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Converging towards Euroscepticism? Negativity in news coverage during the 2014 European Parliament elections in Germany and the UK

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Abstract

In the run up to the 2014 European Parliament elections, the new *Spitzenkandidaten* process and European-wide party campaigns were considered a mechanism to create a more engaged European public. However, right-wing Eurosceptic party groupings gained a significant minority of the seats in the 2014 EP elections. We place this in the context of media and public sphere dynamics of politicised EP elections that have given selective salience to Euroscepticism. We discuss two interrelated media biases that explain this convergence of public debates towards Euroscepticism: a media negativity bias in the selection and tonality of EU news and a media polity bias that privileges contestation of the constitutional make-up of the EU over political and policy-based debates. To investigate these media biases empirically, we analyse EP election news during the 2014 European Parliament elections, taking Germany and the UK as ideal-type cases. We find that the UK news demonstrates a strong negative bias towards the EU *polity*, whereas in Germany EP debates focus more strongly on EU *politics* and *policies* and in fact demonstrate a positivity bias with regard to assessments of the legitimacy of the EU polity.

Keywords:

Politicisation, European Parliament elections, media negativity, polity contestation, Germany, UK

Words: 7,938

Introduction

In recent decades, increasing opportunities for contestation between parties in the EP has been seen as a key strategy for promoting EU-level participation, thus strengthening EU democracy. In this vein, the 2014 EP election introduced the new *Spitzenkandidaten* strategy in which the main party groupings in the EP selected leading candidates for European Commission President. This strategy was intended to encourage debate ‘about politics in, not only of, the EU’ (Follesdal & Hix, 2006, p. 554). Introducing an element of competition over political office would thus trigger ‘government-opposition’ conflicts at EU level and encourage citizens to express preferences towards EU policies or politicians (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Hobolt, 2014). The democratic legitimacy of the EU would thus be enhanced through Europeanised public spheres in which EU actors are visible and EU issues are debated and contested (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2010).

However, Eurosceptic parties achieved unprecedented success in the 2014 elections. Right-wing Eurosceptic party groupings altogether gained a significant minority of the seats – the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), formed by former British Prime Minister David Cameron in 2009, won 70 seats (9.32 per cent), and two newly formed groups – Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom won 48 (6.39 per cent) and 39 (5.2 per cent) respectively. Even though the salience of the EU in the news increased between the 2009 and 2014 EP elections, (Kleinnijenhuis & van Atteveldt, 2016), this politicisation of the EU in public debates is often driven by more fundamental conflicts about EU constitutional issues, the EU’s external relations or crisis (de Wilde et al., 2013; Hutter et al., 2016). The intended politicisation of the EP elections has therefore not necessarily happened along the left/right spectrum but along identitarian lines (Grande and Kriesi 2015, Hooghe and Marks 2009). Public debates in different national contexts can thus also converge on Euroscepticism and not on the *Spitzenkandidaten* who are more likely to campaign on a party political basis rather than contest European integration as such. Through salience given to Eurosceptic actors and debates over the legitimacy of the EU, Europeanisation of EP election campaigns can take place in such a way as to contribute to the development of ‘Eurosceptic’ public spheres (Bijsmans et al., 2017; Gattermann & Vasilopoulou, 2017). We explore the way in which different national public spheres can

shape the politicization of EP election campaigns in ways not always complementary to the objectives of the *Spitzenkandidaten* strategy.

To do this, we explore two interrelated public sphere and media biases that account for the convergence on Euroscepticism in public debates about the EU: a bias towards negativity in the selection and framing of EP election news and a bias towards polity contestation over policy or political contestation. Here, we speak of ‘media bias’ in relation to the agenda setting role and priming effects of the media (Entman, 2007). Selection and framing mechanisms apply in decisions about what kind of news items to prioritise: bad news over neutral or good news, partisan coverage or ‘horse-race’ news about candidates over policy issues (D'Alessio & Allen, 2006; Niven, 2001). Both negativity and polity biases in the media representation of EU elections allow us to distinguish EU politicisation as a case of ‘opposition of principle’, which represents EU politics primarily as a struggle over national interests and systematically disregards partisan competition about *politics* and *policies* (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

In our comparative content analysis of EP election news coverage in the UK and in Germany, we shed light on the key differences in media selection and framing as a main characteristic of the differentiated politicisation of European public spheres (De Wilde et al. 2015). In the case of the UK, the success of UKIP in 2014, and by extension the vote to leave the EU in 2016, is explained in the context of a strong negative bias in relation to EU *polity* debates, whereas in Germany negativity is primarily related to debates about EU *politics* and *policies*. In fact, we find that German news demonstrates a positivity bias in the context of debates about the EU polity. The article therefore contributes to our understanding of the importance of media biases in the analysis of politicised European election campaigns and argues for an inclusion of tone and type of conflict into studies of partisan contestation of the EU. We go beyond existing studies of negativity in the context of EU news by examining the intersection of tone with types of conflict. With an original dataset, we argue that negativity in the German context is part of partisan democratic politics at EU level, which is met with a positivity bias in relation to the EU polity, but it contributes to the fundamental delegitimization of the EU in the UK.

Taking media logics seriously

When considering the role of the media as a driving force of EU politicisation, the focus is often laid on external mobilisation strategies of political actors. European public sphere researchers assume that political parties and candidates can impact on public opinion by making their claims visible in the media (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). The greater visibility of EU and European actors in the public debates the more Europeanised the public sphere is considered to be (see also Risse, 2010). Regarding the 2014 elections, scholars have found wide variation in visibility of the lead candidates across the EU (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1534). There are also differences in the scope of articles – Schulze (2016), for example, finds that German journalists are more likely to write about the EP elections from the perspective of EU actors, whereas the UK coverage is predominantly national. Media salience of EU actors is further found to correlate with a better knowledge of candidates and a higher likelihood of turning out to vote (Gattermann et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015).

EU politicisation is however also shaped by internal media logics. Journalistic practices of news selection and framing account for systematic biases in the way political actors are made salient and meaning is attributed to EU stories. Media frame analysis has contributed to our understanding of Europeanisation as the convergence of meaning structures across national public spheres (Risse, 2010; Sifft et al., 2007). The framing of Europe constructs European identity and accounts for shifting patterns of support and opposition to European integration. When news stories focus on the Euro crisis, for instance, the visibility of candidates in EU news is not an indicator of support for European integration but often generates opposition or enhances Eurosceptic attitudes (Kleinnijenhuis & van Atteveldt, 2016). In the same vein, the news coverage of the EU crisis is found to give selective salience to Eurosceptic actors and lower visibility to EU actors and their policies (Boomgaarden et al., 2013, pp. 621-623). EU politicisation does therefore not necessarily lead to a more Europeanised public sphere, but is rather a symptom of growing Euroscepticism in the media and the national framing of EU debates (Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009, p. 40). To understand the development of politicised EU elections in the context of growing Euroscepticism, it is, therefore, necessary to consider not only exogenous mobilisation strategies of political parties, but also how endogenous media logics contribute to the shaping of public discourse about the EU (de Wilde et al., 2013). We therefore suggest taking media autonomy seriously and turn towards the role of the news media as a driver, amplifier and interpreter of EU contestation (Statham & Trenz, 2012). The focus then shifts to understanding the work of

journalism and its potential biases as important intervening variables that shape political discourse about the EU.

We discuss two potential biases of EU news coverage that drive EU politicisation in partial independence of the campaigning efforts of political parties and candidates or the *Spitzenkandidaten* strategies. The first media bias relates to the tonality of the debate. One consistent finding across news formats and cultures is that bad news is more newsworthy than good news (Soroka, 2014). This is an incentive for journalists, who work in an increasingly competitive environment, to apply negativity filters to political news as a way to increase the value of their product (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Of particular relevance for EU coverage is that media negativity relates, in particular, to foreign news coverage where other criteria for news selection (like familiarity, personalisation, or cultural proximity) are less readily available (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Entman, 2004). Attention to distant events is more easily drawn when stories convey a notion of threat or when the integrity of particular actors and institutions can be undermined. Negativity can lead to distrust in politicians, political cynicism and depress political engagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), particularly negativity that focuses on strategy or personal characteristics of candidates (Crigler et al., 2006). Indeed, scholars have analysed the tone of EU news and found that exposure to negative evaluations of the EU leads to more support for Eurosceptic parties (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014).

Following Lengauer et al. (2011), we distinguish between overall non-directional negativity and directional negativity targeted towards different types of actors. Our first hypothesis is therefore that a media negativity filter applies in the overall framing of EU news stories and in the selection of statements from political actors. With regard to generic news framing, we expect to find an overall non-directional negativity bias in news stories and sources (H1a), suggesting a general preference for bad news over good news, for example, stories and sources that discuss crisis or failure instead of success. As a result, journalists would display a preference for overall negatively framed news stories (story-level negativity) as well as give preference to negative quotes from political actors (source-level negativity). In line with expectations regarding negative tone towards candidates, we also expect to find a tendency for domestic and EU political actors and parties to be discussed negatively in articles and sources through directional negativity (H1b). Drawing on our country-based expectations and to explore the differentiated role of national public spheres, we further expect that in

countries which are favourable to integration and have highly Europeanised public spheres (Germany), actors who discuss the EU negatively will be foreign, whereas in countries which are less Europeanised but discuss the EU in dominantly negative terms (UK) the debate will be mainly driven by domestic actors with only low salience given to foreign actors (H1c). Increasing the media salience of the EU through politicised EP elections, then, would result in more negativity about the EU. Negative tone alone does not, however, necessarily mean that the EU is delegitimised. Indeed, negativity in news can be understood as a form of democratic accountability (Soroka, 2014). In the context of elections, negativity in the form of coverage slanted towards one candidate over another can also mobilise turnout and promote political knowledge and awareness of candidates (Dunaway et al., 2015; Scheufele, 2008). It is therefore important to interpret media negativity in relation to a second potential media bias, which involves the type of conflict amplified by the media.

In the EU setting, such an element of fundamental conflict is introduced by translating politics into polity contestation. Rather than promoting contestation between European political candidates, European elections are often found to debate questions of membership or ‘different visions of democracy in the European Union’ (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1538; see also Treib, 2014). According to Mair (2013, pp. 109-110), national politicians intentionally focus on such polity issues during EU elections, issues upon which the EP is ineffective, while debating the EU polity is avoided during national elections when there could be an impact on the choice of government and its EU preferences, in order to avoid external constraints. The news media are, however, also found to play an active role in amplifying such fundamental polity conflicts (de Wilde et al., 2013). National media has also been found to ignore the ‘everyday’, ‘bread and butter’ politics of the EU and focus instead on crises, EU summits and further integration (van Noije, 2010).

Accordingly, our second hypothesis is that a ‘media polity filter’ applies to the framing of EU news stories and selection of sources in a way that challenges the legitimacy of the EU in fundamental terms. As a result of this second bias, journalists would relate EP election news articles to the constitutional make-up of the EU, often but not necessarily in nationalist terms or through identity conflicts, rather than ideological or partisan contestations, and select sources that discuss the EU in these terms (H2a). They would also disproportionately rely on sources from Eurosceptic/populist actors who generally contest the EU in these terms, rather than those interested primarily in discussing EU policy choices such as mainstream EU actors

(H2b). Promoting partisan competition during EP elections would thus increase the predominance of EU polity rather than policy contestation, turning the multi-dimensional field of EU electoral politics into a bipolar constellation in which national self-determination and EU sovereignty fundamentally oppose each other.

The question is how these two systematic media biases are amplified during EP election campaigns, particularly in relation to the new *Spitzenkandidaten* concept which was intended to a) enhance the legitimacy of the EU system and generate trust in EU institutions and b) open an arena of politics driven by partisan contestation over EU policies and candidates. To explore the relationship between these two biases, we distinguish between negativity in the context of normal political debate over politics or policy and negativity in the context of EU polity contestation. Existing studies of negativity in EU news coverage do not take account of these different manifestations of negativity in this way (Usherwood & Wright, 2017). While negative tone towards the EU polity does not necessarily reveal a negative evaluation of European integration, it nevertheless deviates from electoral contestation that is expected to control EU policies or reflect EU partisan politics and not to engage in system opposition. To further identify between negativity that fosters distrust in the EU, we introduce an additional concept which modifies Easton's (1965) concepts of 'specific' and 'diffuse' support to differentiate between 'specific' negativity directed towards the EU's institutions or representatives or 'diffuse negativity' towards a vague or general notion of 'Europe' or 'Brussels'. Diffuse negativity towards the EU is considered to be more damaging for EU legitimacy than specific negativity which may indicate dissatisfaction with particular institutions but not necessarily a delegitimisation of the integration project as a whole. Our third hypothesis therefore relates to the country differences in our case selection: we expect that the negativity bias remains specific and confined to the level of EU partisan and policy contestation in articles and actor statements in contexts where support for the EU remains high (the case of Germany) (H3a), but expect that diffuse negativity and a 'negative polity bias' applies to news stories and the selection of sources in contexts where support for European integration is generally low (the case of the UK) (H3b).

In the following, we wish to consider how media biases shape public debates and campaigning in different countries. In the case of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, we expect that national media contexts impact on coverage EP candidates receive. In Germany Euroscepticism receives relatively little support by political parties and the media. There has

traditionally been a strong pro-European consensus amongst German political elites, who have considered the country to be the '*Musterknabe*' (model boy) of European integration (Lees, 2002) and resulted in generally positive messages about the EU in the German media. Germany has thus been viewed as having a strong 'European vocation' where German and European interests overlap (Paterson, 2011). Furthermore, the two main *Spitzenkandidaten* - Martin Schulz and Jean-Claude Juncker - were German-speaking and regularly gave interviews in German, which is expected to assist their inclusion in the German media. Nevertheless, the newly formed Alternative for Germany (AfD) won seven seats in the 2014 election. While the party could, at the time, be categorised as a 'soft Eurosceptic' party (Arzheimer, 2015) the result was nevertheless significant in a country with a long-standing pro-European consensus.

The UK, however, has long been considered the EU's 'awkward partner' (George, 1994) with traditionally high levels of Euroscepticism. In 2014, UKIP was a growing challenge to the mainstream parties and in 2013 David Cameron had promised to hold a referendum on EU membership should the Conservatives win a majority in the 2015 general election. The UK's liberal media system has a long history of negative coverage of the EU, exercising 'destructive dissent' in their reporting of European integration (Daddow, 2012), particularly as a result of newspaper ownership becoming concentrated in a small number of billionaire proprietors who have ideological and financial reasons for opposing the EU. Compared with other countries, British EU correspondents have less knowledge of the EU institutions and EU politics (van Noije, 2010, p. 261). Although the UK press has been described as the 'most parochial' in the EU (Pfetsch et al., 2004), the looming possibility of a referendum and the salience of the Euro crisis in recent years would be expected to have increased the visibility of EU issues in the UK press during the 2014 election campaign. At the same time, although they speak English, both *Spitzenkandidaten* were 'foreign' for the UK and neither have strong connections to the country. While the two country studies cannot be generalized across the EU-28, they can serve as ideal-type cases that demonstrate the relationship between the two media biases of negativity and polity contestation.

Operationalisation

To account for a media negativity bias as an element of news coverage of EP election campaigning we analyse *tonality* at two interrelated levels: a) story-level negativity (as

attributed to the journalists); b) source-level negativity (as attributed to particular actors in their statements covered by the news). Adapting the standardised coding instructions from Lengauer et al. (2011), we rank the tone of journalistic story-telling on a scale from negative (-1), neutral/ambivalent (0) to positive (1). A set of indicators for negative and positive tone (such as failure, crisis, frustration, etc. vs. success, achievement, enthusiasm) was used to support the coders' choices. We code for overall non-directional negativity, as well as negativity directed at different actors, that is, whether a negative story targets its negativity at the EU (in a 'specific' or 'diffuse' way), or towards domestic national, opposition or populist opposition actors (here, actors such as UKIP in the UK or AfD in Germany). Coding for directional tone allows us to differentiate between stories or statements that are generally negative but, for example, attribute blame for crises to national governments, and those that are negative in tone towards EU actors or institutions. This allows us to differentiate between general negativity and negativity most likely to provoke diffuse anger or distrust in the EU specifically.

In addition to this basic coding at story level, we measure the statements of particular actors quoted in the articles along the same criteria, thus shifting the emphasis from the positive or negative framings of EU news stories by journalists to the dimensions of actor contestations in the news. Borrowing from claims-making analysis (Koopmans & Statham, 2010), we also code for type of actor (government, legislative, etc.) and scope (e.g. EU, national). We also code for actor country as well as party family along the lines of radical and populist right, conservative, liberal, social democrat, green and radical and populist left¹. We are thus able to show to what extent news coverage in the member states awards high salience to radical/populist right actors, and whether the coverage of EP election campaigning focuses primarily on the EU or national representatives.

To account for the polity bias, we use *generic frames* to measure the dimension of articles and actor statements along the conflict lines of policy, politics and polity, and scope of article (EU, national, other EU member state, etc.). These are not particular story lines or interpretive frames to be reconstructed through qualitative discourse analysis (see Patterson,

¹ We adapted Statham et al.'s (2010) categorisation of party families, including under 'radical or populist right' parties such as *UKIP* and the *AfD* to the right of mainstream conservative parties. Radical/populist left would include parties such as *Die Linke* in Germany and *Syriza* in Greece.

2000, p. 11), nor a measure of evaluation or opinion, but a simple measurement of the conflict dimension. Generic frames have the advantage of providing a reliable measurement for cross-national comparative analysis: they directly test thesis and antithesis in our variables and they are irrespective of specific topics and actors. Articles and actor statements were coded as EU *polity* if they dealt with issues relating to the institutional make-up of the EU, its competences, authority or membership. EU and national *politics* related to the ‘horse race’: articles focused on candidates or partisan competition. Articles and statements were coded as *policy* when they related to the shape or application of particular policies or regulations. These frames were coded independently of tone but allow us to identify those instances where negativity emerges in the context of polity debates – thus raising issues concerning legitimacy and the future of integration – and where it is rather part of ‘normal’ political contestation. Variations along this variable are used to demonstrate not negative opinions but how negative tone intersects with the conflict dimension to support particular types of campaign in EP election debates.

To apply this codebook, we analyse news articles about the EP elections in Germany and the UK from a three-week period spanning the elections of 22nd-25th May 2014, including two weeks prior to and one week following the elections in order to capture the period in which they were most salient in the news. We collect articles from six newspapers: the two most visited online left-leaning and conservative-leaning quality newspapers and the most visited tabloid-style newspaper from each country via the European Media Monitor and online archives. This includes *welt.de*, *spiegel.de* and *bild.de* and *guardian.co.uk*, *telegraph.co.uk* and *dailymail.co.uk*. While this study comprised part of a wider project looking at online news and user engagement, which dictated the need to analyse online news websites with comments sections, the selection of platforms also provides the widest possible breadth of coverage in terms of political leaning. All articles dealing centrally with the EP elections are selected for analysis, including news and opinion articles but excluding interviews. We took a random stratified sample by newspaper of 50 per cent of the articles collected to manage the volume of articles. Altogether, 335 articles and 1128 actor statements were coded by a team of four coders applying Krippendorff’s alpha for reliability tests (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Inter-coder reliability tests were conducted on 30 articles. As there is no official acceptability level, we accepted the score of .60 for the tone as a case of exploratory coding (De Swert, 2012), which has been common practice in a number of other studies (see e.g. van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). Tone variables ranged from .67 to .83. All other variables ranged

between .73 and 1.00. Reliability was further enhanced through team coding, regular discussion and checking of problematic cases, as well as a final coding check by us.

Findings

The media negativity bias

Partially confirming hypothesis H1a, a non-directional negativity bias in political news persists in both countries and across news formats at story-level (see Table 1). There are no significant differences between countries², meaning that, journalists generally display a negativity bias in writing bad news over good news and in the selection of sources who speak negatively about issues. At source level, however, there is a small but significant difference between countries, with UK journalists using more generally negative quotes. With regards to directed tone in articles and sources, hypothesis H1b is also only partially confirmed, but the country difference lies elsewhere. At story-level and source-level, we find no significant differences between countries³ regarding tone towards domestic government and domestic Eurosceptic/populist parties, although the UK media tends to be more positive and generally gives UKIP far more attention than the German press gives the AfD. Generally speaking, journalists favour negative stories and sources about government and Eurosceptic/populist parties.

It is only when we look at negativity towards the EU that the two countries differ significantly: In the UK, articles are generally found to be much more negative towards the EU institutions and actors than German news, where tone towards the EU is balanced ($p < .001$, *Somer's d* = -.220). There are also significant country differences in the way selected actors evaluate the EU ($p < .001$, *Somer's d* = -.334). In the German newspapers, we find a positivity bias, with a third of quotes coded as positive. In the UK newspapers, almost half of the quotes were negative towards the EU with just one in ten coded as positive. German journalists therefore tend to quote actors who discuss the EU and its actors in an affirmative

² Story-level overall tone: $p = .587$, *Somer's d* = -.031; source-level overall tone: $p < .005$, *Somer's d* = -.113

³ Story-level government tone: $p = .167$, *Somer's d* = -.095; domestic Eurosceptic tone: $p = .057$, *Somer's d* = .155. Source-level government tone: $p = .122$, *Somer's d* = .98; domestic Eurosceptic tone: $p = .428$, *Somer's d* = -.054

way, thus constituting an exception to negativity as a news value. British journalists instead confirm the general negativity trend by selecting predominantly quotes from actors who evaluate the EU in negative terms.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Furthermore, when we look at the way in which different types of actors discuss the EU, we also find clear differences between countries⁴ (see Table 2). In the UK, EU, European national and domestic actors tend to discuss the EU in predominantly negative terms. In Germany, all actors except for those from other member states tend to discuss the EU positively. When it comes to EU actors specifically (e.g. MEPs, EU officials, *Spitzenkandidaten*), over 40% discuss the EU or its actors and institutions in positive terms, compared with the UK, where similar numbers discuss the EU in predominantly negative terms, something which can be explained by the high number of Eurosceptic MEPs quoted in the UK news. Thus, H1c is confirmed and demonstrates that negativity about the EU from actors is a predominantly foreign phenomenon in the German news. Furthermore, this suggests that increasing the presence of EU actors in the news does not necessarily lead to more positive impressions of the EU. Rather, national attitudes towards the EU shaped by both journalists and domestic political actors continue to interfere with the two media biases in shaping the representation of the EU in national public spheres.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The media polity bias

According to our polity bias hypothesis, the salience of the EU in the news alone is not a sufficient measure of a politicised campaign. Rather, the type of conflict presented is key. We find a highly significant difference between the two countries ($p < .001$, *Cramer's V* = .399, see Table 3). Hypothesis 2a regarding a polity bias in generic article framing and source selection is only confirmed for the case of the UK where almost half the articles discuss the EU in polity terms compared to just over a quarter in Germany. Some of this relates to David Cameron's promised referendum on EU membership, which made the EU membership issue highly salient, but also to the emphasis placed on more fundamental questions of institutional

⁴ Germany: $p = .000$, *Cramer's V* = .276. The test for the UK could not be carried out due to insufficient numbers in all categories.

make-up, bringing the legitimacy of the EU into question instead of adding a politics dimension to the EU.

[Insert Table 3 here]

While EU politics failed to resonate in the UK, journalists allow EU politics to unfold in Germany by opening up an arena of partisan contestation. Issues in other EU member states are also considerably more salient in Germany than in the UK, which primarily results from a focus on Euroscepticism in Germany as a ‘foreign’ problem. In neither country, however, are EU policy issues raised often. Altogether, almost half the articles in Germany related to European politics and policies, compared with just one in ten for the UK, where such issues were often transformed into polity contestation. Whereas the German media therefore engage with democratic politics at an EU level, the UK primarily focuses either on national politics or a fundamental questioning of the UK’s membership. At the source level, there are also significant country differences, with UK journalists displaying a preference for actor statements which contest EU legitimacy in fundamental terms ($p < .001$, *Cramer’s V* = .325). It becomes evident that the proportion of actors discussing EU polity issues is significantly higher in the UK than in Germany (see Table 3). One in five actors in the UK news discusses European policies and politics compared with over 45% in the German news.

However, the EU polity contestation bias is also driven by the decision to include certain *kinds* of actors most likely to contest the legitimacy of the EU. We therefore confirm H2b and find a tendency on the part of journalists to amplify the voice of Eurosceptics. To remove the effect of the different parties in government, we condensed party families into two categories: mainstream and radical/populist. We find that, while the UK quotes more radical/populist parties, there is a disproportionate space given to them in both countries, amounting to a small but significant country effect ($p < .001$, *Phi* = .141). The Eurosceptic voice in the media is most dominant in the UK where a third of all party actors are from UKIP or other radical/populist parties. In Germany, less than one in five statements can be attributed to the radical/populist actors (although this compares to just 7.1 per cent of the voting share that went to AfD) (see Table 4). If we look at the types of Eurosceptic actors who appear in the media we find, however, again in line with H1c, a striking difference between both countries. Whereas the German press, it was the newsworthiness of foreign Eurosceptic actors (in particular Le Pen and Farage) that makes a difference ($p < .001$, *Cramer’s V* = .363), UK

journalists tend to quote radical/populist actors at all levels ($p < .005$, Cramer's $V = .164$), but almost half of all EU actors quoted in the news belonged to radical right/populist parties. The goal of politicised EP elections to develop into partisan contestation between parties at an EU level therefore backfires in the UK and transforms into polity contestation between EU actors.

[Insert Table 4 here]

A negative polity bias?

Our final hypothesis explored country-specific manifestations in the interaction of these two media biases. With regards to the H3a, we confirm that negativity towards the EU in Germany remains largely confined to partisan and policy contestation. In the German news, we do not find a statistically significant bias at story level when discussing the EU in general, diffuse terms (and the majority of diffuse articles are neutral), reflecting the general pro-EU consensus among political elites (Figure 1). When the EU is discussed in specific terms, there is a very slight negativity bias in the German articles. The positivity bias already identified amongst German actors grows when we look at issue dimensions at the source level (Figure 2). In debates about the EU polity, almost half of statements are positive about the EU. Only when it comes to debates about EU policies does negative tone predominate. This finding suggests that negativity about the EU in Germany rather relates to the shape and direction of policy as well as the powers or roles of specific institutions rather than as part of bigger debates about European integration as such.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

We also confirm hypothesis 3b. In the UK we find significantly more specific negativity and significantly more diffuse neutral/ambivalent tone at the story level ($p < .005$, Somer's $d = .286$). Thus, less diffuse negativity does not translate into more positivity in the UK news, but more ambivalence. When the EU is discussed in specific terms, there is a very clear negativity bias in the UK news with over half of articles coded for EU tone identified as negative. At the source level, actors in the UK press generally speak negatively about the EU whether the tone is specific or diffuse and regardless of the dimension. In debates about the EU polity, over half of all statements are negative. In other words, we find that EU negativity in the German news is part of the critique of EU actors, institutions and policies, whereas in

the UK negativity is specific, directed against a diffuse idea of Europe and part of polity, policy and politics debates. We therefore demonstrate that in Germany Euroscepticism abroad is met with a defence of the EU at home, alongside discussion about EU politics and a contestation between *Spitzenkandidaten*. In the UK, the relatively high salience of the EU in the 2014 transforms, contrary to the intended effects of EP politicisation through elections, into a negative polity campaign that delegitimises the EU in the public sphere.

Conclusion: news media and the selective salience of Euroscepticism

In comparing EP election campaigns in the UK and in Germany, we have considered media tonality and framing as central for understanding the media coverage of EP elections. We go beyond existing studies of EU politicisation by exploring the relationship between media negativity and type of conflict. We demonstrate that overall, the dominant form of media contestation and negativity fails to meet the conditions for enhancing EU representative democracy in which EU political choices are debated across the member states. We found that a double media bias applies to EU election news. Firstly, EU campaigners faced a general negativity bias in the form of filters that select and frame EU news in a dominantly negative tone. Although in Germany directed tone towards the EU tended to be positive or neutral, the tendency for selecting bad news over good news generally means that the EU will be reported in terms of ‘crisis’ or ‘failure’ instead of successful outcomes or achievements and results in high visibility of Eurosceptic actors.

Secondly, we show that EU politicisation in the context of EP elections can also undermine the legitimacy of the EU in systemic terms through a polity bias, instead of promoting partisan competition in the form of *Spitzenkandidaten* campaigns. While a polity bias does not necessarily indicate negative evaluations of European integration as such, when EU negativity intersects with polity debates the news media risks systematically translating EU legitimisation campaigns into Eurosceptic opinion. There would be, in other words, a media-driven ‘spiral of Euroscepticism’ that amplifies negativity towards the EU, bringing Eurosceptic actors and discourses effectively to the enhanced attention of Eurosceptic audiences (De Vreese, 2007). This explains why, from a perspective of German media, the UK debate becomes highly newsworthy. News media facilitate the transnational diffusion of Euroscepticism, contribute to the prominence of their leaders and set the agenda for a type of polity contestation that, instead of holding political candidates and their policies accountable,

launches a polity debate that does not come under the remit of the European Parliament and can challenge the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

Apart from this tendency towards negative polity campaigning, politicisation is found to differ between and within member states – a process of ‘differentiated politicisation’ (de Wilde et al., 2015). By focusing on Germany and the UK we selected poles among the member states where we could expect high variation in the media coverage of EP election news. In the case of Germany, the floor was opened for EU partisan, *Spitzenkandidaten*-led campaigns, with a high degree of attention to EU politics and policy. However, while German journalists paid relatively little attention to domestic Eurosceptic actors (the AfD), they regularly covered EU polity debates in other member states and quoted Eurosceptic foreign actors, finding, therefore, Euroscepticism newsworthy and making Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen ‘prominent’ in Germany. Eurosceptics thus entered the German debate through the backdoor of foreign news coverage which was met with an elite ‘positivity bias’ at home.

In sharp contrast, there was a highly pronounced negative polity bias in the UK news. The news media gave considerable voice to radical/populist actors and excluded voices that defend the principle of European integration. UK press coverage of EP elections is thus characterized by an excess of negativity and the almost complete absence of affirmation both by journalists and political actors. What is striking in the UK coverage is the deeply biased journalism which not only fails to cover the different sides of the political spectrum in EU-level elections but also overtly amplifies and supports domestic Eurosceptic positions. The UK media debate is in this sense characterized by a Brexit consensus. We therefore show that the EU membership question was highly salient during the 2014 EP election and that the news media in the UK has contributed to an environment that facilitated the 2016 vote to leave the EU.

On the one hand, our findings provide new evidence that confirms our expectations of the German and British media landscapes in relation to EU affairs: the generally pro-European consensus in German media and the hostile media environment in the UK. On the other hand, we provide a detailed and original dataset that demonstrates that negativity is not a straightforward news value and its direction is context-dependent. Journalists in Germany show a preference for bad news over good news, write negatively about government and

opposition actors, but reveal a positivity bias in relation to the EU. In the UK, the negativity filter holds across the board, including in relation to Eurosceptic parties - despite the generally Eurosceptic tendencies in the UK media environment. It is in combination with the polity bias that negativity in the UK becomes highly damaging to EU legitimacy.

Finally, we can contribute to the debate on the still largely unexplored normative implications of differentiated politicisation. In light of the fragmented media landscapes in Europe, reception contexts differ widely, which poses a challenge to European campaigners who enter the arena as *Spitzenkandidaten* for European executive office. If “different ‘Europes’ are demanded by different people, in different settings” (de Wilde et al., 2015, p. 15), the *Spitzenkandidaten* will find it hard responding to demands voiced in fragmented national arenas of contestation. The normative implications of these findings go, however, beyond simple technical issues of campaigning. Our findings also imply that the same opportunity for democratic authorisation and control leads to very diverse responses in terms of the dynamics of public contestation. When filtered through the news media European campaigns empower actors unequally: those actors who frame the EU dominantly in negative terms are rewarded with media attention. This does not mean that the positions of such EU polity contestants are also legitimised by the news media. Yet, the Eurosceptics are the most successful media-agenda setters and as such are able to affect the course of the debate in important ways by discussing the limits of sovereignty transfer and questions of membership instead of EU politics and policies.

The patterns of differentiated politicisation found in a two country-comparison limit generalisability. We can assume from our most different case design that similar media biases in EU news coverage apply in different countries and with regard to different news formats. Yet, politicisation yields quite different results in each national context. While democratic innovations such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* might be generally well received in countries with generally pro-EU media systems, in countries with more substantive public and media Euroscepticism such measures may serve primarily to undermine the EU’s legitimacy. Our analysis of election campaigns is also limited to a single moment of time where politicisation can be expected to result in parallel peaks of attention. We do not seek to measure an increase of EU politicisation over time but would expect that patterns of politicisation are even more differentiated in routine periods when attention is not focused on European elections. Our findings also cannot be considered as an indicator for predicting voters’ preferences. We can

expect, however, that for the voters who receive information about the EU primarily through the mass media, it makes a decisive difference whether mediated conflicts remain within the ambit of electoral contestation of candidates or whether they challenge or undermine the legitimacy of the representative system of democracy as such. In this last sense, the relative success of Eurosceptic parties in the elections and the media biases that applied are closely related.

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Table 1: Tone

	Article Tone		Actor Tone	
	German News	UK News	German News	UK News
Overall tone				
Predominantly negative	47.8% (77)	51.1% (89)	35.5% (149)	45.6% (323)
Neutral/ambivalent	43.5% (70)	40.2% (70)	42.1% (177)	37.3% (264)
Predominantly positive	8.7% (14)	8.6% (15)	22.4% (94)	17.1% (121)
	100% (161)	100% (174)	100% (420)	100% (708)
EU tone				
Predominantly negative	17.9% (21)	35.7% (46)	22.0% (44)	45.9% (107)
Neutral/ambivalent	67.5% (79)	58.1% (75)	45.0% (90)	43.3% (101)
Predominantly positive	14.5% (17)	6.2% (8)	33.0% (66)	10.7% (25)
	100% (117)	100% (129)	100% (200)	100% (233)
Government tone				
Predominantly negative	27.7% (23)	41.7% (55)	45.6% (47)	36.4% (90)
Neutral/ambivalent	68.7% (57)	49.2% (65)	36.9% (38)	42.1% (104)
Predominantly positive	3.6% (3)	9.1% (12)	17.5% (18)	21.5% (53)
	100% (83)	100% (132)	100% (103)	100% (247)
Populist/Eurosceptic opposition tone				

Predominantly negative	30.4% (14)	24.4% (33)	30.1% (25)	35.7% (82)
Neutral/ambivalent	63.0% (29)	54.8% (74)	42.2% (35)	38.7 (89)
Predominantly positive	6.5% (3)	20.7% (28)	27.7% (23)	25.7% (59)
	100% (46)	100% (135)	100% (83)	100% (230)

Table 2: Types of actor and tone towards the EU

	EU		European National		Domestic	
	Germany	UK	Germany	UK	Germany	UK
Predominantly negative	11.90% (7)	41.00% (16)	60.00% (15)	60.00% (21)	18.40% (14)	43.30% (52)
Neutral / ambivalent	47.50% (28)	33.30% (13)	20.00% (5)	37.10% (13)	46.10% (35)	50.00% (60)
Predominantly positive	40.70% (24)	25.60% (10)	20.00% (5)	2.90% (1)	35.50% (27)	6.70% (8)
Total	100% (59)	100% (39)	100% (25)	100% (35)	100% (76)	100% (120)

Table 3: Type of conflict

	Articles		Actors	
	Germany	UK	Germany	UK
EU Policies	6.2% (10)	4.0% (7)	8.0% (33)	4.1% (29)
EU Politics	21.1% (34)	6.3% (11)	26.5% (110)	8.5% (60)
EU Member State^a	18.6% (30)	1.7% (3)	16.1% (67)	8.8% (62)
EU Polity	26.1% (42)	47.1% (82)	16.1% (67)	23.7% (168)
National Policies	2.5% (4)	5.7% (10)	1.2% (5)	6.4% (45)
National Politics	24.8% (40)	33.9% (59)	30.8% (128)	48.0% (340)
National Polity	.6% (1)	1.1% (2)	1.2% (5)	.6% (4)
Total	100% (161)	100% (174)	100% (415)	100% (708)

^a EU member state policies, politics and polity have been collapsed into one category.

Table 4: Types of actor by party type

	EU	European National	Domestic National	Total (of party type)
Germany				
Mainstream	100.0% (65)	56.9% (37)	83.9% (156)	81.6% (258)
Radical/populist	0.0% (0)	43.1% (28)	16.1% (30)	18.3% (58)
Total	100% (65)	100% (65)	100% (186)	100% 316
UK				
Mainstream	50.7% (34)	62.7% (42)	73.1% (310)	69.1% (386)
Radical/populist	49.3% (33)	37.3% (25)	26.9% (114)	30.8% (172)
	100% (67)	100% (67)	100% (424)	100% (558)