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Who's afraid of conflict?

How conflict framing in campaign news mobilizes voters

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Abstract

It is commonly acknowledged that the news media can both mobilize and demobilize voters, depending on the exact content of media coverage. Unfortunately, research on these effects has mostly focused on either the one or the other effect in isolation. In this article we test, simultaneously, for both the demobilizing effect of strategy framing as well as for the mobilizing effect of conflict framing within the context of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. In a unique multi-method and comparative cross-national study design we combine a media content analysis (N=52,009) with data from a two-wave panel survey conducted in 21 countries (N=32,411). Consistent with expectations, conflict framing in campaign news coverage mobilized voters to turn out to vote, whereas strategy framing or mere exposure to news did not have any impact. The effect of conflict news was moderated by the degree of general EU favorability at the contextual level, i.e. conflict framing was *more* mobilizing in countries in which the EU is evaluated more positively.

Keywords: news framing, conflict, turnout, electoral mobilization, election campaigns, media content analysis, panel survey.

Introduction

The scholarly and public discussion about the role of the media during elections is heated and ongoing. In the United States much attention has been paid to the role of political advertising in either mobilizing or demobilizing the electorate (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Brooks 2006; Finkel and Geer 1998; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Geer 2006; Goldstein and Freedman 1999, 2002). In other parts of the world where advertising, due to legal restrictions, plays a much less prominent role, most attention has been devoted to the role of the news media. Also in this case, the evidence is mixed with some studies suggesting a mobilizing role of the news media (e.g., Norris 2000; Newton 2002) and others reporting a mixed pattern distinguishing, for example, mobilizing effects of exposure to TV news from demobilizing effects of exposure to other TV content (Newton 1999) or of public broadcasting news from private TV news (Aarts and Semetko 2003).

Previous research has identified different content features of news media coverage with the potential to either mobilize or demobilize citizens in electoral contexts. What media content may then be 'mobilizing'? News focusing on disagreement, conflict and differences of opinion between political actors can provide such mobilizing information because it shows that there is something at stake and something to choose from (de Vreese 2005). News focusing on the electoral strategies and the motivations and calculative actions of politicians can provide demobilizing electorate since voters become cynical vis-à-vis politics (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

In extant research, the processes of mobilization and demobilization have typically been studied separately, focusing either on the negative electoral effects of strategy news or the potential of conflict news. This makes it very hard to draw

Who's afraid of conflict?

substantial conclusions about the role of the news media. In the present study we focus on the role of conflict framing in election campaign news coverage and assess its potentially mobilizing effect on voters. We contrast this effect with the role of strategy news framing in election news and simultaneously assess the potentially demobilizing effect on voters.

In the present study we investigate the effect of news media coverage of the election on individual turnout. More specifically, we are interested in the role of news coverage in the mobilization of the electorate over the course of the campaign. To accomplish this, we apply a research design in which we combine a media content analysis of campaign news coverage with panel survey data. Thereby, we focus on the impact of campaign news coverage framed in terms of conflict or strategy on the mobilization of voters for which we outline our expectations below. Since the *campaign context* may also vary from one case to the next, we test our expectations in a range of contexts. Since we are particularly interested in the impact of specific content characteristics of campaign news coverage we need to also pay attention to the country context in which such content is received and expect the same content to have different effects in different contexts, as further specified below. We conduct our study in a cross-national comparative context so as to gain more analytical leverage and insights into the contextual impact.

Study context: The 2009 European Parliamentary Elections

The context for this study is provided by the 2009 elections for the European Parliament (EP) which are typically classified as second-order elections, i.e. elections in which not much is at stake in the eyes of both political elites as well as citizens which is reflected in low campaign involvement and equally low turnout rates

Who's afraid of conflict?

(Franklin, 2001). In recent years the EU has been facing widespread public scepticism (Boomgaarden et al. 2011), key referendums on issues of further EU integration have failed as a result of this (Lubbers, 2008; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008) and elite contestation over the issue of Europe is increasing and attitudes towards the EU become increasingly important for voters not only in European elections and referendums (Hobolt, 2009) but even in national elections given the increasing power of the EU and its relevance for domestic legislation and politics (de Vries 2007).

However, despite these trends, turnout in the most recent 2009 EP election hit another all-time record low with only 43% of European citizens casting their vote. Nevertheless, part of the story is that turnout varied considerably across countries, reaching from participation rates above 90% (Luxembourg and Belgium) in countries in which voting is obligatory, to rates above 70% (Malta) or 60% (Italy) and all the way down to below 20% (Slovakia) or just above 20% (Lithuania and Poland). Previous research suggests that the overall turnout decline in EP elections may not necessarily be indicative of a general decrease in interest and engagement on side of the citizens but is also a result of the gradual enlargement of the European Union. The boost in turnout which countries commonly show at their first EP election and its absence at subsequent elections partially accounts for the overall turnout decline over time (Franklin 2004).¹ Furthermore, previous research has pointed to the fact that even when political culture and structural features are considered, citizens of different countries turn out at different rates, suggesting that national differences remain regarding the perceived importance of EP elections. Recently, it was called for more studies of the role of elite cues regarding the elections, e.g. the influence of election news coverage in the national print and broadcast media across countries on voter turnout (Flickinger and Studlar, 2007).

Who's afraid of conflict?

The vast majority of European citizens receive most of their information about the EU and EP elections from traditional news media such as television news and newspapers (e.g., Eurobarometer 55-64). Previous research has shown that the way the media present the EU affects how people think of it, i.e. their support regarding specific EU policies (Maier and Rittberger 2008; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; Lecheler & de Vreese 2010), their perceptions of how much their own country has benefited from EU membership (Vliegenthart et al. 2008) and also if and what to vote for in EU referendums or EP elections (de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007; Hobolt 2009; Schuck and de Vreese 2008). Thus, the extent to which the EU is present in the news can affect public opinion formation and electoral behaviour (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). Therefore, as most of what citizens learn about an EP election and the campaign stems from the media (Bennett and Entman 2001), it is relevant to ask what role the news media play in either mobilizing or de-mobilizing the electorate.

Theoretical framework

How conflict news framing mobilizes

News about politics is in general framed in terms of conflict (McManus 1994; Patterson 1993). Previous research has pointed to the distinctively high news value of stories that focus on conflict between political actors (Price 1989). News media tend to focus on stories where there is conflict – where two sides can be pitted against one another (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Thus, the presence of conflict is an essential criterion for a story to make it into the news, not only because it ‘sells’, but also to meet professional standards of balanced reporting (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; McManus 1994). Conflict is also inherent to politics. It is embodied in political reasoning (Lupia, McCobbins, and Popkin 2000) and in democratic theory conflict is

Who's afraid of conflict?

seen as an essential part of democratic decision-making (e.g., Sartori 1987).

Schattschneider (1960, p. 135) defined democracy as 'a competitive political system' with elites defining policy options so that citizens can make a choice: 'conflict, competition, organization, leadership and responsibility are the ingredients of a working definition of democracy'.

Conflict results from the competition of different ideas and, typically, precedes consensus about a problem. Thus, if citizens realize that it is part of democratic decision-making, conflict may, in principle, have positive effects on citizens' political attitudes and participation (de Vreese and Tobiasen 2007). Citizens may, for example, come to the conclusion that democracy functions well, may be activated to talk about political affairs or may feel a greater incentive to vote. Min (2004) adds a nuance to this by spelling out the potentially different role of different types of conflict, whereby conflict about substantive issues has a positive impact on mobilization whereas conflict about persons has less or more of the opposite effect.

Most research has focused on the question what impact conflict framing can have on political attitudes and political behavior. In the current study we expect conflict framing in the news to be generally mobilizing, however, we also consider the role of country characteristics as a conditioning factor. Recent research has shown country characteristics to matter for the degree to which EP election news is framed in terms of conflict. In countries, which are net contributors to the EU (i.e. countries that pay more to the EU budget than they receive) the degree of conflict framing in news coverage is higher (Schuck et al., 2011a). Furthermore, we also know that there is more conflict framing in EP election news coverage in countries in which support for the EU is low (Schuck et al., 2011b). Given that the media portrayal of the EU generally is more negative than positive (de Vreese, 2005) previous research has

Who's afraid of conflict?

shown that if the EU is portrayed in a positive light this carries the potential to be especially effective on audiences, and more so than negative coverage, given the fact that in a context in which most news is negative, positive news sticks out more and draws more attention (Boomgaarden, 2008; Vliegenthart et al., 2008). At the same time we know that the media portrayal of the EU, while negative on average, shows considerable variation across countries and is shifting from consistently negative to a more mixed pattern of predominantly negative and positive coverage, now being positive on average in almost as many countries (i.e. 13) as it is negative in (i.e. 14) (Schuck et al., 2011). In the current study we apply and further extend the context argument and put it to an empirical test, suggesting that conflict framing is especially effective in terms of mobilization in country contexts in which the EU is portrayed more favorably and conflict over the EU is less widespread and less typical in media coverage, because it sticks out more, and less so in countries in which conflict is the norm and the EU is seen less favorably. Thus, in the present study we expect conflict framing to have more of a mobilizing effect on voters in countries in which baseline levels of EU favorability in media coverage are higher compared to countries in which levels of EU favorability are lower. The current study context, the 2009 EP elections, provides a unique case of varying degrees of EU favorability across countries to test our expectations.

How strategy news framing demobilizes

A second feature of campaign news coverage that received ample attention relates to mediated information about strategic behaviors of political actors. Developments towards increasing professionalization of election campaigns (e.g., Norris 2000) and the application of advanced political marketing strategies in political parties'

Who's afraid of conflict?

campaigning efforts (e.g., Kavanagh 1995) have led to increasing attention by journalists for what is going on 'behind the campaign' (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). News relying on such a *strategy frame* when covering election campaigns emphasizes considerations relating to how political actors present a certain issue or event and the style of such presentation. It furthermore relates to the description of specific actions of political actors to improve their position in the public eye. In sum, strategic news is described as stressing the strategies, performances, styles and tactics of campaigning necessary to for a candidate or party to obtain and remain in a favorable position (Esser and D'Angelo 2006; Jamieson 1992).

Such strategic news framing appears to be a standard ingredient of election coverage nowadays, to the disadvantage of substantial issue news coverage (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar et al. 2004). This observation applies to the US context, but has also been made – among others – for Germany (Esser and Hemmer 2008), the UK (Scammell and Semetko 2008), or the Netherlands (Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008). Exposure to this strategy framing in the media has often been blamed to contribute to public cynicism and, consequently, to demobilize voters (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997). However, findings are mixed and some stress the contingency of the effect of strategy framing on cynicism (Valentino et al. 2001), others argued that while strategy framing might increase public cynicism this does not necessarily result in lower turnout (de Vreese and Semetko 2002; de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2008). In the current study we test the impact of conflict and strategy framing on voter mobilization over the course of a campaign simultaneously, assuming that while conflict framing has the potential to mobilize voters, strategy framing is more likely to demobilize or at least not mobilize voters to the same extent as conflict framing. In the current study we do not put forward a context hypothesis for strategy framing,

Who's afraid of conflict?

given that the literature is less clear regarding the supposed (de-)mobilizing effect of this kind of coverage and given that in a recent study variation in the degree of strategy framing in news coverage across countries - different to conflict framing - could not be explained by a set of possible predictors pertaining to time, media or political considerations (Schuck et al., 2011). This makes us cautious to put forward expectations regarding contextual factors potentially conditioning the effect of strategy framing with regard to (de-)mobilization and lets us concentrate on the main question if strategy framing has an effect at all and to begin with.

Overall, the fact that EP elections are held at the same time in several countries provides us with comparative leverage to test our competing hypotheses about the impact of exposure to different types of news, in different political contexts. Based on the above considerations, we put forward the following expectations in the present study:

(H1a): *Exposure to campaign news coverage framed in terms of conflict mobilizes voters to turn out to vote.*

(H1b): *Exposure to campaign news coverage framed in terms of strategy demobilizes voters to turn out to vote.*

(H2): *Campaign news coverage framed in terms of conflict has more of a mobilizing effect on voters in contexts in which general EU favorability is higher than in contexts in which general EU favorability is lower.*

Data & Methods

A multi-method research design including a content analysis and a two-wave panel survey was employed, first, to investigate how the news media in the different EU

Who's afraid of conflict?

member states have covered the campaign, and second, to assess the impact of such coverage on the decision of voters to turn out to vote.

This design enables us to assess the effect of campaign news more specifically by building in the results from our media content analysis with regard to the media framing of election coverage directly in specific news outlets into our measure of individual news exposure to those same news outlets in our panel survey analysis. For this, we analyse the media content of exactly those specific media outlets which are also included in our panel study design and for which respondents report their individual exposure. Building in actual media content characteristics into individual exposure measures yields a more accurate and realistic account of modelling media effects. In the current study it enables us to compare the impact of both conflict and strategy framing with each other as well as with general news exposure.

What is furthermore unique about our design is that it includes an in-depth content analysis of campaign coverage in 21 of the 27 EU member states and combines it with panel survey data in the same 21 countries, allowing for a multi-level analysis assessing the impact of both individual-level and country-level variables as well as their cross-level interaction on the mobilization of voters in the 2009 EP elections across Europe in one single study.

Media content analysis

To empirically test our expectations and collect information to build into our weighted measure of news exposure in the analysis of our panel data, we rely on a large scale media content analysis. This content analysis was carried out within the framework of PIREDEU (www.piredeu.eu), Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral

Who's afraid of conflict?

Democracy in the European Union. PIREDEU is funded by the European Union's FP 7 program (for more details see data documentation report in Schuck et al. 2010).

Sample: The content analysis was carried out on a sample of national news media coverage in all 27 EU member states.ⁱⁱ In each country we include the main national evening news broadcasts of the most widely watched public and commercial television stations. We also include two 'quality' (i.e. broadsheet) and one tabloid newspaper from each country. Our overall television sample consists of 58 TV networks and our overall newspaper sample consists of 84 different newspapers.

Period of study: The content analysis was conducted for news items published or broadcast within the three weeks running up to the election. Since election days varied across countries also the coding period varied from e.g. May 14th-June 4th for some countries up to May 17th – June 7th for others.

Data collection: For television news coverage, all news items have been coded; for newspapers, all news items on the title page and on one randomly selected page as well as all stories pertaining particularly to the EU and/or the EU election on any other page of the newspaper have been coded.ⁱⁱⁱ In total, 52,009 news stories have been coded in all 27 EU-member countries, 19,996 of these news stories dealt specifically with the EU of which 10,978 news stories dealt specifically with the EU election.^{iv} The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

Coding procedure: Coding was conducted by a total of 58 coders at two locations, the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and the University of Exeter (UK). Coders were trained and supervised and the coder training included repeated tests of intercoder-reliability which yielded satisfactory results (reported below).^v

Measures

Who's afraid of conflict?

Conflict framing. A conflict frame was considered to be present in a given news story when the story mentioned either (1) two or more sides of a problem or issue; (2) any conflict or disagreement; (3) a personal attack between two or more actors; or (4) an actor's reproaching or blaming another. These four items together formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = .63), while Krippendorff's alpha's for intercoder reliability was = .57.

Strategy framing. A strategy frame was considered to be present when a given news story mentioned that there was a reference to 'winners or losers' regarding the presumed outcome of the elections in the news item (Krippendorff's alpha = .73).

Panel survey

The data for this study come from the 2009 European Election Campaign Study.^{vi} A two-wave panel survey was carried out in 21 European Union member states.^{vii} Respondents were interviewed about one month prior to the EP elections and immediately afterwards. Fieldwork dates were 6-18th of May^{viii} and 8-19th of June^{ix} 2009. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI).

Country sample: The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS Opinion in Brussels and involved TNS subsidiaries in each country. All subsidiaries comply with ESOMAR guidelines for survey research. A total of 32,411 respondents participated in wave one and 22,806 respondents participated in wave two.^x On average, 1,086 respondents per country completed the questionnaires of both waves, varying from 1,001 in Austria to 2,000 in Belgium.^{xi} In each country, a sample was drawn from TNS databases. These databases rely on multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. Each database consists of between

Who's afraid of conflict?

3,600 (Slovakia) and 339,000 (the UK) individuals. Quotas (on age, gender, and education) were enforced in sampling from the database. The average response rate was 31% in wave 1 and the re-contact rate was on average 80% in wave 2.^{xii} The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age and education compared to census data. As we are mostly interested in the underlying relationships between variables, we consider the deviations in the sample vis-à-vis the adult population less problematic and we exert appropriate caution when making inferences about absolute values.^{xiii}

Questionnaire and translations: The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into the different national languages. It was then translated back into English as an additional check of the accuracy of the translations. The translation was supervised by the research team and it was carried out by TNS (which also executes and translates the Eurobarometer surveys). Irregularities and problems arising from this process were resolved by deliberation. For more information, see de Vreese et al., 2010.

Measures:

The specific wording of all items and the descriptives for the variables listed below can be found in Appendix A. We specified multilevel regression models with actual turnout (wave 2) as the dependent variable. In our model we focused on *change* between our panel waves. We controlled for turnout intention at time 1 and assessed the impact of individual news exposure as well as country-level variables on actual turnout.

Our key dependent variable in the present study is turnout. There is a well-known turnout bias in studies that rely on self-reported measures (e.g., Burden 2005; Granberg and Holmberg 1991). As Duff et al. (2007) report, providing respondents

Who's afraid of conflict?

with socially acceptable excuses for not voting can tackle this problem and reduce over-reporting. The turnout question we are applying in our study follows the NES and has shown to reduce over-reporting by as much as 8% (Duff et al., 2007).

As we are interested in individual-level *change* between turnout intention and actual turnout in between panel waves and the effect of campaign news coverage, i.e. voter mobilization, we in the following focus on the description and results for our dynamic change model (wave 2).

Turnout change model (wave 2)

Dependent variable

Respondents were asked to indicate if they voted in the election and presented with different answering options to choose from in case they did not cast their vote (see Duffy et al. 2007) which were later collapsed into one category for the analysis (1-voted, 0-did not vote).

Independent variables

Control variables

In order to model *change* between our two panel waves, we use a lagged term for turnout intention at wave one in our model (see Markus [1979] for discussion of the use of lagged specifications in panel data). This enables us to control for the level of initial turnout intention and to assess individual change during the period between the two panel waves. Furthermore, we control for age, gender and education (see Appendix A for measurement and descriptives). Additionally, we control at the country level for whether or not voting is compulsory (Flickinger and Studlar 2007; Franklin 2001, 2004).^{xiv}

News exposure (individual level):

Who's afraid of conflict?

The core independent variable in this study is news exposure. Respondents indicated for each news outlet that was also included in our media content analysis for their respective country how many days per week they used any of these in an average week. For the unweighted general news exposure measure we built a simple additive exposure index (number of days per week per outlet added up and divided by number of outlets). For the conflict news measure we build a weighted additive index by weighing the individual exposure to each news outlet by the degree of conflict framing in each respective outlet. For the strategy framing we build another weighted additive index by weighing the individual exposure to each news outlet by the degree of strategy framing (see Appendix A for descriptives and individual formulas).

EU favorability (country level): The general favorability towards the EU in a certain country is based on the tone towards EU in all analyzed media outlets. Tone is measured at the level of the news item and ranges from -2 (very unfavorable) to +2 (very favorable). All news items mentioning the EU are taken into consideration and their mean tone towards the EU is used. Krippendorff's alpha = .65.^{xv}

Data analysis

Our dataset has a multilevel structure, with individual respondents nested in countries. Our *change* model (wave 2) has actual turnout as the dependent variable. Since this variable is binary, we conduct three separate multilevel logistic regressions, in which we control for turnout intention at time 1, thus assessing *change* in between the two panel waves. Furthermore, we include socio-demographics and compulsory voting as additional controls in these models and the news exposure variable as our key independent variable. As we are comparing the impact of different aspects of news consumption (mere exposure, conflict framing and strategy framing), we first present

Who's afraid of conflict?

fixed-effects models demonstrating the main effect of our different news measures on turnout. In a second step, we consider possible cross-level interactions between our conflict news variable and 'EU favorability' as our country-level variable in a random-effects model.

Results

As Figure 1 illustrates, the degree of conflict framing in campaign news coverage varies across countries and has been of considerable prominence in campaign news coverage ($M=.28$, $SD=.29$). Averaging the degree of conflict framing per country (i.e. including all news outlets in a country) yields high scores for France ($M=.47$, $SD=.35$), Austria ($M=.45$, $SD=.28$), and Malta ($M=.45$, $SD=.34$), followed by Latvia ($M=.37$, $SD=.30$), Romania ($M=.37$, $SD=.34$), and Italy ($M=.36$, $SD=.30$). Conflict framing was least prominent in Lithuania ($M=.05$, $SD=.16$), Germany ($M=.13$, $SD=.20$), Sweden ($M=.15$, $SD=.20$), Estonia ($M=.17$, $SD=.25$), and Ireland ($M=.19$, $SD=.27$). In our analysis later on, we will build in the outlet-specific conflict framing scores of our media content analysis into our survey measure of individual news exposure in order to assess the impact of conflict and strategy framing on the (de-)mobilization of voters.

--- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

Next, we turn to our content analysis findings regarding the degree of strategy framing in campaign news coverage. In general terms, as Figure 2 illustrates, strategy framing appears to be less present in campaign news coverage ($M=.06$, $SD=.24$) compared to conflict framing. However, also the degree of strategy framing shows considerable cross-country variation reaching from $M=.20$ ($SD=.41$) in Romania,

Who's afraid of conflict?

$M=.14$ ($SD=.35$) in the Czech Republic and $M=.13$ ($SD=.34$) in Belgium to scores as low as $M=.00$ ($SD=.00$) in Luxembourg, $M=.01$ ($SD=.12$) in Malta, or $M=.02$ ($SD=.14$) in Lithuania.

--- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

Turnout change model (wave 2)

Table 1 presents the results for a model that includes different news variables – general news exposure, conflict framing and strategy framing. As this model shows, exposure to conflict news has a positive effect on turnout. These findings yield support for Hypothesis 1a: the more an individual is exposed to news that is framed in terms of conflict, the more likely it is that (s)he will turn out to vote. Furthermore, the model also shows that mere news exposure has no effect and the effect of strategy news is in the expected negative direction but not significant. These results do not provide support for Hypothesis 1b: strategy framing has no discernable impact on voter mobilization. This is in line with recent studies casting doubt that strategy framing demobilizes citizens in elections (de Vreese & Semetko, 2006).

In all models, the intention to turn out as reported in wave 1 has a strong influence. Additionally, we find that males, higher educated and older people are more likely to turn out. Not surprisingly, respondents living in countries where voting is compulsory are more likely to actually vote.

--- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

We now turn to the question whether the effect of conflict framing differs across countries. We expect it to vary across countries with different degrees of EU favorability. The first model presented in Table 2 resembles the second model in

Who's afraid of conflict?

Table 1, but includes EU favorability as an additional independent variable. In model 2, we estimate the same model using a random-effects instead of a fixed-effects specification. This means that we allow conflict framing to vary across countries. Results are largely similar to the previous model and we find that there is indeed significant variation of the effect of conflict framing across countries, though this variation is small. The final model in Table 2 provides a test for our second hypothesis: does the effect of conflict framing indeed depend upon the degree of EU favorability in a country?

--- TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

The results support the hypothesis: the positive interaction term indicates that the higher the degree of EU favorability in a country, the higher the impact of conflict framing on mobilizing citizens to turn out to vote will be. The effect is significant at a .05-level and also the model improvement is significant. Additionally, the variance in the effect of conflict framing across countries is now not significantly different from zero anymore. Figure 3 provides insight in predicted probabilities for different levels of conflict framing (ranging from its minimum to its maximum) and EU favorability (lowest, mean, highest).

--- FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE ---

The figure illustrates the considerable differences in the mobilization of citizens to turn out to vote in the elections for respondents who are exposed to more or less favorable news about Europe. – with those living in countries in which degrees of EU favorability are highest showing the lowest turnout and those living in countries in which degrees of EU favorability are lowest showing the highest turnout. This gap

Who's afraid of conflict?

closes when exposure to conflict framing increases, meaning that conflict framing indeed has a mobilizing effect on voters in countries in which degrees of EU favorability are highest, and thus conflict about Europe is less widespread at the baseline, and more so than in countries in which degrees of EU favorability are at lower levels and conflict about Europe is the norm rather than the exception.

Conclusion

The present study investigates the impact of campaign news coverage on turnout in the 2009 EP elections. We demonstrate that exposure to conflict framing in the news mobilized voters to turn out and vote in these elections and that this effect is more pronounced in countries in which the baseline level of EU favorability is comparatively high. In such country contexts conflict framing in the news is less common (Schuck et al., 2011) and exposure to such coverage shows to have more of an impact and more potential to mobilize voters to turn out to vote in the elections compared to countries in which levels of favorability are already low and conflict is more widespread.

Our study carries important implications, both with regard to the discussion about the alleged democratic deficit of the EU and the growing detachment of European citizens from the Union as well as concerning the more normative question regarding the function and role of political conflict and controversy in election campaigns. Our findings suggest that conflict framing in the news might be part of the solution rather than the problem. Conflict mobilizes and contributes to the politicization of EP elections, which have formerly been seen as a mere second-order contest, ruled by domestic considerations. It has the potential to flag an election as salient to voters, indicating that there is something at stake. Particularly, in political

Who's afraid of conflict?

systems with multilevel governance, such as the EU, where citizens feel further removed from politics and political decision-making, we argue, from a normative viewpoint, conflict is good for democracy and can have positive effects on the participation of citizens as demonstrated in this study. However, who benefits from such focus on conflict and voter mobilization, e.g. Euroskeptic parties, and thus what are the concrete outcomes of such mobilization in substantive terms, waits to be explored.

The present study combined a media content analysis with panel survey data in 21 of the 27 EU member states, assessing media effects on voter mobilization more elaborately and thus also methodologically represents a contribution to existing investigations into the role of the media in elections. Based on our findings we conclude that future research should consider the contents of campaign news coverage as an important factor in explaining cross-country variation in turnout in EP elections and, importantly, also take into account those factors that can explain how the same content can have different effects in different contexts.

Who's afraid of conflict?

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Who's afraid of conflict?

Appendix A: Overview of variables

Turnout intention (wave 1): Likelihood to turn out to vote in election on 7-point scale (1-very unlikely; 7-very likely): “In elections to the European Parliament a lot of people do not vote, while others do. Thinking about the European Parliamentary elections this coming June, will you go and vote?” ($M=5.21$, $SD=2.03$).

Turnout (wave 2): Dummy variable indicating if respondent voted (=1) or not (=0) based on the following question and answering categories: “In talking to people about elections to the European Parliament, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they didn't have time, they were sick, or because of other reasons. Which of the following statements best describes you?”; “1-I did not vote in the European Parliamentary elections”; “2-I thought about voting this time but didn't”; “3-I usually vote but didn't this time”; “4-I voted in the European Parliamentary elections”.

Gender: Male = 0; female = 1 (54.3%).

Age: Measured in years ($M= 38.93$, $SD= 13.29$).

Education: Measured with country-specific lists indicating obtainable educational degrees and recoded into three categories comparable across countries from lowest to highest: (1) low (51.4%); (2) medium (9.3%), (3) high (39.3%).

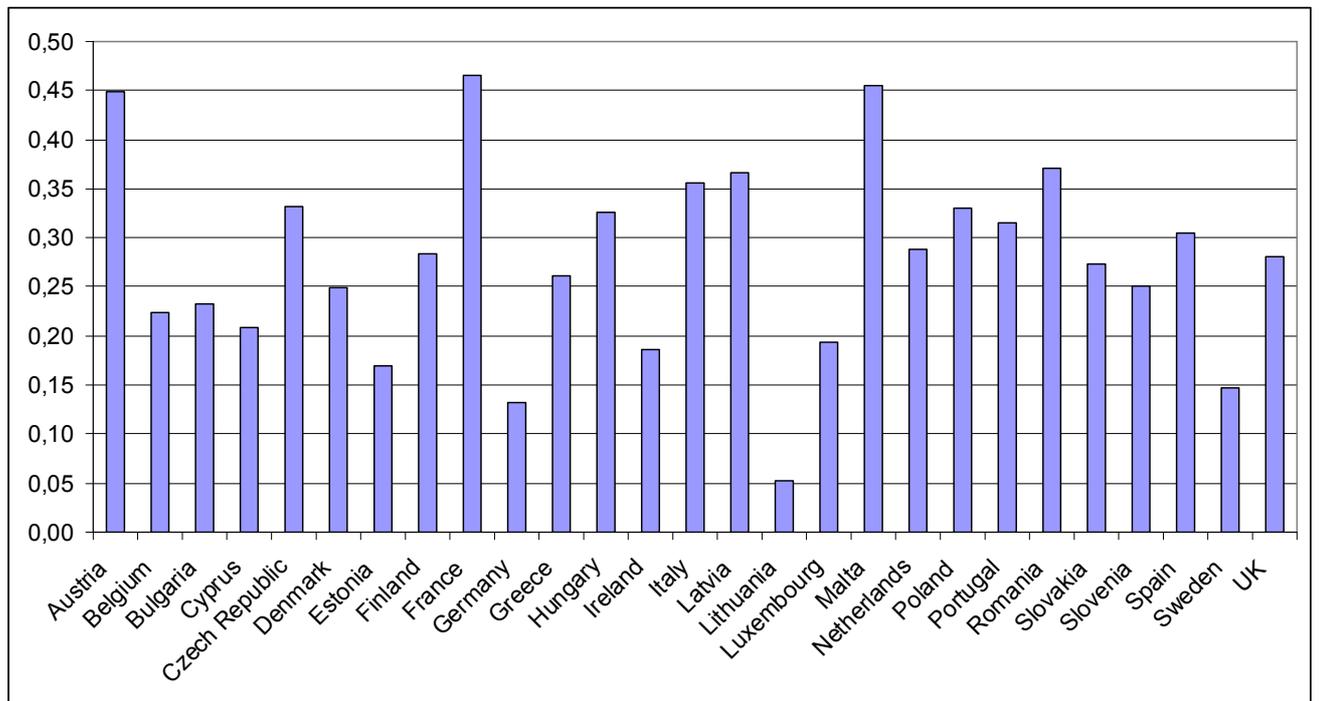
Campaign news exposure: Exposure to each newspaper outlet was measured on a scale from 0-6 and exposure to each TV news show was measured on a scale from 0-7 indicating exposure in an average week. For the *general news exposure measure* we sum up individual exposure to each news outlet. For *conflict news* we sum up individual exposure to each news outlet, weighted by the average degree of conflict framing in each respective outlet. For *strategy* framing we sum up individual exposure

Who's afraid of conflict?

to each news outlet, weighted by the average degree of strategy framing in each respective outlet.

Who's afraid of conflict?

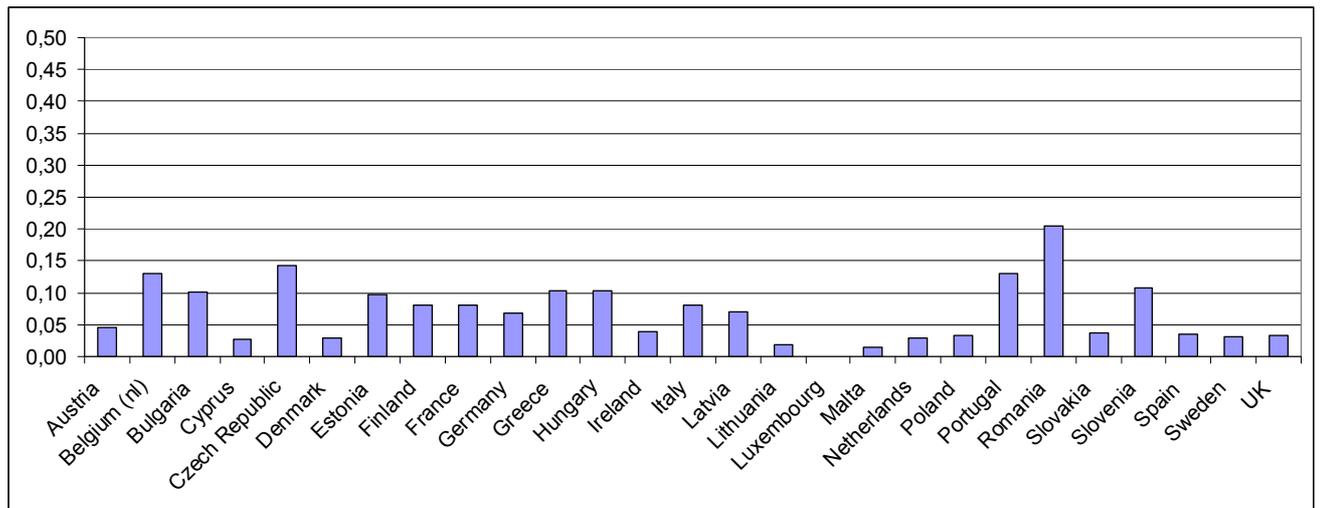
Figure 1: Level of conflict framing in campaign coverage in all 27 EU member states



Note: Bars indicate average level of conflict framing in media coverage in the respective EU member states.

Who's afraid of conflict?

Figure 2: Level of strategy framing in campaign coverage in all 27 EU member states



Note: Bars indicate average level of strategy framing in media coverage in the respective EU member states.

Who's afraid of conflict?

Table 1: Multilevel logistic regression explaining turnout in 2009 EP elections

(wave2)

	Turnout model	
	B	SE
Vote intention (t-1)	0.522***	0.009
Education	0.146***	0.018
Female	-0.193***	0.034
Age	0.015***	0.001
News exposure	-0.001	0.008
News conflict	0.048*	0.026
News strategy	-0.050	0.053
Compulsory voting	1.001*	0.433
Constant	-3.066***	0.157
Variance country level	0.331	
Log restricted-likelihood	-11066.71	

Note. Bs are unstandardized coefficients from fixed-effects multilevel models. *

p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001 (one-tailed); N= 21,790

Who's afraid of conflict?

Table 2: Multilevel logistic regression explaining turnout in 2009 EP elections

(wave2)

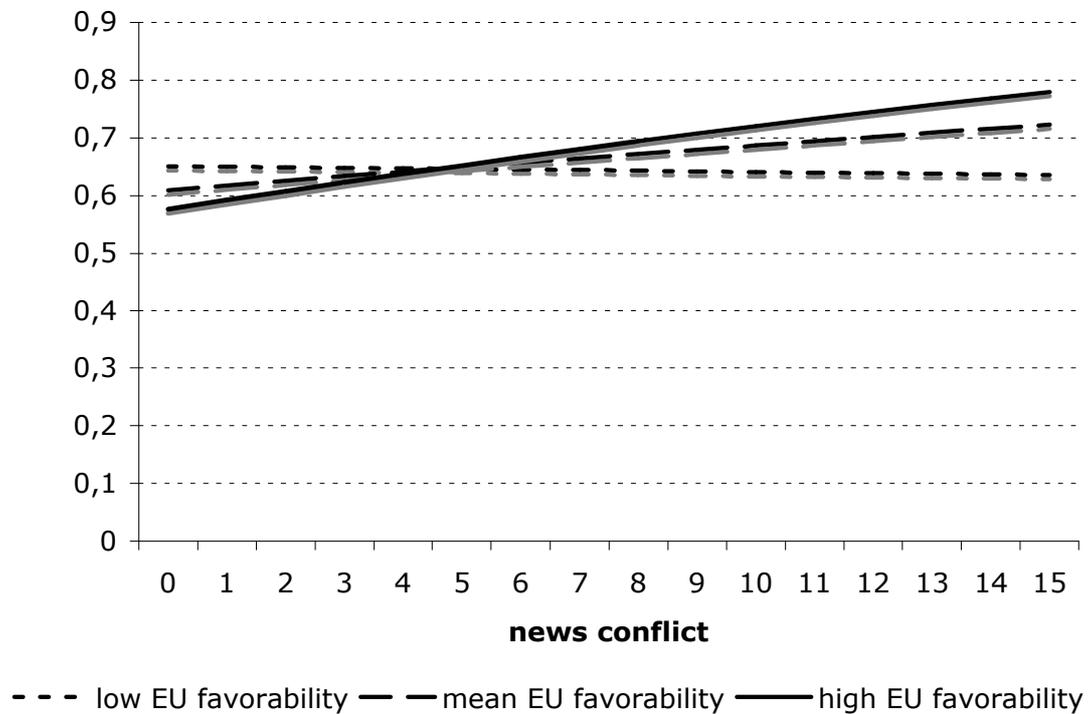
	Fixed effects model		Random effects model		Cross-level interaction	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Vote intention (t-1)	0.522***	0.009	0.522***	0.009	0.522***	0.009
Education	0.146***	0.018	0.146***	0.018	0.146***	0.018
Female	-0.193***	0.034	-0.193***	0.034	-0.195***	0.034
Age	0.015***	0.001	0.015***	0.001	0.015***	0.001
News conflict	0.033***	0.010	0.032**	0.011	0.042***	0.011
EU favorability	-0.395	1.305	-0.472	1.329	-0.843	1.317
News*favorability					0.182*	0.087
Compulsory voting	0.938*	0.462	0.935*	0.466	0.921*	0.460
Constant	-3.077***	0.164	-3.081***	0.165	-3.097***	0.164
Variance country level	0.332		0.337		0.329	
Variance news conflict			0.0003		0.0000	
Log restricted-likelihood	-11067.227		-11067.138		-11065.017	

Note. Bs are unstandardized coefficients from multilevel models. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed); $N = 21,790$

Who's afraid of conflict?

Figure 3: Predicted turnout probabilities for different levels of conflict news depending on degree of general EU favorability in a country



Note. Other variables and variances are held constant at mean levels, respondent is assumed to be male. Low EU favorability is -0.26 (the score of Austria on that variable), mean EU favorability is -0.04, high EU favorability is +0.12 (resembling the score of Spain on that variable). Prediction is based on the fixed part of the analysis.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Furthermore, none of the new EU member states have compulsory voting, thus increasingly diluting the impact of this factor.

ⁱⁱ We focus on national television and newspapers because these media are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe (*Eurobarometer* 54–62).

ⁱⁱⁱ Sport, Travel, Housing, Culture, Motor/Auto, Fashion or Entertainment sections have not been coded.

^{iv} In order to be classified as EU story, the EU or any sort of EU institution, policy or synonym had to be mentioned at least once in a story. In order to be classified as EU election story, the EP election or the campaign had to be mentioned explicitly at least once in the story.

^v The study coordinators not only attended but also performed as trainers in all training sessions at both locations. The inter-coder reliability scores reported below are based on a combined test including all 58 coders from both locations and is based on a sub-sample of 35 randomly selected news items, including both TV and newspaper items and including EU, EU election as well as non-EU stories (for more detailed information on inter-coder reliability see the documentation report, Schuck et al. 2010).

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

^{vii} The countries were the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Belgium

(Flanders and Wallonia), Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia & Bulgaria. The country selection includes larger and smaller member states, countries from North, South, East and West, and long term and new members to the Union. The country selection was finalized based on feasibility.

^{viii} Fieldwork started on May 6 in all countries. In the UK and Ireland data collection finished on May 11, in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Czech Republic, Austria, Portugal, Netherlands, Finland and Slovakia on May 12, in Hungary, Poland and Latvia on May 13, in Denmark and Belgium on May 14, in Lithuania on May 15 and in Bulgaria on May 18.

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

^x The age limit in Austria was 16. This is because voting age in Austria is 16 (whereas it is 18 in all other countries).

^{xi} In Belgium, 1,000 Flemish respondents and 1,000 Walloon respondents completed both waves of the survey.

^{xii} The response rates vary from 19% (Denmark) to 63% (Lithuania) in wave 1 and the re-contact rate between 67% (Latvia) and 89% (Hungary). An analysis of the non-participation (i.e. respondents who were invited but did not participate or not complete the interview) showed that non-respondents were younger, included more men compared to women in the UK, Sweden and Denmark and more women in Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Austria. Concerning education, the pool of non-respondents was significantly lower educated in six countries (Spain, Denmark, Czech Republic, Poland, the Netherlands and Finland).

^{xiii} An overview of the composition of our sample vis-à-vis census data per country showed no differences between the adult population and the sample in terms of *gender* in Austria, Ireland, Slovakia and Spain. The mean difference between the population and the sample was 2.76% (SD=3.43%). Small deviations occurred (0-8%), with sometimes women overrepresented and sometimes men. One substantial overrepresentation (of women) by 15% occurred in Latvia. *Young citizens* were generally slightly overrepresented in the samples. The share of young citizens (under 35) deviated 9.62% on average (SD=8.95%), with a minimum of 1% absolute deviation (overrepresentation) in Italy and Sweden, and a maximum of 34% (overrepresentation) in Greece. The largest underrepresentation of younger citizens was found in Latvia (14%). The share of *older* citizens (55+) (M=16.57%, SD=9.91%) deviated from 1% in France and the UK (overrepresentations) to 33% (underrepresentation in Greece). Most countries had slight underrepresentation of older citizens. The German sample had the largest overrepresentation (2%). In terms of *education* (collapsed in three categories, following the European Social Survey), the sample reflected the population in Ireland and Spain, while deviations (M=8.12%, SD=8.37%) were found in other countries with higher educated citizens being overrepresented in the samples. Underrepresentations were found in Greece (1%), France (6%), Slovakia (5%) and Sweden (11%). For more information, see de Vreese et al., 2010.

^{xiv} In two countries, Belgium and Greece, this is the case. Respondents from those countries get assigned a '1' on the dummy variable "compulsory voting", respondents from other countries get assigned a '0' on this variable.

^{xv} As an alternative indicator for EU favorability in a country, which is not itself derived from media content, we also consider to what extent a country has a net

benefit as a result of its EU membership (not presented here). As pointed out by Zimmer, Schneider and Dobbins (2005) the EU budget and the contributions made by individual EU countries are among the most contested topics within the EU. We can thus assume that countries which have a higher net benefit in financial terms are more favorable towards the EU and countries which have more costs than benefits are less favorable towards the EU. This alternative indicator for EU favorability measures the yearly percentage of the Gross National Income (GNI) of a country that is being paid to the European Union (negative score, i.e. low favorability) or is being received from the European Union (positive score, i.e. high favorability). Data are collected from the 2008 annual budget report from the European Commission, preceding the 2009 EP elections. The results are not presented here but are in line with the findings regarding our other indicator for EU favorability as reported in the results section of this study, i.e. conflict framing shows to have more of a mobilizing effect in countries in which net benefit (i.e. EU favorability) is high.