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The writing is on the wall: the limited professionalization of European parliament election campaign posters

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the overtime variation in content and style of European Parliament election campaign posters in the Netherlands and Italy. We put forward several hypotheses that tap the professionalization of political communication against the backdrop of politicization of EU affairs. Our sample comprises 333 posters for a total of 59 parties, which we analyse by quantitative content analysis. With the exception of personalization elements, our results show that professionalization trends are hardly manifest in the extent to which election posters change over time by means of featuring party logos, explicit calls to vote, European symbols, policy issues or Eurosceptic messages. While there are some marked differences on the latter four indicators between challenger and mainstream parties, these differences do not become more or less pronounced over time. Although Italian posters have become slightly more professionalized than Dutch posters, we conclude that European Parliament election posters have remained rather traditional.

KEYWORDS

Content analysis; election campaigns; European Union; political parties; personalization of politics; politicization; professionalization of political communication

Introduction

In the past decades, political communication has become increasingly more professionalized. This is especially true for the communicative behaviour of political elites themselves (e.g. Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Norris 2000; Negrine and Lilleker 2002). Professionalization of political communication can be defined as ‘a process by which the political actors adapt their strategies to changes in society and in the political system as well as to changes in the media system’ (Holtz-Bacha 2002, 23). Past fundamental changes in Western societies include partisan dealignment and increased electoral volatility (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), which has rendered electoral contests much more competitive. Here, one major organizational response of political parties is an increasing concentration of the electoral strategy in the hands of the party leadership (e.g. Katz and Mair 2002). Media system changes include the consecutive introduction of television, the internet and social media (see Norris 2000; Mancini 2013a). In fact, the mediatization of politics is closely related to and partly intertwined with this professionalization process. Strömbäck (2008) argues that media and political actors are increasingly influenced by a media logic, which includes a greater focus on

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persons and personalities and an increase in the use of entertainment features and negativity in communication (e.g. Brants and van Praag 2006; Strömbäck 2008). As a consequence, political parties have professionalized their electoral campaigns by, for example, formalizing skills training and hiring more specialists (Negrine and Lilleker 2002). The outcome of this professionalization is likely to be reflected in the way parties and politicians communicate towards the electorate during election campaigns, both in terms of content and style.

While campaigning tools have diversified considerably over the last few years to also include pseudo-events, micro-targeting, online and social media activities, some more traditional campaign activities are still being employed by political parties, including political ads in traditional media, election posters, leaflets and door-to-door canvassing. This diversification is in itself an indicator of the professionalization of political campaigning (e.g. Norris 2000); and although research on individual campaign means is scarce, studies find that also traditional forms of campaigning have become more professionalized over time in terms of their content and style (e.g. vanHeerde-Hudson 2011; Vliegenthart 2012; but see Scammell and Langer 2006).

We seek to add to this body of literature, and specifically replicate and extend existing research on the overtime professionalization of election posters (Vliegenthart 2012). In doing so, our focus lies on European Parliament (EP) election campaign posters. Election posters are still considered one of the key forms of political communication around the world (Seidman 2008; Dumitrescu 2010; Holtz-Bacha and Johansson 2017), despite the increasing use of other forms of political communication. The benefits of election posters are manifold. In particular, they are relatively fast and cheap to produce and reach a large number of voters (Johansson 2014). Moreover, and importantly, producers are in charge of the communication and do not have to rely on the media to distribute their campaign messages (Holtz-Bacha and Johansson 2017, 7). From a research perspective, they are one of the few campaign tools that have been extensively used for decades, allowing for extensive longitudinal comparisons.

The purpose of this article is to assess the extent to which EP election campaign posters have become more professionalized over time. Although EP elections are characterized as second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) because they are dominated by domestic political considerations, research finds that the campaign activities and expenditures of the candidates are rather comprehensive (Bowler and Farrell 2011) and positively related to electoral success (Sudulich, Wall, and Farrell 2013). In other words, EP election campaigns matter nevertheless. We know little about the degree of professionalization of European election campaigns beyond cross-country comparisons at single points in time (De Vreese 2009; Holtz-Bacha et al. 2012; Moring et al. 2016; for exceptions, see Tenscher and Mykkänen 2013, 2014). The idea of professionalization per definition assumes over-time changes. While European election posters have also been subject to previous research in the context of recent, individual EP elections (Dillenburger, Holtz-Bacha, and Lessinger 2005; Adam et al. 2013; Lessinger and Holtz-Bacha 2016), we take a *longitudinal* perspective over the course of eight European elections between 1979 and 2014. Additionally, we compare the results across two different country contexts, namely the Netherlands and Italy.

While professionalization and related trends such as mediatization have been assumed to be universal phenomena, and traceable in any kind of election campaign throughout Western Europe, EP elections are additionally unique in being considered

exemplary of *politicization* processes in the European Union (EU) (e.g. Giovannini, Polverari, and Seddone 2016, 122; Braun, Hutter, and Kerscher 2016). Politicization is understood as ‘expansion of the scope of conflict *within* the political system’ (Hutter and Grande 2014, 1003, emphasis in the original) and is a consequence of increasing EU authority (De Wilde and Zürn 2012). Any study about the professionalization of EP election campaigns must therefore also take EU politicization processes into account. According to Kriesi (2016) ‘*national* politics are still the crucial arena for the politicization of European integration’ (emphasis in the original). Since national political parties, and especially (Euro-sceptic) challenger parties, are the main drivers of this politicization (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hutter and Grande 2014), we account for the different electoral strategies of challenger and mainstream parties. Our study therefore also makes a novel contribution to the so-called party-centred theory of professionalized campaigning (Gibson and Römmele 2001).

Theory

Vliegthart (2012, 138–140) has identified several characteristics that indicate the level of professionalization of election posters, which he expects to change linearly over time. These comprise increasing consistency in the design of posters, fewer explicit calls to vote, an increase in personalization, a shift away from abstract political values and ideology towards concrete policy issues, and more negative references. These content characteristics reflect the increased importance of visual elements, political leaders’ catch-all appeal of parties, and negativity as a way to convince floating voters, while the declining prominence of ideology and fewer calls to vote stand for a decreased importance and size of an own, stable constituency. Below we explain the extent to which we expect these indicators to also be applicable as part of professionalization trends in the context of EP elections in both the Netherlands and Italy; and extend some of the hypotheses against the backdrop of the increasing politicization of EU affairs as reflected in the different behaviour of challenger and mainstream parties.

Challenger parties are those that have not previously participated in government and tend to be radical, green and single-issue parties; mainstream parties usually belong to traditional party families (De Vries and Hobolt 2012, 251). Challenger parties tend to treat questions related to the EU as a ‘wedge issue’ with the intention to fuel conflict within and between mainstream parties (van de Wardt, De Vries, and Hobolt 2014). Put differently, challenger parties promote European issues strategically in order to sway voters in their favour. And they have become more motivated to do so over time because questions related to the polity have gained prominence among the public as the shift from ‘permissive consensus’ (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970) over ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009) to mass Euro-scepticism in public opinion (Vasilopoulou 2013) over the last decades suggests (see also De Wilde and Zürn 2012). Conversely, Hooghe and Marks (2009, 19) argue that mainstream parties respond to increased contestation by de-emphasizing European issues: initially, there was no need to engage given the lack of public salience – if anything citizens held more negative opinions, while nowadays EU issues have the potential to disunite parties because the EU dimension cuts across the traditional left-right cleavage (see Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). However, these electoral strategies mainly apply to questions concerning the EU polity. EU policies provide for different dynamics: Braun, Hutter

and Kerscher (2016, 575) argue that EU policies do 'not tend to pose the same threat to the internal cohesion of mainstream parties' and thus they emphasize policies instead of the polity in EU elections. We might thus expect diverging professionalization trends with respect to characteristics of EP election posters that relate to the EU polity or policies.

Regarding the design of election posters, the increasing presence of the party logo is one of the key indicators of professionalization in visual campaign communication (Vliegenthart 2012). Willnat, Verghese and Mammadov (2017) contend that in the case of Indian politics party symbols serve as information short-cuts; their visual emphasis allows voters to recognize the respective parties on the ballot. This recognition function may also be at play in European elections. Alongside the general professionalization in the use of party logos, political parties may be particularly inclined to provide their voters with visual cues to ensure the latter recognize that they are the same *national* parties standing in *European* elections, regardless of their electoral strategy, i.e. whether these are mainstream or challenger parties. At the same time, this strategy may also imply that national parties increasingly downplay their affiliation to European party families in light of increasing politicization. In the first few European elections, parties may have considered it beneficial to inform their voters about their political ties on the European stage in the absence of socialization with EU politics. But as European elections become more politicized over time – and as pro-European mainstream parties prefer to play down European issues – mainstream parties may refrain more often from mentioning their European party family. Eurosceptic challenger parties, on the contrary, are often not organized in pre-existing political families, but form their political groups inside the EP on an ad-hoc basis following electoral outcomes. So, they have anyways fewer opportunities to mention any European party family. That is why we have similar expectations for both mainstream and challenger parties:

H1a: Over time, logos of national parties are likely to appear more often on EP election posters of both challenger and mainstream parties.

H1b: Over time, logos of European party families are likely to appear less often on EP election posters of both challenger and mainstream parties.

Another key indicator of professionalization is that election posters decreasingly exhibit explicit calls to take part in elections and/or vote for the respective party (Vliegenthart 2012). For EU elections, we expect that this trend – if present – is particularly driven by mainstream parties, which may be increasingly incentivized to convince voters to vote for them for substantive reasons, be they candidates or issues, amid greater politicization of EU issues (see Braun, Hutter, and Kerscher 2016). Challenger parties, on the contrary, tend to benefit from protest voting in EU elections – and increasingly so over time (see Hix and Marsh 2011, 6), which may in turn motivate them to mobilize these voters by explicitly asking them to vote.

H2a: Over time, direct calls to vote are likely to become *less* numerous in the textual elements of EP election posters of mainstream parties.

H2b: Over time, direct calls to vote are likely to become *more* numerous in the textual elements of EP election posters of challenger parties.

With respect to the substance of election posters, Vliegenthart (2012) argued that the frequency and prominence of political leaders in both visual and textual elements increases over time. This trend can be described as personalization whereby the focus increasingly shifts to individual politicians at the expense of political parties (see Rahat and Sheafer 2007, 65). The introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in 2014 may represent an indicator for the increasing personalization of EP election campaigns (see van der Brug, Gattermann, and de Vreese 2016, 3), although national parties paid little attention to these pan-European lead candidates in their campaign communication (e.g. Braun and Popa 2018). Nonetheless, political parties may still rely on their national candidates during the campaigns, regardless of whether they are mainstream or challenger parties. Although Holtz-Bacha et al. (2012, 80) maintain that ‘personalization is not to be expected in European election campaigns, because the candidates for the European Parliament are usually less well known among voters than those in the national elections’, this does not mean that we may not discern a longitudinal trend towards greater (yet still relatively low) personalization. Media coverage of Dutch politics has become more personalized over time during and outside of election campaigns (e.g. Kriesi 2012; Boumans, Boomgaarden, and Vliegenthart 2013). Similarly, Italian election campaigns are nowadays highly personalized (Campus 2010, 224; Mancini 2013b, 343). Regarding media coverage of European affairs, however, news coverage about the European Commission does not become more personalized over time (Gattermann 2018). Yet, we have no knowledge about any mediated personalization of the EP. Campaigning activities in EP elections might follow the professionalization pattern of national elections more closely than a supposed *supranational* media logic. That is why we still expect that political parties in general increasingly personalize their EP election campaigns over time with respect to emphasizing their own national candidates. Like Vliegenthart (2012), we distinguish between visual and textual elements of posters:

H3a: Over time, national candidates are likely to appear more often in the visual elements of EP election posters of both challenger and mainstream parties.

H3b: Over time, national candidates are likely to appear more prominently in the visual elements of EP election posters of both challenger and mainstream parties.

H3c: Over time, national candidates are likely to be more often mentioned in the textual elements of EP election posters of both challenger and mainstream parties.

Substantial aspects of election posters not only concern candidates, but also policy issues. The EU has increased its authority over the polity and policies tremendously over recent decades (see De Wilde and Zürn 2012). Put differently, the stakes have increased over the years, and politics have become much more substantial instead of symbolic. An indicator of these developments is that the media pay more attention to EU politics in their news coverage, and more regularly so, over time (e.g. Boomgaarden et al. 2010; Gattermann 2013). In line with the professionalization thesis (see Vliegenthart 2012), we would thus generally expect EP election posters increasingly pay more attention to

concrete policy issues at the expense of symbols related to the European project, such as the EU flag or maps of Europe, over time. However, these trends are likely to differ between mainstream and challenger parties. Popa and Dumitrescu (2017) argue that party manifestos for European elections decreasingly use EU symbols after 1999 – due to heightened EU politicization. In another study, they argue that EU symbols may be perceived by voters as cues for more pro-European party positions (Dumitrescu and Popa 2016); an aspect that particularly mainstream parties might want to avoid amid heightened politicization as we argued further above. Challenger parties, on the contrary, may increasingly make use of symbols if they were to illustrate their opposition towards the EU.

H4a: Over time, European symbols are likely to appear *less* often on EP election posters of mainstream parties.

H4b: Over time, European symbols are likely to be referred to *more* frequently on EP election posters of challenger parties.

Likewise, pro-European parties generally refer more often to policy issues in EP election manifestos than Eurosceptic parties (Braun, Hutter, and Kerscher 2016). Amid further EU integration and therewith increasing politicization, we would hence expect that mainstream parties increasingly provide voters with policy alternatives in the context of EU politics over time, while challenger parties tend to focus more on the EU polity (such as through the greater use of symbols).

H5a: Over time, concrete policy issues are likely to be referred to *more* frequently on EP election posters of mainstream parties.

H5b: Over time, concrete policy issues are likely to be referred to *less* frequently on EP election posters of challenger parties.

Vliegenthart (2012) also hypothesized that election posters will feature more negative references over time, although he could not confirm it in the Dutch context. Indeed, de Nooy and Kleinnijenhuis (2015) argue that negative campaigning is less pronounced in the Netherlands because of the multi-party system that often produces multi-party coalition governments; and Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) suggest that negative campaigning occurs less often in the paid media. Yet, this does not imply that EU elections are not contested. In fact, Eurosceptic parties (Belluati 2016) and inter-party contestation over the EU (Schuck et al. 2011) generate considerable media attention during EU election campaigns. Since the EU polity has become increasingly challenged with the rising politicization over EU integration, we expect that outspoken Euroscepticism becomes also more prominent on posters of challenger parties over time. Because mainstream parties tend to keep EU issues off the agenda and have been actively involved in shaping the EU project through the European Council when in government (see Hooghe and Marks 2009, 21), we expect no particular trend for mainstream parties with respect to Eurosceptic elements.

H6: Over time, Eurosceptic elements are likely to appear *more* often on EP election posters of challenger parties compared to mainstream parties.

Thus far, we have argued that indicators of professionalization are likely to be more frequently present over time regardless of the country context. However, that is not to say that the respective elements are comparable in scope in both countries under study or change to a similar degree over time. Both countries are founding members of the EU, parliamentary democracies and characterized by multi-party systems. Politics in Italy have been comparatively less stable with 66 (predominantly) coalition governments since World War II relative to 30 Dutch coalition governments. Initially, Dutch politics were characterized by social and cultural segmentation (e.g. Andeweg and Irwin 2009), whereas Italian politics were highly polarized ideologically (Bartolini and Mair 1990, 186). Garzia (2013, 71–72) underlines the contrast between the Dutch and Italian party systems: while the former has gradually adapted to societal, political and media changes over time, the latter has experienced an abrupt party system breakdown in the early 1990s as parties dissolved and new parties were formed. Likewise, Kriesi (2016) argues that in North-Western European countries it is mainly radical right parties that contest the EU, while in Southern Europe Euroscepticism is mainly channelled through extreme parties on the left of the political spectrum. Thus, if we were to find similar professionalization trends in such different contexts, those patterns are likely also present in other country contexts.

The countries also differ on central aspects related to their media systems, which provide an important context for understanding the extent to which political actors are influenced by media logic (Strömbäck 2008, 234). The Dutch media system has been traditionally described as democratic-corporatist with high levels of political parallelism, particularly in the press, high degrees of professionalization of journalism, strong public service broadcasters, and a moderate degree of state intervention to maintain freedom of the press (Hallin and Mancini 2004). More recently, Brüggemann et al. (2014, 1056) describe the Netherlands as being ‘more liberal than originally conceptualized’. Brants and van Praag (2006, 27), however, argue that in the Netherlands ‘professionalisation was rather late in coming’. Moreover, they find that in the 2003 election campaigns, media logic has not yet been fully embraced and contend that both the strong public service tradition and consensual politics likely undermine further mediatization processes in the future. Also, Vliegthart and Kruikemeier (2017) argue that the use of political marketing strategies in the Netherlands has remained relatively limited.

By contrast, the Italian media system has been conventionally classified as polarized-pluralist media system that exhibits high levels of political polarization and partisanship among journalists as well as in media content and consumption, which has recently taken the form of dramatization of the public sphere (Mancini 2013b). Moreover, Hallin and Mancini (2004) define the polarized-pluralist system as showing low levels of professionalization and low press circulation alongside rather high levels of state intervention. Their conceptualization holds in the recent empirical analysis by Brüggemann et al. (2014). However, since Berlusconi has entered the political stage in 1994, scholars have observed professionalization of political campaigning (Mancini 2007) as well as mediatization of Italian politics (Campus 2010, 226). All told, the extent to which

professionalization is evident in EP election posters is unlikely to be exactly the same in the Netherlands and Italy. This article thus asks:

RQ1: To what extent do the degrees of professionalization elements in EP election posters differ across country?

Data and methods

We collected posters for all eight EP elections between 1979 and 2014. The Dutch delegation to the EP has comprised 25 to 31 seats, the Italian delegation included 72 to 81 seats. On average 6.625 Dutch and 12.25 Italian parties have been elected to the EP, ranging from a minimum of four Dutch parties in 1979 and six Italian parties in 2009 to a maximum of nine Dutch parties in 2014 and 19 Italian parties in 1999 (see Directorate General for Communication, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit 2014). The Dutch sample comprises 156 election posters for a total of 32 parties, which we gathered from the *Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen* (Documentation Centre Dutch Political Parties) at the University of Groningen, which holds a large collection. There is some variation in the number of posters we obtained for each election year, ranging from 6 and 9 posters in 2014 and 1994, respectively, to 45 posters in 2009. For the remaining years, the samples comprise between 11 and 30 posters (see appendix). The Italian sample includes 177 election posters for 27 parties in total. We obtained those from the *Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna* (<http://www.iger.org/manifesti-politici/>), which provides a large public database. Unfortunately, no posters were available for 2009. The lowest number of posters concern 1979 (9) and 2014 (8); we coded between 25 and 44 posters for the remaining years (see appendix). We are aware that both samples are slightly skewed. Hence, for both samples, we created a weigh variable in such a way that if a party had more posters during one election, they together count as one poster.

We employed two Dutch coders and two Italian-speaking coders with an interest in Dutch and Italian politics, respectively. They coded the posters following a comprehensive codebook, which we adapted from Vliegenthart (2012). We list the detailed operationalization of elements in Table A4 in the appendix. We operationalize the national party logo (H1a), European party logo (H1b), explicit call to vote (H2a/H2b), image (H3a) and text (H3c) mentioning a politician, and symbol (H4a/H4b) as 1 if present and 0 if absent. The prominence of a politician (H3b) is measured by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the image is larger than half of the poster and 0 if otherwise. The variables for H5a/H5b and H6 are 1 if concrete policy issues and Eurosceptic messages, respectively, are present in the image, the text or in both parts of posters. Inter-coder reliability tests were conducted on sub-samples of 14 Dutch and 17 Italian posters. We report the standardized Lotus coefficient (Fretwurst 2013) for each item in Table A4. The scores are satisfactory.

To test our hypotheses, we employ logistic regression with the year as a central independent variable in the following analysis (see also Vliegenthart 2012). To test H2, H4, H5 and H6 and to control for the type of party in the remaining models, we add a dummy which is 1 when the respective party is a challenger party and 0 if otherwise. This categorization is based on De Vries and Hobolt (2012, 251), according to whom one central measure of the challenger party concept is that they have never participated in government up until the respective election since 1945. Overall, there are more posters

by challenger parties in the Dutch sample (unweighted sample: 48.08% of all posters; weighted sample: 51.92%) compared to the Italian sample (unweighted sample: 12.99%; weighted sample: 35.11%), which partially reflects the many coalition governments Italy has had. We conduct the regression analyses separately for each country, but compare the presence of each of the characteristics across the two countries.

Results

We begin directly with the statistical analyses to test our hypotheses. [Table 1](#) shows the results from the logistic regressions performed on each dependent variable with the election year as the main predictor – reported as odds ratios (OR): values larger than 1 indicate a positive effect, values lower than 1 specify a negative effect of the election year on the respective dependent variable (shown in the rows). The results are shown separately per country sample. Share is the percentage of posters that contains the respective indicator. The Nagelkerke R-Squared provides information about the model fit for each regression, alongside the percentage of correct predictions. All models include the party dummy; for H2, H4, H5 and H6, we expect differential effects for challenger and mainstream parties and test the interaction effect of challenger party and election year. In those models, the main effect of time reflects the impact for mainstream parties, and the interaction term the deviation from that effect for challenger parties.

Hypothesis H1a stipulated that logos of national parties are likely to appear more often on EP election posters over time. In the Dutch case, the odds ratio is 0.874, which indicates that with every additional year, the odds that European election posters feature a national party logo decrease by 12.6% over time. The use of party logos does not vary over time in Italy, even though they appear more often on Italian (97.8%) than on Dutch (90.4%) election posters ($\chi^2 = 5.10$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Therefore, H1a needs to be rejected. These findings are peculiar as Vliegthart (2012) found support for a similar hypothesis regarding national election posters. Concerning H1b, there is some evidence in the Dutch sample that there is a decrease in the number of references to the logos of European party families (OR = .959, $p < .1$). In the Italian case, the results suggest that European party logos appear more often on EP election posters over time (OR = 1.097, $p < .1$), which contradicts our initial expectations. Interestingly, there are no differences between Dutch and Italian posters as regards the frequency of European party logos being visible on EP election posters. Hence, the results only provide some support for H1b in the Dutch case, but not in the Italian sample.

We also hypothesized that direct calls to vote are likely to become less numerous on EP election posters of mainstream parties (H2a) and more numerous on posters of challenger parties (H2b). We find limited support. Overall, explicit calls to vote are significantly more common on Italian (35.5%) than on Dutch posters (25.6%) ($\chi^2 = 2.72$, $df = 1$, $p < .1$). Regardless of the interaction effects, [Table A6](#) in the [appendix](#) shows that Italian posters in general provide evidence for rising professionalization as the number of references to vote for a particular party are decreasing over time (OR = .947, $p < .05$). In the case of Dutch EP election posters, the trend seems to be reversed. Over time, the odds increase by 5.9% every year that posters contain such a message rather than not having a direct call to vote, and the results suggest this effect to be slightly, though not significantly, stronger for



Table 1. Predicting differential overtime change in characteristics of EP election campaign posters, considering mainstream and challenger parties.

Dependent variable	Dutch sample					Italian sample						
	Share (%)	Election year	Challenger party	Year* challenger party	Nagelkerke R2	Predicted correctly (%)	Share (%)	Election year	Challenger Party	Year* challenger party	Nagelkerke R2	Predicted correctly (%)
National party logo (H1a)	90.4*	.874**(.046)	.068**(.1013)	-/-	.331	89.2	97.8*	.973(.070)	- x	-/-	.008	97.5
European party logo (H1b)	10.3	.959+ (.025)	.367+ (.583)	-/-	.088	89.8	8.6	1.097+ (.049)	.000	-/-	.266	91.2
Calls to vote (H2a +H2b)	25.6+	1.046+ (.026)	.000(.75.886)	1.025(.038)	.113	75.9	35.5+	.924*(.032)	.000(96.976)	1.064(.049)	.116	65.7
Candidate image (H3a)	31.4	1.037*(.016)	.587(.355)	-/-	.061	65.8	40.9	1.048*(.023)	1.044(.452)	-/-	.061	56.8
Prominence candidate (H3b)	37.0***	1.118*(.051)	.088**(.809)	-/-	.378	83.0	81.8***	1.146+ (.076)	.729(.999)	-/-	.205	90.4
Candidate text (H3c)	42.9	.966*(.015)	1.397(.333)	-/-	.050	61.7	45.2	1.003(.022)	2.158+ (.442)	-/-	.044	60.2
EU symbol (H4a +H4b)	28.2	1.018(.025)	20,268 (67,506)	.995(.034)	.054	72.0	30.1	1.008(.030)	.000 (100,410)	1.052(.050)	.038	66.1
Policy presence (H5a+H5b)	11.5+	1.020(.032)	1.504 ^{E+15} (91,049)	.983(.701)	.005	88.3	20.4+	1.083+ (.046)	4.490 ^{E+70} (119,246)	.922(.060)	.122	79.4
Eurocepticism (H6)	23.7*	.987(.042)	557,543,102 (93,844)	.991(.047)	.247	76.1	12.9*	1.070(.057)	.000 (154,791)	1.037(.077)	.191	87.5

Notes: Share is the percentage of posters that contains the respective indicator. For election year, party, and interaction term, cells contain ORs (SE); weighted samples: $n=156$ (Netherlands), $n=93$ (Italy), except for 'prominence candidate' $n=46$ (Netherlands), $n=33$ (Italy); $^+p < .1$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$ (two-tailed tests) – for share, this indicates the existence of significant differences across countries. x No reliable estimation due to limited variation in dependent variable.

challenger parties (Table A6). Overall, this means we reject H2a for both countries and accept H2b only for the Netherlands.

When it comes to the personalization of EP election posters, the longitudinal results are similar for Dutch and Italian posters, controlling for different types of parties: The effects of the election year on the presence of candidates (H3a) and their prominence in the visual elements of EP election posters (H3b) are positive and significant, albeit rather small. Concretely, the odds increase by about 3.7% and 4.8%, respectively, per year that a poster features a candidate's image. H3a can therefore be accepted, and party type does not make a difference. Similarly, these images also become more prominent over time which lends support for H3b in both the Italian (OR = 1.146, $p < .1$) and Dutch sample (OR = 1.118, $p < .05$). However, we find no support for H3c: contrary to our initial assumptions, the election year has a significant negative effect on the presence of candidates in the text of Dutch EP election posters. Every year, the odds decrease by 3.4% that posters mention EP candidates by name; Italian posters, however, do not vary in that respect over time.

Overall, with the exception of H3c in the Italian case, the results are largely in line with Vliegenthart's (2012) findings as regards the visibility and prominence of party leaders on Dutch national election posters. Interestingly, the prominence of candidate images is also significantly greater in the Italian case (81.8%) compared to the Dutch case (37.0%) ($\chi^2 = 15.67$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), which resonates with a recent media study by Gattermann (2018) who finds that Italian newspaper coverage of the European Commission is much more personalized than the respective Dutch newspaper coverage.

The next question is whether voters also learn more about what the election candidates stand for over time in terms of policy issues. We expected that European symbols are likely to appear less often on EP election posters of mainstream parties over time (H4a) and more often on posters of challenger parties (H4b), which is not the case in either country. We therefore reject both hypotheses. Yet, Dutch challenger parties feature EU symbols more often than mainstream parties (OR = 2.246, $p < .05$, Table A6). We also anticipated that concrete policy issues are likely to be referred to more frequently on EP election posters of mainstream parties (H5a) and less frequently so on posters of challenger parties (H5b), but the effects are not statistically significant. Both hypotheses are rejected. This time, Italian challenger parties more often refer to concrete policy issues (OR = 2.843, $p < .05$; Table A6). Policy issues are generally more prominent on Italian posters (20.4%) compared to Dutch posters (11.5%) ($\chi^2 = 3.64$, $df = 1$, $p < .1$).

Turning to our last hypothesis, which stipulated that Eurosceptic elements are likely to appear more often on EP election posters of challenger parties over time (H6), the results indicate that while both Dutch (OR = 10.594, $p < .001$, Table A6) and Italian challenger parties (OR = 3.375, $p < .1$ Table A6) significantly more often than mainstream parties feature Eurosceptic elements, this difference does not increase over time. Thus, H6 is rejected. Generally, Eurosceptic elements are more common on Dutch posters (23.7%) compared to Italian posters (12.9%) ($\chi^2 = 4.31$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), and only the latter become more frequent over time (OR = 1.093, $p < .01$ Table A6).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to contribute to the emerging literature on the professionalization of political communication by studying overtime variation in the content of EP election campaign posters over the course of eight EP elections in the Netherlands and Italy. Our findings are mixed. The only comparable trend that we identified across election campaigns in both countries is the personalization of the visual elements of EP posters, i.e. the frequency and prominence of candidates' images. This finding lends support to the professionalization thesis as regards one of its central components, namely personalization. Since our focus lies on second-order elections, which are thought of to be less prone to being personalized (e.g. Holtz-Bacha et al. 2012; Giebler and Weßels 2013), our analysis provides a conservative test of the personalization thesis. Although the literature on media coverage of election campaigns provides opposing evidence as regards personalization (e.g. Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; Kriesi 2012) and cannot confirm the personalization thesis with regards to EU politicians (Gattermann 2018), our findings suggest that campaigning by national political parties has become more personalized over time – and separately from the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure of 2014.¹ This trend holds for both challenger and mainstream parties.

However, the remaining indicators do not provide sufficient evidence for a professionalization trend in EP election campaign posters that is robust across countries and in line with our differing expectations for challenger and mainstream parties amid heightened politicization of EU affairs. Some poster elements do not vary over time, including references to concrete policy issues and EU symbols. For others, we find mixed effects, which bear further implications. While we could not directly confirm hypotheses related to explicit calls to vote and to Euroscepticism, the results suggest that there are potential contagious effects at play (see Meijers and Rauh 2016). Here, one possible explanation for the general increase in the number of calls to vote on Dutch election posters could be that as challenger parties increase their mobilizing potential mainstream parties follow suit in order not to lose votes. A similar contagious effect might be present in the Italian sample when it comes to the general increase in Euroscepticism on EP election posters over time – even if challenger parties produce more Eurosceptic posters. To systematically test these assumptions, we recommend that future research adds other campaign means to the longitudinal study of the professionalization of EP elections campaigns alongside more political parties. That way, we are able to provide a more differentiated picture of the party-centred theory of professionalized campaigning (Gibson and Römmele 2001) by, for instance, also considering party size, ideology and leadership structure (Tenscher and Mykkänen 2013), alongside actual degrees of Euroscepticism among both challenger and mainstream parties.

Overall and regardless of the type of party, there is more evidence for professionalization trends in Italy compared to the Netherlands: over time, Italian posters for the EP elections show the logos of European party families more often (but not of national parties), less frequently feature explicit calls to vote and also become more negative towards the EU. Dutch election posters, on the other hand, decreasingly provide logos of national parties and candidate names on the posters, while the number of explicit calls to vote increase over time. These results have a clear implication: with the exception of personalization elements, EP election campaign posters did not show robust signs of

professionalization and this trend is thus only to a very limited extent reflected in this particular campaign tool. Despite significant campaigns efforts by EP candidates (Bowler and Farrell 2011; Sudulich, Wall, and Farrell 2013), expenditures have not yielded more professional election posters over time. Given that professionalization can have negative consequences such as further dealignment (see Holtz-Bacha 2002, 26), the absence thereof may not necessarily be a threat to the democratic quality of EP elections. However, lack of professionalization in EP election campaigning may provide voters with the impression that political parties incite the second-order phenomenon (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Our results deviate from Vliegenthart's study (2012) as he found more evidence for professionalization of national election posters in the Netherlands than the findings of our study suggest; combined, these findings resonate well Tenscher and Mykkänen (2014) who showed that professionalization in general tends to be higher in national compared to EP elections in Germany and to a lesser degree also in Finland.

It remains to be seen whether this lack of professionalization elements in EP election posters is also evident in other countries, and whether personalization – as the only confirmed indicator of professionalization – in party campaigning replicates across the EU. Previous research has also identified considerable variation in the degrees of general professionalization of EP election campaigns (e.g. De Vreese 2009; Tenscher and Mykkänen 2013). Additional time-variant factors may be at play, particularly with a view to politicization of EU affairs, such as public opinion towards the EU (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries 2016), media salience of European affairs (e.g. Boomgaarden et al. 2010) and inter-party polarization over the EU (e.g. De Vreese 2009; Braun, Hutter, and Kersch 2016), which have the potential to influence the campaign context and therefore also how mainstream and challenger parties communicate with the electorate via their election posters. While we may have captured linear trends with our time variable, our sample is rather small with only 15 campaign contexts considered to assess these possible mechanisms systematically. Future research should therefore expand the country selection to determine the extent to which such systemic factors play a role for longitudinal variation in party campaigns in European elections.

Note

1. We replicated all our analyses excluding the 2014 campaign. Results are highly similar, with the exception of a non-significant (instead of significant) positive effect of challenger parties on Euroscepticism in Italy.

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Appendix

Table A1. Number of campaign posters per country by election year.

	Netherlands		Italy	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1979	30	19.2	9	5.1
1984	15	9.6	27	15.3
1989	14	9.0	25	14.1
1994	9	5.8	22	12.4
1999	11	7.1	42	23.7
2004	26	16.7	44	24.9
2009	45	28.8	0	0.0
2014	6	3.8	8	4.5
Total	156	100.0	177	100.0

**Table A2.** Number of campaign posters by a party in the Netherlands.

Party	Frequency	Percent
A200 Protest	1	0.6
CDA	29	18.6
Centrum Democraten	1	0.6
Christen Unie	1	0.6
CPN	11	7.1
D66	11	7.1
De groenen	2	1.3
Democratisch Europa	1	0.6
Een Betere Toekomst	1	0.6
Europa Transparant	1	0.6
Europees Verkiezers Platform Nederland	1	0.6
God Met Ons	2	1.3
GPV	2	1.3
Groen Progressief Akkoord	6	3.8
GroenLinks	11	7.1
IDE	1	0.6
Leefbaar Europa	1	0.6
LPF	4	2.6
Newropeans	2	1.3
PEP	1	0.6
PPR	1	0.6
PSP	4	2.6
PvdA	14	9.0
PvdD	4	2.6
PVV	1	0.6
Respect.nu	1	0.6
SGP	1	0.6
SGP, RPF, GPV	2	1.3
Solidara	1	0.6
SP	12	7.7
VVD	25	16.0
Total	156	100.0

Table A3. Number of campaign posters by a party in Italy.

Party	Frequency	Percent
Alleanza Nazionale	20	11.3
CCD Democratici di Centro	6	3.4
Democratici di Sinistra	2	1.1
Democrazia Proletaria	2	1.1
Federazione dei Verdi	5	2.8
Forza Italia	25	14.1
Fronte Nazionale	1	0.6
I Democratici	2	1.1
I Radicali/Lista Emma Bonino	1	0.6
Indepedent	1	0.6
Italia dei Valori	3	1.7
L'Altra Europa con Tsipras	1	0.6
Lega Nord	2	1.1
Lista Verdi	2	1.1
Movimento Cinque Stelle	4	2.3
Movimento Politico Occidentale	1	0.6
Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore	1	0.6
NCD-UDC	1	0.6
Partito Comunista Italiano	46	26.0
Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (PdCI)	14	7.9
Partito Democratico	2	1.1
Partito Democratico della Sinistra	7	4.0
Partito Socialista (PSI)	9	5.1
Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano	1	0.6
PDUP (per il comunismo)	1	0.6
Progressisti (pds)	1	0.6
Uniti nell'Ulivo	16	9.0
Total	177	100.0

Table A4. Operationalization of the hypotheses and standardized Lotus coefficients.

Hypothesis	Operationalization	Lotus	
		NL	IT
H1a	Does the poster contain a party logo? The answer to this question is also 'yes' if the name of the party is portrayed in a stylized manner.	1	1
H1b	Does the poster contain the logo of the respective European party family? The answer to this question is also 'yes' if the name of the party is portrayed in a stylized manner.	0.79	1
H2a, H2b	Does the text on the poster contain an explicit call to vote in the respective European Parliament election?	0.89	0.91
H3a	Does the poster contain an image of a politician?	1	1
H3b	If the poster contains an image of a politician, which part of the poster is used for the image? ^a	0.90	1
H3c	Does the text on the poster refer to a politician, i.e. is the name of a politician provided?	1	0.82
H4a, H4b	Does the image in the poster refer to the European Union or Europe by using a symbol or any other abstract image (e.g. the European flag, a map of Europe)?	1	0.91
H5a, H5b	Does the image on the poster refer to concrete policy issues? Code yes, if the image is not simply about a candidate or not simply showing an EU symbol, but is connected to a policy such as education, security, data protection, immigration, etc.	1	0.91
	Does the text on the poster refer to concrete policy issues?	0.79	0.82
H6a, H6b	In general, does the image convey a Eurosceptic message towards the EU, Europe or European institutions? Or, is the image rather positive towards the EU, Europe or European institutions? ^b	1	1
	In general, does the text convey a Eurosceptic message towards the EU, Europe or European institutions? Or, is the text rather euphoric about the EU, Europe or European institutions? ^b	0.89	0.82

Notes: Most coding instructions had yes/no response categories, except for the following: ^a response categories range from 'Less than a quarter of the poster' to 'More than three quarters of the poster (to full size)'; this variable has been recoded into 1 – 'more than half' and 0 – 'less than half'; ^b response categories comprise 1 – 'rather Eurosceptic', 2 – 'Rather positive towards EU/Europe', 3 – 'Neutral (provided that there is a reference to the EU/Europe)', and 4 – 'Cannot say/not relevant'; these variables have been recoded into 1-'rather Eurosceptic' and 0 – 'rather positive or neutral/not relevant'. For both ^a and ^b we report the standardized Lotus coefficients for the recoded items.

Table A5. Descriptive statistics.

	Dutch sample			Italian sample		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
National party logo	156	.9067	.29177	93	.9750	.15697
European party logo	156	.1017	.30328	93	.0875	.28410
Calls to vote	156	.2556	.43761	93	.3590	.48229
Candidate image	156	.3170	.46682	93	.4067	.49389
Prominence candidate	46	.3764	.48985	32	.8219	.38866
Candidate text	156	.4318	.49692	93	.4480	.49998
EU symbol	156	.2796	.45025	93	.3020	.46160
Policy presence	156	.1167	.32205	93	.2056	.40634
Euroscepticism	156	.2391	.42794	93	.1250	.33251

Note: the range for all variables is 0–1 in both samples; N corresponds to weighted data.



Table A6. Predicting overtime change in characteristics of EP election campaign posters.

Dependent variable	Dutch sample				Italian sample			
	Share (%)	Election year	Challenger party	R2	Share (%)	Election year	Challenger Party	R2
Calls to vote (H2)	25.6+	1.059*(.019)	1.519(.387)	.109	35.5+	.947*(.024)	1.668(.463)	.093
EU symbol (H4)	28.2	1.015(.017)	2.246*(.374)	.054	30.1	1.027(.024)	1.187(.472)	.022
Policy presence (H5)	11.5+	1.012(.023)	1.021(.502)	.003	20.4+	1.036(.028)	2.834*(.530)	.091
Euroscepticism (H6)	23.7*	.981(.019)	10.594***(.535)	.247	12.9*	1.093*(.038)	3.375+ (.672)	.187

Notes: Share is the percentage of posters that contains the respective indicator. For election year and party, cells contain ORs (SE); weighted samples: $n = 156$ (Netherlands), $n = 93$ (Italy); $^+p < .1$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$ (two-tailed tests) – for share, this indicates the existence of significant differences across countries.