Framing Europe: television news and European integration

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 6

The effects of strategic news on political cynicism, issue evaluations and policy support: A two-wave experiment

Introduction

Content analyses of political news in the US suggest that the balance of news coverage changed from issue-based stories to strategic coverage that emphasizes the horse race and tactics of politics (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993). Indicators of strategic coverage have been defined as coverage of candidate motivations and personalities, focus on disagreement between parties, candidates or voters, and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Crigler, Just & Belt, 2002; Jamieson, 1992). In the same vein, game news has been defined as the game providing the plot of a news story about politics while focusing on polls, and positioning the electorate as spectators and candidates as performers (Patterson, 1993). The argument has been put forward that this type of news coverage is not only found during election campaigns and that the strategic frame is also found in the coverage of public policy issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000).

In the content analysis of European news (discussed in Chapter 4), mixed evidence of presence of the strategy frame in political reporting was found. The content analysis suggested that there was significantly more strategic framing of European issues in Denmark which was related to the national referendum on the euro in 2000 (see also de Vreese and Semetko (2002b). However, the assessment of the prevalence of the strategy frame is without reference point, because we do not have any studies in Europe that investigate the use of the strategy frame comparatively (neither cross-nationally nor over time) that may serve as benchmarks for this study. Other studies in Europe have addressed the focus on the horse race in the news coverage of elections (e.g., Brants & van Kempen, 2002; van Praag & Brants, 2000), but they have not specifically investigated the strategy frame. Whether or not the strategic focus in news about European affairs is limited or substantial it remains important to investigate the effects this mode of news coverage have. This chapter studies the effects of strategic news in a European context.
Strategic News and Political Cynicism. The significance for democracy of understanding antecedents and effects of political cynicism is widely acknowledged (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hetherington, 1998; 2001). Decreasing trust in political institutions and increasing public cynicism about politics have led scholars to search for explanations in terms of social and cultural changes and developments in political parties and partisanship (e.g., Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Miller, 1974; Nye et al., 1997). The contents of political communication and political campaigning styles have been blamed for driving some of these trends. Beginning with the ‘video-malaise’ thesis (Robinson, 1976), several studies focused on the role played by the media in undermining political trust and producing political cynicism (e.g., Hart, 1994).

Scholars have claimed that the media – through which most citizens experience politics – contribute to increases in political cynicism on the one hand and decreases in political efficacy, confidence in political institutions, and public sentiments to participate in elections on the other (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Entman 1989; Fallows, 1996; Nye et al., 1997; Patterson, 1993). Specifically, previous research has suggested that news about politics framed in terms of strategy, that is news emphasizing the game aspects of politics and stressing politicians’ motivations for their actions, may evoke political cynicism and negative perceptions of political campaigns (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Crigler et al., 2002; Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001a, 2001b).

Most evidence of the effects of strategic news coverage on political cynicism stems from experimental studies in the U.S. (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001, 2001b). These studies have contributed with important empirical evidence to the general claims made about the negative impact of (news) media on politics (Fallows, 1996; Hart, 1994; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993; Robinson, 1976). To date, the majority of these studies has focused on the effects of strategic news coverage on political cynicism in the context of election campaigns (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001a). Given the bias towards studying the effects of strategic news in the context of election campaigns, the first goal of this chapter is to investigate the effects of the strategic news frame in relation to a policy discussion of a routine political/economic topic, outside the context of an election campaign.

Negative and Strategic Communication and Mobilization. Studies investigating behavioral effects of negative campaign communication on mobilization and turnout have, for the most part, focused on the effects of negativity found in political advertising and commercials. Ansolabehere et al. (1994; 1999) challenged the notion that campaigns boost citizens’ involvement (in terms of interest, awareness, and sense of importance) as suggested in classical voting behavior studies (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954). They found that
exposure to negative advertising dropped intentions to vote by five percentage points and concluded "the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns are accompanied by a weakened sense of political efficacy. Voters who watch negative advertisements become more cynical about the responsiveness of public officials and the electoral process" (Ansolabehere et al., 1999, p. 829).

Drawing on aggregate level survey data and content indicators for political ads, they additionally demonstrated that electoral turnout was lower in states with a higher presence of negative ads (Ansolabehere et al., 1999). A later review of experimental and survey data boldly concluded "negative advertising demobilized voters" (Ansolabehere et al., 1999, p. 901). Another study also found that strong attack advertising demobilizes the electorate while 'balanced' or contrasted ads have a mobilizing effect (Romer, Jamieson & Cappella, 2000). The evidence is by no means conclusive, however. Finkel and Geer (1998), for example, draw on content analysis of presidential ads and panel survey data and found no demobilizing effects of negative ads. Freedman and Goldstein (1999) actually found that exposure to negative ads increased likelihood of voting. And Wattenberg and Brians (1999) questioned the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns and attack advertising by arguing that the intent of these campaign messages is to change voters' minds and voting preferences rather than to demobilize the electorate and depress turnout. These studies and others suggest that the evidence on the effects of negative advertising with respect to turnout in US elections is mixed (see also Lau, Sigelman, Heldman & Babbitt, 1999).

These studies all focus on advertisements, but news is a more important and credible source of information about politics (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). It remains an open question whether negative political coverage, in the form of strategic news, affects the electoral process in a negative direction and depresses turnout. The second goal of the study is therefore to investigate the relationship between exposure to strategic news and electoral mobilization.

**American exceptionalism?** While the discussion of the role of (news) media in political processes has received attention both within the U.S. and in Europe, the evidence is not conclusive as to whether exposure to news contributes in a negative or positive direction towards, for example, political cynicism, trust, and electoral mobilization. Studies in the U.S. suggest that media disengage citizens, fuel cynicism, and erode social capital (Bennett et al., 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Putnam 1995; 2000). This perspective is challenged by studies drawing on data from both the U.S. and Europe suggesting that attention to news media is associated with higher levels of trust, knowledge, and political mobilization (Norris, 2000). Others suggest that effects, either virtuous or vicious, are not omni-present but contingent
upon, for example, the type of media use, political sophistication, and education (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Moy & Pfau, 2001; Moy & Scheufele, 2000). In this vein, Brants and van Kempen (2002) found that audiences exposed to commercial news were more cynical about politics than audiences exposed to public broadcasting news.

The claim that strategic news coverage fuels political cynicism is largely based on evidence from the American political context. While news in other countries is also framed in terms of strategy and focuses on, for example, aspects of candidate motivations and campaign conduct during elections (e.g., Norris et al., 1999), no study has investigated the effects of strategic news. There are no indicators as to whether previous evidence of the effects of strategic news may in fact generalize across countries and political systems or whether our current knowledge is biased by single country data (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990).

All people equal: the effects of political knowledge and political efficacy. Previous research is inconclusive about the contribution of political knowledge to the frame-setting process. For example, Kinder and Sanders (1990) found that persons with lower levels of political information were more susceptible to framing effects and Valentino et al. (2001) found exposure to strategic news to be associated with lower levels of turnout intention for participants with lower levels of education, which they called political sophistication. Along these lines, Crigler et al. (2002) found strategic news to affect undecided voters more than voters with a strong political preference. However, Nelson et al. (1997) found persons with higher levels of political information to be more susceptible to framing effects and Rhee (1997) found political knowledge to significantly bolster readers’ use of an experimentally induced frame in their interpretation of an election campaign. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) in one of their field experiments found ‘political sophistication’ to be a significant positive predictor for political cynicism, but this was not a consistent finding across all their experiments. Finally, Price et al. (1997) found that political knowledge contributed to more elaborate responses to news, but did not find evidence that knowledge either enhances or depresses susceptibility to news frames. Given the inconclusive nature of previous research, this study investigated the potentially intervening role of political knowledge in the frame-setting process.

The current study investigates the effects of strategic news with political cynicism as the dependent variable. Recent studies suggest that political efficacy, that is citizens’ feeling of making a difference in the political process, is an important factor for understanding political cynicism. One study found a negative relationship between efficacy and cynicism suggesting that efficacious citizens were less likely to be cynical about politics (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). In an additional study, the negative relationship between efficacy and cynicism
was confirmed and it was additionally concluded that cynicism was a key predictor of negativism towards both political campaigns and the media (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). Based on this evidence the current study also considers the impact of political efficacy in the frame-setting process. The effect of efficacy on political cynicism is assessed simultaneously with the effect of political knowledge, which Pinkleton and Austin (2001; 2002) did not use in their studies.

Cynical today, cynical tomorrow? Previous studies have focused in detail on a variety of effects of strategic news coverage. Strategic news has been found to activate attention to personality traits and motivations of politicians which in turn produce negative campaign evaluations and cynicism about politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Strategic news predisposes viewers to attend to and process less substantive information more actively and it produces lower levels of information retention (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001b). Finally strategic news produces more negative reactions towards politics than sincere/issue-based news (Valentino et al., 2001b) and strategic news impedes feelings of civic duty and trust in government for less educated segments of the electorate (Valentino et al., 2001a).

The effects on these dependent variables have all been established in post-tests held immediately after exposure to experimentally manipulated news. In studies investigating effects of other frames in television news, such as, for example, effects on the degree of tolerance extended towards political movements (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Nelson et al., 1997) and the assignment of responsibility for social and political problems (Iyengar, 1991) effects were also documented as immediate short-term responses to the manipulated stimulus material. It remains an open question, however, whether the effects of strategic news coverage persist over time, whether they diminish or whether they disappear entirely.

Most experimental designs in political communication research do not include a temporal component. Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) experimental studies of the agenda-setting process are exceptions. In two experiments they included a delayed post-test one week after participants had been exposed to an experimentally manipulated television news program. In both studies they found support that the agenda-setting effect was maintained over the one week period in between the immediate and delayed post-test. A potential shortcoming of their design was the lack of knowledge about what information participants encountered during the period between the post-tests. In the investigation of the persistency of agenda-setting, they did not control for participants’ media use and attention. It is very well possible that participants were exposed to additional news about, for example, unemployment or education which could
cue participants to consider these problems salient. It is therefore difficult to confidently ascribe the effect entirely to the experimental manipulation.

While some work has been conducted on the persistence of agenda-setting effects, this is virtually absent in the framing literature. Most experimental framing studies investigating change have utilized pre- and post-tests in the design, but these studies still focus on immediate responses to stimuli (and compare how exposure affected initial pre-test responses). The series of experiments by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) was conducted during five consecutive days, but the design did not include delayed or repeated post-tests. In one field experiment, participants were interviewed two to three days after exposure, but this time lag was not the focus of the investigation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 103). The persistence of effects of news frames over time therefore remains unclear. Cumulative effects of repeated exposure to specific types of content can be investigated in panel studies. However, such designs are often less successful in identifying the effects of a single independent variable, exposure to strategic news, which is the essence of experimentation (Brown & Melamed, 1990; Kinder & Palfrey, 1993).

The literature on framing effects suggests that the impact of certain news frames may be persistent, but little prior research has investigated the longevity and robustness of these effects. One notable exception investigated the effects of an advocate news frames, that is a frame advocating an interest group’s perspective on a local farming issue (Tewksbury et al., 2000). The presence of the frame was manipulated to vary in different news stories to which students were exposed. A retest three weeks after the initial exposure revealed significant, though muted effects of the news frame which is a first indication that framing effects might be persistent. However, previous studies specifically investigating the effects of the strategic news frames have not been able to address the longevity of such effects.

**Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Based on the considerations outlined above, an experiment exploring the effects of strategic news on political cynicism, issue evaluations, policy support, and electoral participation was designed. The study focuses on the enlargement of the European Union.

As discussed in the preceding pages, previous research has centered on the effects of the strategy frame in election campaigns or in relation to high salience issues such as health care (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Crigler et al., 2002; Valentino et al., 2001a). The current study investigates the effects in the context of the enlargement of the European Union and investigates the effects of the strategy frame in television news. Recent advances in the field have focused on
the press only, while the investigators themselves acknowledge that television news is a potentially more powerful medium (e.g., Valentino et al., 2001a). Based on the findings by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), which were partly replicated by Valentino et al. (2001a), it is hypothesized that exposure to strategic news induces political cynicism compared to issue-based news.

- **Hypothesis 1**: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news.

Exposure to strategy-based news has also been found to activate negative evaluations of a policy issue (Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001b). Previous studies have demonstrated this effect for print news and based on these findings it was expected that exposure to strategic television news activates negative issue evaluations and depresses positive issue evaluations.

- **Hypothesis 2a**: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy renders more negative thoughts about political issues relative to exposure to issue-based news.

- **Hypothesis 2b**: Exposure to news framed in terms of issue coverage renders more positive thoughts about political issues relative to exposure to news framed in terms of strategy.

The effects of strategic news on support for European enlargement are also investigated. As argued in the previous chapter, there is some evidence to suggest that news frames alter support for a political issue, such as, for example, support for social protests and local farming issues (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Tewksbury et al., 2000) so a hypothesis was cautiously formulated.

- **Hypothesis 3**: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy suppresses policy support relative to exposure to issue-based news.

The effects of exposure to strategic news on electoral mobilization are also investigated. The expectation is that strategic framed news suppresses vote intention (Valentino et al., 2001a).

- **Hypothesis 4**: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy suppresses, relative to exposure to issue-based news, voting intention.

Finally, to investigate the duration of effects of strategic news two research questions are posed:

- **Research question 1**: Do effects of exposure to news framed in terms of strategy on political cynicism persist over time?

- **Research question 2**: Do effects of exposure to news framed in terms of strategy on policy support persist over time?
Method

DESIGN. To investigate the effects of strategic versus issue-based news coverage, a two-wave experiment with immediate and delayed post-tests with repeated measures was conducted. Despite criticisms of impeded external validity, experimental research is superior in an attempt to investigate effects of a key independent variable (Kinder & Palfrey, 1993). This study focuses on television because television is repeatedly identified as the most important source of political information (Eurobarometer, 56, 2002; Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). To address potential shortcomings in previous experimental studies of television news (see below), an entire version of the main national evening 8 o’clock news broadcast in the Netherlands was produced in co-operation with NOS Journaal. Inserted into this bulletin was a news story on the enlargement of the European Union. Two versions of this story were produced for this post-test only, between-subjects experimental design. One version of this story was framed in terms of strategy and the other was focused on substantive aspects of the issue.

The study was designed to investigate the longevity of the effects of exposure to strategic news. In a delayed post-test one week after the experiment, participants were re-interviews drawing on repeated measures. To control for any confounding influence of information obtained about the EU between the immediate and the delayed post-test, the participants’ news media exposure and attention to news during the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest was mapped. In addition, a content analysis of all television news and current affairs programs as well as print media (newspapers and magazines) during that week was conducted to explore whether exposure to additional news about the enlargement issue affected responses.

PROCEDURE. The experimental design consisted of three distinct stages. First, participants were sampled and invited to come to the headquarters of the NOS KLO Audience Research Department to participate in a television study. The study took place on three weeknights in October 2001. Upon arrival, participants were randomly assigned to the two conditions. The news programs were watched in different viewing rooms with a maximum of 12 participants per room. Coffee/tea, soft drinks, and cakes were available in all rooms, and participants were encouraged to help themselves. The experimental leaders were randomly assigned to the different viewing rooms/conditions.

First, participants filled out a background questionnaire containing demographics, measures of media use, an assessment of political knowledge, and feeling of political efficacy. Second, participants watched the experimental bulletin. They were informed that they would watch a proof taping of today’s 8 o’clock News [8 uur Journaal], taped in the late afternoon of that day. A
post-test was taken immediately after watching the news. Upon completion of the post-test, participants were reimbursed for their travel costs and they received a gift voucher at the value of approximately 16 euro. A second post-test was conducted by telephone one week after the experiment took place. This design allows investigating in how far the experimentally induced effects remain stable or diminish over time. Following this delayed post-test participants were debriefed.

**Sample.** Participants were recruited by the NOS KLO to ensure variation in terms of gender, age, and level of education as these demographic indicators have proven to be important for understanding support for European integration (Eurobarometer, 49, 1998; Gabel, 1998). A total of 83 participants (60% males, age 15-67 ($M = 43.8$, $SD = 15.2$), with varying levels of education) completed all steps in the study. This sample is not representative but superior to student samples generally used in framing experiments given the nature of the issue.

**Stimulus Material.** As discussed in Chapters 1 and 5, previous research on the effects of frames in television news has a number of potential shortcomings in design and external validity. First, insufficient control over the stimulus material, i.e. lack of ability to specifically manipulate the independent variable which may jeopardize the experimental design (Reeves & Geiger, 1994; Slater, 1991). Second, minimal discussion of the validity of the frames whose effects are investigated (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Third, single message stimuli-designs where the effects of messages are tested without an appropriate context which increases the artificiality of the experimental situation (Slater, 1991).

The frame explored in this study – the strategy frame – is theoretically grounded, observed in daily journalistic practices, and its presence has been documented in content analyses of political news. Second, the news stories used are produced rather than selected as being representative of a particular frame. This ensures full control over the stimulus material, i.e. variation in the manipulation only and exclusion of other, unintended, variation in the material. Third, the experimentally manipulated news story is inserted into a bulletin of the national main evening news, thus not utilizing a criticized single-stimuli design.

To improve the external validity of the study, the stimulus material used in the experiment was produced in cooperation with the Dutch public broadcaster, NOS. A bulletin with the characteristics of the regular 8 o'clock news [8 uur Journal], including a nation-wide known anchorman, was produced. This bulletin, with the experimentally manipulated story as the second story, was made according to common journalistic practices and technical standards at NOS Journal (see Figure 6.1).
Figure 6.1. Still-shots of the manipulated television news story about the enlargement of the European Union

NOS Journaal introduction

NOS Journaal anchor

Secretary of State D. Benschop

Treaty of Rome, the launch of the ECSC

Map of Europe with ascension countries

European Union flag in front of the European Parliament
The focal point of the experimentally manipulated news story was a (simulated) publication of a report by the European Commission encouraging a fast entry of Poland into the European Union. The story was introduced by the anchor. It then contained a brief summary of the report’s conclusions. Following this, Dick Benschop, at that time Secretary of State for European Affairs, provided a quote which was scripted in advance. The news story then provided brief background information about the history of the European Union developing from a 1950s Steel and Coal Community to a 1990s Economic and Monetary Union. A second quote was then delivered by the Secretary of State before a closing statement about public support for the enlargement in other EU countries. The stimulus material was produced to reflect characteristics of the coverage as identified in the content analysis in Chapter 4. For example, the story had a primarily domestic focus and featured domestic politicians. Figure 6.1 illustrates the stimulus material.

One version of the news story contained a strategy frame and the other an issue frame. With the exception of three sentences the two stories were identical in each of the experimental conditions (the full text of both stories is included in Appendix C). The experimental manipulation consisted of one sentence in the opening section of the story. In one version the journalist here referred to a ‘charm campaign’ and a ‘strategic plan’ (strategy version) rather than ‘concrete policies’ (issue version). Second, the Secretary of State referred to a ‘battle’ (strategy) as opposed to a ‘signal’ (issue) in his quote. Finally, the closing sentence referred to mobilizing public support (strategy) versus focusing on policies (issue).

Strategic news is defined in the literature as [1] emphasis of performance, style, and perception of the candidate, [2] analysis of candidate actions as part of a consolidation of positions, [3] language of wars, games, and competitions, and [4] focus on polls (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). It was specifically chosen to vary the focus on motivations for political actions (to gain public support versus focusing on concrete policies) and the use of war language to create the issue and strategy versions of the news story. Varying all elements of strategic news leaves too much uncertainty about which of the elements may cause variation in cynical responses.

**Measures.** Political cynicism. Four items were derived from Cappella & Jamieson (1997) to tap perceptions of politicians’ motivations, their character, and confidence in the substance of policy debates: (a) Politicians are too superficial when dealing with enlargement, (b) Politicians are too concerned with public opinion about enlargement, (c) The debate about enlargement is more about strategy then content, and (d) Politicians are clear and honest in their arguments about enlargement (reverse coded). The items formed a scale of political cynicism (wave 1 $M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.79$, $\alpha = .64$; wave 2 $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.73$, $\alpha = .67$).
Issue evaluation. The second hypothesis predicted that strategy news activates and renders negative associations about a target, in this case the issue of enlargement, while issue framed news activates and renders positive associations. To measure the volume of negative versus positive reactions to the issue of enlargement of the European Union, an open-ended thought-listing item was used. The question wording was: "We are interested to hear how you think about the issue of the enlargement of the European Union. One of the news stories in the 'Journaal' was about the enlargement of the EU. Please list your thoughts and feelings about the EU enlargement".

This procedure has successfully been employed in previous experimental research on the effects of frames in the news (e.g. Iyengar, 1991; Price et al., 1997; Tewksbury et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2001a; 2001b; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Each respondent, on average, listed about three thoughts ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.48$). The affective tone of each thought was assessed as 'positive' towards enlargement, 'negative' or 'neutral'. The thoughts were coded by two coders blind to the experimental condition. The inter-coder agreement on the classification of thoughts ranged from $r = .91$ to $r = .95$.

Policy support. To test the effect of the two frames on support for advanced European integration in the form of enlargement of the European Union, five items were used. The items (measured on five-point Likert agree-disagree scales) included positively and negatively framed statements: (a) The enlargement of the EU has more disadvantages than advantages, (b) The enlargement of the EU should happen faster than it is currently happening, (c) I would be willing to sacrifice to help a less strong country in Europe, (d) The EU should be enlarged with former East-bloc countries such as Poland and Lithuania, and (e) The EU should be enlarged with South European countries such as Cyprus and Turkey. The responses to the statements were recoded and averaged to form a scale of 'enlargement support' ranging from 1 to 5 (wave 1 $M = 3.06$, $SD = .80$, $\alpha = .83$; wave 2 $M = 3.04$, $SD = .79$, $\alpha = .76$).

Vote intention. The study also investigated whether the strategic news frame suppressed electoral mobilization. Given that no election was waged on the issue of EU enlargement, but that discussions took place as to whether more of future EU decisions should be determined in national referendums, the (hypothetical) question to what extent participants considered it likely that they would vote in such a referendum was posed. Participants were asked to assess the likelihood of them turning out to vote if a referendum on the enlargement issue would be held. It is acknowledged that a self-reported turnout approximation based on a potential election is susceptible to numerous biases. Because the likelihood of over-reporting the intention out to vote is likely to be randomly
distributed across the conditions and because the study does not make any inferences about the relative level of turnout intention this measure is still appropriate to assess the effects of differences in the news reporting (strategy versus issue) on turnout intention. The answers to this question were dichotomized into ‘intends to vote’ and ‘does not intend to vote’.

Other variables. In addition to the effect of the news frame on issue evaluation, other variables were expected to affect the nature of participants’ cognitive responses. Specifically, political knowledge and the degree of issue elaboration (Price et al., 1997; Rhee, 1997) were expected to influence the responses. Accordingly these were included in the analysis. Political knowledge was measured by six factual questions, averaged to range from 0 to 1 \((M = .67, SD = .28)\) \((\alpha = .63)\). Issue elaboration was measured by verbosity, i.e. the number of words participants listed for the open-ended measure \((M = 32.3, SD = 21.7)\).

For the analysis of political cynicism, a measure of internal political efficacy was included (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; 2002). Political efficacy was measured by three standard items and averaged to form a scale from 1 to 7 \((M = 3.53, SD = 1.43)\) \((\alpha = .61)\). For the analysis of support for European integration (H3), gender, age, education, and political knowledge were included in the analysis.

Content analysis. In the week between the experiment and the delayed post-test, a content analysis was carried out of the major news outlets in the Netherlands. The main evening television news programs, the main weekly current affairs magazines, and the front page of daily newspapers were monitored to identify news about the EU. For a news story to be included in the analysis, the EU had to be mentioned at least in two independent sentences. The news stories were coded for topic and indicators of strategic news framing (see above). The content analysis showed that two news programs in the week between the immediate and the delayed post-test contained news about the EU. Three front pages of the daily newspapers contained news about the EU, these were however unrelated to the topic of enlargement. No stories were found in the magazines included in the sample. The content analysis was carried out during the week between the experiment and the delayed post-test to inform the exposure measures used in the second post-test.

Delayed post-test. In the delayed post-test, the measures of political cynicism and EU enlargement support were repeated. The measures were part of a battery of attitude questions about current political news to avoid undesired panel test effects in the repeated measures. Prior to the delayed post-test, the content analysis (see above) revealed in which outlets at which days, news about European affairs had been included.
Exposure to news about the EU was tapped by specifically asking the respondents if they had seen either of any of the two news programs that contained EU news in the week between the immediate and the delayed post-test. Exposure to the newspaper stories about EU was tapped from the pre-test questionnaire of media use. Most respondents reported reading only one daily newspaper. An additional attention measure asked respondents to report how much attention they had paid to different topics in the news. One item (ranging from 1 ('no attention') to 4 ('a lot of attention')) dealt with 'attention to news about the EU' specifically ($M = 1.85, SD = .73$).

Data analysis. To analyze the difference between the conditions in the immediate post-test analyses of variance with covariates (ANCOVA) were used. The experimental condition was the fixed factor and political knowledge, verbosity, and political efficacy were used as covariates. To analyze the difference within each condition over time (between the immediate and the delayed post-test), paired sample t-tests were used.

Results

The effect of strategic news on political cynicism. The first hypothesis suggested that exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism compared to exposure to news based on issue-coverage. The first research question additionally asked if such an effect would persist or diminish over time.

Table 6.1. Political cynicism by experimental condition, immediate post-test and delayed post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Immediate posttest</th>
<th>Delayed posttest</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issue (n=42)</td>
<td>Strategy (n=41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Cynicism</td>
<td>3.67_a</td>
<td>4.11_b</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(.88)</td>
<td>(.60)</td>
</tr>
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Note: Cell entries are mean scores of cynicism on a 5-point scale, standard deviations in parentheses. Different a, b subscripts indicate significant between-condition difference with $p < .01$. Different x, y subscripts indicate significant within-condition over-time difference with $p < .05$. Entries with no subscript do not differ significantly.

Table 6.1 displays the means of political cynicism in the two conditions in the immediate and delayed post-test. The first hypothesis is supported as participants in the strategy condition ($M = 4.11$) displayed a significantly higher level of political cynicism compared to participants in the issue condition ($M = 3.67$) in the immediate post-test ($F(1, 82) = 6.89, \eta^2 = .08, p = .01$). In the delayed
post-test, participants in the strategy condition \((M = 3.45)\) did not differ from participants in the issue condition \((M = 3.43)\) in their level of cynicism \((F(1, 82) = 0.17, \eta^2 = .00, p = .90)\).

Table 6.1 also shows that the difference found between the two conditions in the immediate post-test does not persist in the delayed post-test conducted one week later. The level of cynicism decreased for participants in the strategy condition (from \(M = 4.11\) in immediate post-test to \(M = 3.45\) in the delayed post-test). Figure 6.1 illustrates the level of political cynicism in both conditions in the immediate and the delayed post-test:

**Figure 6.1.** Political cynicism by experimental condition, immediate post-test and delayed post-test

![Graph showing political cynicism by experimental condition](image)

Note: Entries are mean scores of cynicism on a 5-point scale.

Introducing political knowledge and political efficacy as covariates did not affect the impact of exposure to the strategy frame on political cynicism. The effect of exposure to strategy news was still significant in the immediate post-test after adjustment for the covariates \((F(1, 82) = 12.92, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .14, p = .001)\) (see Table 6.2). Political knowledge significantly covaried with political cynicism \((\beta = .89, t(82) = 3.05, p < .01)\) while political efficacy was a significant negative covariate for political cynicism \((\beta = -.09, t(82) = -1.67, p = .08)\). This suggests that the more politically knowledgeable and the participants feeling less efficacious were more likely to express higher levels of political cynicism. \(^{17}\)
Table 6.2. ANCOVA of political cynicism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Immediate post-test</th>
<th>Delayed post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>df</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.16 #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.33 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy frame</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Partial eta $^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.92 ***</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>(.48)</td>
<td>(.55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 81 (strategy = 40, issue = 41). Numbers in parentheses are mean square errors. #p < .10. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

In the analysis of political cynicism in the delayed post-test, *exposure to strategic news* in the period between the immediate and the delayed post-test was not formally modeled. This is because of the virtual absence of news about European affairs and the low number of participants reporting being exposed to and paying attention to this news. Essentially this means that the delayed post-test was conducted after a week in which the participants were not exposed to any additional information about the EU. The implications of this are addressed further in the discussion.

The effect of strategic news on issue evaluation. The second set of hypotheses predicted that in comparison with exposure to news with an issue-focus, exposure to news framed in terms of strategy activates and renders negative evaluations of the enlargement issue.

Table 6.3. Positive, neutral and negative issue evaluations by experimental condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Issue frame condition (n=42)</th>
<th>Strategy frame condition (n=41)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of positive comments</td>
<td>.79x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of neutral comments</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of negative comments</td>
<td>.95a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences a,b p < .05, x,y p < .10.

Table 6.3 shows the valence – positive, neutral, and negative – of the thoughts participants reported in each of the conditions. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the number of positive thoughts differed significantly between the two condi-
tions with participants in the strategy condition \((M = .44)\) listing fewer positive thoughts than participants in the issue condition \((M = .79)\) \((F(1, 82) = 3.20, \eta^2 = .04, p = .07)\). Conversely, participants in the strategy condition \((M = 1.54)\) listed more negative thoughts than participants in the issue condition \((M = .95)\) \((F(1, 82) = 4.47, \eta^2 = .01, p < .05)\). The volume of neutral thoughts was not affected by the experimental condition so that participants in both conditions listed, on average, a comparable amount of neutral thoughts \((F(1, 82) = .56, \eta^2 = .01, p = .46)\). In sum, the frame significantly influenced the likelihood that participants reacted with valenced — both positive and negative — responses. Figure 6.2 illustrates the level of political cynicism in both conditions in the immediate and the delayed post-test:

Figure 6.2. Positive, neutral and negative issue evaluations by experimental condition

Introducing political knowledge and issue elaboration (i.e., verbosity) as covariates did not alter the results. Exposure to strategy news still had a significant negative effect on listing positive thoughts \((F(1, 82) = 4.13, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .04, p = .08)\) and a positive significant effect on listing negative thoughts \((F(1, 82) = 9.40, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .11, p < .01)\) after adjustment for the covariates (see Table 6.4).

Verbosity was a positive predictor of the number of neutral thoughts \((\beta = .74, t(82) = 3.05, p = .01)\). Political knowledge \((\beta = .94, t(82) = 2.11, p < .05)\) and verbosity \((\beta = .03, t(82) = 4.30, p < .001)\) were both significant positive covariates for the number of negative thoughts. This suggests that the more politically knowledgeable, and participants elaborating more on the issue, more often
provided negative comments. None of the covariates were significant for predicting the number of positive thoughts."

Table 6.4. ANCOVA of issue evaluation by experimental condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of words</td>
<td>df 1</td>
<td>F 9.03 **</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>df 1</td>
<td>F .46</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy frame</td>
<td>df 1</td>
<td>F .44</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>df 79</td>
<td>F (1.26)</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 81 (strategy = 40, issue = 41). Numbers in parentheses are mean square errors.
# p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

THE EFFECT OF STRATEGIC NEWS ON POLICY SUPPORT. Hypothesis 3 suggested that exposure to news framed in terms of strategy suppresses policy support. Table 6.5 presents the index of ‘EU enlargement support’.

Table 6.5. Support by experimental condition, immediate and delayed posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Immediate posttest</th>
<th>Delayed posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issue condition</td>
<td>Strategy condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=42)</td>
<td>(n=42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU enlargement support</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. The means do not differ significantly from each other.

Table 6.5 shows that there was no significant difference in the level of support for future enlargement of the EU between participants in the strategy and the issue condition. Political knowledge was a positive covariate in both post-tests and this was statistically significant in the immediate post-test ($F(1, 82) = 5.41$, partial $\eta^2 = .07, p < .05$) ($\beta = .80, t(82) = 2.33, p < .05$). The findings suggest that more politically knowledgeable individuals are more supportive of the EU enlargement plans and that exposure to strategic news coverage does not affect policy support.
The effects of strategic news on turnout. The final aspect of this study was an investigation of the effect of exposure to strategic news on political mobilization. The findings suggest that the intention to turn out to vote in a potential referendum on the enlargement issue did not differ significantly between the two conditions. Thirty-eight percent of the participants in the strategy condition reported being likely to turn out to vote compared to 39% of the participants in the issue condition.

Discussion

The study was designed to investigate the effects of strategic news coverage of politics on a number of dependent variables and to explore whether any effects induced by exposure to news framed in terms of strategy were persistent or would diminish over time. The evidence is supportive of the claim that exposure to strategic news encourages political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001a). This evidence is found outside the US in the context of a routine political news topic in a non-election period.

The effect of strategy news on cynicism was not persistent and disappeared over time. The data do not provide empirical support for claims inferred from previous studies of the long-term effects of strategic news coverage. However, this study is merely a first exploration of effects of strategic news in a temporal perspective. Therefore only tentative conclusions about the longevity and robustness of effects on cynicism are appropriate. We may for example find that repeated exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a cumulative effect. Such a phenomenon would be in line with arguments advanced by Zaller (1992; 2002) suggesting that media effects are likely to be of modest magnitude and most prominent in cases of extensive coverage with consistent directional bias.

The study was designed to control for the effect of repeated exposure to news about the EU framed in terms of strategy. In the delayed post-test, the individual participants' news media exposure and attention was mapped during the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest. A content analysis of all television news and current affairs programs as well as print media (newspapers and magazines) during that week was conducted to explore whether exposure to additional news about the enlargement issue might alter responses. This dimension of the research is not formally modeled in the analysis because the EU enlargement was almost entirely absent from the news during that week.

On the one hand, this is an asset for the design because it is possible to quite confidently rule out that participants were exposed to additional information about the enlargement issue during the week between the immediate and the delayed post-test. This control makes the experiment quite unique in a real life
setting. On the other hand, an experimental design with a temporal dimension in combination with individual-level news exposure and attention measures in addition to a content analysis of these news outlets would provide an interesting and compelling design. Such a design is a worthwhile path to pursue in the quest to disentangle the robustness and persistency of effects of strategic news on political cynicism.

Participants’ feelings of political efficacy and their political knowledge also affected the level of political cynicism. Politically efficacious individuals were less likely to express cynicism. This finding is an experimentally based corroboration of Pinkleton and Austin’s (2002) survey-based evidence of the negative relationship between cynicism and efficacy. In addition, the study suggested that political knowledge contributed to political cynicism. This finding is in line with Cappella and Jamieson’s (1997) findings. However, whereas Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found political knowledge (or ‘political sophistication’ as they call it) to be a stronger predictor of political cynicism than exposure to news containing the strategy frame in a multivariate analysis, this study suggests that exposure to the strategy frame drives political cynicism more than political knowledge. Both contribute to political cynicism, but knowledge is a weaker predictor compared to exposure to the strategic news frame.

The study also suggests that strategic news activates negative evaluations of a policy issue compared to issue-based news that renders more positive issue evaluations. Participants in the issue condition produced significantly more positive thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the strategy condition. In addition, participants who were exposed to strategy-framed news listed significantly more negative thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the issue condition. The degree of issue elaboration and political knowledge were both positive covariates for expressing negative comments suggesting that persons with a higher level of political knowledge and individuals offering a more elaborate evaluation of the issue were more likely to express negative evaluations.

This effect of strategic news on the affective responses by participants exposed to strategic news is supportive of previous studies that found the strategy frame to produce negative campaign evaluations (Valentino et al., 2001b). However, the Valentino et al. (2001b) study was not able to assess their findings in terms of the impact of individual characteristics on the framing effects process and therefore the specific role of political knowledge and issue elaboration in the framing process was not investigated. Previously, Rhee (1997) concluded that more knowledgeable and verbose persons made more use of the strategy frame in their issue evaluations. The current study supports Rhee’s (1997) conclusions, but whereas his findings suggested that the degree of issue elaboration was more important than exposure to the strategy frame for participants’ issue
interpretation, this study finds the strategy frame to be the strongest predictor for negative issue interpretation.

The current study found effects of the strategy frame in television news. In this sense the study contradicts Rhee (1997, p. 42) who only found effects of the strategy frame for print news and not broadcast news. He ascribes this finding to television's lack of ability to transfer "prepositional systems" because of the multi-model presentation of information including both visuals and text. This study does not support this conclusion and instead lends support to Graber's (1990; 2001) argument, that the combination of text and visuals leads not to a more shallow issue interpretation, but rather a deeper and more sophisticated level of information processing.

The third expectation in the current study was that strategic news also would have an impact on policy support, but this hypothesis was not supported. The type of frame does not affect the level of support for EU enlargement. A similar level of approval for future enlargement of the European Union was found in the two conditions both immediately after exposure to the news bulletin containing a story about the enlargement and in the delayed post-test. Thus it is cautiously concluded that strategic news does not affect policy support. The study also does not provide any evidence to suggest that the strategic mode of news reporting depresses citizens' intention to vote.

The overall conclusion of the study is that news media may indeed contribute to political cynicism and negative associations with political and economic issues. However, these effects diminish over time and it is possible to quite confidently rule out that this was the effect of exposure to new information since most participants were in an 'information-vacuum' between the immediate and the delayed post-test. The study suggests that knowledgeable citizens were both more likely to express political cynicism and to evaluate the enlargement issue negatively, but they were at the same time more supportive of EU enlargement plans.

These findings are an addition to the 'spiral of cynicism' argument. Knowledgeable citizens appear to be more sophisticated in their information processing and to reflect at greater length about an issue. This leads to relying more on a frame provided in the news when expressing reactions to an issue, but does not imply that a strong attitudinal change takes place. The evidence from earlier studies in the priming tradition suggesting that 'novices are more susceptible' to media effects (e.g., Krosnick & Kinder, 1990) cannot be sustained by this study. The current findings, however, corroborate with recent advancements in priming research that suggest that political 'experts' perhaps choose to rely on a source — for example the news — when thinking about and expressing reactions to an issue in the news (Miller & Krosnick, 2000).
For the process of advanced European integration, the experiment reported here suggests that news coverage may be a very important though often neglected intermediary for understanding public opinion about European issues. Strategic news about the EU evokes political cynicism and activates negative associations with its policies, but this does not automatically affect the level of support for EU policies.