

News about the European Parliament: Patterns and external drivers of broadsheet coverage

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Abstract

Few political communication studies deal with the European Parliament during non-election times even though it takes decisions in a wide range of policy areas. This study examines the patterns and external drivers of European Parliament broadsheet coverage by analysing 2155 articles from six European Union countries during a routine period (2005–2007). Generally, it finds that the European Parliament receives regular coverage. However, developments in the domestic context also influence European Parliament news coverage. Public support for the European Union increases the number of reports about the European Parliament. While national elections do not compromise its news coverage, higher levels of party political contestation over the European Union and trust towards the national parliament lead to lower coverage. The implications are discussed with reference to the European Parliament's democratic legitimacy.

Keywords

European Parliament, explanatory analysis, news coverage, routine period, visibility

Introduction

In the European Union (EU), mass media hold the important function of transmitting news, information and commentary from Brussels to European citizens. Previous research has shown that EU news coverage is able to affect turnout in European elections (e.g., Banducci and Semetko, 2003) and public opinion, such as support for EU integration (e.g., Vliegenthart et al., 2008). Above all, news

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coverage is able to raise public awareness of EU politics. At the same time, public opinion feeds back to the media as well. Newsmakers are also able to hold European representatives accountable (see Meyer, 2002). Hence, by its reciprocal nature media coverage has a legitimising function (e.g., see Statham, 2010; Trenz, 2008) and may contribute to reducing the EU's democratic deficit, of which the European Parliament (EP) is part (see Føllesdal and Hix, 2006).

Key issues and salient events are a prominent subject in EU political communication research, although there is some scholarly interest in longitudinal studies and routine periods (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königslöw, 2007; Norris, 2000; Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Peter et al., 2003; Statham, 2006). Many studies also examine media coverage of EP election campaigns (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2006; Leroy and Siune, 1994; Schuck et al., 2011). However, few political communication studies deal with the EP itself, let alone during non-election times. This is surprising since election campaigns are limited to short time frames and are not necessarily representative of the day-to-day political business during the legislative term. After all, the EP has increased its power and takes decisions in a wide range of policy areas that directly affect the daily lives of European citizens. It follows that the news coverage of the EP *between* elections deserves particular scholarly attention. We know from existing research that its media visibility was not very high for the very first Parliament (Sonntag, 1983) and in 1996 (Morgan, 1999). However, even though European affairs generally are only marginally visible in the national media (e.g., Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Peter et al., 2003), scholars find that EU news coverage has risen over the years (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Rissee, 2010; Schuck et al., 2011), which calls for more research on the EP.

This article studies the visibility of EU parliamentary affairs in the quality press during a routine period of decision making and thus a phase that is largely unaffected by highly salient events at the EU level. My first aim is to investigate patterns of EP news coverage. To this end, I conduct a quantitative content analysis of 2155 broadsheet articles published in six countries – Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria – between 1 October 2005 and 30 September 2007 within the EP's sixth legislative term. Contrary to scholarly expectations regarding the lack of newsworthiness of EU parliamentary affairs (e.g., Baisnée, 2003; Gavin, 2001; Shephard, 1997), the findings show that the EP receives regular news coverage and that these reports closely follow the calendar of the EP plenary. However, I also find cross-country variation, which supports previous findings in the field (e.g., de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese et al., 2006; Kevin, 2003; Trenz, 2004).

My second aim is to explain this variation in EP broadsheet coverage. Explanatory analyses of EU news coverage still deserve more scholarly attention (see Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Statham, 2006). Some studies find that newsmakers' routines and the relationship with their editors matter for variation in EU news coverage (e.g., Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese, 2003). Such factors are internal to the news production process.

The literature has also looked at the impact of potential external factors on EU news coverage, including key issues and events at the EU level (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Sonntag, 1983). However, these may not necessarily serve as explanatory factors during routine periods. Furthermore, varying degrees of party political contestation over the EU (Schuck et al., 2011) and levels of public satisfaction with domestic democracy (Peter and de Vreese, 2004) have yet to be tested for EP news coverage in particular.

I propose here that the domestic context explains EP news coverage during routine periods. To test the effect of external factors on the volume of EP news I employ Tobit regression models. The findings show that national elections do not compromise the EP's news coverage. The number of reports rather remains at a high level in the run up to and during national elections, which suggests that the EP and its members (MEPs) are relevant to national election campaigns. Further, at times and in countries where citizens are more in favour of EU membership, the EP receives more coverage – although a reciprocal effect is also probable. The results, however, suggest that higher levels of party political contestation over the EU are related to lower EP news coverage. Higher public trust in the national parliament negatively affects the attention European broadsheets pay to the EP, a relationship that contradicts initial expectations. Overall, the findings show that EU parliamentary affairs receive regular coverage. However, news coverage is not independent from the national political cycle or public opinion. This has implications both for the democratic legitimacy of the EP and for future research on EU news coverage.

Studying the European Parliament's news visibility

The first aim of this article is to examine whether and to what extent European broadsheets report European parliamentary affairs. Although this study does not assess the EP's newsworthiness, i.e. the quality its activities have in the eyes of newsmakers in order to become news (see de Vreese, 2003: 59), understanding patterns of EP news coverage between European elections contributes to answering questions about its democratic legitimacy – especially since European legislators are mainly elected on the basis of political developments in the national context (e.g., Hix and Marsh, 2007, 2011). Given the media's potential to influence public awareness of the EU, a lack of EP news coverage would be unfavourable to the relationship between representatives and represented (see Shephard, 1997). A regular coverage, on the contrary, would imply that the EP's role of fostering 'publicity and transparency' in the EU (Liebert, 2007: 262) has the approval of the European quality press and thus enhances the chances for EU citizens to take note of EU parliamentary activities.

Sonntag (1983), who studied EP media coverage across four countries (France, Italy, West Germany and the UK) and across different media between 1979 and 1981, observed a downward trend in the amount of news from the first Parliament. Subsequent research also painted a rather negative picture of EP news coverage. Anderson and McLeod (2004), for instance, showed that the EP and its members

tend not to provide sufficient support for journalists. The EP actually competes for media attention against many other political institutions in Brussels such as the European Commission, the Council or even NATO. And European legislators are likely to receive less media attention than Commissioners or national heads of governments (see Koopmans, 2007). The EP often lost out in the past because of its former, limited decision-making powers (see Gavin, 2001; Morgan, 1999). In addition, the complex internal procedures (Gavin, 2001: 305) of the Parliament and the lack of political contestation in plenary sessions (see Baisnée, 2003: 100–102) would have undermined the newsworthiness of the institution.

Journalists do not generally consider EU affairs important enough to appear on the daily news agenda (Kevin, 2003: 127). That is presumably also why media research often focuses on particular events and issues such as elections, referenda or specific policies. In fact, Trenz (2008: 306) suggests that media attention is not linked ‘to regular decision-making processes in the EU’, in which the EP plays a key role. In particular, scholars also expect EP media coverage to be ‘irregular and limited’ (Shephard, 1997: 439).

However, it is likely that EP news coverage shows a different pattern for the sixth Parliament. The EP has evolved into a powerful institution at the EU level. It has the right to vote the Commission in and out of office, of which it has made ample use in the past. And it has been on par with the Council in many policy areas, especially those related to the single market, even before the Lisbon Treaty came into force. Furthermore, party political conflict inside the EP increasingly evolves along traditional left-right lines (Hix et al., 2006). These developments suggest that the interest of EU newsmakers in the EP has also grown over the last few years, since news values of conflict and power become more applicable. Boomgaarden et al. (2010), for instance, find that EP plenary sessions trigger general EU news coverage. Furthermore, European political actors increasingly respond to media demands (see Bijmans, 2011: 73–82). The EP has so increased its visibility by, among other things, launching a new website in September 2005, followed by a web television channel in 2008. In sum, regular EP news coverage would therefore be a reasonable finding of this study. However, parliamentary activities may not be a sufficient condition for explaining variation in EP news coverage.

Explaining news coverage of the European Parliament

Although the number of studies on EU news coverage has grown considerably, external factors responsible for its variation over time and space are still somewhat understudied (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Peter and de Vreese, 2004). Cross-country variation in EU news coverage is a common finding (e.g., Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königslöw, 2007; de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese et al., 2006). Yet, what are the underlying factors that drive this kind of variation? I propose here that the domestic context matters for EP news coverage during routine periods. In the absence of a unitary EU media system, there is an incentive for national media to make EU news coverage relevant to their domestic audience (see Kevin, 2003: 132; Peter

et al., 2003: 310; Trenz, 2004: 306). Editors also tend to enforce this at the home office (e.g., de Vreese, 2003; Gavin, 2001; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). From a rational actor perspective, responding to their consumers' taste ensures profits for the news corporation and guarantees the income of individual journalists (cf. Fengler and Russ-Mohl, 2008; McManus, 1994).

In their longitudinal study of EU news coverage between 1990 and 2006, Boomgaarden et al. (2010) classify exogenous factors into the following three categories: institutional events at the EU level, including EU summits and elections; significant events related to EU policies, e.g., enlargements; and EU-related national events such as referenda. Since this study investigates EP news coverage during a routine period, i.e. a phase which was largely unaffected by highly salient EU events directly involving the EP, European elections or unexpected decisions of the EP do not necessarily serve as explanatory factors. However, national events, such as general elections, demand news space and attention which reduces the chances of the EP to receive news coverage. The second-order nature of EU elections suggests that EU parliamentary affairs are less important than national politics (e.g., see Hix and Marsh, 2007, 2011). At the same time, scholars attest the media a poor informative function surrounding EU polling days evoking a 'second-rate coverage' (de Vreese et al., 2007) compared to the attention national and other events receive.

H1: National election campaigns are likely to lead to lower EP news coverage.

Previous research on EU news coverage hypothesised the explanatory power of public opinion towards the EU (cf. de Vreese, 2001: 287; Peter et al., 2003: 310). Although EU news coverage may affect public opinion (e.g., see Vliegenthart et al., 2008), we can expect a reciprocal relationship between media and their consumers with the former also responding to the interest of the audience. Norris (2000), for instance, identifies a 'virtuous circle' between media coverage and abstention from voting in EP elections, whereby media and party campaigns activate those who are already active and participate in politics, and in turn provide reasons for newsmakers to report about politics. Consequently, a similar circular relationship can be assumed regarding the relationship between EP news and public interest in European affairs. Seeking to explain the variation in public trust towards the EP in Eurobarometer data, Gabel (2003) finds that the strongest predictor is public support for EU membership. Assuming that support for EU membership and appreciation of the EP are interlinked, I also expect public opinion towards the EU to affect EP news coverage.

H2: EP news coverage is likely to be more comprehensive when the public is more supportive of EU membership.

Peter and de Vreese (2004: 8), by contrast, anticipate the opposite outcome: '...we expect that less support of the EU leads to more emphasis on contentious and controversial, in other words, negative aspects of the EU and, consequently, to

more coverage'. Even though they do not find a significant effect on the prominence of EU affairs in television news, their assumptions point at an alternative hypothesis of political contestation over the EU in the domestic context. Schuck et al. (2011) argue that news coverage of the 2009 EU election is higher in countries where the EU itself is subject to greater party political contestation – measured by the extent of polarization. In particular, they find a curvilinear relationship whereby low levels of party political contestation negatively influence the visibility of EU elections, assuming that mainstream parties try to keep the issue off the agenda. A positive effect is found when party polarization is considerably high, such as when anti-European parties participate in the campaigns.

H3: EP news coverage is likely to be more comprehensive when party political contestation over the EU is higher.

Regardless of its effects, however, public opinion towards the EU cannot be linked to an understanding of supranational affairs per se. Goetze and Rittberger (2010: 51) develop an argument based on sociological institutionalism and propose that the EP derives its legitimacy from experiences with parliamentarism at the national level since 'a high degree of legitimacy of existing practices and procedures makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of alternative modes of democratically legitimizing the EU 'off the beaten track''. The EP is therefore not distinct from its national equivalents; instead it follows in their footsteps. Anderson (1998) argues that, when evaluating support for EU membership and in the absence of comprehensive knowledge, citizens would use proxies that they derive from their experience with the domestic political context. McLaren (2007) finds a positive relationship between trust in national institutions and attitudes towards European institutions. A similar effect can be expected with respect to the relationship between public trust towards the national parliament and EP news coverage. Peter and de Vreese (2004), for instance, discover that higher levels of public satisfaction with domestic democracy render EU news in television programmes a more prominent status. Hence, I expect that trust in the national parliament has a positive effect on the extent to which readers are interested to read about the EP, to which newsmakers ultimately respond.

H4: EP news coverage is likely to be more comprehensive when public trust in the national parliament is higher.

Data and method

Case selection

This study relies on a quantitative content analysis of 18 broadsheets from six EU member states – Ireland, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria. We find six independent national political cycles among the chosen countries.

Furthermore, taken as pairs, Ireland and the Netherlands, Germany and France, Britain and Austria score similarly on levels of public opinion towards EU membership – high, medium and low, respectively (e.g., European Commission, 2005, 2010). Variation in public trust towards the representative body is nevertheless greater over time than across country (e.g., European Commission, 2005, 2010).

EU citizens substantially rely on daily newspapers as source of information about EU affairs (e.g., European Commission, 2010). Although broadsheets are not representative of the national media landscape, elite journalists may act as opinion leaders in their national context and are likely to shape other media content and to influence political actors and public opinion. At the same time, it is rather unlikely that elite journalists publish news that utterly refutes the views of the general public (see Diez Medrano, 2003: 256–257). This allows for some generalisation of the results.

I selected three major broadsheets per country: one financial or business newspaper and two political broadsheets, of which one pertains to the centre-left, the other to the centre-right of the political spectrum. All selected newspapers are distributed at the respective national level and represent some of the most commonly studied broadsheets in the field of EU political communication research (e.g., Bijlsma, 2011; Statham, 2006; Trenz, 2004). Table 1 informs about the selection.

The period of investigation, 1 October 2005 to 30 September 2007, can be characterised as a routine period since it was largely unaffected by political or economic crises or highly salient EU events that directly involved the EP. It covers two annual cycles of the sixth Parliament and comprises a reasonably large number of cases (2155). I collected articles via Nexis UK, an online newspaper database, and via newspapers' own online archives. To be selected an article had to comprise at least 100 words and to evidently mention the EP or any equivalent (e.g., MEPs, committees, reports) in the title, the highlight section or the first paragraph, plus twice independently in the text, i.e. not in the same sentence. Articles had to be written by the respective newspaper's own staff. To ensure intercoder reliability, two additional coders each independently applied the selection criteria to a random sample of articles, and three supplementary coders independently coded random samples of about 10% of all articles. All coding was conducted manually.

Although I do not assess here how the EP's broadsheet coverage relates to that of other institutions or actors in terms of prominence, we can account for the instances in which the EP did not receive any coverage. For that, I extended the data sample by so-called 'zero observations' which capture every working day a newspaper did not publish anything on the EP, which would have complied with the initial selection criteria. This increases the sample size to 10,847, which includes both actual articles and fictional news reports.

Dependent variable

There are several ways to measure the news visibility of EU parliamentary affairs. One indicator represents the overall N of newspaper articles (2155) to describe

Table 1. Data overview

Newspaper	Country	Affiliation	Brussels staff ^a	No. of articles	Total
Irish Times	IE	Centre-left	1	230	385
Irish Independent		Centre-right	1	138	
Sunday Business Post		Business/financial	0	17	
The Guardian	GB	Centre-left	2	53	204
The Times		Centre-right	1.5 ^b	47	
Financial Times		Business/financial	4	104	
Le Monde	FR	Centre-left	4	158	336
Le Figaro		Centre-right	2	50	
Les Echos		Business/financial	1	128	
De Volkskrant	NL	Centre-left	2	107	320
Trouw		Centre-right	2	99	
NRC Handelsblad		Business/financial	2	114	
Süddeutsche Zeitung	DE	Centre-left	3	191	641
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung		Centre-right	4	301	
Handelsblatt		Business/financial	3	149	
Der Standard	AT	Centre-left	1	118	269
Salzburger Nachrichten		Centre-right	1	96	
WirtschaftsBlatt		Business/financial	1	55	
Total articles					2155
Zero observations added					8692
Total N					10847

^aThe numbers apply for the period of investigation.

^bThe permanent staff is supported by a freelancer.

patterns of news coverage over time and across country. Krippendorff's alpha as a measure for intercoder reliability ranges from .82 to .92 for the selection of relevant articles. Another indicator measures the overall article length in terms of word count (Krippendorff's alpha $\geq .99$). Since every language requires a different amount of words to deliver the exact same message, the descriptive analysis also considers the verbosity multiplier of Huber and Shipan (2002: 179). The overall article length, on the other hand, tells us little about to what extent these news items deal with EU parliamentary affairs. The EP is seldom the sole subject. Hence, for the models I use a dependent variable which measures the percentage of news within articles referring to EU parliamentary affairs and thereby indicates the volume of pure EP news coverage. It is calculated as the total count of words of all sentences that contain references to the EP or any equivalent (Krippendorff's alpha $\geq .87$), relative to the article length. By including zero observations, the variable ranges from 0 to 100.

The regressions are estimated by Tobit models (Tobin, 1958) due to the large proportion of zero observations in the dependent variable. As the requirement of a normal distribution of the dependent variable is not met, we are unable to include country fixed-effects as robustness checks. Country dummies, on the other hand, lead to multicollinearity given the rather dominant cross-country variation. Furthermore, Plümper et al. (2005: 330) remark that ‘the inclusion of unit dummies makes it impossible to estimate the effect of time invariant exogenous variables’. Here, the models are estimated separately with standard errors clustered by broadsheet (BS) and country, which allows us to account for the nested structure of the data.¹

Independent variables

The effect of national general elections (H1) is estimated by the rounded distance in months between each article date and the polling day, whereby the latter date is subtracted from the former. General elections in Ireland (24 May 2007), France (presidential elections: 22 April 2007 and 6 May 2007; legislative elections: 10 June 2007 and 17 June 2007), Austria (01 October 2006) and the Netherlands (22 November 2006) fell into the period of investigation. For the remaining two countries, I selected the previous election date (UK: 05 May 2005; Germany: 18 September 2005). The models include the *squared distance to national GE (months)*.

To test the effects of public opinion the models contain two variables from the Eurobarometer (EB 64 – EB 68). The variable corresponding to H2 measures the support levels for EU membership (*EB support for EU*). The precise Eurobarometer question asks ‘Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY’S) membership of the European Union is/would be...?’ The analysis considers the percentage falling into the first response category ‘a good thing’. While this variable conforms to a country dummy, it is one of the best measures of public evaluation towards the EU to date. Peter and de Vreese (2004) also used it to test its effect on the amount of television coverage on EU affairs.

The variable corresponding to H4 describes the public trust levels for the national parliament in a country (*EB trust in NP*). Here, the Eurobarometer question is phrased: ‘I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.’ The respective measure in the models includes the percentage of people who ‘tend to trust’ their national parliament.

To assess whether levels of party political contestation over European integration influence EP news coverage (H3), the models include the weighted party system dispersion employed by Schuck et al. (2011) who themselves rely on Alvarez and Nagler (2004):

$$\text{WPSD} = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^n VS_{jk}(P_{jk} - \bar{P}_k)^2} \quad (1)$$

where VS_{jk} is the vote share² and P_{jk} is the position of party j in country k towards European integration, while P_k is the weighted mean of all party positions in country k . I obtained information on party attitudes towards the EU from the Chapel Hill expert surveys of 2002 and 2006 (Hooghe et al., 2010) where the overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration ranges from 1–‘strongly opposed’ to 7–‘strongly in favour’.

The models also include a number of controls. A dummy variable (*EP sitting*) indicates whether the EP held a plenary session on or the day before the publication dates and zero-observation days. It serves to control for variation over time. A similar variable, *NP sitting*, is coded in the exactly same way for each national parliament. It is likely that the national parliament takes political and legislative decisions which also attract media attention. Another dummy variable (*EU Presidency*) measures whether a country was holding the EU presidency at a time. The British government was responsible for the second half of 2005. The Austrian chancellor was Head of the Council between July and December 2006, directly succeeded by his German counterpart until 30 June 2007. *GDP growth rate* per capita serves as a control of the economic state in each country. Its measure changes quarterly compared to the previous one.³ The remaining controls comprise the circulation numbers in 10,000s of each broadsheet as an estimate for 2006 (*BS circulation (10000s)*),⁴ and the type of newspaper coded as a dummy which includes left-leaning political broadsheets (*Centre-left BS*) and business or financial newspapers (*Business BS*). The variable *BS No of staff* controls for the number of Brussels correspondents a newspaper employs – with higher numbers of staff likely to distribute more EP news (see also Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königslöw, 2007: 6–7).

Generally, most of the independent variables describe longitudinal patterns. The cross-sectional design used here does, however, not fully capture the dynamics of broadsheet coverage of EU parliamentary affairs (see also Bechtel and Leuffen, 2010). Future research might employ a larger set of countries and time periods to fully account for these variations.

Results

Regular broadsheet coverage

Figure 1 describes the total distribution of articles published between October 2005 and September 2007 (24 months). It shows that EP broadsheet coverage follows the parliamentary calendar with increasing coverage during the winter months since the EP is, like most parliaments, most active after the legislative summer break. The mean of 11.27 indicates that slightly more articles were published in the first year of the investigation (standard deviation = 6.81). In the winter of 2005/06 the EP dealt with some influential legislative issues such as the Services Directive⁵ and REACH⁶ which supposedly raised the interest of the press. European affairs have often been criticized for being lengthy, complex or irrelevant and thus would not receive

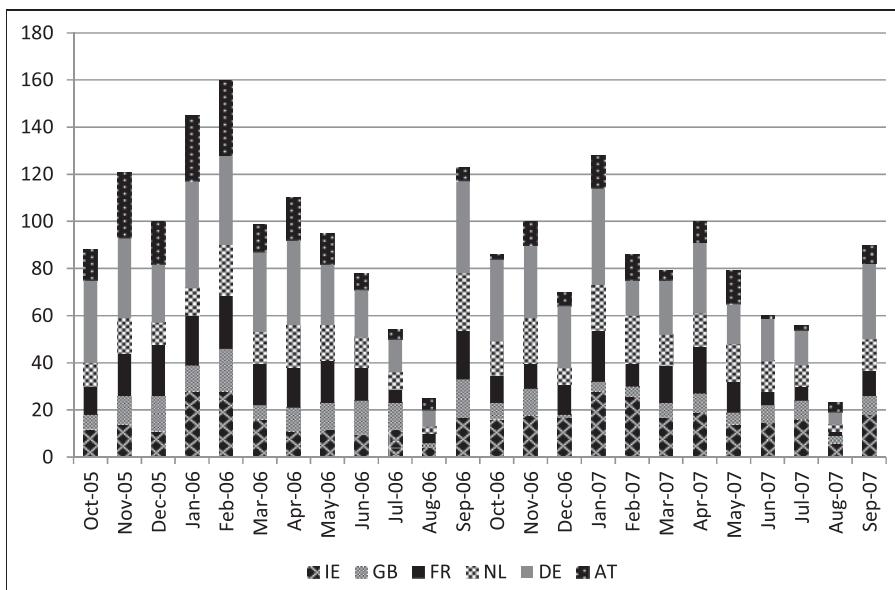


Figure 1. Total distribution of broadsheet articles over time and by country.

Note: N = 2155.

regular attention (e.g., see de Vreese, 2003; Kevin, 2003; Trenz, 2008). Figure 1, however, demonstrates that there is a steady and predictable supply of EP news which implies that they are newsworthy and an essential part of EU broadsheet coverage.

The figure also shows that the cross-country variation is biased towards the German sample with a higher amount of publications (641) than for the other countries (see also Table 1). Previous research also found that these newspapers, and especially the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, publish far more stories on EU affairs than others (Bijlsmans, 2011: 131; Kevin, 2003: 56). British (204) and Austrian newspapers (269), on the other hand, remain relatively silent compared to the rest.

However, British (449 words) and Irish articles (396) are on average longer than their counterparts, and the Austrian ones are shortest (238) (accounting for Huber and Shipan's, 2002: 179, verbosity multiplier; see web appendix). These particularities already imply that explanations for this variation in numbers and length are not necessarily clear cut: At first glance, the differences in the British and Austrian news do not yet allow us to infer that public opinion towards the EU is responsible for the extent of EP news coverage in these countries. While support for the EU is low in both member states, British news are much longer (with about 211 words on average) than their Austrian counterparts. Furthermore, when considering how much of these articles actually concern the EP, one can derive that German and British articles devote far less attention to the EP than others with each about 57% (see web appendix). Articles of the French and Austrian broadsheets, on the

contrary, contain more news about EU parliamentary affairs (68.58% and 66.94%, respectively).

Regression results

Table 2 evaluates with the help of the Tobit regression models whether the explanations introduced above affect the volume of EP news. Model 1A and 1B represent the basic model; models 2A to 3B add controls. Models 4A and 4B test the interaction between *EB trust in NP* and *EB support for EU*, which will be elaborated later, while Models 5A to 6B contain *political contestation*. Models 7A and 7B include the squared distance to national general elections.

The first finding corresponds to the results of the previous section, whereby news coverage follows the plenary calendar. When the Parliament gathers in Strasbourg, the visibility of EU parliamentary activities increases by about 59.81% to 62.38%. The effect remains statistically significant throughout the models. It shows that plenary debates and votes matter for broadsheet coverage – and that despite accusations of plenary sessions lacking heated discussions and focussing on technical details only (see Baisnée, 2003: 100–102). Although we are unable to say here what makes the Strasbourg meetings newsworthy enough to report about them, we can be certain that they have a positive effect on broadsheet coverage.

Turning to the effects of public opinion, the results show that support for EU membership has a positive effect on the amount of news about EU parliamentary affairs: every percentage point increase in support levels leads to an increase of .83% to .93% more news about the EP (Models 1A to 3B). Compared to the previous factor, this influence is rather small, yet remains significant and positive throughout the models. We can derive a relationship between the extent to which citizens approve of the whole, i.e. one country's EU membership, and the degree of interest they express in EU parliamentary affairs. While a reciprocal relationship cannot be ruled out here, the findings suggest that the more pro-European the readership, the more open they are to receiving news about their EU representative body, to which newsmakers eventually respond. This lends support to H2.

The effect of public trust towards the national parliament exposes a peculiarity. H4 suggests that higher trust levels predict higher EP news coverage, because readers appreciate parliamentary democracy in the domestic context and thus should also express more interest in receiving news from the EP. The findings from models 1A to 3B reveal, however, that the contrary is the case: with every percentage point increase in the levels of trust towards the national representative body, the visibility of the European counterpart diminishes by about 1.05% to 1.12%. This implies that the EP seems to be losing out on its national equivalents. The effect becomes more apparent in Models 4A and 4B which include an interaction term of *EB support for EU* and *EB trust in NP*. The beta coefficient is rather small with -0.05 , yet significant. The negative sign implies that for a given level of EU support an increase in trust towards the national parliament mitigates the (positive) impact of EU support. It means that regardless of the public stances

Table 2. Tobit models, explaining variation in the volume of EP news^a

	Model 1A	Model IB	Model 2A	Model 2B	Model 3A	Model 3B	Model 4A	Model 4B	Model 5A	Model 5B	Model 6A	Model 6B	Model 7A	Model 7B
EB support for EU	.93*** (.33)	.93*** (.42)	.83*** (.25)	.83*** (.35)	.91*** (.23)	.91*** (.31)	.321*** (1.37)	.321*** (1.39)					.88*** (.21)	.88*** (.26)
EB trust in NP	-1.07*** (.38)	-1.07*** (.38)	-1.05*** (.35)	-1.05*** (.16)	-1.12*** (.34)	-1.12*** (.10)	1.97 (1.83)	1.97 (1.83)	1.97 (1.83)	1.97 (1.83)	1.97 (1.83)	1.97 (1.83)	-1.18*** (.34)	-1.18*** (.34)
EP sitting	62.38*** (3.65)	62.38*** (4.32)	61.16*** (3.23)	61.16*** (3.91)	60.63*** (3.01)	60.63*** (3.68)	60.15*** (3.10)	60.15*** (3.85)	59.81*** (3.10)	59.81*** (3.82)	59.81*** (3.10)	59.81*** (3.82)	59.87*** (3.76)	59.87*** (3.01)
NP sitting	5.55	5.55	6.75*	6.75*	6.34	8.84**	8.84**	12.80***	12.80***	12.54***	12.54***	6.63*	6.63*	6.63*
BS No of staff														
Centre-left BS														
Business BS														
BS circulation (1000s)														
EU Presidency														
GDP growth rate														
Interaction of EB trust in NP & EB support for EU														
Political Contestation														
Squared Political Contestation														

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

	Model 1A	Model 1B	Model 2A	Model 2B	Model 3A	Model 3B	Model 4A	Model 4B	Model 5A	Model 5B	Model 6A	Model 6B	Model 7A	Model 7B
Squared distance to national GE (months)														
SE clustered by			Country	BS										
Constant	-102.94***	-102.94***	-98.27***	-98.27***	-106.93***	-106.93***	-256.43***	-256.43***	-25.83	-25.83	-72.31	-72.31	-101.81***	-101.81***
(26.71)	(37.93)	(28.03)	(27.84)	(28.18)	(26.50)	(26.50)	(93.83)	(88.87)	(25.32)	(25.32)	(32.51)	(32.51)	(27.37)	(27.37)
Sigma Constant	91.36***	91.36***	90.18***	90.18***	89.74***	89.74***	89.50***	89.50***	89.88***	89.88***	89.86***	89.86***	89.54***	89.54***
(4.56)	(7.33)	(4.56)	(7.34)	(4.49)	(7.15)	(4.49)	(4.57)	(7.28)	(4.60)	(4.60)	(7.32)	(7.32)	(4.55)	(4.55)
N	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847	10847
Pseudo R Squared	.0253	.0253	.0297	.0297	.0313	.0313	.0323	.0323	.0318	.0318	.0318	.0318	.0321	.0321

^aAdjusted standard errors in parentheses; dependent variable: amount of news dealing with EU parliamentary affairs (%).

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

towards EU membership, the appreciation of the national equivalent shortens EP broadsheet coverage, albeit marginally only. Public opinion research found that the quality of national institutions also negatively affects public support for EU integration (Rohrschneider, 2002; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). More specifically, a recent study identifies a relationship between citizens' positive evaluations of the quality of national institutions and low rates of satisfaction with the democratic performance of EU institutions (Desmet et al., 2012). Jack-knife tests (not shown here) demonstrate, however, that the UK, Germany and Austria drive the interaction effect, since the precise effect is not statistically significant once they are removed from the model. Thus, for them the allegation of the EP being a 'second-order institution' in the public eye (Desmet et al., 2012) is most likely to be true – despite varying levels of public support for the EU. In fact, the so-called 'Lisbon ruling'⁷ provided by the German Constitutional Court in 2009 emphasizes the prerogatives of the German Bundestag in EU affairs. In the British case, Parliament is the true sovereign of the political system. As such it is no surprise that, coupled with the public hostility towards the EU, the EP is not held in high regard but probably perceived as a threat to the role of the House of Commons.

The effect of party political contestation over EU integration (H3) shows that with every one unit increase in dispersion the EP receives about 6.32% less news coverage (Models 5A and 5B). Schuck et al. (2011: 49) report a similar finding for the levels of party polarization on news coverage of the 2009 EU elections. However, in their study the visibility of EU news increases significantly with the squared effect of dispersion, i.e. when party polarization over European integration is considerably high. A squared term has been entered into Models 6A and 6B as well, but both the simple and squared effects are not statistically significant. These findings do not provide sufficient support for the alternative hypothesis that higher party political contestation over the EU leads to more comprehensive EP broadsheet coverage.

It is noteworthy here that the above effects hold when controlling for the remaining variables. Newspaper type and circulation numbers do not produce any (significant) effect which suggests that cross-media variation is not a crucial determinant. The number of staff broadsheets employ in Brussels, however, has a positive effect adding between 11.28% and 12.73% to the volume of news produced about the EP (Models 2A to 4B). Yet, it does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance once the German sample is removed from Model 3 by a jack-knife test not shown here. Moreover, the GDP growth rate has a positive, significant effect on EP news coverage throughout the models (4.54%–6.35%). Put differently, in times of economic growth more reports on the EP are published. One reason might be that newspaper corporations invest more resources (staff, paper volume and/or special editions) during such periods.

The effect of the EU Presidency is only driven by the Austrian newspapers as jack-knife tests (not shown here) suggest. One explanation for this might be that under the Austrian Presidency the EU multi-annual budget for 2007–13 was negotiated. Further, the legislative cycle of the national parliament is not statistically

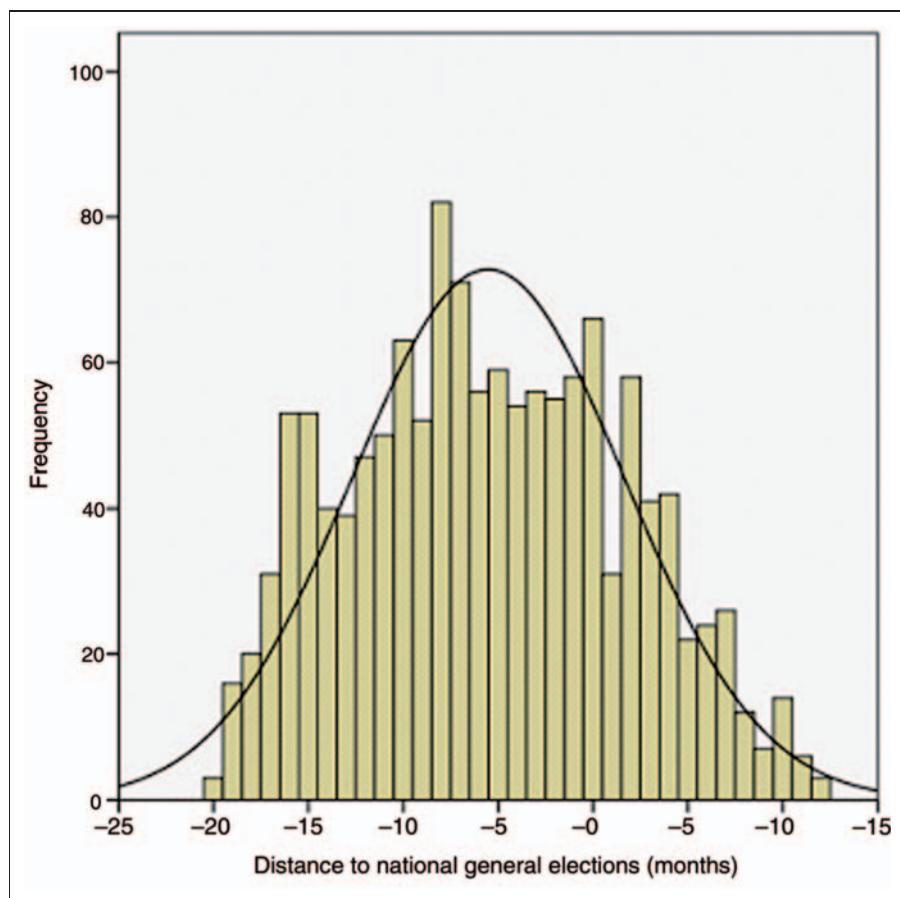


Figure 2. Distribution of broadsheet articles according to distance to national general elections.

Note. $N = 1310$.

significant throughout the models and thus whether it is sitting or not does not severely bias EP news coverage. However, national elections have a significant effect on the volume of EP news. As a reminder, H1 states that they supposedly undermine the news visibility of the EP. The significant, negative coefficient ($-.04$) of the squared distance to national elections entered in Models 7A and 7B suggests, however, that the volume of EP news decreases with the increasing distance to national elections.⁸ Conversely, it means that the EP receives more news coverage when the election date is closer, although we are unable to say here whether this finding holds for the time period before or after the national polling day.

A different test is carried out in order to receive a better understanding of the effect. For this, the actual distribution of newspaper articles over time in the

four countries which held a national election during the period of investigation ($N=1310$) is plotted as the rounded distance in months between the articles' date and national general elections (Figure 2).⁹ Since these elections took place during the second half of the study period, the mean, median and standard deviation of the distribution tell us little about the relationship. However, Figure 2 shows that one of the modes falls into the month (0) of the election campaigns.

Further, the distribution demonstrates that in the months preceding each polling day EP news coverage remains at a high level relatively stable. Right afterwards, the number of articles decreases considerably. I interpret this as a sign that domestic general elections actually play a role for EP news coverage – but not in the way as previously assumed. In fact, it seems that EP politics matter for the domestic context. In particular, the results imply that national election campaigns experience Europeanization effects (cf. de Vries, 2007) as MEPs supposedly become involved in the campaigns. H1 has thus to be rejected.

Conclusions

In this article, I studied the patterns and external drivers of EP news coverage provided by the quality press of six countries – Ireland, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria. The empirical contribution lies in the study of a routine period of two years during the sixth Parliament. More importantly, and contrary to previous expectations, the findings demonstrate that the EP receives regular coverage, which closely follows the parliamentary calendar. In particular, the results show that plenary debates trigger the volume of EP news. This relationship not only has implications for further research of EU news coverage, which thus far has predominantly focussed on key events and issues, but also for the debate surrounding the emergence of a European public sphere. According to Statham (2010: 278) one necessary condition for the latter is that 'the decision-making process is made sufficiently and adequately visible to citizens'. I have argued in this article that broadsheets are an appropriate choice given their ability to link EU politics and citizens by means of their opinion-leadership. However, in the absence of comparable measures across news issues and media we are unable to assess whether the EP's visibility is indeed sufficient or adequate in this case. Future research should address this question and especially investigate whether and to what extent the EP is also visible in tabloids, regional dailies, online news and television programmes.

To explain variation in EP news coverage I proposed that the domestic context plays a crucial role during routine periods. A first indicator for this argument is cross-country variation in EP news coverage, which lends support to previous findings in EU communication research (e.g., see de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese et al., 2006; Kevin, 2003). Cross-country variation does not necessarily compromise the visibility of EU parliamentary affairs at a pan-European level. Even if national public spheres were to prevail, Risse (2010) argues that the Europeanization of

national public spheres does not hinder the emergence of a transnational European community. The same holds for transnational public debates (see Bijlsma, 2011). This study suggests that EU parliamentary politics matter for general election campaigns, since, contrary to initial assumptions, EP news coverage is high in the run-up to and during national elections. The EP and its members are presumably able to contribute to the Europeanization of national public spheres, although it lies outside the scope of this article to answer questions about the extent to which such Europeanization takes place. Future research could provide more detailed answers as to how European parliamentary actors contribute to national electoral campaigns in the media.

Regarding the effects of public opinion and political contestation, the findings provide a mixed picture. EP broadsheet coverage increases with rising levels of public support for the EU, although a reverse effect is also probable. Yet, this is not necessarily supportive for European parliamentary democracy as it is unlikely that public awareness of the EP is high where public support for EU integration is low. Further, higher levels of political contestation over the EU are related to lower EP broadsheet coverage – even though previous research found a positive effect on EU election coverage (Schuck et al., 2011). The findings are therefore surprising, especially since domestic party contestation extends towards the European level via party channels. The British Conservatives, for instance, already debated their break from the European People's Party during the time of investigation.

Contrary to initial expectations, I find that greater public confidence in the national parliament is negatively related to EP broadsheet coverage. Goetze and Rittberger (2010: 50) argue that 'the EP's role in providing democratic legitimacy has become (largely) unquestioned by political elites'. My results, however, imply that the public – and the press – still compare the EP to the national standard of parliamentary democracy. In this relationship, national parliaments are presumably held in higher regard than the EP. The EP's competences have expanded considerably over the last two decades, while the direct influence of national parliaments in EU policy-making, despite formal acknowledgement by the Lisbon Treaty, is likely to have little or no effect (see Raunio, 2010). Hence, citizens might fear that their national parliament, which is still somewhat closer to them, is being increasingly undermined.

The extent to which these findings hold after Lisbon lies outside the scope of this study since the period of investigation focused on the sixth Parliament. Against the backdrop of the enduring financial crisis, we may expect that, following the results, the EP receives lower broadsheet coverage during economic recession. Nevertheless, I showed that European broadsheets already paid regular attention to EU parliamentary affairs before the Lisbon Treaty allowed the EP greater jurisdiction for another time. I only investigated external factors here and hence was unable to answer questions about whether – following the EP's increased competences – MEPs themselves, legislative decisions or party political conflict raise the interest of newsmakers on location. Future research might therefore examine actual media content, news values and the motives of Brussels correspondents more

closely to assess in what way both the EP and the media contribute to strengthening its democratic legitimacy in the public eye.

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Notes

1. The web appendix also includes Poisson and Zero-inflated Negative Binomial Regression models in which the dependent variables are (a) the number of articles a newspaper has published per day and (b) the overall article length.
2. I adapted the vote share for each national election listed above. In the Irish case it includes first preference votes; for France it only considers the first electoral round; for Germany only the party votes were accounted for.
3. Data obtained from OECD.StatExtracts. Available at: <http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=350> – (accessed 5 December 2011).
4. Source: World Association of Newspapers (2007) and newspapers' own information.
5. Directive on services in the internal market (Directive 2006/123/EC).
6. Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006).
7. See BVerfG, 2 BvE 2/08 of 30/6/2009, Paragraph No. (1-421). Available at: http://www.bverfg.de/entscheidungen/es20090630_2bve000208en.html (accessed 5 December 2011).
8. The effect is not statistically significant once Germany and the UK are removed, for which no general elections fell into the study period.
9. Election dates are subtracted from publication dates.

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