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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES

POLICY DEPARTMENT C
CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Constitutional Affairs

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Strengthening European Democracy: Citizens' Participation. Which challenges do we face at the European Elections of 2014?

Dialogue with Churches and Non-Confessional Organisations

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Challenges to electoral participation in the European elections of 2014

Restoring Electoral Faith: Prospects and Risks

NOTE

Abstract

This note examines the challenges arising in the context of the European Elections of 2014. Drawing on the history of the constitutional evolution of the EU it turns to analyse opportunities and possible risks related to prospect of turning the European elections into personalized contest for the presidency of the European Commission.

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[1] The views expressed here are personal.

CONTENTS

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1. A SHORT HISTORY

In its institutional design the European Union is like a 2013 car running with an engine designed in the 50s and 60s.

The original governance structure of European Integration was not designed for democratic control at the Union level. The word democracy is nowhere to be found in the Schuman Declaration. And, as is well known, the original "parliament" – the Assembly – was little more than a talking shop. In some areas there was a requirement of consultation before adoption of Union law by Commission and Council. Frequently, however, the 'deal was done' prior to consulting Parliament. The day the Parliamentary 'Avis' was delivered, the legislation was adopted. Even that limited consultation requirement was, in its execution, a pro-forma gesture. Since decision making required unanimity, it was assumed that democratic legitimation would take place through national parliamentary control over governmental action within the Council.

As the volume of European legislative and administrative activity expanded and then exploded and especially once majority voting was introduced, it became increasingly apparent that this old model of control through national parliament was illusory. The result was a gaping democracy deficit at the heart of European decision making.

The first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 proved, however, a disappointment: A "mere" 64% of eligible European electors turned out to vote. This number was low by comparison to national elections. Even more worrying was the fact that electoral campaigns were national in content: The issues debated and the results reflected domestic politics within each of the Member States, typically an expression of approval or disapproval of the Member State government. They were European Elections in name only; their reality was all about domestic governance.

The standard explanation was that with a weak Parliament with no decisive say in European legislation, a wise electorate was not willing to waste its time and mental effort on a elections which would have no effect on European politics. Why bother to vote? And those who did were not thinking of Europe but on passing judgment on national governments.

2. THE DEMOCRATIC "PATCH" AND THE ELECTORAL PARADOX

The democracy deficit did not go unnoticed. In a series of IGCs the powers of the European Parliament were progressively increased until – on the eve of the last elections in 2009 – one could veritably characterize the Parliament as a Co-Legislator with the Council. One should be honest: For decades there was shared political understanding that empowering Parliament was the solution to the democracy deficit. If the diagnosis was that the weakness of the Parliament accounted for the low electoral turnout, then an increase in Parliamentary power would reverse that trend.

Reality confounded the theory. In each of the subsequent elections, Europe voted for a Parliament with increased powers. In each election there was a decrease in voter turnout.

In the last elections in 2009 the turnout hit a record low: 43%. In some Member States it was in the low 20%.

Consider: A 'talking shop' Parliament in 1979 with a turnout in the mid 60%. The true co-legislator in 2009 and a turnout which is almost two thirds of that – an in absolute terms a figure so low that it compromises the legitimacy not just of the Union but of Parliament itself to hold itself out as a veritable *vox populi*.

One cannot point the finger at Parliament itself. It has streamlines its operation. Its work has been effective on discreet measures. It has cleaned up the 'gravy train' reality and image. It is by most accounts a serious professional chamber the parliamentary operation of which compares well with national parliaments.

Euro-Parliamentarians scratch their head and in some deep sense feel deceived by the people – that is the impression I have received from discussion with many. Should we follow Brecht's vicious quip: The people have disappointed; let's change the people?

The remedy is not "work harder" as some journalists lazily comment or 'we must explain ourselves better to the electorate' as many Parliamentarians regularly parrot – echoing that pernicious Marxist concept of false consciousness. The people, it seems to me, are wise enough. The problem is not Parliament or Parliamentarians. It is structural, deep in the design of European governance, that 1960s engine not built for Euro-Parliamentary democratic legitimation.

3. EXPLAINING THE DEMOCRATIC/POLITICAL DEFICIT

At the heart of the electoral facet of liberal democracy in all its variants – whether the French Presidential system or the British Parliamentary one and all others – is choice. Voters, the people, get to choose: who will govern, what the shape of government will be. One-party states, even where there is an election and a vote, are not considered democratic because of the absence of choice. And even in multi-party *polities*, when the political and economic powers are such, through say, control of the media, that it is always the same party (and always with huge majorities) that gets elected, we consider such as an illusion of democracy: Voters must have an effective way to rid themselves of a government they do not like, and to change, in some ways, the course of politics and policy. Here then is a corollary proposition to choice: Democracy without Politics – is not democracy. By politics I mean, typically, parties with different ideological orientations, with different teams of leadership and with different programmatic platforms.

The unpalatable truth is the following: With all its increased powers it still makes no (appreciable) difference to Europe and in Europe whether and how the people vote for the European Parliament. The problem is, as I just said, not the quality of Parliamentarians (which is the same as in national politics ranging from the superb to the laughable) nor gravy trains or anything of the sort. It is. I believe, and as I have argued ad nauseam including before this Chamber, structural, deriving from the very design of governance in the EU.

Europe is Governance without Government and herein is the problem. In essence, the two primordial features of any functioning democracy are missing – the grand principles of accountability and representation.

As regards accountability, even the basic condition of representative democracy that at election time, the citizens "can throw the scoundrels out" – that is replace the government – does not operate in Europe. The form of European governance is such that there is no 'government' to throw out. Dismissing the Commission by Parliament is not quite the same, not even remotely so.

Startlingly, but not surprisingly, political accountability at the EU level is remarkably weak. There have been some spectacular political failures of European governance. The embarrassing Copenhagen climate fiasco; the weak (at best) realisation of the much touted Lisbon Agenda, the very story of the defunct "Constitution" to mention not to mention various contours in the Euro-saga. At times of failure national politicians can sanctimoniously point to "Europe" and at the European level responsibility for any failure is so entangled between Commission, Council and Parliament with their respective "Presidents" that somehow political responsibility is never claimed. Failure is always an orphan.

It is hard to point in these instances of failure and others to any measure of political accountability, of someone paying a political price, as would be the case in national politics. In fact it is difficult to point to a single instance of accountability for political failure as distinct from personal accountability for misconduct in the annals of European integration.

Nota Bene: This is not, decidedly not, a story of corruption or malfeasance – Europe is good at rooting out politicians whose conduct does not meet high standards of probity -- but one of structural weakness. My argument is that this failure is rooted in the very structure of European governance. It is not designed for political accountability.

In similar vein, it is impossible to link in any meaningful and systematic way the results of elections to the European Parliament to the performance of the political groups within the preceding parliamentary session, in the way that is part of the mainstay of political accountability within member states. Structurally, dissatisfaction with 'Europe' has no channel to affect, at the European level, the agents of European governance.

Likewise, at the most primitive level of democracy, there is simply no moment in the civic calendar of Europe where the citizen can influence directly the outcome of any policy choice facing the Community and Union in the way that citizens can when choosing between parties which offer more or less sharp distinct programs at the national level. The political colour of the European Parliament only very weakly gets translated into the legislative and administrative output of the Union.

The 'political deficit', to use the felicitous phrase of Renaud Dehousse, is at the core of the democracy deficit. The Commission, by its self-understanding, linked to its very ontology, cannot be 'partisan' in a right-left sense, neither can the Council, by virtue of the haphazard political nature of its composition. Democracy normally must have some meaningful mechanism for expression of voter preference predicated on choice among options, typically informed by stronger or weaker ideological orientation. That is an indispensable component of politics. Democracy without politics, as I indicated, is in my view an oxymoron. And yet, that is not only Europe, but it is also a defining feature of Europe – the 'non-partisan' nature of the Commission – that is celebrated. And for many good reasons. The stock phrase found in endless student text books and the like, that the Supranational Commission vindicates the European interest, whereas the intergovernmental Council is a clearing house for Member State interest, is, at best, naïve.

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Does the 'European interest' not necessarily involve political and ideological choices? At times explicit, but even if implicit always present?

Thus the two most primordial norms of democracy, the principle of accountability and the principle of representation are compromised in the very structure and process of the Union.

Against these structural defects in European accountability and representation it should surprise no one, least of all, Members of the European Parliament why voter turnout is in decline reaching historical lows.

4. REVERSING THE TREND – PROSPECT AND RISKS

2014 offers for the very first time the prospect of meaningful change. The idea has been the books for decades (!) including in my books. But good ideas that remain in books are just such. They collect dust together with the books which contain them.

Credit thus should go to the current Parliament and its President for turning the next election to a de-facto race also for Presidency of the Commission.

This is an important ground breaking move. All political 'families' (the current nomenclature for nascent European parties) it seems will field their respective candidates. The idea is simple: When voting for the European Parliament voters will, effectively, be voting for the next President of the Commission. It will be impossible, it is argued convincingly, for the European Council to override such choice 'by the people(s)' and impose one of their back-room, non-transparent, rabbit-out-of-the-hat choices on Europe.

The potential importance for European democracy of this development if it is realized is as great or greater than anything proposed in the defunct Constitution and interestingly and significantly it can happen without any changes to the current Treaties, demonstrating, yet again, the primacy of politics over law. It will not only be that voters for the first time will have choice – but the very organization of the elections with competing candidates will, in and of itself, have the potential of a huge contribution to the much vaunted and much absent European public space. It will pose real challenges to the media (Just think of the challenge of organizing TV debates, now a *sine-qua-non* of electoral politics.) Good, democracy enhancing challenges. And much more. I do not need to spell it out here.

You note the caution in my assessment: I speak of "potential importance." Why only potential? And I mention risks. What are these?

The first risk is that of a mere beauty contest. Yes, there will be candidates but they end up saying more or less the same thing: Transparency, subsidiarity, full employment with really not much to choose among them, other than their mediatic appeal. This is already partly a reality of contemporary politics in Europe and elsewhere, but in elections to the European Parliament the risk is greater: It is hard to see the appeal of, say, a German candidate in, say, Portugal; or a French candidate in, say, Ireland – hardly known, not speaking the language, not having, perhaps, celebrity status (regardless of twitting, and facebooking etc) as a means of galvanizing the electorate. It might even have a negative effect, perhaps even strengthening the local – Anti-Europe candidate which now exists in so many of the Member States.

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If this potentially transformative mountain is not to breed a political molehill, if the choice offered is not to be reduced to a (potentially ineffective) political beauty contest, there are two questions which the candidates will have to be asked again and again:

1. What in your program for Europe differentiates you from the other mainstream candidates? How will your Europe, *programmatically and policy wise*, be different from the Europe of your Christian Democrat or Green or Liberal or Socialist opponent?

If the contest develops into a European version of motherhood and apple pie – issues on which all candidates essentially agree, the cynical blow to European democracy will be particularly bitter. Politics without 'politics' is, as noted above, not democracy.

2. How will you ensure, if elected, that the Commission of which you will be President, will actually pursue the policy preferences to which you are committed and on which you were elected? Will you be willing to use the powers the Treaty gives you to ensure that at least a majority of Commissioners will share your principal preferences – without whose support your commitments risk remaining a dead letter?

Even if a candidate is willing to take up the challenge of the first question and commit to policy preferences which present a real, rather than beauty contest, choice to the European electorate, this will be of little impact in vindicating the principle of representation discussed above if such preferences, by and large, are not translated into the Commission program. And that cannot happen if the Commission is not committed, by and large, to similar preferences. The powers of the President alone to shape the policies of the Union are limited in the extreme and it would be a deception to suggest to the electorate otherwise. By contrast, a Europe with a politically committed President, a supportive College of Commissioners and a majority or plurality in the European Parliament represents a new and radically different Europe.

If that is the choice presented to the electorate, if the media plays along – and the so called Fourth Estate will have a huge role in determining whether this exercise really brings about the sea-change in electoral interest – there really is a chance that one will have reversed the trend of electoral apathy so inimical to the EP and to European democracy at large.

And herein, alongside the great promise, lies, too, the equally great risk. The ideological politicization of the Commission and, in its wake, the politicization of Europe as a whole, is a whole new ball game. It would require not only a huge shift in the Institutional culture of the Institutions of the Union but an adaptation of the political culture of the polity as a whole with not insignificant trade-offs.

There was and is good reason for the 'political neutrality' of the Commission: It provided a different kind of legitimacy – the ability to say that the Commission is "above politics" that it represents all Europeans, that it represents the interests of Europe etc. It is something of a false assumption that when you have in a polity a, say, Center-Right or Center-Left government they do not work for the whole polity and that the prime minister is not the prime minister of all citizens. That, too, is part of the discipline of true democracy. But for years we have acculturated the European public to think along this neutral paradigm which has its values. Transition will not be easy.

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Think of the new paradigm of popular social and political attitudes to Europe in a country whose internal majority is at odds with the Union's overall political orientation as expressed in EP elections. Nothing new in federal states, but altogether new in Europe. Here, too, the reader does not need me to spell out all the trade-offs. There is no easy answer. The difficulty may be expressed as follows:

The political status-quo in terms of democratic legitimation is non-sustainable. The move to a new paradigm comes with serious risks. What a deliciously and invigorating choice for the European leadership. Hold the 2014 elections on a business-as-usual model and risk a further decline in European democratic legitimacy, leaving the only "exciting" campaign platforms to come from the burgeoning radical anti-European parties on the extreme left and right. Go for a political Europe and risk a paradigm shift with many unknowns.

5. WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

Several things can derail the prospect of this new paradigm:

1. A dreaded backroom deal to derail the whole idea. I believe that the process has gone far enough ahead to minimize this possibility. Make no mistake, however: The governments of the Member States might be quite hostile to all of this – not least a President of the Commission who enjoys a measure of direct or semi-direct popular legitimation and whose election was not a gift of the European Council.

2. The Anti-Europe resurgence dominates the election. This might end up with an unintended beauty contest version of the new paradigm – i.e. different politicians vying for votes not based on real policy choices presented to the electoral but on their overall mediatic success and a centric platform that does little more than 'defending Europe'. One should be very clear: Democracy means that all legitimate voices are part of the process and there is nothing in and of itself shameful in running in the elections on an Anti-European platform (so long as it is not marred by racist and xenophobic positions which fall foul of the law). My point is that if the elections turn to be a 'referendum on Europe' rather than different approaches how the Union should exercise its powers, the 'political choice' moment will be reduced to a single issue at the expense of the real promise of the new paradigm. All things told, a beauty contest would still be an improvement on the status quo. But it has its own political risks – apart from its normative unattractiveness. The electorate might see through it, leading to further disenchantment; or, the electorate will simply not allow it, in the sense of asking the competing candidates type 2 questions forcing them to define themselves politically.

3. The most important risk is that the process itself will be a victim of entrenched apathy to the European elections. The Union and Parliament itself, and not just the candidates will have to be willing to spend considerable resources and using the most sophisticated new social media to put the "It's a new type of election' message clearly on the radar of European citizens. There will have to be far more collaboration among the candidates on a kind of Road Show in the various member states, so that local media and local electorates get to see not one candidate in isolation but get used to the idea of a slate of candidates from which they must choose.[2]

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[2] At the European University Institute, the European Union Democracy Observatory (EUDO) is designing an online tool to help citizens make an informed choice in the EP 2014 elections. This tool will allow users to compare their

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political preferences on a multitude of issues with the positions held by the parties running in the elections. The 2014 tool builds on the very successful EU Profiler Voting Advice Application (www.euprofiler.eu) which helped 2.5 million citizens in the six weeks prior to the 2009 elections get tailor-made matches, in their respective languages, with the platforms of the political parties. It will also allow European citizens to connect with each other, across the entire continent – through their social media sites – based on their political affinities and independent language barriers.

DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES

POLICY DEPARTMENT C: CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reinforcement of citizens' involvement and participation

NOTE

Abstract

This Note identifies key predictors of political participation with a specific focus on the 2014 European Parliament elections and the role of the media in particular. It analyzes how national media cover EP elections and the effects the news coverage has on electoral turnout. It also identifies new developments in the light of changing media landscapes, social media, and the Lisbon treaty.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political and electoral participation are not guaranteed automatically in a democracy. In the light of dwindling participation in European Parliament elections, this Note provides an overview of key predictors for participation in EP elections, looking in particular on the role of the media, by pointing to research on what kinds of media coverage is especially effective in sparking citizen engagement and turnout.

The aim of the present Note is to provide a comprehensive overview of predictors of participation in EP elections, with a specific analysis of the role of media and information. The Note briefly summarizes the state of the art literature and makes a number of observations about:

The usage of different media for political information during EP elections
The coverage of the media of EP elections
The effects of news coverage on electoral participation

The Note concludes with a discussion of current developments, in particular with regards to new and social media, new opportunities post Lisbon, and new modes of political participation.

1. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

KEY FINDINGS

- Healthy democracies have a high level of **public engagement**.

- **Voting** is the most important mode of political participation.

- Turnout at EP elections is currently at **43%** (2009), down from 62% (1979).

- EP elections are the **most important moment** for citizens to engage with EU politics.

Enabling and reinforcing citizen participation in democratic processes is a core feature of healthy societies. To ensure resilient, innovative, and inclusive societies *civic engagement and political participation on a wide scale* is needed. Ensuring broad political participation is essential for European democracies, since electoral exclusion has significant and wide-ranging negative consequences.

At the core of political participation, is the act of voting. In the words of Aldrich (1993, p. 246): "Turning out to vote is the most common and important act citizens take in a democracy and, therefore, is one of the most important behaviors for scholars of democratic politics to understand."

European citizens have *direct* and *indirect* opportunities to participate in elections that address issues beyond the nation state. In *national* elections, issues of European integration are increasingly playing a role (see De Vries, 2007) and anecdotal evidence from recent elections in, e.g., France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Greece supports this claim. EU issue voting in national elections is an indirect form of EU political participation as the subsequently elected power holders participate in inter-governmental activities. Voting is also possible in national *referenda* (typically on EU membership, treaties, and key policies; see Hobolt, 2009; de Vreese, 2007) and of course in the direct elections for the European Parliament (e.g., van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). In this note, the focus is on participation in the light of the upcoming 2014 EP elections

2. PREDICTORS OF PARTICIPATION

KEY FINDINGS

- Voter participation is determined by **individual** level and **contextual** level factors.

- Individual factors include **social demographics** and political **attitudes** and values.

- Contextual factors include **compulsory voting** and **electoral system**.

- The **role of the media** and the wider information environment has received little attention.

Not everybody participates in elections and people participate for different reasons. Broadly speaking, research on the predictors of turnout has identified a number of individual level and contextual level predictors. These have also been dubbed as *motivational* (individual) and *facilitative* (contextual). In addition a number of predictors have to do with the nature of European Parliament elections in particular.

Individual level factors:
> Socio-demographic factors
> Political attitudes and values

Contextual factors:
> Electoral system
> Political system

2.1   Individual level

Plenty of studies have documented the importance of socio-demographic factors for electoral participation. Older and higher educated people are more likely to participate than young and lower educated people (Verba & Nie, 1972). It is also well established that individuals with higher levels of political interest, political knowledge, and higher levels of efficacy are more likely to participate (e.g. Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In relation to the EU specifically, research is mixed, but generally suggests that positive EU attitudes are related to higher turnout (e.g. Franklin et al., 1996).

2.2   Contextual level

At the contextual level, a key factor is, not unsurprisingly, compulsory voting. Compulsory voting increases the potential costs of *not* voting beyond the costs associated with voting. Electoral system effects, such as proportional systems are important. For the EP specifically, Franklin et al. (1996) showed that compulsory voting, Sunday voting (as opposed to weekday voting), and proportionality of the electoral system increase turnout. In addition, factors such as the importance of the elections, the (perceived) closeness of the electoral race, and the salience of electoral cleavages matter.

2.3   EP specific

Based on analysis of the EP elections, Mattila (2003) made the following three recommendations for boosting turnout:

> Elections on weekends. This echoes earlier proposals that voting for the EP should be allowed on two consecutive days in each country, e.g., on Sunday and on Monday.
> Dividing countries into multiple constituencies (at least the large countries): this would candidates 'closer' to voters and thereby increase turnout
> The EP elections should not be held in June–September.

While these general observations about turnout as well as the EP specific recommendations are of importance, a crucial element of understanding the turnout and participation puzzle has been not been addressed: the issue of the supply and nature of information about the elections, as typically provided by the *media*.

3. THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION

KEY FINDINGS

- The role of the media as a source of mobilisation and participation is **unclear**.

- **Television** and **newspapers** (in 2009) are still most important sources of political information for citizens, with **Internet news** use not far behind.

- Visibility of EP elections is **increasing** in the media.

- **Elite contestation** leads to higher media visibility of the elections

- The tone of the news coverage is **more evaluative**, both more positive *and* more negative.

- News framing in terms of **conflict** varies across the EU.

- Exposure to conflict news framing **increases the likelihood of turnout**.

Communication is one of the most central features of today's society. Research and popular wisdom contain many optimistic accounts of the democratic and engaging potential of (particularly online) communication. Research, however, is divergent on the impact of the media for political participation (e.g., Newton, 2006).

In the United States much attention has been paid to the role of political advertising in either mobilizing or demobilizing the electorate (e.g. Ansolabehere et al., 1994). In Europe, however, where advertising, due to legal restrictions, plays a much less prominent role, most attention has been devoted to the role of the *news media*.

3.1   Media Use

Taking a step back, it is useful to consider what media are used by citizens in Europe for political information. Eurobarometer data time and again have shown that television news and newspapers are the most important sources of political information. Hollander (2007) has found consistent evidence across the extant research that in particular newspaper reading is correlated with political engagement.

Evidence from 21 countries in the 2009 EP campaign (De Vreese et al., 2010) confirms this picture. Figure 1-3 (Annex) show that, across the EU, television news is the most frequently used source of information. Between 50-80% of citizens turn to television news regularly (defined as 4+ days a week). The level of usage of newspapers is somewhat lower and the spread is also larger, with frequent readership ranging from about 30 to 70+%. These numbers confirm the relevance of traditional media, also during the campaign for the EP elections. However, Figure 3 also shows a wide usage of Internet news (ranging from 40-70%). Most of the Internet news exposure takes place at the conventional media outlet news sites. This fact underscores the remaining importance of traditional media while at the same time documenting the transition to new modes of news consumption.

3.2   Media coverage of EP elections

In the past years a comprehensive body of knowledge has accumulated on how the media across the EU cover EP elections (see De Vreese et al., 2006 and Schuck et al. 2011 for overviews). To understand the role played by the media it is important to consider different media content features: the *visibility* of EP news, the *tone* of the news coverage and the *framing* of the coverage are the defining features.

Visibility in the news is a necessary condition for subsequent public discussion, engagement, and participation. The tone of the news is important for understanding effects on public opinion and evaluations, and the framing of the news affects both issue understanding but also electoral behaviour, such as, for example turnout. An important content feature that can mobilize citizens is *conflict* news framing, i.e., news focusing on disagreement, conflict, and differences of opinion between political actors. Such information is potentially mobilizing information because it shows an electorate that there is something at stake and something to choose from (De Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007).

How do the media in the EU cover EP elections? It should first be noted that there is huge variation, between countries, media types, and specific outlets. Generalizations should thus be made with care and it is important to note that information environments differ considerably.

In terms of *visibility*, in 2009, on average about 16% of the <u>television</u> news coverage (most widely watch commercial and public news show per country included) in the three weeks leading up to the elections dealt with the EU or the EP election specifically (see Figure 4, and Schuck et al., 2011 for details, range 7-48%). Visibility was highest in Greece and Malta, followed by Poland, Slovenia, Portugal and Cyprus. Visibility decreased in Denmark, Ireland and Slovakia compared to the 2004 EP elections whereas it remained comparatively high in Austria and Sweden and increased notably in Portugal and Latvia (see de Vreese et al., 2006). In six countries (Greece, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Portugal, Cyprus) EU news amounted up to more than 20% of the evening news whereas in eight countries it made up less than 10% of the evening news. In the <u>newspaper</u> coverage (Figure 5), the visibility is also highest in Malta and Greece. As in 2004, visibility in the Netherlands, Belgium and Lithuania remains comparatively low, however, it is lowest in Portugal, followed by Italy, Romania and Slovakia. Overall <u>media visibility increased in 2009</u> compared to previous elections and also the variation in visibility across countries was larger and visibility is larger in countries where political elites are divided over issues of European integration and where contestation is higher.

In terms of *tone* of the news, the coverage in 2009 was <u>more evaluative</u> than previously. The tone towards the EU in news coverage is most positive in Malta and most negative in Greece (see Figure 6). In 13 out of 27 countries (compared to only 4 out of 25 in 2004), the EU was evaluated predominantly positively. The negative tone towards the EU in Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, the UK, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Italy and France remains largely similar across the 04-09 elections. Both latest arrivals, Romania and Bulgaria, are positive in their evaluative tone towards the EU. The nine countries in which tone is most negative on average are all old member states. In conclusion the tone towards Europe continues to be negative overall (see e.g., De Vreese, 2003); but seems to also become more positive in relative terms. Furthermore, EU news has become <u>more evaluative in general</u>, showing a greater share of evaluative news compared to the previous 2004 elections. In 2009, 21% of the news mentioning the EP elections included explicit positive or/and negative evaluations, compared to 16% in 2004 (De Vreese et al., 2006).

Finally, turning to *conflict news framing* (measured with several items and re-calculated to range from 0-1), Figure 7 shows the degree of conflict framing in campaign news coverage across the EU in 2009. Conflict framing varies across countries and, on average, the degree of conflict framing per country (i.e. including all news outlets) is highest in France, Austria, and Malta, followed by Latvia, Romania, and Italy. Conflict framing was least prominent in Lithuania, Germany, Sweden, Estonia, and Ireland.

3.3   Effects of media exposure on turnout

A vast body of research focuses on the effects of media exposure on turnout. While this research yields mixed findings, there is – ceteris paribus – more evidence for a positive impact of news media exposure on turnout than the opposite. An important question is to establish what kind of media coverage is conducive to turnout. Prominent US based research shows that exposure to news framing politics as a strategic game of self-serving and strategically operating politicians cause demobilization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). This finding has <u>not</u> been widely reproduced in a European context. Looking at the impact of *conflict* media exposure in particular, a 21-country study in 2009 (De Vreese et al., 2010) linked a two wave panel survey and the media content analysis of the coverage. Building on the findings from Figure 7, discussed above, it was assessed what the effect of conflict news exposure was, controlling for the impact of both direct and mediated campaign contact. Exposure to conflict news is positive and significant (see Schuck, Vliegenthart & de Vreese, 2014 for details). This shows that <u>conflictual news is positive for participation</u>.

4. NEW MEDIA, NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW MODES OF PARTICIPATION?

Three themes are important for future discussions:

> The role of new media for political participation and EP elections in particular
> The role of new opportunities post Lisbon
> The role of new modes of political participation

New media: the media landscape is rapidly changing and media use patterns too. Traditional news providers, albeit still very important, especially due to their strong online presence, are now in competition with social media and new providers. On the consumption side this implies that citizens, in principle, can opt to avoid political information all together or consume it 24/7. This has implications for participation too. However, despite the omni-presence and wide use of social media in the EU, there is only limited evidence of active usage of e.g., Facebook and Twitter for *political* purposes. This observation is dovetailed by US based research with notable single campaign exceptions. An EP-relevant illustration; based on the 2009 EP campaign study (De Vreese et al., 2010), less than 5% reported being contacted by a political campaign about the EP elections on social media (see Figure 8). This is not to suggest that social media are not important, on the contrary, but it is an important antidote against the high expectations for social media platforms in politics. Social media can function as <u>auxiliary</u> means in a mobilization campaign, but they are less likely to convince many politically uninterested citizens to turn out to vote, at EP or other elections, due to the <u>self selection nature</u> of the platforms.

New opportunities: with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, the next President of the Commission is supposed to reflect the outcome of the elections and the composition of the

EP. It is anticipated that the political groups will actively back a candidate during the campaign. This is likely to have two types of positive impact on the EP campaign: it will generate attention in and by it self as a novel component to the campaign and its dynamics and it will raise the political stakes. Extrapolating from existing research, especially the latter is a positive element for participation (see also Hix, 2008). As discussed above, contestation between the political elites (such as different endorsements of, ideally high-profile, candidates) yields more news coverage. It also has the potential to amplify the amount of media conflict coverage which has shown to be a positive for turnout. The actual impact of this new treaty provision obviously depends on the nature of the candidates, the political investments in campaigning, and the media.

New modes of participation: as has been argued in this Note, electoral participation is obviously at the core of political engagement in EU's democracies. However, it makes sense to consider a broadened understanding of political participation. First, citizens have also been asked to voice opinions in various referenda related to the integration of the Europe. Many of the electoral dynamics are the same in referenda, but in addition, referenda provide political parties with dilemmas (because of the yes/no nature of the issue), shake the common standards for balanced media coverage (often magnifying the voice of minority standpoints, due to the yes/no nature), and encourage political fringe entrepreneurs to campaign (see De Vreese 2007 for an overview). Beyond referendums, political participation and engagement should also be considered as involving non-institutionalized forms of participation, often enabled by technological developments and growing interactivity and community building. Finally, participation should be seen as a process of indirect mobilization whereby collaboration with civil society actors is crucial. Some of these issues are well beyond the specific EP14 campaign context, and relate to role of media, information and technology in 'between-election' times. However, these partnerships are also potentially very important for the EP14 mobilization and engagement. Importantly, such partnerships should guided by a philosophy that when asking citizens to vote, citizens must have a substantive choice and not just be asked to perform a 'citizen duty'. In other words, mobilization efforts should be based on highlighting the diversity of electoral supply, which entices media and citizens.

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ANNEX

Figure 1 Media usage during 2009 EP campaign
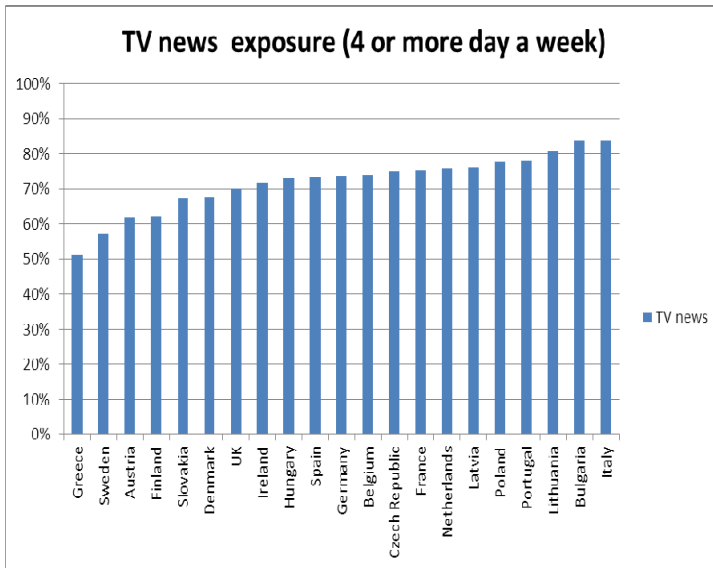
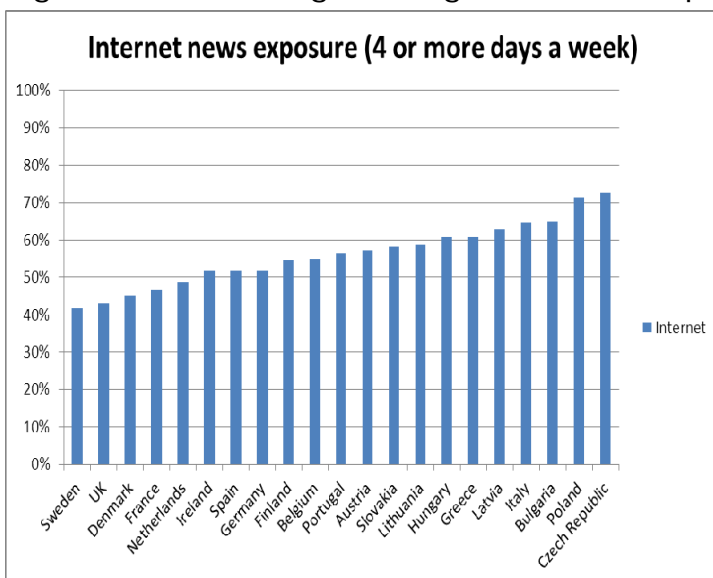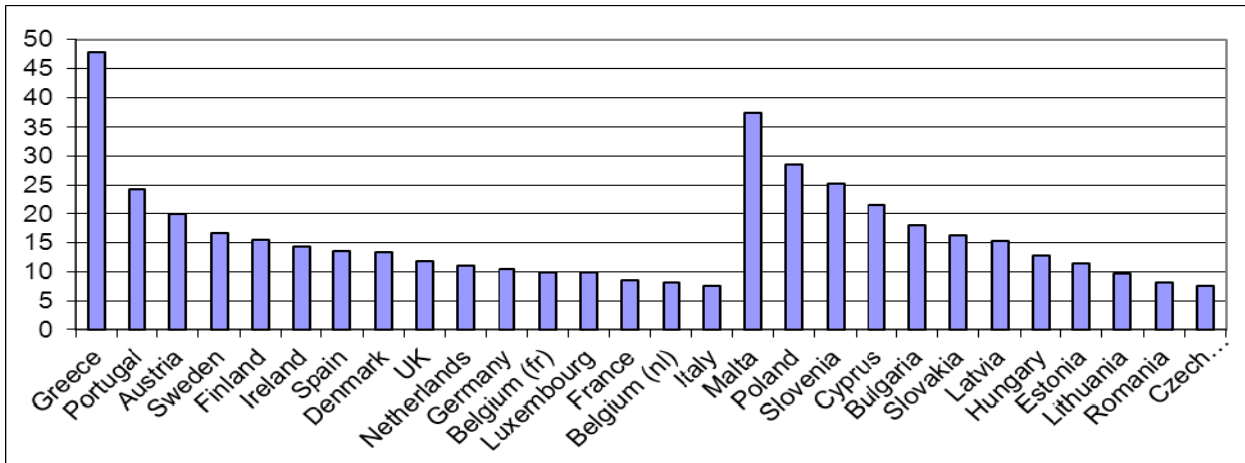## Figure 2 Media usage during 2009 EP campaign
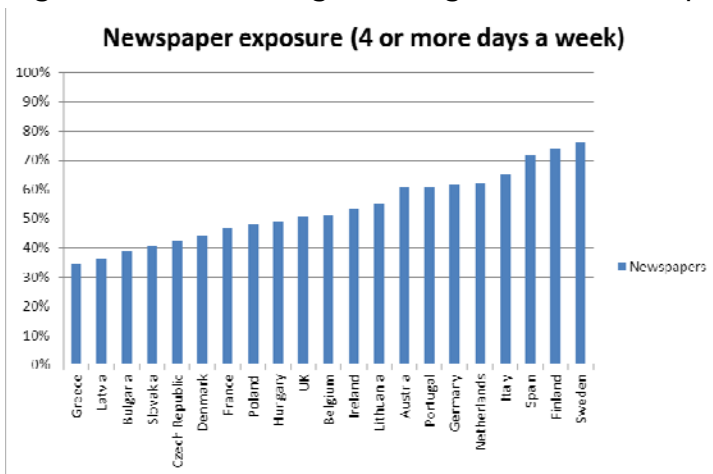
Figure 3 Media usage during 2009 EP campaign

Visibility EU television news (%)
Figure 4 Media coverage of EP elections

Visibility EU news newspapers (front page and random page) (%)
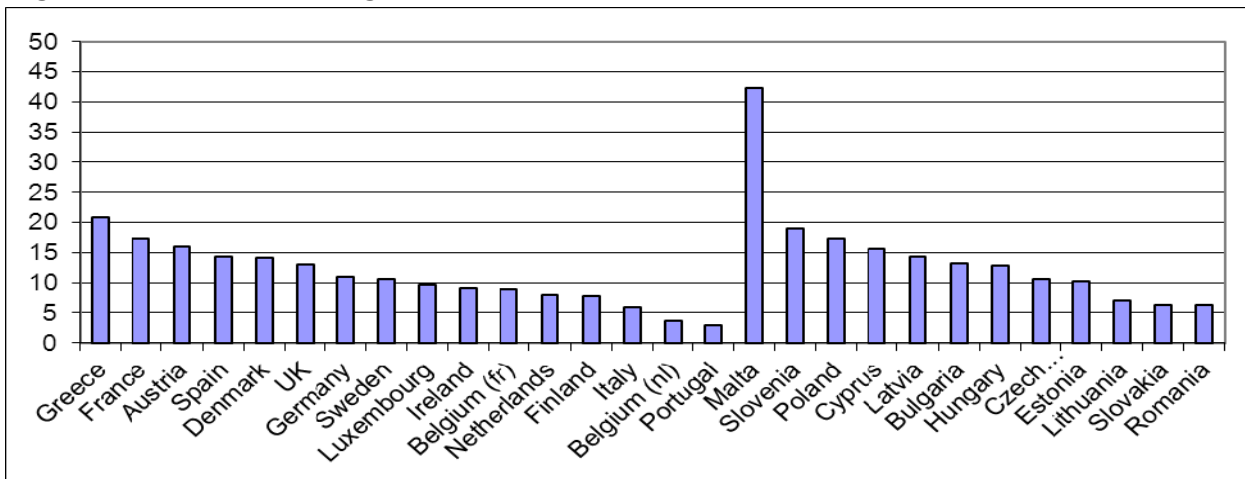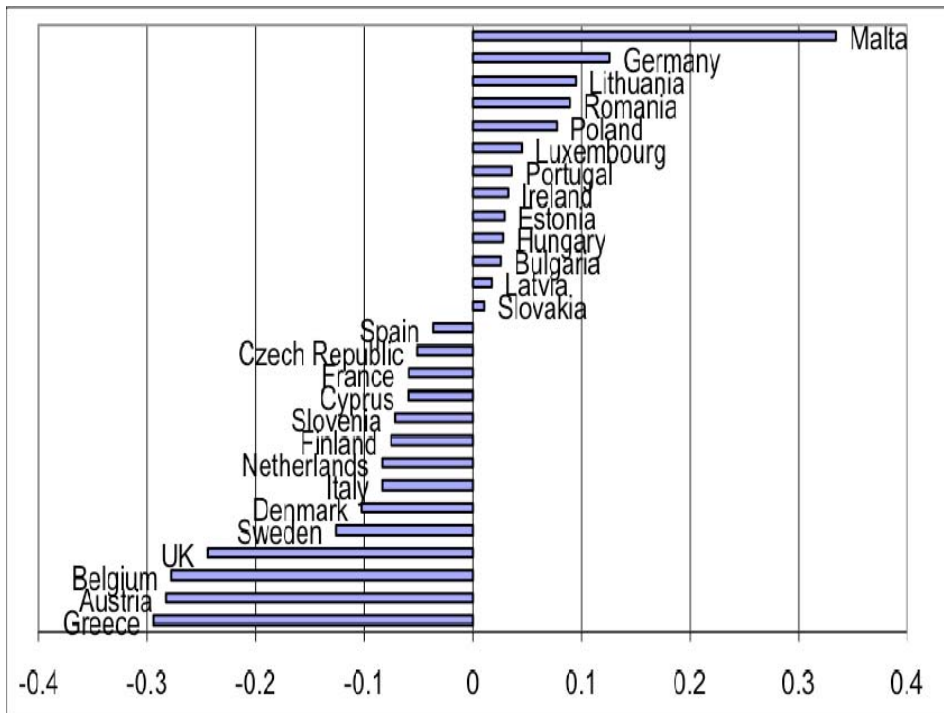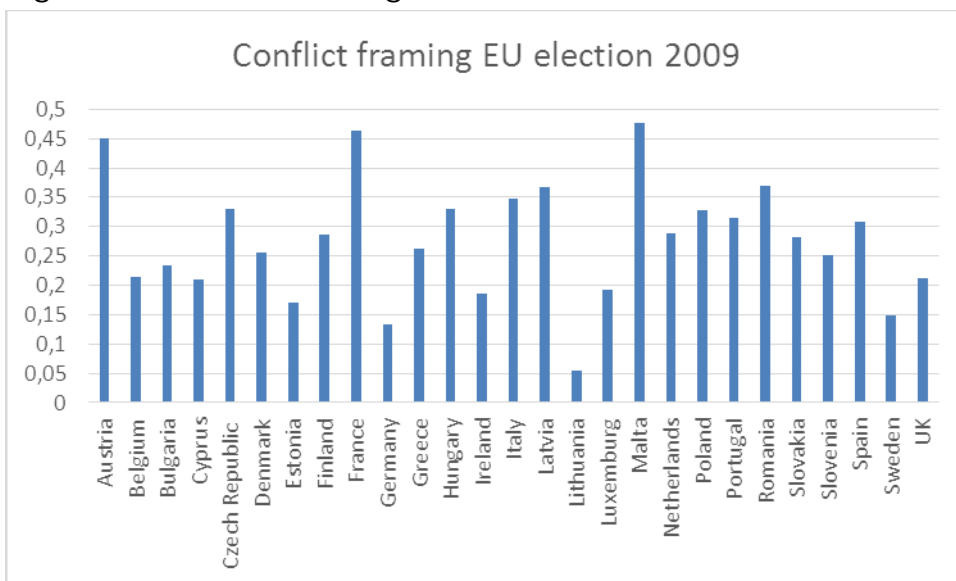Figure 5 Media coverage of EP elections

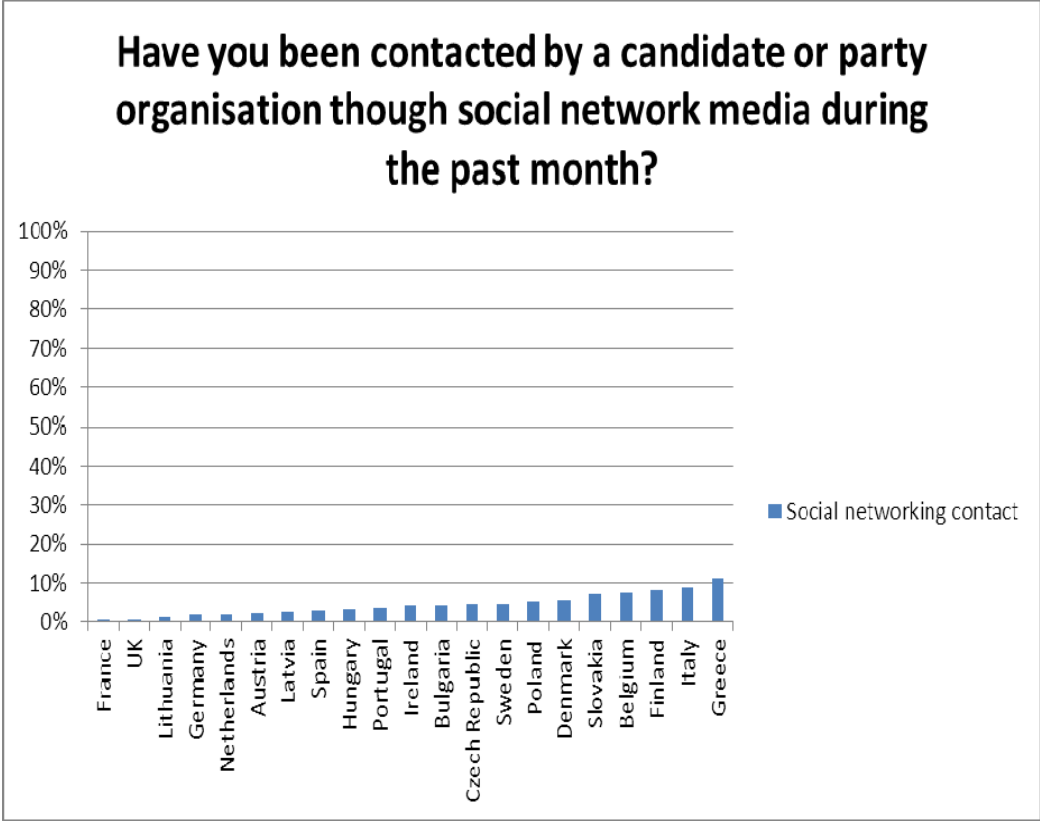## Figure 6 Positive and negative evaluation in the news

Note: Range from -1 to +1. Source: De Vreese et al. (2010).

Figure 7 Conflict framing in the news

Note: Range from 0-1. Source: De Vreese et al. (2010).

Figure 8 Social media contacts, EP elections 2009

Have you been contacted by a candidate or party organisation though social network media during the past month?

Note: Source: De Vreese et al. (2010).

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