

The EU: A supranational institution with national consequences

Evaluating the influence of EU-related media coverage on national party politics

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Abstract

In this project, I propose to investigate the influence of EU-related media coverage on party support in Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. This investigation will resolve along the lines of two major theories. First, the concept of a Europeanized public sphere will be used to assess to what extent media coverage on EU-related issues is comparable in the countries mentioned above. Second, the concepts of issue ownership and party competition will be used to identify how different parties profit from media attention to EU-related issues. Of specific importance are the distinctions between through (EU policy) and about (EU functioning) issues and between mainstream and fringe parties. Combined, the analysis of both of these concepts will make it possible to assess what kind of influence EU-related media coverage has on national party support. With the increasing contestation over Europe in mind, longitudinal data (2001-2017) will be used to place this influence in an over-time perspective. Analyses will be conducted using automated methods, such as topic modeling and sentiment analysis. The goal is to provide generalizable results based on a large, representative dataset and to explain cross-national differences and their developments across time.

Keywords: europe, media, issue ownership, party preference, agenda-setting, automated text analysis

Introduction

All across Europe electoral results are more volatile than ever before. With citizens switching electoral allegiances quickly, media, arguably, have a stronger impact on the vote than ever before. Parties that own those issues (Petrocik, 1996) that are emphasized by the media are likely to win votes. Here, the media primes the public (Domke, Shah and Wackman, 1998; Iyengar and Simon, 1993). The literature describes these and more interactions and reciprocal relations between the media, political and public agenda (e.g. Brandenburg, 2002; Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2014; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis and Oegema, 2008; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Following the existing literature many questions remain regarding the effect of the media agenda on party preference. More specifically, little is known yet on the influence of EU-related media coverage on national party support. This is strange, considering that scholars have found increasing levels of EU issue voting (de Vries and Tillman, 2011), increasing amounts of EU-related media coverage (Boomgaarden et al., 2013), and increasing politicization of EU-related issues (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). However, the increasing importance of the EU overall is seldom analyzed by combining the theories mentioned above. Thus the goal of this dissertation will be to integrate the theories on EU issue voting, EU-related media coverage and EU issue competition in national politics into a unified theory on how EU-related media coverage influences national party politics. Because the studies mentioned above all find the importance of the EU increasing over time, analyzing the impact of media coverage over time is a specific goal as well. Besides, the inclusion of different countries (Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands) makes it possible to assess whether the trends found are actually specific to EU member states (which Norway is not). Data will consist of national daily newspaper articles from these countries, collected over the period 2001-2017. It will be combined with monthly survey data on party preference and issue ownership data from the respective national election studies. The theoretical contribution of such a study can be found in the attempt to fill the gap between EU issue voting theory and EU-related media studies. From a societal perspective, the relevance can mostly be found in the combination of rising eurosceptic populist parties all across Europe in combination with a growing importance of the EU itself. Because of this the question how the EU influences national politics is becoming more and more important.

RQ: In what way and to what extent does EU-related media coverage in newspapers from Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands influence political party support in those countries during the period 2001-2017, and how does this influence develop over time?

Theoretical framework

The backbone of the theoretical part of this dissertation is formed by a combination of agenda-setting (e.g. McCombs and Shaw, 1972), priming (Domke, Shah and Wackman, 1998; Iyengar and Simon, 1993), framing (Vliegenthart et al., 2008; Entman, 1993) and issue ownership theories (Thesen, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2017; Petrocik, 1996). The combination of these theories makes it possible to evaluate the influence of media issue attention on political party support and eventually general election outcomes. Within this framework the media, through their gatekeeper function, prioritize specific issues, and present them with a specific (positive or negative) frame. This results in priming of both the issues and their associated frames on the public agenda. Parties that own those issues (i.e. are considered capable of handling those issues well and successfully put them onto the political agenda), will benefit from positive media attention to "their" issues through priming, which results in increased party support. This framework leads to three basic questions, 1) to what extent and in which way do media cover EU-related issues, 2) to what extent and in which way are EU-related issues owned by specific political parties and 3) to what extent and in which way does the presence/absence of EU-related issue ownership and media coverage influence party support?

The most important question of all however is whether or not EU-related media coverage can at all be expected to have an influence on national party support. Fortunately, several studies show from several different perspectives that this is the case. van Spanje and de Vreese (2014) find in the context of EP elections that media attention for the EU, and more specifically the positive or negative way in which it is framed, affect vote outcomes. Similarly, Vliegenthart et al. (2008) find influences of EU-related media coverage on public opinion regarding the EU. From the political perspective, EU issue voting is also something that is confirmed to happen in national elections (de Vries, 2007; de Vries, Steenbergen and Hangartner, 2009; de Vries and Tillman, 2011), meaning

that EU-related issues are taken into account by voters when making their decision.

The country sample consisting of Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands is no coincidence, as these three countries have highly similar political and media (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) systems, but differing formal relationships with the EU. Norway is not a member of the EU at all, but through its membership of the European Economic Area it still has to adhere to much of the economy-related regulations coming from Brussels. Denmark, whilst being a member of the EU is not part of the monetary union. The Netherlands is one of the founding members of EU (EEC), and it is also a part of the monetary union. It seems reasonable to assume that these differing formal relationships will influence the impact of EU-related media coverage on party preference in addition to party and media system differences. In general, it can be expected that stronger ties with the EU will also result in a stronger influence of EU-related media coverage on party preference.

The Europeanization of national public spheres

In general, attention for the EU in news media is low, and rises with specific high-profile events, such as European Parliament elections and summits (e.g. Trezz, 2004; Machill, Beiler and Fischer, 2006; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Boomgaarden et al., 2010). Because of this, many studies investigating EU-related media coverage focus on these high profile events (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese et al., 2006; van Spanje and de Vreese, 2014; Boomgaarden et al., 2013, 2010). While showing the importance of such events, some of these studies also show an increase in overall EU-related media coverage over time (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Vliegthart et al., 2008). However, the amount of media attention for EU-related issues varies quite widely between countries (Vliegthart et al., 2008). This variation is at least partly explained by the amount of party competition on EU-related issues (Boomgaarden et al., 2010). Similar results are found by de Vries (2007), showing that EU issue voting takes place only when EU-related issues are salient on the public agenda, and when party competition on these issues is strong. Issue salience on the media and public agenda is strongly related to each other through priming, and thus both studies essentially identify party competition as a prerequisite for EU-related issues to have an effect on national politics.

Europeanized public sphere theory is also concerned with EU-related media coverage. But rather than focusing on the amount and content, this theory is aimed specifically at the comparability of EU-related media coverage between countries (e.g. Trenz, 2004; Machill, Beiler and Fischer, 2006; Koopmans and Erbe, 2004). While there is discussion on how such a Europeanized public sphere comes into existence, the idea most conforming to reality is that of national public spheres Europeanizing over time (Machill, Beiler and Fischer, 2006). This process is twofold, because the media can pay more attention to both the EU and its institutions (vertical) and to issues concerning fellow member states (horizontal) (Koopmans and Erbe, 2004). The focus on EU-related media coverage in this dissertation however implies only vertical Europeanization can be investigated. Note that Norway, as a non-EU member, will function as a baseline when investigating the level of Europeanization in media coverage. Taking into account the quantity, content, and framing of EU-related media coverage, this results in the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent does EU-related media coverage differ between national newspapers from Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands in terms of quantity and content, and how do these differences develop over time?

Issue ownership and party support

One of the core aspects of this dissertation is the concept of issue ownership (Thesen, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2017; Petrocik, 1996). Political parties compete on issue attention by "forcing political opponents to pay attention to issues they would rather see disappear" (Green-Pedersen, 2007, p. 609). This competition takes place on both the content of the party competition agenda (what issues are contested) and the positions that are part of this agenda (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Furthermore, it turns out issue ownership, despite the constant contestation over issue ownership, is quite stable over time (Seeberg, 2017). This is of importance because there will only be a few time points (election studies) with information on issue ownership. Issue salience is also strongly related to the above, because issues that are more salient on the public agenda also have a stronger impact on vote outcomes (Belanger and Meguid, 2008). Through priming, this shows the

potential impact of media issue attention on party support. This impact is however conditional on both the framing of the issue (i.e. positive or negative) and the positional issue ownership of the party (e.g. a eurosceptic party will gain support because of negatively framed EU-related media coverage).

Issue contestation on EU-related issues is however debated. Several studies find that EU integration and related issues are becoming more and more politicized (e.g. Adam and Maier, 2011; de Vries, 2007), while others consider the EU a "sleeping giant" (Green-Pedersen, 2012). The giant is sleeping mainly because politicization of EU-related issues does not take place along the left-right dimension. Instead it aligns along a gal(green, alternative, libertarian)/tan(traditionalism, authority, nationalism) dimension (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). This lack of alignment with the left-right dimension is also present when looking from a public opinion perspective, as "extreme attitudes towards Europe are not more evident at any particular point on the left/right scale" (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004, p. 8). Because of this lack of alignment and generally negative public opinion, mainstream parties do not have an incentive to politicize the issue (Green-Pedersen, 2012). As a result, EU-related issues are mostly politicized by parties on the fringes of the political spectrum, that in general raise issues not coinciding with the left-right dimension (de Vries, 2007; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004; Meguid, 2005). To say the giant is still sleeping would however be an overstatement, as EU-related issues are becoming more and more politicized.

Most of the studies mentioned above consider the EU to be a single issue. However, a distinction should be made between issues concerning legislation and policy implementations *through* the EU and issues concerning topics and policies *about* the functioning of the EU itself. Mainstream parties pay more attention to (and thus own) *through* issues, while niche parties pay more attention to (and own) *about* issues. This has however only been tested for individual countries (Austria and Denmark respectively) (Senninger and Wagner, 2015; Senninger, 2017). Regardless, the distinction between *through* and *about* issues has merit, simply because it allows a more detailed issue ownership definition of EU-related issues. But because of the limited scope of Senninger's research, the extent to which his results can be generalized is not yet clear. In combination with the theories of (positional) issue ownership and EU issue contestation and voting, this leads to the following two

research questions:

RQ2: To what extent do mainstream and niche parties focus on through and about issues respectively in Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands, and how does this change over time?

RQ3: To what extent is party preference for mainstream and niche parties influenced by EU-related media coverage on through and about issues in Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands and how does this influence develop over time?

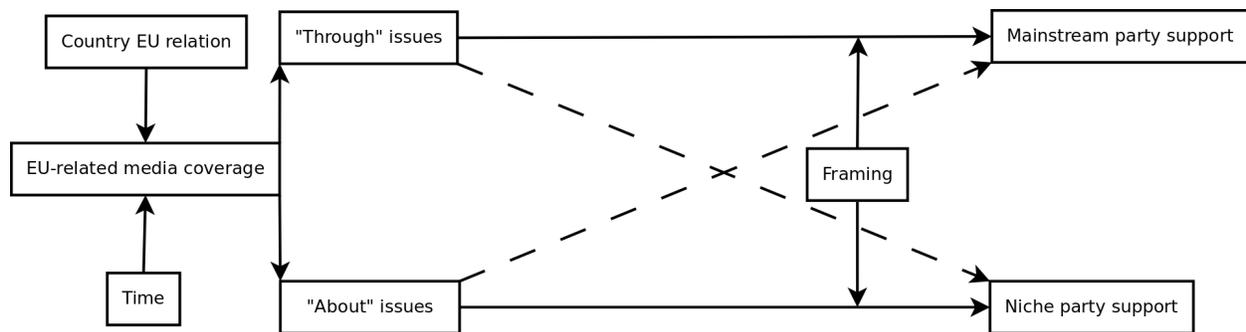


Figure 1: Conceptual model visualizing the RQs proposed above

Data

The primary data sources will consist of newspaper and survey data from the countries included in the study, which are available as part of a larger comparative project funded by the UiS University Fund. This project also sets the newspaper sampling procedure, consisting of one left-leaning broadsheet, one right-leaning broadsheet and one tabloid per country. Articles will be sampled from these newspapers based on mentionings of either the EU or European actors, both institutional and individual. At least one of such mentions needs to be present in an article for it to be selected. The survey data will consist of monthly party preference data on the individual level, combined with issue ownership data from the national election surveys that fall within the time period of the study.

Methods

Because of the large amount of text data, automated text analysis methods will be used in combination with manual content analysis. Manual coding will be conducted by native speakers from each country through a codebook that will be translated into each country's main language. As the dataset is too large to be entirely coded by hand, the initial manual coding will be used to train an automated classification algorithm to identify the main subject of each article. The output of this algorithm will then be reviewed and corrected by the coders, after which the revised data is used as additional input to train the algorithm. This iterative process will be repeated until the algorithm achieves an acceptable level of accuracy. The resulting data will then be used to identify the presence of *through* and *about* issues in the news articles. While no final decision has been made yet regarding the choice of algorithm, previous research shows the viability of so-called computer-assisted content analysis (e.g. Loftis and Mortensen, 2016).

A similar method will also be used to gather data on whether or not these issues are presented in a positive or negative manner (valence framing). Coders will both code the overall sentiment towards the coded issue, and mark the specific words they used to identify this sentiment. This data can be used either in a similar way as above, to train a sentiment classification algorithm, or directly as a dictionary. In the latter case, the marked words will be merged into a word list along with a positive and/or negative valence score, after which the presence of those words in an article is counted, and an average sentiment score is computed from the valence scores of individual words (e.g. Wilson, Wiebe and Hoffmann, 2005; Mohammad and Turney, 2010).

In order to analyze the data resulting from the procedures described above, and because of the longitudinal nature of that data, vector autoregression (VAR) will be used in combination with Granger causality tests in order to derive causal structures from the data (Vliegthart, 2014). Specifically the testing for causality is of importance, because it is the only way through which the possible influence of media issue attention on party preference can be evaluated.

Resources & project timetable

No resource allocation overview is provided here, as costs related to the collection and processing of the data are covered within the overarching project of which this dissertation will be a part. Resources that are specifically related to this position will be used to attend the PhD course in Trondheim, and to attend and present the progress and results of this project at international conferences.

Time period	Activities
August 2017	PhD course in Media, Opinion and Political Behavior at NTNU (Trondheim)
Sept 2017 - March 2018	Collecting manually coded data. Testing, training and optimizing automated text analysis methods.
Spring 2018	PhD course in Philosophy of Science at UiS
March 2018 - July 2018	Writing of methods paper/research note on choices made with regards to automated text analysis
August 2018 - Dec 2018	Data analysis and writing of paper based on RQ1
Jan 2019 - April 2019	Data analysis and writing of paper based on RQ2
Spring 2019	PhD course in Research Ethics and Design at UiS
May 2019 - Sept 2019	Data analysis and writing of paper based on RQ3
Oct 2019 - March 2020	Writing dissertation based on papers above, and answering main RQ

Table 1: Project timetable

Note: The obligatory methods course is missing in this timetable, but will most likely be Multivariat analyse: Anvendt faktor- og regresjonsanalyse offered at UiS. However, no specific information on this course is currently available in the course catalogue.

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