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Country Characteristics as Contingent Conditions of Agenda Setting

The Moderating Influence of Polarized Elite Opinion

Agenda-setting research has largely neglected country characteristics as contingent conditions of agenda setting. Focusing on the issue of European integration, this study investigated whether the amount of European Union (EU) coverage in television news affected the extent to which EU citizens perceived European integration to be important. More specifically, it was studied from a cross-national comparative perspective whether the nature of elite opinion about European integration moderated the occurrence of agenda-setting effects. Content analytic data and survey data from 14 EU member states were linked at the individual level. More EU coverage did not automatically increase the perceived importance of European integration. The occurrence of the agenda-setting pattern rather depended on the nature of elite opinion. The more EU stories people watched in countries in which political elites disagreed about European integration, the more important they considered European integration. If elite opinion about European integration was consensual, this pattern did not occur.

Keywords: *agenda setting; media effects; cross-national comparative research; European Union; television*

Agenda-setting research has abundantly demonstrated the link between the amount of media coverage and the perceived importance of issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; for reviews, see Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Rössler, 1997). The amount of coverage that media devote to a particular issue can shape to what extent the public considers the issue important. Strikingly, however, two aspects of agenda-setting research remained largely unstudied. First,

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agenda setting is predominantly concerned with top issues. This preoccupation with top issues may obstruct our view on less powerful, yet also meaningful, effects (Meadow, 1980, p. 95; Nord, 1981, p. 574). In their overview of agenda setting, Rogers and Dearing (1988) have, therefore, requested that "future scholars of the agenda-setting process should include issues and events that receive much less media attention (ranging down to those that are hardly mentioned in the media) and that may only barely register on the public agenda" (p. 576).

Second, research has largely ignored country characteristics as potential contingent conditions of agenda setting. Scholars did focus on media and audience characteristics as contingent conditions of agenda setting (Winter, 1981) and did call for "more research in a wider variety of countries" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 98). But we still do not know whether and how particular country characteristics enhance or diminish agenda-setting effects. What is required, then, is a cross-nationally comparative approach to agenda setting. Such an approach goes beyond replicating agenda setting in various countries or demonstrating differences between agenda-setting effects in multiple countries. A cross-nationally comparative approach tries to expand our knowledge of the contingent conditions of agenda setting in terms of the potentially moderating role of substantive country characteristics. Eventually, this approach may lead to an improved explanation of the phenomenon.

Consequently, this study has two goals. First, it investigates whether there is evidence of agenda-setting effects for less frequently covered issues and whether there is a homogeneous pattern across countries. Second, the study tries to clarify if the occurrence of agenda setting depends on country characteristics. The main focus lies on the coverage of the European Union (EU) and people's perception of the importance of European integration. Research consistently shows that coverage of the EU amounts to rather little (e.g., Leroy & Siune, 1994; Norris, 2000; Siune, 1983). This issue, therefore, seems appropriate to investigate whether agenda-setting effects also occur for less frequently covered issues. Moreover, the issue of European integration lends itself to a cross-nationally comparative approach to agenda setting because the issue can be expected to be covered in all EU member states. For reasons that will be outlined in the next section, the study focuses on the interaction between exposure to media coverage of the EU (located at the individual level) and the nature of elite opinion on European integration (located at the country level). In terms of media coverage, this investigation centers on the television news coverage of the EU. The majority of EU citizens consistently mention television as their preferred source of information when looking for information about the EU (Eurobarometer 51-56, 1999-

2001). Moreover, a political-economic process such as European integration is most likely to be covered in news outlets.

Agenda Setting, European Integration, and Elite Opinion

If existing studies dealt with media effects on the perceived importance of issues, they have not focused on European integration (for an exception, see Schönbach, 1981). And if studies have dealt with European integration, they have hardly focused on media effects, let alone on agenda setting. The existing literature, then, can only provide rough guidance as to research expectations. In line with the first research goal, the key question is whether the coverage of a less visible, supranational issue such as European integration can affect the perceived importance of European integration at all. In a study conducted around the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, Schönbach (1981) found that higher exposure to television news led people to perceive further European integration to be more important. Unfortunately, the actual media coverage was not assessed.

Further evidence to presume media effects on the importance perceptions of European integration derives from a strand in agenda-setting research that centers on the character of issues. Several agenda-setting studies have documented that unobtrusive issues (i.e., issues that most people cannot experience directly) led to stronger agenda-setting effects than obtrusive issues (i.e., issues that most people can experience directly) (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Zucker, 1978). Because unobtrusive issues can only be experienced through the media, the coverage has a greater potential to shape people's perceptions of the issues. Assuming that, to the vast majority of EU citizens, European integration is unobtrusive, the expectation is that a greater amount of EU coverage will be associated with greater perceived importance of European integration even if the amount of coverage is relatively low.[1]

The emphasis here lies on differing amounts of EU coverage and differing levels of perceived importance. If one wants to investigate whether less prominently covered issues affect perceptions of importance as suggested by Rogers and Dearing (1988), it is in the first place necessary to study (potentially) differing levels of media coverage of a particular issue along with (potentially) differing levels of perceived importance of the particular issue. Along with an investigation of country characteristics as contingent conditions of agenda-setting effects on individual audience members, such an analysis also calls for an individual level of analysis. The disaggregation of effect analyses generally presents another desideratum of agenda-setting research (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) and helps circumvent the danger of

ecological fallacy.[2] The focus on a single issue and on individuals as units of analysis locates this study in what McCombs' Acapulco typology called the "cognitive portrait" perspective in agenda setting (McCombs, 1981; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002).

As mentioned in the introduction, agenda-setting research has largely neglected cross-nationally comparative approaches. As a result, we do not know whether country characteristics present additional contingent conditions of agenda setting. What is more, because cross-nationally comparative research is essentially about analysis and explanation at multiple levels (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), agenda-setting research may have given away the chance of improved explanations by not having taken a cross-nationally comparative perspective. A cross-nationally comparative perspective entails that researchers not merely describe that there are similarities or differences in agenda-setting between country A and country B. Rather, in a cross-nationally comparative perspective, country-level variables are included as additional explanations of agenda setting. This eventually requires that country names be replaced with proper, theoretically grounded country variables (Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

Taking into account that agenda setting as a media effect is preferably investigated at the individual level, country-level characteristics can be studied in their interaction with individual-level characteristics. This implies that the emergence of the traditional agenda-setting pattern may be conditional on the interplay of (individual) media exposure and (contextual) country characteristics. When individuals from different countries expose themselves more strongly to the coverage of a particular issue, they may not automatically consider the issue more important. The extent to which individuals perceive an issue as important may rather depend on their particular country context.

To establish a potential moderating influence of country characteristics, it is in the first place necessary to check whether multiple within-country analyses elicit homogeneous results (for the logic of analysis, see Przeworski & Teune, 1970, in particular, chap. 3). If this is not the case, country characteristics may be an important moderator of agenda-setting effects. This study, therefore, tests in a first step whether a similar pattern of agenda-setting effects emerges across countries. Assuming that there will be different patterns of agenda-setting effects across countries, it will be analyzed in a next step whether a cross-level interaction between (individual) media exposure and a (contextual) country characteristic can account for the differences. The explanatory power of cross-level interactions with their multiple levels of explanation is well known (Pan & McLeod, 1991; Price, Ritchie, & Eulau, 1991), and cross-level interactions offer an excellent opportunity to advance

our understanding of agenda setting with respect to country characteristics as contingent conditions.

Concerning the presumed effect of amount of media coverage on perceived importance of European integration (both are individual-level variables), a moderating influence of country characteristics may come from consensus or polarization in elite opinion on European integration. It is important to note that the nature of elite opinion is conceptualized here as country-level phenomenon. By elite, a country's political elite is meant, consisting in this study of the various political parties in a particular country. Elite-driven approaches have their foundations in Converse's (1964) work and have recently been advanced by Zaller (1990, 1992). In research on the EU, scholars have used them to explain public support for European integration or EU-related opinions (e.g., Janssen, 1991; McLaren, 2001; Wessels, 1995). The basic notion is that citizens form their opinions about European integration by relying on cues they get from political parties (for empirical evidence, see, e.g., van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991; Wessels, 1995). Linking this notion to media influence on support for European integration, Banducci, Karp, and Lauf (2001) found the nature of elite opinion on European integration to be an important moderator of media coverage. Depending on whether elite opinion was consensual or polarized, the amount and tone of party coverage had opposing effects. Although support for European integration and perceived importance of European integration are conceptually different, the conditioning impact of nature of elite opinion reported by Banducci et al. suggests that the basic pattern may also hold for the interplay of media coverage and perceptions of importance.

However, before expectations can be specified, the two components of the presumed moderator—its consensual or polarized nature and its elite character—must be disentangled. The moderating influence of both elite opinion on one hand and consensus or polarization on the other have only been tentatively discussed in agenda-setting research.[3] Rogers and Dearing (1988, Figure 1) mentioned interpersonal communication among elites as one of the influences on the agenda-setting process. Apparently, it is self-evident to the authors that political elites play an important role in shaping the perception of political issues because they do not further elaborate on this aspect. Besides the media, it is the political elites that define problems and potential solutions and, thereby, the importance of issues.

McCombs and Gilbert (1986) have discussed the polarization of issues as influence increasing agenda-setting effects. Although the authors presented only one empirical study as evidence, it seems plausible to assume that polarization of an issue (or, in this study, of the parties that argue about an issue) increases the perceived importance of an issue. Polarization of an

issue suggests that the issue is meaningful and revolves around a problem that needs to be solved. This may particularly apply to an issue as remote and abstract as European integration. Researchers such as van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) and Duch and Taylor (1997) have pointed out that consensus among elites reduces the chances of European integration to become a prevalent issue in elections. What may be obvious for the choice of election topics may also apply to citizens' importance perceptions. Citizens interpret elite consensus in the sense that solutions to an issue have been found and that the issue is consequently less threatening and, thus, less important.

The considerations outlined in the preceding paragraphs lead to the following expectations. The basic association between greater amounts of EU coverage and greater perceived importance of European integration depends on whether elite opinion on European integration is consensual or polarized. In other words, the extent to which (individual) exposure to EU coverage influences importance perceptions is conditioned by the (contextual) nature of elite opinion. If elite opinion is consensual, greater levels of EU coverage will not increase the perceived importance of European integration. However, if elite opinion is polarized, greater levels of EU coverage will be associated with greater perceived importance of EU integration. Technically speaking, I expect a (cross-level) interaction between the nature of elite opinion and the amount of EU coverage to which individuals are exposed.

One conceptual confusion should be avoided here. One could argue that greater perceived importance of European integration is merely the result of greater amounts of EU coverage in countries with polarized elite opinion because conflict and disagreement increase the newsworthiness of events or issues (see news value research, e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976). Implicitly, such a conclusion takes only the country level into account and ignores the cross-level character of the expected interaction. What is more, this conclusion neglects the core of the proposed cross-level interaction. If the amount of coverage an individual is exposed to is kept constant (i.e., at identical levels of EU coverage), individual perceptions of the importance of European integration will differ depending on the nature of elite opinion.

Method

Procedure

As a secondary analysis, this study links the content analysis of the television news coverage of the June 1999 European election campaign to postelection surveys carried out in all EU countries immediately after the European elections.[4] Although the elections of the European Parliament present an

important event at the level of EU politics, they have consistently been found not to be very visible in national television news (e.g., for the 1979 European elections, see Siune, 1983; for the 1989 European elections, see Leroy & Siune, 1994; for the 1999 elections, see Peter, 2003). The period of investigation seems, therefore, appropriate for studying potential agenda-setting effects of a less visible issue.

The content analysis of the television news coverage was conducted for the 2 weeks prior to the June 1999 European elections. Per country, the main evening news outlet of both the most widely watched public broadcasting and private channel were selected. Because Belgium is divided into Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, evening news of the two most widely watched Dutch- and French-speaking channels were included. As an acknowledgment of the bicultural nature of Belgium, the Dutch- and French-speaking channels are analyzed separately throughout this study (for a similar procedure, see van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Given that no private channels exist in Austria or were of no importance in Ireland in 1999, only the public broadcasting channel with the largest reach was included in these two countries. Because only a minority watches the Greek public broadcasting channel ET1 (Seri, 2002), a second private channel was analyzed in Greece. Because of its limited reach in comparison to networks in other countries, the Luxemburger channel was not part of the analysis. For further information on the outlets investigated, see Appendix A.

The single news story (defined as semantic entity with at least one topic delimited from another story by a change of topic) presented the unit of analysis. Overall, 5,477 stories were coded. Detailed information about the number of stories coded in the various countries can be found in Appendix A. The news stories were coded by 37 native speakers who were trained during 6 weeks before coding, tested for intercoder reliability, and supervised throughout the whole coding period. For each country, the stories were randomly assigned to the coders. Because in cross-national comparative content analyses, differences between the countries can be the unintended result of lacking coordination of the various country groups, the coder trainers of the country groups were in daily contact to coordinate the coding in the country groups and to resolve problems. Moreover, the majority of the coding was centrally done at the University of Amsterdam to keep the coding process as comparable as possible.[5] For the reliability test, coders of all country groups had to code at least 18 randomly selected television stories per channel.[6]

To assess citizens' perceptions of the importance of further European integration along with the control variables, surveys carried out in the EU member states immediately after the European elections were used. The computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted from June 14 to July

8, 1999, and were in each country based on a nationally representative random sample of people older than 18 years of age. The sample size was at least 500 respondents in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden, and at least 1,000 respondents in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom.[7] The response rates varied between 28% in Greece and 59% in Denmark (see Appendix A for detailed information). These response rates are low, but this may not necessarily bias the results, as Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, and Presser (2000) have recently demonstrated.[8]

Measures—Dependent, Independent, and Control Variables

Because this study deals with a single issue, it is recommendable to operationalize importance perceptions slightly differently than is usually done with the so-called most-important-problem question. To assess the perceived importance of European integration, EU citizens were asked, "Thinking about European integration, is this compared to other important topics in [your country] a topic of great importance, some importance, little importance, or no importance at all?" The variable was inversely coded so that 4 means *great importance*.

The amount of EU coverage was operationalized as the sum of both EU stories and EU-related stories. EU stories were stories that either dealt with the European election campaign or other EU topics such as EU enlargement. EU-related stories were characterized by explicit reference to the EU, EU politics, or EU institutions. The average intercoder agreement was 98% for story topic and 92% for link to the EU.[9] Omitting EU-related stories and, thus, additional media information about the EU would not appropriately mirror the information people actually received about European integration from television news during the period of investigation. More generally, it seems important to account for the fact that the EU and European integration pervade domains that may gradually become Europeanized, for example, domestic or foreign politics. As Appendix A shows, EU-related stories had indeed some share in the coverage. Neither EU nor EU-related matters presented a top issue in the period of investigation. Nevertheless, the issue was not completely invisible, and countries and channels varied sufficiently for the purposes of this investigation.

Both types of stories were weighted by the prominence of the particular story. The prominence of the stories was operationalized by drawing on a formula, which Watt and van den Berg developed and validated in 1981 and which Watt, Mazza, and Snyder modified in 1993.[10] The formula is

$$P = \frac{TL_{Bulletin} - ST_{Story}}{TL_{Bulletin}} + \frac{L_{Story}}{AL_{Story/Bulletin}} + (A * F * 0.5)$$

where P = prominence of particular news story; $TL_{Bulletin}$ = total length of the particular bulletin coded (in seconds); ST_{Story} = starting time, that is, time from the start of the bulletin to the beginning of the particular story (in seconds); L_{Story} = length of the particular story coded (in seconds); $AL_{Story/Bulletin}$ = average length of the stories in the bulletin coded (in seconds); A = anchor present (coded 1 if yes); F = film material/video material present (coded 1 if yes).

Stories are the more prominent the earlier they begin in a bulletin, the longer they are, and if they are introduced by an anchor and visualized by film material. In the content analysis, the length of each story in a particular bulletin was measured in seconds. The sum of the length of all stories represents the total length of a particular bulletin ($TL_{Bulletin}$). By cumulating the length of stories within a particular bulletin, the starting time of a particular story within a bulletin (ST_{Story}) was computed. The average story length within a bulletin is simply the mean of the stories broadcast within that bulletin. The presence of an actor and the presence of film material were coded as dichotomous categories. The reliabilities were for length (metric variable) $r = .98$ and 95% for both the anchor category and the film material category.

EU stories and EU-related stories cannot be treated equally in terms of their potential impact on importance perceptions. To represent the relation of EU-related to elaborate EU stories, EU-related stories were multiplied with .5.[11] Both EU and EU-related stories were weighted by their prominence. The weighting of the stories by their prominence has been requested by a number of scholars who argued that people not only receive cues of the importance of issues by the frequency with which they occur but also by the length, placement, or presentation of stories in a bulletin (Brosius, 1994; McCombs, 1981; McCombs & Gilbert, 1986).

The consensual or polarized nature of elite opinion about the EU was operationalized via the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party. An anti-EU party was defined as a party that had, in a survey among experts (Ray, 1999), received on average a score of 2 (*opposed to European integration*) on a 7-point Likert-type scale.[12] Because the influence of a so-called sufficiently visible anti-EU party is to be assessed, parties had to have gained at least 5% of the votes in the latest general election (assessed with reference to the year 1999). In other words, a party that was rated as extremely opposed to European integration but that received less than 5% of the votes in the latest elections would not indicate the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party. The pertinent country would thus not be considered to have polarized

elite opinion. The visibility of the anti-EU parties ranged from 5.6% and 7.4% in Greece and Denmark via 12% in Sweden to 21.9% in Austria and 24.8% in France (for further information, see Appendix A). The anti-EU parties in these countries are thus all but marginalized extremist groups and can be considered to adequately represent polarized elite opinion about European integration.

A number of control measures were included in the analysis. The basic aim is to present a test as rigorous as possible for media measures to exert influence. In other words, only if factors that have been shown to affect opinions about further European integration are included and media measures are yet influential, one can be confident not to have found spurious effects. Appendix B gives a rationale for the control variables used and explicates their operationalization.

Missing Values

Trying to specify a model as rigorously as possible to test media effects usually comes at the cost of an increased number of missing values. The traditionally applied listwise deletion of missing values leads to a deletion of all respondents if they did not answer only one of the relevant questions. This entails not only a loss of valuable information but also a severe selection bias that has been shown to be as big a threat to the validity of inferences as omitted variables. Because about 50% of the respondents would be lost applying the model specified above, it seems necessary to impute the missing values. Therefore, I tried to logically reconstruct nonresponses by using related information provided by the remaining answers in the questionnaire.[13] In general, this led to a reduction of missing cases ranging between 30% and 70% for the particular variables. The remaining unsolvable missing cases were replaced either by mean substitution (for metric variables) or were recoded to the modal value (for dichotomies). The replacement of missing values with substantive values was done for the control variables with exception of the two support measures, which are generally hard to reconstruct. To minimize the danger of arbitrary data modification, the dependent variable was also excluded from this procedure.

Data Analysis

Because the sample sizes varied across countries, the data were weighted. The total sample size (without Luxembourg) was 13,248 respondents. Acknowledging the bicultural character of Belgium, the country was split in its Flemish and Wallonian part, resulting in 15 so-called systems for analysis.

The samples of each of the 15 systems were subsequently weighted such that each system had the same sample size while the original total sample size was preserved;[14] systems with a larger sample size were weighted down (usually with a factor around 0.9), and systems with a smaller sample size were weighted up (usually with a factor around 1.8).

The amount of EU coverage was assessed with the content analysis, weighted by story prominence as explained above, and was subsequently added, per country, to each respondent who regularly watched one or both of two news outlets content analyzed (for a similar procedure, see Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991). For example, in Britain, those respondents who watched BBC *9 o'clock news* or ITN's *News at 6:30* or both were assigned the pertinent EU coverage measures. This means that, per country, three different values were assigned. Because not all respondents regularly watched one or both of the outlets, the overall sample sized dropped to 8,863 respondents. However, the selected sample did not meaningfully deviate from the original sample. In addition, to each of the 15 systems it was added whether elite opinion was consensual (coded as 0) or polarized (coded as 1).

The expected cross-level interaction between the country-level factor nature of elite opinion and the individual exposure to EU coverage creates a problem with the estimation of the standard error. Because the data are located at two levels and because the respondents are, to some extent, nested in the particular country, the observations (or respondents) within a particular country are no longer independent. If this is not taken into account in the analyses (e.g., when regular OLS regression models are estimated), the standard error of especially the cross-level interaction effect is underestimated. This, in turn, leads to an increased chance of a Type I error. To avoid such problems, I used the so-called sandwich estimator of the standard error (Huber, 1967; White, 1980).[15] This way of estimating the standard error takes into account that the respondents within a particular cluster (i.e., system) are no longer independent and corrects the standard error accordingly (usually the corrected robust standard error is larger than its uncorrected counterpart, t values thus become less easily significant). The critical t values are assessed on the basis of number of clusters (i.e., systems) minus 1 degree of freedom, thus 14. This may lead to a slight underestimation of the significance of individual-level effects.

As outlined above, a cross-level interaction between amount of EU coverage and nature of elite opinion is expected. I will analyze this interaction effect following a procedure suggested by Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan (1990) and Aiken and West (1991). In a nutshell, this procedure entails post hoc probing of the interaction effects by plotting and testing the simple slopes for significant difference from zero. The term *simple slope* refers to the slopes of

Table 1
Impact of the Amount of European Union Coverage on the Perceived Importance of European Integration per Country

Country	Unstandardized Multiple Regression Coefficient	*SE*	Explained Variance
Flanders (n = 182)	.006	.003*	.54
Greece (n = 134)	.005	.002*	.35
Denmark (n = 716)	.003	.002*	.13
United Kingdom (n = 457)	.003	.006	.19
Germany (n = 662)	< .001	.002	.19
Italy (n = 1,663)	< .001	.001	.15
Portugal (n = 421)	< .001	.001	.25
The Netherlands (n = 639)	–.017	.007*	.10
Wallonia (n = 110)	–.009	.007	.32
Finland (n = 287)	–.003	.002	.16
Spain (n = 363)	–.001	.003	.10
Sweden (n = 362)	–.001	.002	.26
France (n = 577)	<– .001	.001	.10

Note. The coefficients presented in this table are controlled for all variables outlined in Appendix B. The analyses could not be done for Austria and Ireland, where only one public broadcasting outlet was analyzed and where the measure of amount of coverage thus lacks variance.
*p < .05.

the focal independent variable (i.e., amount of coverage) as conditional on the values of the moderating variable (i.e., nature of elite opinion). The statistical post hoc probing of the simple slope for significant difference from zero is based on (a) the computation of the various simple slopes at the values of the moderating variable, (b) the computation of the standard errors of each of the simple slopes, and (c) the computation of the t value of each of these slopes. The respective t value subsequently allows a check for significant difference from zero. Note that the required computations are not available in standard statistical software packages and have to be conducted separately. Because of limitations of space, I can neither explicate the logic of the procedure nor the relevant formulas here. However, Jaccard et al. (1990, pp. 26-28, 31-33) and Aiken and West (1991, chaps. 2 and 4) thoroughly discuss procedure and formulas.

Results

The first goal of this study was to test whether EU citizens who watched more EU coverage also perceived further EU integration to be more important.[16] If one analyzes the various countries separately as a first approach to the problem (see Table 1), no clear pattern emerges. Both positive and negative effects occurred, yet, if significant, effects were predominantly positive, except in the

Table 2
Interaction Effect of Amount of European Union Coverage and Nature of Elite Opinion on the Perceived Importance of European Integration

Item	Perceived Importance of European Integration	*SE*
Control variables		
Female	–.002	.029
Age	.001	.001
Education	.002	.003
In labor force	–.022	.021
Subjective social class	.033	.018
Interpersonal communication	–.032	.025
Party cues	–.011	.014
Left-right position	–.010	.006
Support for the EU	.313	.040***
Support for European integration	.001	.001
Political interest	.050	.018*
Need for orientation	–.108	.046*
Attention to EU news	.203	.029***
TV exposure	.002	.007
Newspaper exposure	–.011	.008
Number of TV news outlets	–.014	.019
Number of newspapers	–.004	.020
Conflict in EU coverage	.001	.002
Key variables		
Amount of EU coverage	–.001	.002
Polarized elite opinion	–.030	.103
Interaction effect		
Elite Opinion × Amount EU Coverage	.005	.001**
Constant	1.739	
R^2	.18	

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients. EU = European Union.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Netherlands. In other words, there was hardly any evidence of a homogeneous influence of the amount of EU coverage on importance perceptions. This suggests that country characteristics such as the nature of elite opinion may moderate whether the amount of EU coverage affects importance perceptions.

Was there evidence that the nature of elite opinion on further European integration conditioned whether the amount of EU coverage affected importance perceptions (second research goal)? As Table 2 shows, a significant interaction between the nature of elite opinion and the amount of coverage emerged ($b = .005, p < .01$). If one plots the predicted values of the model (see Figure 1), it becomes more easily comprehensible how the nature of elite opinion conditioned the influence of amount of coverage. For computational

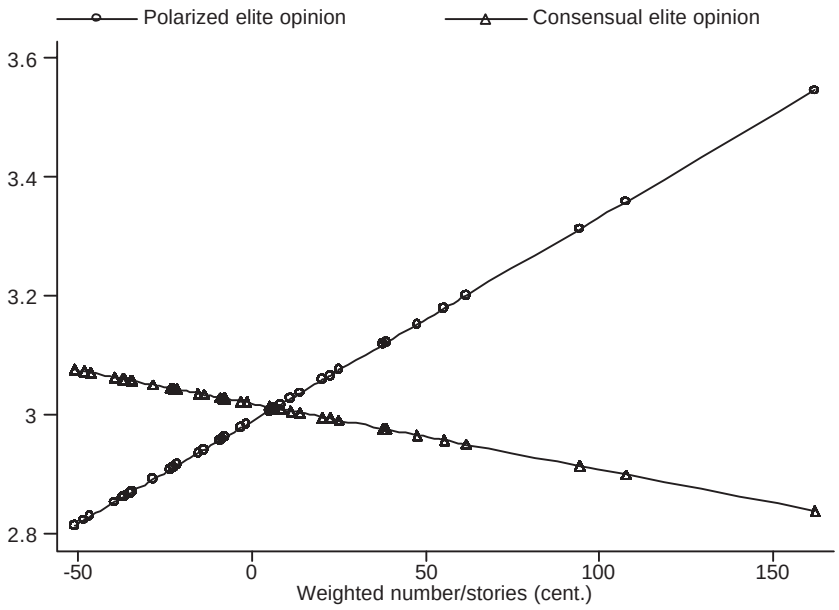

Figure 1. Visualization of the Interaction Effect of Amount of EU Coverage and Nature of Elite Opinion on the Perceived Importance of European Integration

Note. To compute the values of this figure, all control variables from Table 2 were set to their mean. EU = European Union.

reasons, the values of the weighted amount of coverage are centered. The sample mean of this variable is zero. Negative values indicate an amount of coverage below the sample mean, positive values indicate an amount of coverage above the sample mean. If elite opinion on further integration was polarized, higher amounts of EU coverage were indeed associated with perceptions of further EU integration as more important. However, if elite opinion was consensual, higher amounts of EU coverage seemed to be related to perceptions of European integration as less important.

To see whether this first impression is statistically tenable, the simple slopes (i.e., the slope of each line in Figure 1) have to be tested as to whether they differ significantly from zero. The simple slopes at the two values of elite opinion were as follows:[17]

$$SL_{e=0} = -1.1 \times 10^{-3} + 4.5 \times 10^{-3} \times 0 = 1.1 \times 10^{-3}$$
$$SL_{e=1} = -1.1 \times 10^{-3} + 4.5 \times 10^{-3} \times 1 = 3.4 \times 10^{-3}$$

To compute a t value for the two simple slopes, the standard error of both slopes has to be calculated first. The necessary values for the computation of the standard error of the simple slopes were obtained from the variance/covariance matrix of the regression coefficients, which is too large to be documented here. The standard error of the simple slope when elite opinion is consensual (i.e., the variable equals zero, subscript $e = 0$) or polarized (i.e., the variable equals 1, subscript $e = 1$) is[18]

$$SE_{e=0} = (2.8 \times 10^{-6} + 2 \times 0 \times [-1.7 \times 10^{-6}] + 0^2 \times [2.2 \times 10^{-6}])^{1/2} = 1.67 \times 10^{-3}$$
$$SE_{e=1} = (2.8 \times 10^{-6} + 2 \times 1 \times [-1.7 \times 10^{-6}] + 1^2 \times [2.2 \times 10^{-6}])^{1/2} = 1.26 \times 10^{-3}$$

The t values are obtained by dividing the slope by its standard error:

$$t_{e=0} = -1.1 \times 10^{-3} / 1.67 \times 10^{-3} = 0.6587 \ (ns)$$
$$t_{e=1} = 3.4 \times 10^{-3} / 1.26 \times 10^{-3} = 2.6984 \ (p < .05)$$

This post hoc probing investigates the effect of the amount of coverage a person is exposed to on individual importance perceptions as moderated by a particular context characteristic. As a consequence, the degrees of freedom for the assessment of the critical t value can be determined on the basis of the individual respondents. With 7,881 degrees of freedom, the critical t value is +1.96 (for positive values) or –1.96 (for negative values) for a coefficient to be significant at the 5% level (two-tailed). Consequently, the slope, when elite opinion was consensual (subscript $e = 0$), was not significant, whereas the slope was significant when elite opinion was polarized.[19] In other words, if people watched more EU stories in countries in which European integration was contentious among parties, they considered European integration to be more important. However, if people watched more EU stories in countries in which elite opinion about European integration was consensual, their importance perception of EU integration remained unaffected. Thus, the post hoc statistical probing of the interaction term has revealed that the initially visually detected negative relationship between amount of EU coverage and importance perception in countries with consensual elite opinion was random. However, the traditional agenda-setting pattern held in countries with polarized elite opinion.

Discussion

This study adds a third category of contingent conditions to research on agenda–setting, country characteristics. By adopting a cross-nationally

comparative perspective, the study showed that agenda-setting effects were not homogenous across countries. The effect of the amount of coverage on importance perceptions was conditional on the nature of elite opinion in the various countries. Moreover, the study demonstrated agenda-setting effects concerning an issue that receives less media attention than the top issues usually investigated in agenda-setting research. Three conclusions can be drawn.

First, agenda-setting research benefits from a cross-nationally comparative perspective. Agenda setting has been investigated with respect to many recipient and media variables (Winter, 1981) and has been found to depend on a variety of factors (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Rössler, 1997). Nevertheless, scholars who warned that agenda setting may not be spatially indifferent remained largely unnoticed (e.g., Merten, 1991). Evidence of agenda-setting processes in various countries seemed to corroborate a more universal character of agenda setting. However, this accumulation of single evidence from different countries cannot substitute for a cross-nationally comparative test of agenda setting. This study has shown with respect to a particular issue—EU integration studied during an identical period of time—that there was no homogenous, directionally consistent association between the amount of EU coverage and importance perceptions of European integration across the 15 systems. Higher amounts of EU coverage were not necessarily related to greater perceived importance of European integration. The initially confusing pattern was clarified by the contextual variable nature of elite opinion. Polarized elite opinion was conducive to the traditional agenda-setting pattern, although no agenda-setting effect occurred when elite opinion was consensual. Agenda setting, then, is not only dependent on certain recipient and media characteristics as established in previous research (Winter, 1981). Agenda setting is also contingent on the particular country context. Further research may find a fruitful task to further elaborate on this third group of contingent conditions of agenda setting.

Second, agenda-setting research may reveal interesting effects when focusing on issues that are not breaking news. The bias in agenda setting toward the investigation of top issues implies structural similarities among the top issues. Top issues typically share the news values of controversy, relevance, surprise, or important persons, and it is consequently virtually impossible for people not to find such issues important (at least as far as impersonal, abstract issues are concerned). With less frequently covered issues, the structure of issues and the response of the audience may be more versatile. In other words, there may be much more variation in audience response to the amount of coverage if the coverage does not impose the issue on the recipient.

The findings suggest that people's response to the coverage of a particular issue may be shaped by the nature of elite opinion about the issue. Whether people react in their importance perceptions to higher amounts of the coverage of an issue depends on the contentiousness of the issue among political elites. This finding was obtained when the level of conflict in EU coverage was controlled for. Thus, it is not the conflict-loaded character of the coverage that (indirectly) would shape citizens perceptions of the importance of the EU. Rather, it is the cues people get from polarization or consensus among elites that lead them to respond to media coverage more sensitively. Political elites disagreeing about European integration seem to sensitize citizens to the issue. Political elites agreeing about European integration seem to numb them.

Third, elite opinion about European integration is not only a powerful influence on what people think about Europe, it also conditions whether they think about Europe at all, and this might have far-reaching consequences. Typically, research has conceptualized the influence of elite opinion as having a direct impact on people's support for European integration (e.g., Janssen, 1991; Wessels, 1995). Recently, researchers have successfully begun to investigate indirect forms of elite opinion affecting support for European integration (Banducci et al., 2001). This study takes the moderating influence of elite opinion further (or some may say back) to importance perceptions. It may be an interesting question for future research to investigate whether the two findings concerning the moderated influence of media coverage on importance perceptions and support are related. As Miller and Krosnick (2000) have shown that the perception of issues as important conditions whether media coverage affects further judgments. If (a) elite opinion moderates agenda-setting effects, if (b) elite opinion moderates the effects of coverage on support for European integration, and if (c) agenda setting conditions media effects on other judgments (e.g., support), then media effects on support for European integration should be most pronounced among citizens in countries with polarized elite opinion and considerable amounts of EU coverage. Disentangling the various relationships may not only enrich our understanding of the antecedents of support for European integration but also about the ramifications of agenda setting.

This study has linked television coverage to importance measures in 14 EU countries and has investigated a largely neglected problem in agenda-setting research. Although the results provide new insights, there are at least three problems in the analysis that need to be briefly discussed. First, the question arises of whether the nature of elite opinion, too, is conveyed to the people by the media. If this is the case, the nature of elite opinion can possibly be captured more rigidly with characteristics of the media coverage. It would

be ignorant to argue against the fact that media and television in particular are the most important sources of information about the EU. However, there are also more direct sources of information about the EU (e.g., meetings, talks with EU representatives), especially during European election campaigns. More important, the substantive key variable of conflict in EU coverage was controlled for along with a lot of other media measures such as the number of outlets and newspapers people used and the degree of media exposure. This supports the notion that elite opinion as a country-level phenomenon may moderate the classic agenda-setting pattern independent of and beyond substantive characteristics of the coverage.

The second concern applies to the internal validity of the analysis. The study is based on a content analysis linked to a cross-sectional survey of people. Strictly speaking, this does not permit a clear reasoning that the media coverage changed individual importance perceptions. In terms of stringent causal reasoning, a baseline measure of respondents importance perceptions assessed before the content analysis was conducted would have been required. In other words, although the importance measures were collected after the content measures, it cannot be ruled out that there is merely a correlation between the media coverage and importance perceptions. Causally even more troublesome, it might be that journalists correctly picked up people's perceptions of the importance of European integration and adjusted the coverage accordingly. Assuming further that importance perceptions are stable and did not change over the period of investigation, there could have been actually effects of people's importance perceptions on the amount of EU coverage.

Similar problems have been widely discussed in agenda-setting research and scholars have tried to solve them with cross-lagged panel correlation designs (e.g., Tipton, Haney, & Baseheart, 1975) or time-series analyses (e.g., Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). However, such analyses are typically done at an aggregate level and are thus subject to ecological fallacy (for summary, see Rössler, 1997). Moreover, it does not seem feasible to apply such designs to comparative studies with 15 systems. In sum, this study can, strictly speaking, provide only evidence of an association between television coverage of the EU and individual importance perceptions. However, given the trade-off between comparative research at an individual level of analysis and internally more valid, yet still problematic designs, the findings of this study seem encouraging.

A third concern may relate to the time lag between media coverage and people's response. Several studies have investigated the optimal time lag for agenda-setting effects to occur (e.g., Wanta & Hu, 1994; Winter & Eyal, 1981). Tentatively, one may conclude that, for nonlocal television news, the optimal

time lag lies somewhere between 1 and 2 weeks when the analysis is to be conducted at the individual level (Rössler, 1997). This suggests that, for the respondents interviewed between June 21 and July 4, the agenda-setting effects should be the strongest, which may introduce somewhat of a bias into the sample. Conversely, one may argue that the design of this study does not take into account forgetting about media contents and assumes that people perfectly remember what they have watched some time ago. Watt et al. (1993) and Zhu, Watt, Snyder, Yan, and Jiang (1993) have suggested an effect decay curve to take memory decay into account, but investigated it only at the aggregate level of analysis.

Unfortunately, such modeling was not possible in this study because of systematically missing data.[20] However, it must be clearly stated that time-lag problems and unrealistic assumptions about cognitive processes plague the vast majority of studies in the field and it is by no means clear to what extent they distort the findings.

In conclusion, this study shows that agenda-setting research may benefit from also studying less visible issues. More importantly, a cross-nationally comparative perspective may enrich our understanding of agenda setting. As was demonstrated for the nature of elite opinion, country characteristics may enable or impair the occurrence of agenda setting and present a third category of contingent conditions of agenda setting. Greater media attention to a particular issue does not automatically increase the perceived importance of the issue among the public. The emergence of the traditional agenda-setting pattern rather depends on the country context. Media may be stunningly successful in telling people what to think about. But specific country characteristics may be even more successful in shaping whether this process takes place at all.

Appendix A

Table A1: Background Information and Figures

Country	Channels Analyzed	Number of Stories	EU Stories	EU-Related Stories	Elite Opinion Polarized	Response Rate Survey
Austria	ORF, ZiB (pb)	142	22	21	Yes—Freedom Party, nationalist, 21.9%	50.4
Belgium–Flanders	VTR, Het Journaal (pb)	245	3	35	No	37.0
	VTM, Nieuws (pr)	235	2	28		
Belgium–Wallonia	La Une, JT Meteo (pb)	237	8	30	No	37.0
	RTL, Le Journal (pr)	249	8	33		
Denmark	TV1, TV-Avisen (pb)	131	16	20	Yes—Danish Peoples Party, nationalist, 7.4%	59.0
	TV2, Nyhederne (pr)	141	10	12		
Finland	Yle, Finish News (pb)	145	22	11	No	41.2
	MTV3, News (pr)	128	8	4		
France	TF1, Le Journal (pr)	343	18	25	Yes—French Communist Party, communist, 9.9%; National Front, nationalist, 14.9%	44.0
	F2, Le Journal (pb)	304	36	20		
Germany	ARD, Tagesschau (pb)	174	9	29	No	49.3
	RTL, RTL Aktuell (pr)	185	2	16		
Greece	Antenna, Ta Nea Tou (pr)	254	15	25	Yes—Communist Party, communist, 5.6%	28.0
	Mega, Kentriko deltio (pr)	169	15	17		
	ET1, News (pb)	187	53	19		
Ireland	RTE1, News (21:00) (pb)	125	5	15	No	29.4
Italy	Rai Uno, TG1 (pb)	198	22	22	No	Internet panel
	Canale5, TG5 (pr)	172	10	24		

The Netherlands	NOS, Het Journaal (pb)	90	2	6	No	30.2
	RTL, Nieuws (pr)	129	2	7		
Portugal	RTP1, News (pb)	186	23	10	No	44.5
	SIC, News (pr)	185	16	5		
Spain	TVE1, Telediario (pb)	324	7	13	No	Quota sample
	Tele5, Telecino (pr)	273	9	18		
Sweden	TV2, Rapport (pb)	153	18	11	Yes—Left Party, socialist, 12%	31.0
	TV4, Nyheterna (pr)	119	12	8		
United Kingdom	BBC, Nine OClock News (pb)	132	7	8	No	49.0
	ITV, News at 6.30 (pr)	122	6	3		

Note. EU = European Union; (pb) = public broadcasting; (pr) = private.

Appendix B
Operationalization of Control Variables

The set of control variables was created with respect to findings from both agenda-setting research and studies on cognitions about European integration. As result of a review of agenda-setting research, Rössler (1997, pp. 283-284) distilled an explanatory model that includes, among others, the following variables: age, gender, education, media use and exposure, and need for orientation.[21] Research on the antecedents of cognitions about European integration has focused on utilitarian motives (e.g., Gabel, 1998; McLaren, 2002), party cues (e.g., Franklin, Marsh, & McLaren, 1994), or the position on the left-right spectrum (e.g., Budge, Robertson, & Hearl, 1987; McLaren, 2002).

I included six more control variables of varying specificity: political interest, attentiveness to news about the European Union (EU), interpersonal communication, support for the EU, support for further European integration, and the level of conflict in the coverage. Political interest has often been discussed in agenda-setting research (e.g., McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974; Wanta, 1997; Weaver et al., 1981). Drew and Weaver (1990) and McLeod and McDonald (1985) have shown that attention to media content presents an essential additional measure complementing the measure media exposure. Scholars often regard interpersonal communication as potential protection against media messages (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; and more recently, Schmitt-Beck, 2000). It should therefore be controlled for. The two support measures were included because cognitions about the EU and European integration cannot be assumed to present a coherent, consistent, and logical entity. What has been found for political opinions in general (e.g., Zaller & Feldman, 1992), may even more apply to EU-related cognitions as Anderson (1998) has argued. Moreover, several studies on citizens knowledge, awareness, and information about European integration have shown that EU citizens know little about EU-level politics (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Janssen, 1991). This suggests that people may try to rationalize and render consistent the little they know about European integration. Therefore, I include the two support measures even though the two may not have a causally clearly unidirectional relationship with importance perceptions. The emergence of potential media effects is only robust if the alternative explanation of rationalized answers is controlled for. Finally, the level of conflict in the coverage was also controlled for. One could argue that polarized or consensual nature of elite opinion primarily shapes the level of conflict in the stories but does not drive the pattern specified above. To preclude this, the level of conflict in the coverage has to be controlled for.

Table B1: Operationalization of the Control Variables

Variable	(Re-)Coding and Question Wording (where necessary)
Gender	0 (*male*), 1 (*female*).
Education	"How old were you when you stopped full-time education?" If still studying, age was coded. Maximum age was set to 26 to avoid distortion of older people still/again studying.
In labor force	0 (*no*), 1 (*yes*).
Subjective social class	1 (*working class*) to 5 (*upper class*).
Interpersonal communication	"How often did you . . . during the two or three weeks before the European election . . . talk to friends or family about the election?" where 1 (*never*) to 3 (*often*).
Party cues	(a) Identification of party proximity with probability to vote for a particular party, from 1 (*not at all probable*) to 10 (*very probable*); (b) identification of perceived party position on European integration, from 1 (*unification has already gone too far*) to 10 (*unification should be pushed further*); (c) if answer to item a ≥ 6, then answer to item b represents party cue. If multiple answers to item a ≥ 6, then the average of item b was computed. If all answers to item a ≤ 6, then party cue was set to 5.5.
Left-right position	1 (*left*) to 10 (*right*).
Support for the EU	"Generally speaking, do you think that [your country's] membership of the European Union is a . . ." from 1 (*bad thing*) to 3 (*good thing*).
Support for European integration	"Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say that it already has gone too far. What is your opinion?" from 1 (*unification has already gone too far*) to 10 (*unification should be pushed further*).
Political interest	"To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?" from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very*).
Need for orientation	"Do you think you are sufficiently well-informed or not sufficiently well-informed about the politics of the European Union?" with dichotomous response category where 0 (*not sufficiently well informed*).
Attention EU news	"How much attention do you pay to news about Europe?" from 1 (*none*) to 4 (*a lot*).
Newspaper/TV exposure	Normally per week, thus on 1 to 7 days.
Number TV outlets/newspapers	Sum of the TV channels/newspapers used.
Conflict in EU coverage	Explicit mentioning of conflict/disagreement in EU stories and EU–related stories (intercoder agreement: 79%). Then weighted by the prominence of the particular story and summed across all days per outlet. If conflict in EU–related stories, multiplication with 0.5 to represent relation between EU stories and EU–related stories.

Note. EU = European Union.

Notes

1. Obtrusive issues may also lead to more pronounced agenda-setting effects (Demers, Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989). This finding is theoretically integrated with the cognitive priming hypothesis stating that personal experience cognitively primes or sensitizes people to messages about a particular issue. Other researchers have conceptualized obtrusiveness of an issue as characteristic of the recipient rather than as predetermined characteristic of the issue (e.g., Lasorsa & Wanta, 1990), which is in line with the concept of a person's issue sensitivity (Erbring et al., 1980; Rössler, 1997). Although the turn from a message-oriented to a recipient-oriented perspective has been an important advancement in agenda-setting research, it is of limited use for the problem of this study. It is not plausible to assume that, among all EU citizens, there are very many differing degrees of issue sensitivity. The vast majority is not even slightly sensitized to EU issues as, for example, the consistently low awareness levels of EU institutions show (Anderson, 1998; Janssen, 1991).

2. Referring to the danger of ecological fallacy, several scholars have emphasized the problems of generalizing from aggregate-level data to individual-level media effects (e.g., Becker, 1982; Rössler, 1997; Weaver, 1982; Zhu, 1992). Interestingly, McCombs and Shaw (1972) mentioned the problem in their classic agenda-setting study: "This [i.e., aggregate level analysis] is satisfactory as a first test of the agenda-setting hypothesis, but subsequent research must move from a broad societal level to the psychological level, matching individual attitudes with individual use of the mass media" (p. 185). The problems of aggregate-level analyses also present a rationale against the investigation of a single issue at the aggregate level across multiple countries, which might appear to be an alternative to the design chosen for this study.

3. However, particularly in political science-based research, there are several studies demonstrating how political elites try or indeed influence issue definitions and opinion processes, for example, Caldeira (1987), Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1989), and Marshall (1987).

4. The surveys are part of the 1999 European Election Study (EES). The EES was funded by grants from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO), the German Federal Press and Information Agency, the CIS (Spain), the University of Mannheim, Germany, and Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. A consortium of European survey organizations directed by IPSOS, Germany, carried out the fieldwork. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the sponsors bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations published here.

5. The Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish coders worked at their home institutions in Genoa, Athens, Lisbon, and Madrid. However, coder trainers had visited all country groups and intensively trained the coders at the various locations. Moreover, the coder trainers closely monitored the coders work throughout the whole coding phase.

6. For Germany, only 12 stories were coded. No reliabilities were assessed for Spain, but the coding was carefully monitored throughout the coding process. Only one coder coded the Danish news. The coding was, however, closely checked by the coder trainer.

7. In Italy, an already existing Internet panel with 3,708 respondents was used. In this Internet panel, respondents participated in a number of surveys. One of these surveys was the survey conducted immediately after the European elections. The Spanish sample is a quota sample.

8. Moreover, it should be taken into account that the computation of the response rates is based on a very conservative definition of the net sample, which includes the relatively high amount of losses of respondents who could not be contacted at all. The

fact that no contact at all was made with the person to be interviewed might, however, also indicate corporate lines, fax numbers, and so forth (i.e., quality-neutral losses). A less conservative definition of the net sample would have resulted in higher response rates.

9. The reliability score for story topic refers to the recoded topic as it is used in this study.

10. Note that I added the presence of an anchor to Watt, Mazza, and Snyders (1993) formula. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that some outlets (e.g., the German ones) present short news blocks in which no anchor introduces the story. In the formula used by Watt et al. (1993), this has not been taken into account and would lead to an overestimation of the prominence of such short news stories.

11. Separate analyses for EU stories and EU–related stories (not shown) revealed the same effect pattern as presented in the Results section. However, when only EU–related stories were analyzed, the effects became weaker and were only significant at the 10% level. In addition, I checked different weights for EU–related stories ranging from 1.0 (unweighted) to 0.1. Generally, the effect size increased when the weighting factor decreased, but the basic effect pattern remained significant even when EU–related stories were not weighted. Nevertheless, I decided against the unweighted option because it seems inappropriate to assign the same potential impact to both stories that elaborately deal with the EU and to stories that only marginally refer to the EU. Conversely (and as outlined above), it would misrepresent the pervasive supranational character of the EU and European integration to omit EU–related stories from the analysis.

12. The results from Ray's 1996 survey are used.

13. For example, if a respondent had not placed himself or herself on the left-right scale but had indicated the likelihood of voting particular parties, his or her left-right position could be concluded from where he or she had placed the particular party on the left-right scale. Similarly, political interest was estimated from people's participation in political events; attention to European news was deduced from people's exposure to European election news, news exposure from media use, and so forth.

14. Dividing the total sample of 13,248 respondents by 15 systems results in a typical sample size of 883.2. This is subsequently divided by the actual number of respondents per system to obtain the weighting factor for each system.

15. Most recently, Steenbergen and Jones (2002) suggested and employed multilevel modeling as solution to this problem. However, in the context of this study, three important caveats against multilevel modeling have to be raised. First, cross-nationally comparative research on the EU usually does not meet the requirements of proper multilevel models. Multilevel modeling typically requires the contextual units (here, countries) to be randomly sampled, which is not the case in this study. Second, multilevel models presuppose sufficient power to test cross-level interactions. Scholars agree that at least 20 to 25 contextual units (here, systems) are necessary for meaningful multilevel modeling (e.g., Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). In the context of the EU and its 15 member states, this is not possible. Third, Steenbergen and Jones (2002) "caution researchers against blindly using these models [i.e., multilevel models] in data analysis" (p. 235). Instead, they also suggest more traditional ways of correcting standard errors in hierarchical data, for example, the sandwich estimation of the standard error used in this study.

16. For reasons of linguistic ease, I will keep on using the terms *watching more EU coverage* and *amount of EU coverage*, although they do not fully reflect the operationalization of the concept that weights the number of EU stories by its prominence.

17. The simple slopes were computed by substituting the values obtained in Table 2 in $(b_1 + b_3Z)$. This simple slope results from transforming the original regression equation $Y = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Z + b_3XZ + e$ into $Y = (b_1 + b_3Z)X + b_2Z + b_0 + e$ where Y represents

the perceived importance, X is the amount of coverage, and Z is the nature of elite opinion. Control variables are omitted for didactic reasons. For further information on the modeling of interaction effects, see Aiken and West (1991, chap. 2).

18. The formula used is: $SE = (s_{11} + 2Zs_{13} + Z^2 s_{33})^{1/2}$ where s_{11} is the estimated variance of coefficient b_1 in the previous footnote, s_{13} is the estimated covariance of coefficient b_1 and b_3 and s_{33} is the variance of coefficient b_3. Z represents the nature of elite opinion. For derivation and further explication of this formula, see Aiken and West (1991, chap. 2).

19. Even if the significance testing is done at the basis of 14 degrees of freedom (number of systems minus 1) in line with the original analyses in Table 2, the effect when elite opinion is polarized is still significant at better than the .05 level. However, setting the degrees of freedom to 14 presents a very rigorous test, which seems in this post hoc probing of the interaction effect not appropriate given the conceptualization of the effects as individual-level effects.

20. In the Italian sample, no date of interview was collected.

21. Rössler (1997) also included other variables such as the size and structure of a persons personal network, issues sensitivity, strength of personality, political knowledge, or communicative style. Because the analysis presented here is a secondary analysis, these variables were not available.

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