluation differential might result from a higher number of EU representatives covered. If this is not taken into account in explanatory analyses, spurious effects may emerge. Therefore, it is necessary to include specific control variables in the explanatory model. In the case of the number of election stories as dependent variable, this is, per outlet, the number of the remaining stories broadcast. When the number of EU representatives is the dependent variable, this is the number of the remaining actors. When the dependent variable is the audibility of EU representatives (i.e., the number of their quotes), the control variable would be the number of the remaining actors being quoted. And in the case of the evaluation of EU representatives, this is the number of EU representatives covered. The prominence measure is inherently relative which alleviates the problem.

The independent variables were operationalized as follows. Satisfaction with domestic democracy, trust in parties, and trust in the European Parliament were retrieved from Eurobarometer 51. The Eurobarometer 51 survey was conducted between March 12 and May 4, 1999, among at least 1,000 citizens of 15 years of age or older in all EU countries. The period of investigation precedes the content analysis (done at the end of May, begin of June), which is important for the analysis. Because in both East and West Germany more than 1,000 people were interviewed, the data for Germany were weighted according to the population size in the two parts of Germany. The British data are based on the 1,040 interviews

31 The total number of stories (including election stories), the total number of actors (including EU representatives), and the total number of quotes (including quotes from EU representatives) cannot be used as control variables because they dependent variables would partly be regressed on themselves.
completed in England, Scotland, and Wales. It has been argued above that, due to deeply entrenched cultural differences, Belgium should be split into Flanders and Wallonia. As a result, the relevant measures were separately computed for the two Belgian communities (see for the same procedure, e.g., Ackaert, de Winter, & Swyngedouw, 1996; van der Eijk, Franklin, & Oppenhuis, 1996; Franklin, van der Eijk, & Oppenhuis, 1996).

For each country (in Belgium: for each community), the mean satisfaction with domestic democracy and the proportion of trust in parties and in the European Parliament were computed. Before, the measures had been recoded such that higher values indicated more satisfaction with domestic democracy (measured on a four-point scale), or more trust in parties and the European Parliament (both measured as dichotomy). "Don't know" answers were excluded from analysis. The values for the particular countries are documented in Technical Appendix B in Table B2. Table B2 also documents in how many European elections a particular country has already participated. The consensual or polarized nature of elite opinion about the EU was operationalized via the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party. An anti-EU party was defined as party that had, in a survey among experts (Ray, 1999), received on average a score of 2 (opposed to European integration) on a seven-point scale. Because the influence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party is to be assessed, parties had to have gained at least 5% of the votes in the latest general election (assessed with reference to the year 1999). In other words, a party which has been rated as extremely opposed to European integration, but which has received less than 5% of the votes in the latest elections would not indicate the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party. The pertinent country would thus not be considered to have polarized elite opinion.

2.2.2 Data analysis

Mediated effects analysis for visibility and audibility of EU representatives

In section 2.1.2, I have outlined the possibility that the effects of the explanatory factors on visibility and audibility of EU representatives are mediated. More specifically, I have specified the three conditions that must be met to find evidence of mediated effects. To analyze the three conditions for the presumed mediating effect of the number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives) on visibility (audibility) of EU representatives, I estimated three regressions as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). In the first regression model, the visibility (audibility) of EU representatives was regressed on the four explanatory factors plus the control variable. This regression model is the base line model and indicates if there are any effects of the presumed explanatory factors at all. In the second regression

32 The results from Ray's 1996 survey are used.
33 The emphasis in this analysis is on whether the impact of the explanatory factors is mediated. Of course, the control variable (e.g., the visibility of non-EU representatives) cannot logically be mediated (e.g., by the number of election stories). However, in order to rule out from the very beginning the possibility of spurious effects of the explanatory variables, the control variable is included already in the first model. This procedure is efficient in that it presents the most rigid test of the prerequisites of mediating effects. If no effects emerge in the base-line model, there will be no mediating influence, either.
model, the presumed mediating variable number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives) was regressed on the explanatory factors. In the third regression model, I regressed the visibility of EU representatives (audibility) on the explanatory factors and the number of election stories (visibility of EU representatives).

Problems with significance testing in the explanatory analyses

Given the selection of the outlets and taking into account that the variables for the explanatory analysis are located at the outlet and the country level, two problems with statistical inference arise. First, a selection of the main evening news of the most widely watched public broadcasting and private channel per country does not constitute a random sample. However, this selection of television outlets represents the television coverage of a country reasonably well (see for information on all of the countries the thorough overviews in Hans-Bredow-Institut, 2002, and European Journalism Centre, 2002). Even if, however, the selection may thus be considered appropriate for a cautious use of significance tests, inferences from the selection are, second, impeded by the fact that, across the entire selection of outlets, the outlets are not completely independent of one another. Because outlets were selected within a particular country, the two outlets within the particular country are not independent of each other across the entire selection of outlets. Such hierarchies and, thus, dependencies in the data structure lead to an underestimation of the standard error and a higher chance of a type-1 error, if the data analysis does not account for the hierarchical data structure (e.g., Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Snijders & Bosker, 1999; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002).

What, then, are the consequences for the explanatory analysis? A first solution may be to do without significance tests. However, it is difficult to decide when an effect is meaningful without having criteria clearly established by significance tests. A second solution might be to analyze the data with multi-level techniques. This is clearly not possible with the power of the data at hand (e.g., Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, 2000; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). A third solution may be based on a very cautious interpretation of the meaning of significance tests accompanied by an alternative modeling of the hierarchical data structure. In terms of the cautious interpretation of the meaning of the significance tests, significance tests will predominantly be used as indication of the robustness of potential effects. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the posed questions relate only to the television coverage of the 1999 European election campaign. In other words, potential effects cannot be taken as evidence of general influences in the media coverage of the EU. In terms of an alternative modeling of the hierarchical data structure, I chose the so-called 'sandwich' estimator of the standard error (Huber, 1967; White, 1980). This sort of standard error takes into account that cases (i.e., outlets) are not independent of one another, but cluster within a country and corrects the standard error accordingly. This also entails that the critical t-value is

---

34 For additional information on Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, see Hujanen (2000); on the Netherlands: Brants and Neijens (1998), van Praag and van der Eijk (1998); on Germany: Pfetsch (1996); on Italy: Mazzoleni (2000); on the UK: Norris et al. (1999).

35 This is also the reason why no significance tests are presented for the descriptive analyses.
assessed with number of clusters (i.e., countries) minus one degrees of freedom. For fourteen countries, the pertinent degrees of freedom are 13.

2.3 Results – European elections in television news

Analogously to the setup of the research questions section, the analyses of both the formal characteristics and the EU representatives will start with a descriptive account and will be followed by the more explanatory analyses.

2.3.1 Formal characteristics – sometimes visible, but never prominent

The first research question asked whether television coverage of the European election campaign peaked in the week prior to election day. Because in the Greek content analysis, several days were missing for the week prior to election day, Greece had to excluded from this particular analysis. As can be seen in Figure 2.1, in all countries except Portugal, Spain, and Flanders, the number of stories about the European election campaign slightly increased in the week immediately before election day. In none of the countries, however, did the number of stories shoot up markedly in the week before election day, with the exception of Italy and Finland. Rather, it seems that the number of stories broadcast in the penultimate week before election day 'affected' the coverage in the week immediately prior to election day. This is confirmed when regressing the number of stories broadcast in the week immediately before election day on the number of stories broadcast in the penultimate week before the elections. The unstandardized coefficient of 1.1 (SE = .21; beta = .71) with a constant of 1.5 indicates that, with each additional story broadcast in the penultimate week, the number of stories broadcast in the week immediately before the elections increased by

Figure 2.1: Number of election stories in the two weeks prior to election day

2 Weeks prior | 1 Week prior

Note. Countries are ordered by number of election stories in the last week.
Coverage of the 1999 European election campaign

one. This is only a small increase although the predictive power of the amount of coverage in the penultimate week before the elections is very strong. In other words, when the coverage of the election campaign had been low two weeks prior to the election, it remained low in the week immediately preceding election day. Conversely, when there had been much campaign coverage in the penultimate week, there was also much coverage in the week before the election. This suggests that the countries generally differed in whether the Election campaign was considered an issue (e.g., in France, Italy, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark) or whether it was largely ignored (e.g., Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Flanders).

The aforementioned results illustrate the (non-)development of the amount of election coverage across the two weeks preceding the election. However, the results do not tell us anything about the visibility of election coverage relative to other types of coverage (research question 1b). Thus, how visible was the coverage of the European election campaign in comparison to EU-related and other political coverage? As Figure 2.2 shows, there was a considerable difference between EU countries. In Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries (except Spain) plus Austria, the election coverage had a share of at least 13% in the entire political coverage. Opposed to this group of countries were the UK, Spain, both parts of Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Germany. Geographically put, in the center of the EU and on the islands, election coverage amounted to not more than a share of 6% in the entire coverage, with the coverage being virtually absent in the Netherlands, Germany and Flanders. However, in all of the countries except Portugal and France, the share of EU-related coverage in the entire political coverage was greater than the share of election coverage. Moreover, in all of the countries the remaining political stories constituted the majority of the entire political coverage. In other words, the coverage of the European election campaign was present in a narrow majority of EU countries, but was most of the time less visible than EU-related coverage. EU-related coverage was present in all countries, but was generally less visible than the remaining political coverage.

![Figure 2.2: Share of various story types in political coverage](image)

*Note.* Countries are ordered by the share of election stories. Absolute figures for entire political coverage are documented in Table B1 in Technical Appendix B.
The amount of EU coverage only partly represents the character of coverage. In an extreme case, it may be that there are a lot of stories about the election, but all of them are very short and placed at the end of a bulletin. Consequently, election stories would not figure prominently in the coverage. Thus, how prominent was the coverage of the European election campaign in comparison with EU-related and remaining political coverage? One can see in Figure 2.3 that election coverage was on average less prominent than EU-related or remaining political coverage, the exception being Portugal, Denmark, and Wallonia. However, EU-related stories figured more prominently than remaining political stories in the majority of the countries. Although, in sum, the European elections were not covered prominently, affairs that relate to or evolve around the EU largely were. If one compares the prominence of the EU stories across the various countries, there appear to be more similarities than differences. The fact that Portuguese election stories were by far more prominent and German election stories by far less prominent than election stories in the remaining countries may be the result of some country-specific reporting, notably very long stories in Portugal and very short ones in Germany. Overall, however, the prominence of election stories was similar across the various countries.

**Figure 2.3: Average prominence of various story types**

![Figure 2.3: Average prominence of various story types](image)

*Note.* Countries are ordered by prominence of election stories. Absolute figures for entire political coverage are documented in Table B1 in Technical Appendix B.

**Influences on the amount and prominence of election coverage**

The descriptive analysis of the formal characteristics of European election campaign coverage has demonstrated notable differences in the amount of election coverage across the countries. Conversely, a striking homogeneity of the prominence of election coverage was found. However, the descriptive analyses provide hardly any insight into what may influence the formal characteristics of election coverage. As outlined above, I presumed four factors to play
a role – the character of an outlet as publicly or commercially funded, polarization of elite opinion, the number of elections in which a country has participated, and satisfaction with domestic democracy. Table 2.1 shows that the four factors generally explain the amount of election coverage well. As expected, public broadcasting outlets broadcast more election stories than private outlets. This was true even when controlling for outlet differences in terms of the number of remaining stories broadcast. Also in line with my expectations, polarized elite opinion about the EU increased the number of election stories. Conversely, but also as expected, the amount of election coverage decreased as levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy increased. Put differently, dissatisfaction with domestic democracy was conducive to the visibility of the election campaign in the news. The effect found for the number of elections in which countries had already participated did not turn out to be 'robust', yet was in the predicted direction.

Table 2.1: Influences on the amount and the prominence of European election coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Amount (N = 28)</th>
<th>Prominence (N = 28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public broadcasting outlet</td>
<td>5.48* (2.34)</td>
<td>.12 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of European elections</td>
<td>-0.91 (1.37)</td>
<td>-.19 (.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized elite opinion</td>
<td>14.55* (4.89)</td>
<td>.05 (.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with domestic democracy</td>
<td>-12.28* (4.98)</td>
<td>-.10 (.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of remaining stories broadcast</td>
<td>0.02 (0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>35.16</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R square .56 .08

*p < .05 (t-test, two-tailed)

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients, robust standard errors in brackets.

Data sources: Eurobarometer 51, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign
To the extent to which the model predicted the amount of election coverage well, it failed to explain the prominence of election coverage. It had not been expected that public broadcasting and private television outlets would differ as to how prominently they present election stories. However, there was no empirical evidence of any of the expected influences, either.

2.3.2 Substantive characteristics – older member states lack interest

Research question 3a focused upon the visibility of EU representatives in election coverage as compared to the visibility of non-EU representatives. As a first look at Figure 2.4 shows, EU representatives were more visible than non-EU representatives in 8 of the 14 countries. In terms of whether EU representatives outnumbered non-EU representatives, the Scandinavian countries formed a unit, whereas the Mediterranean countries split up in two groups with Italy and Spain covering EU representatives more often than non-EU representatives and France and Greece where EU representatives were less often covered. That is, while the election campaign was strongly covered in Greece and not in Spain, EU representatives dominated what little coverage there was in Spain, yet hardly appeared on Greek television. It is also worth noting that non-EU representatives appeared slightly more often than EU representatives in the French coverage of the election campaign, although the campaign itself was fairly well covered in French television news (see Figure 2.2). In the remaining countries except Austria, EU representatives were by and large invisible. In Wallonia, Ireland, the UK, and in Germany, non-EU representatives outnumbered the few EU representatives.

Figure 2.4: Visibility of EU and non-EU representatives in election coverage

Note. Countries are ordered by visibility of EU representatives. Figures indicate the number of appearances.

36 The fact that, in Greece, so many non-EU representatives were covered is, to some extent, related to the fact that Greek news stories are long, which generally increases the chance of actors being covered.
If one compares the number of EU representatives across countries, it becomes clear that the visibility of EU representatives varied considerably. Whereas, for example, nearly 100 EU representatives were covered in French television in the two weeks preceding election day, overall only one EU representative occurred in German television outlets. As was true for the relative amount of election coverage, the group of countries where EU representatives are to some extent visible (i.e., where more than 40 EU representatives appeared) again consisted of Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries plus Austria, but without Spain.

Were EU representatives more audible than non-EU representatives, were they more often quoted (research question 3b)? Figure 2.5 reveals that, if actors were quoted at all, the majority of quotes seemed to come from EU representatives. This applied especially to the Scandinavian-Mediterranean group of countries including Austria, but excluding Greece. In the remaining countries, EU representatives were by and large silent or less often quoted (Wallonia, the Netherlands, Greece, and the UK). If one focuses only on the audibility of EU representatives across countries, it is again the Scandinavian-Mediterranean group of countries plus Austria (except Greece) where statements of EU representatives were broadcast at all, of course differing in their frequency. For the countries that do not belong to this group, the voicelessness of the EU representatives seems to be the logical consequence of the little coverage of EU representatives (or of the little coverage of the campaign, for that matter).

![Figure 2.5: Audibility of EU representatives and non-EU representatives in election coverage](image)

**Figure 2.5: Audibility of EU representatives and non-EU representatives in election coverage**

Note. Countries are ordered by the audibility of EU representatives. Figures indicate the number of quotes.

Although the visibility and audibility of EU representatives indicate that television news pays attention to them, the two measures do not tell anything about the evaluations in the coverage. News coverage is usually considered not to be evaluative and this also applied to the election coverage of EU representatives. Across all countries, 78% of the election
coverage of EU representatives and 76% of the election coverage of non-EU representatives was neutral, with by and large not much difference between the particular countries. More important, therefore, appears the question whether negative evaluations prevailed when there were evaluations (research question 4a) and, furthermore, whether the evaluative direction was the same for EU representatives and non-EU representatives (research question 4b).

Figure 2.6 shows the evaluation differential between positive and negative evaluations for both EU representatives and non-EU representatives. In the majority of the countries, negative evaluations slightly outnumbered positive evaluations. Only Spanish coverage depicted EU representatives positively. In the UK, Ireland, Germany, and Flanders there were no evaluations of EU representatives at all or they equalized each other. When one compares the evaluation of EU representatives with the evaluation of non-EU representatives, it shows that, in none of the countries, the evaluative direction of the two groups diverged. In most of the countries, both EU representatives and non-EU representatives were negatively evaluated. There was no evidence that the evaluative direction of the two groups was in any way opposed.\textsuperscript{37}

![Figure 2.6: Evaluation differential of EU and non-EU representatives in election coverage](image)

\textit{Note.} Countries are ordered by direction and size of the evaluation differential for EU representatives.

\textsuperscript{37} Strictly speaking, Figure 2.6 does not allow to compare whether the two groups were more or less negatively evaluated because a difference between the evaluation differential of EU representatives and non-EU representatives may to some extent result from differences in the absolute number of occurrences of the two actor groups. However, due to the small number of actors and, thereby, evaluations in several countries, percentage-based measures would be meaningless.
Influences on visibility, audibility, and evaluation of EU representatives

The descriptive analyses have shown notable differences in the coverage of EU representatives, both with respect to their visibility and audibility. However, as argued above, the description of country differences generally calls for explanations. Thus, the key question in this section is: to what extent can the four explanatory factors introduced in section 2.1.2 explain the country differences when controlling for outlet differences in terms of varying numbers of actors covered in election stories? As model 1 for visibility of EU representatives in Table 2.2 shows, the number of elections in which a country has participated affected the visibility of EU representatives. In other words, with each additional European election in which a country had participated, the number of EU representatives dropped by 11 representatives. None of the other predictors exerted a meaningful impact on the visibility of EU representatives.

Was the effect of the number of elections mediated by the number of election stories? To recapitulate, to find a mediating influence of the number of election stories on the visibility of EU representatives, two further conditions must be met. First, the effect of number of elections has also to occur when number of election stories is the dependent variable. Second, when controlling for number of election stories, the already described impact of number of elections has to disappear. As model 2 in Table 2.2 shows, the number of elections in which a country had participated did not influence the number of election stories. The second condition for mediated effects is thus not met. Model 3 with visibility of EU representatives as dependent variable finally also displays that the number of election stories broadcast did not mediate the influence found in model 1 — the influence of number of elections remained unaffected by the inclusion of number of election stories in the model. Most importantly, the number of election stories did not exert a meaningful influence on the visibility of EU representatives. In sum, the analysis of what impinges upon the visibility of EU representatives has produced a clear finding. The visibility of EU representatives decreased with an increasing number of elections. This effect is direct and unmediated by the number of election stories.

What was found for the influences on the visibility of EU representatives, also applied to their audibility. The audibility of EU representatives also diminished with the number of elections in which countries have participated. Additionally, there was an effect of the control variable audibility of non-EU representatives, which suggests that there may be general tendencies whether actors are quoted or not. More important, however, is again the question of whether the effect of number of elections is mediated by another variable, in this case the visibility of EU representatives. Following the logic of analysis described above, two more regression models were estimated to test whether the conditions of a mediating impact of visibility of EU representatives were met. Model 2 for the audibility analysis in Table 2.2 indicates that the visibility of EU representatives (i.e., the presumed mediator) was indeed affected by the number of elections. Thus, the second condition for a mediating influence of the visibility of EU representatives was met. The third condition states that the influence of number of elections has to disappear while an effect of the visibility of EU representatives must occur when both variables are included in the same model. Model 3 for the audibility
Table 2.2: Influences on the visibility and audibility of EU representatives in election coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Visibility analysis (N = 26)</th>
<th>Audibility analysis (N = 26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visibility EU representatives</td>
<td>Number of European elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public broadcasting outlet</strong></td>
<td>14.66 (8.93)</td>
<td>4.75* (1.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of European elections</td>
<td>-11.27* (3.75)</td>
<td>-.41 (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized elite opinion</td>
<td>3.22 (19.67)</td>
<td>13.94* (5.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in political parties</td>
<td>4.95 (40.47)</td>
<td>-29.87* (13.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility non-EU representatives</td>
<td>.32 (.65)</td>
<td>.13 (.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audibility non-EU representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number election stories</td>
<td>.41 (.95)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility EU representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>44.97</td>
<td>11.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R square</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (t-test, two-tailed). Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients, robust standard errors in brackets.

Data sources: Eurobarometer 51, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign
analysis in Table 2.2 shows that this was the case. An extremely strong effect of the visibility of EU representatives emerged, while the impact of number of elections completely disappeared. In conclusion, this suggests that the number of European elections in which a country has taken part only indirectly affects the audibility of EU representatives via the visibility of EU representatives.

The descriptive analysis of the evaluation of EU representatives revealed a mostly negative direction, yet with varying intensity across the countries. Can the explanatory factors account for the varying intensities when controlling for the number of covered EU representatives? Table 2.3 indicates that this was not the case. None of the predictors showed a robust effect on the evaluation of EU representatives, although at least the effect of public broadcasting outlets was in the predicted direction.

Table 2.3: Influences on the evaluation of EU representatives in election coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of EU representatives (N = 26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public broadcasting outlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized elite opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in political parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in European Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of EU representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R Square</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients, robust standard errors in brackets. Data sources: Eurobarometer 51, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign.*

**2.4 Discussion – covering a "non-issue"**

Most of the questions raised in this chapter, most of the reasoning developed, and most of the analyses presented differ from how existing research has investigated the coverage of European election campaigns. Conceptually, this was to a large extent the result of an underdeveloped and incoherent field of research providing little guidance. Analytically, new strategies of analyzing cross-national content data had to be developed because previous content analyses had exclusively remained descriptive, ignoring explanatory analyses. To what extent, then, do the findings in this chapter confirm or challenge previous research? To what extent can the findings enhance our understanding of the how television news covers European election campaigns and provide new directions for future research?
2.4.2 Formal characteristics – unimportant visibility

The European election campaign was most visible in the final week before election day. However, the number of stories about the campaign increased only slightly in the final week compared to the penultimate week before the elections. What is more, the number of stories broadcast in the penultimate week before the elections proved an outstanding predictor of how many stories would be in television news in the final week. This finding to some extent runs counter to Leroy and Siune’s (1994) result for the 1989 election campaign, namely that "the television campaign (...) only gathered momentum in the final week when an overwhelming majority of EC items was broadcast" (p. 58) (see for similar findings: Reiser, 1994; Siune, 1983). Admittedly, the findings may hardly be comparable because Leroy and Siune (1983) only focused on Belgium and Denmark, Reiser solely on Germany and Siune only on the nine countries that were members of the EEC in 1979. However, it is important to note that the election coverage in the 1999 campaign obviously followed a different pattern. The question was not whether the coverage would accumulate in a particular country in the final week before the elections. The question was rather whether there was coverage at all in a particular country. If there was coverage, then the election campaign was visible in both weeks before election day. If there was no coverage, then this did only marginally change in the final week. Put differently, in several countries, most notably Flanders, Germany, and the Netherlands, the elections were considered a "non-issue", as for example a leading journalist in the Netherlands remarked (de Vreese, 2001, p.168; for in-depths interviews with English and Danish journalists, see de Vreese, 2002 ).

As a result of the varying number of election stories in the EU member countries, the share of election coverage in the entire political coverage differed considerably between countries. In the vast majority of countries, the relative amount of election coverage was lower than the relative amount of EU-related coverage and both types of coverage were outnumbered by the remaining political coverage. This is certainly a result of the scope of three types of coverage – election coverage is more specific than EU-related coverage and both are more specific than remaining political coverage. It is hence more important to note that, in terms of the relative amount of election coverage, the EU was separated. In a Scandinavian-Mediterranean group including Austria, the campaign was visible and had a considerable share in political coverage. In the remaining countries plus Spain, the campaign tended to be ignored. This is even more striking when bearing in mind that the latter group encompasses countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, countries usually regarded as important protagonists of further European integration. The fact that a political key event at the EU level was neglected in a several countries should, however, not be prematurely attributed to an importance gap of the EU in these countries. Election stories and EU-related stories usually had a share of more than 20% in the political coverage, with the exception of the UK and the Netherlands. Moreover, the lack of election coverage may result from specific events dominating the then news situation, such as the dioxin scandal in Belgium or, more generally, the peace agreement reached for the Kosovo war at the EU summit in Cologne.

However, these specific aspects cannot explain the bigger picture of obvious country differences in the amount of election coverage. The explanatory analyses revealed that the
Coverage of the 1999 European election campaign

Public broadcasting or private character of an outlet, polarization of elite opinion, and satisfaction with domestic democracy affected the amount of election coverage. The fact that the European elections mainly took place in public broadcasting outlets may add some fuel to the lingering discussion about the differences between public broadcasting and private news reporting. Most studies on the divergence or convergence of public broadcasting and private channels are based on single country analyses (e.g., for Denmark: Powers, Kristjandottir, & Sutton, 1994; for Germany: Pfetsch, 1996; Bruns & Marcinkowski, 1996; for the Netherlands: Brants & Neijens, 1998; van Praag & van der Eijk, 1998; for Sweden: Hvitfelt, 1994). The heterogeneous findings may result from the fact that the studies are methodologically hardly comparable. Responding to Brants’ (1998) call for really comparative (and comparable) content analyses, the analysis of the visibility of EU representatives in election coverage has elicited differences between public broadcasting and private channels in a comparative setting. It is beyond the scope and the goal of this chapter to integrate this finding into the normative discussions about the quality of news reporting. However, the result suggests the public broadcasting outlets paid more attention to bringing something as abstract and as remote as the EU and as the European Parliament to EU citizens than did private outlets. If it is true that voters depend on media information to come to halfway sensible voting decisions, then private outlets may not have taken this task seriously as far as the European elections are concerned.

Polarized elite opinion augmented the share of election news in the political coverage. Generally, the presence of conflict and disagreement is a key factor in news selection (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976) and journalists consider conflict pivotal in their decision of whether to cover an EU event or issue (e.g., de Vreese, 2002). One can assume that the polarization of elite opinion as created by the existence of anti-EU parties introduces this factor into an election campaign. Apart from that, polarized elite opinion and the existence of an anti-EU party may more generally stand for a more developed interest or need to discuss EU matters. For example, in Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, a visible anti-EU party does not exist and the amount of coverage rather mirrors permissive disinterest in European elections than a critical, yet caring approach to this key event of European politics. Whether citizens of the various EU countries care about the EU and feel the need to discuss European matters, cannot be assessed with the EU support measures routinely gauged in the Eurobarometers. Besides, other country-specific factors may be relevant here, for example the possibility to decide about EU issues in referenda (Gerhards, 2000). Despite these difficulties, it may be worth thinking about to what extent countries differ in their need to discuss EU matters and whether this shapes both the existence of visible anti-EU parties and the amount of election coverage.

Dissatisfaction with domestic democracy turned out to increase the amount of election coverage while satisfaction with domestic democracy rather reduced election coverage. Several studies have shown that EU-related attitudes and behavior have their foundations in domestic politics (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Franklin et al., 1994; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000). Obviously, this mechanism is of more general nature and its impact resonates far further than public opinion, thus also applying to the television coverage of European elections. It can be assumed that the EU becomes politically more relevant in countries in which domestic
governance functions less well. If citizens are dissatisfied with democratic processes and governance in their country, they may project their hopes of better governance onto the EU and especially its democratic core, the European Parliament. The thus increased political relevance trickles down to the media and materializes in more coverage of the EU. This reasoning also implies that the influence of satisfaction with domestic democracy may be mediated by other variables. To investigate this was beyond the scope of this analysis, but might be a fruitful task for further research. In any case, the finding demonstrates that we should not ignore the domestic and national context when attempting to understand the European and supra-national.

Prominence

In nearly all of the countries, election stories figured less prominently than EU-related stories and stories about other political matters. Bearing in mind that the coverage was comparatively visible in the Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries plus Austria, one may characterize the election campaign as being of unimportant visibility in these countries. In the remaining countries, the low amount of the coverage as such was even 'undercut' by its lacking prominence. It nearly seems as if television outlets, most notably the Irish and German ones, tried everything to keep the European elections out of citizens' awareness.

The explanatory analysis of potential influences on prominence also elicited homogenous results – in the sense that none of the presumed influences explained anything. To a large extent, this results from the lacking variance in how prominent election coverage was across the countries and outlets. However, the predictors employed may also be too general to explain the perceived importance of election events that eventually translates in the prominence of news stories. Medium-inherent factors or journalistic routines and attitudes might possibly serve as much more powerful predictors, but could not be included in the analysis as outlined above.

2.4.2 Substantive characteristics – third-order coverage of a second-order event

In the majority of countries, EU representatives were more visible in political news than non-EU representatives, thus giving the EU to some extent a face in the European election campaign. However, there was also a large group of countries in which the EU somewhat resembled a faceless dwarf. Obviously, the repeated experience of an election impaired the coverage of EU representatives. EU representatives seem to lose newsworthiness with each additional experience of European elections. The "second-order" character of European elections noted after the first European elections (van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996; Reif & Schmitt, 1980) thus culminates in the coverage of EU representatives. A repeatedly boring second-order event has led to third-order coverage of EU representatives. Conversely, a lack of experience with European elections led to more coverage of EU representatives as could be seen in the countries having acceded to the EU only lately. In these countries, EU representatives presented to some extent still something novel. In line with research on news values (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976), the novelty of the EU representatives may subsequently have increased the coverage. Given that in five 'old' member states of the EU,
not more than ten EU representatives appeared in the two most-widely watched television outlets in the hot phase of a European key event, one may start to question whether, in these countries, television news plays a role at all in mediating EU representatives to the represented citizens. One may also question whether, in these countries, EU citizens may be able to sufficiently inform themselves about the European elections and EU representatives on the basis of television news. This question seems worrying when taking into account that television is the preferred means of information for EU citizens (Eurobarometer 51-56). If the coverage of EU representatives in 2004 follows the same pattern as its predecessor in 1999, one can expect a notable decrease of EU representatives covered in the newer EU member states.

The influence just described was not mediated by the number of election stories broadcast. In other words, the broadcasting of a lot of election stories does not imply that a lot of EU representatives occur in these stories. The size of the media stage does not affect the occurrence of EU representatives. The most obvious examples for the tendency to cover the election campaign without focusing on EU representatives were the French and Greek outlets. In these outlets, stage and plot were European, but the actors were not. Apparently, a different logic is applied when deciding whether to cover the election campaign as compared to the decision whether to cover EU representatives.

Whether and to what extent EU representatives were audible, depended heavily on the occurrence of EU representatives. This is intuitively plausible and not a very sizzling finding. Nevertheless, two aspects of this result are worth mentioning. First, the effect of the number of EU representatives on their audibility was unusually strong. Thus, once covered, EU representatives are likely to be quoted. Second, the experience with previous European elections again made an impact, albeit mediated. Put differently, EU representatives in traditional EU member states are not only disadvantaged in their chance of being covered compared to their counterparts in newer EU member countries. They are, as a result, also damned to search for other carriers for their messages than television news.

The evaluation of the EU representatives was mostly neutral. However, when evaluations occurred, they were predominantly negative in the majority of countries. This applied not only to EU representatives, but also to non-EU representatives. This finding concurs with previous research from single-country content analyses (e.g., Kepplinger, 1998; Kepplinger & Rettich, 1996; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2001; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Obviously, the evaluation of EU representatives follows the same rules as the coverage of other political actors in different settings. Thus, the slightly negative slant in the coverage of EU representatives is not the result of hostility targeted at EU representatives. As suggested by Kepplinger and Weissbecker (1991), the negative depiction of EU representatives may rather derive from a generally slightly negative orientation in news reporting (see also: Westerstahl & Johansson, 1986; Wilke, 1984). The presumption that negative approaches towards the EU or the European Parliament do not interfere with the evaluation of EU representatives is further supported by the lacking influence of trust in the European parliament on the evaluation of EU representatives. The expected more negative evaluation of EU representatives in public broadcasting outlets did not turn out to be robust, although being
in the predicted direction. This suggests that Reiser's (1994) findings can only be seen as snapshot of the German coverage of the 1989 European elections. In general, however, it would have been more desirable to demonstrate what shapes evaluations of EU representatives instead of saying what does not. Clearly, more research is needed in this respect.

2.5 Summary

In sum, how can the coverage of the 1999 European election campaign be characterized? Four very broad generalizations may be made:

1. The campaign was virtually absent on Irish, English, and German television. It only took place in a Scandinavian-Mediterranean group of countries plus Austria. However, it seems as if the fate of European election coverage lies somewhere between complete invisibility and unimportant visibility: even in the countries where the campaign was visible, it remained less prominent than other events.

2. There is more coverage of the European elections, if (a) elite opinion is polarized, if (b) citizens are dissatisfied with domestic governance, and if (c) public broadcasting outlets become aware of the election.

3. The experience of previous European election campaigns acts as deterrent for the renewed coverage of EU representatives.


5. The generally slightly negative evaluation of EU representatives is the result of a generally negative slant in news reporting that also applies to the evaluation of non-EU representatives.

Although these findings might enhance our understanding of European election coverage and may show new directions of further research, they cannot compensate for (another) big gap in current research – our complete lack of knowledge of how the EU is covered in periods other than election campaigns. To gain an encompassing insight into how television news covers the EU, it is also important to study EU coverage during summit and routine periods. This will be dealt with in the following chapter.