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PRESENTATIONS OF EUROPE ON POLITICAL PARTY WEBSITES DURING THE 2004 EP ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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Abstract

In this article we investigate the online communication about Europe as present on websites produced by French, British and Dutch political parties during the 2004 European Parliament (EP) election campaign. It is through the manner in which Europe is presented within this online communication that political parties' view on what constitutes "Europe" becomes manifest. It is argued that the existence of common understandings of what constitutes "Europe" being shared among political parties from various EU member states can be considered an indicator of Europeanisation of political communication and, subsequently, of a European public sphere. This article elaborates on the national and cross-national differences and similarities regarding *the manner in which Europe is presented* in the content of political party websites. We report on two presentations: (1) the *focus* (European versus national) in which the issue domains interests, identity and values are mentioned in parties' online communication about Europe, and (2) the *attitude* towards Europe (positive versus negative) expressed by these parties. Cross-national similarities in parties' online communication about Europe were observed among the liberal parties, the sovereign and extreme right-wing parties, and the green parties. More diversity was observed among the social democratic parties and centre-right parties.

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Introduction

In this article we explore the online communicative practices of French, British and Dutch political parties during the 2004 European Parliament (EP) election campaign. Through their Web sites, parties, as other actors in the public sphere, offer a particular perspective on European news, issues and events, suggesting whether and why issues concerning Europe are socially and politically relevant – their view on what constitutes “Europe” becomes manifest. The existence of common understandings of what constitutes “Europe” being shared among political parties from various European Union (EU) member states can be considered an indicator of Europeanisation of political communication and, subsequently, of a European public sphere.

The study investigates online content of political party Web sites, and involves comparisons along parties’ national basis, as well as cross-national comparisons along parties’ political orientation. Furthermore, it is argued that the Internet, in contrast to other mass media outlets (e.g., leaflets, party manifestos, articles in newspapers), offer producers the possibility to prioritise particular information, by putting it on the homepage of a site. For this reason, the analysis presented here also focuses on whether the presentation of Europe on parties’ central pages (main site home page and election site/section home page) is representative of the overall manner in which parties present Europe in their online communication. Central in the study are parties’ common understandings of what constitutes “Europe.” The general research question of the study is: *What differences and similarities can be observed in the manner in which French, British and Dutch political parties present Europe on their Web sites during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign?*

Theory – Presenting Europe

In the current discussion on European integration, the notion of public sphere has begun to play a central role. However, scholars disagree how to deal, both theoretically and empirically, with this notion at the European level. Early scholars, such as Grimm (1995) and Schlesinger (1999), have insisted on the non-existence of a European public sphere, based on unsubstantiated assumptions concerning the character of the public sphere and its relation to key concepts such as language, media system and state frontiers. Others hold a less strict view on what constitutes a European public sphere and define it not in terms of a supranational community that translates into a public sphere, but as a community that emerges through the debate of specific issues (e.g. Risse 2003; Van de Steeg et al. 2003). As Risse argues: “A European public sphere does not fall from heaven, and does not pre-exist outside social and political discourse” (Risse 2003, 2). Central in this second view on what constitutes a European public sphere are direct (face-to-face) or indirect (mass-mediated representations or the Internet) communicative interactions about European issues.

Risse and Van de Steeg (2003) distinguish two approaches that measure elements of a mediated European public sphere. The first approach essentially counts how often Europe, European institutions or European issues are mentioned in the media (e.g. Gerhards 2000; Trenz 2004). In a general sense, scholars conclude that the salience of European issues in the media has risen during the last decennium (Risse and Van de Steeg 2003; Trenz 2004). A second approach concentrates on the

cross-national appearance of similar presentations of Europe in the mass media¹ (e.g. Trenz 2000; Van de Steeg 2002). These studies observe that European issues are being discussed and reported in various media across Europe at the same time, at similar levels of attention in the issue cycle of media reporting, and in a similar manner using similar perspectives (Risse and Van de Steeg 2003; Trenz 2004). Semetko, De Vreese and Peter (2000, 129) conclude a European perspective is increasingly present in the British and German national news in addition to a domestic (national) perspective. Also, Risse and Van de Steeg discover similarities in presentations of Europe across 15 newspapers from five EU Member States in the context of the rise of the controversial Austrian politician Jörg Haider; two presentations directly related to Europe appeared frequently in each of the newspapers: “Europe as moral community,” and “European legal standards” (Risse and Van de Steeg 2003, 6-7).

The research presented in this article can be placed within the second approach proposed by Risse and Van de Steeg, but focuses on Internet-based representations. We investigate whether and to what degree common understandings about what constitutes “Europe” exist among Dutch, French and British political parties. These common understandings become manifest through the manner in which Europe is presented by parties on their websites during the 2004 EP election campaign.

The theoretical starting point of this study is the typology developed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz (2000, 2002), who investigated three what they term “thematic fields” in which Europe is addressed in the mass media (see also: Trenz 2004). We believe this typology constitutes three of the most essential *issue domains* of communication about Europe.² The first issue domain, *interests*, is present when rational arguments and/or motivations are put forward that refer to specific interests or strategic actions. Examples of this issue domain include references to advantages or disadvantages of European integration, consequences of EU legislation, and economic/market issues addressed in the text. The second issue domain, *identity*, is present when arguments and/or motivations are put forward that refer to the self-awareness or the collective identity of a particular community.³ Examples of this domain include references to “our homeland” and “our culture,” reference to a “European community,” and emphasis to a shared past and common future. The third issue domain, *values*, is present when arguments and/or motivations are put forward that refer to universally acknowledged moral principles. Examples of this domain include references to: democratic principles, freedom, human rights, political equality, and tolerance (Eder, Kantner and Trenz 2002, 44-46). In an analysis of news coverage of European governance and policy-making during the year 2000, Eder, Kantner and Trenz found that 85% of the articles in the sample contained interests issues, 38% values issues, and 27% identity issues; most articles contained multiple issue domains (see: Trenz 2004, 309-310).

In this study we adapt the typology developed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz, adding two components we consider missing in their typology – which, in our opinion, mainly serves as a tool for identifying and categorising issues in communication about Europe, instead of a theoretical foundation for investigating the manner in which Europe is presented within that communication. First, we feel it important to gather information about whether political parties, when mentioning the three issue domains, *employ a European or national focus*. This would lead to a more specified knowledge of the party’s view on Europe and related European issues: does a

party consider Europe as one entity with shared interests and a shared identity, or does a party consider these to be reserved for the nation state. In the first example, a European focus is employed, in the second example a national focus. For values, it turned out that parties only employed a European focus when communicating about values; therefore, we only report on European values.

Second, we feel it important to gather information about whether political parties, when communicating about Europe, *express a positive or negative attitude*. This would lead to a more specified knowledge about whether the EU, European integration and related issues are considered a positive or negative development or situation by the producer of the text. In this study we have incorporated these two components *focus* and *attitude*. We consider them important indicators of Europeanisation of political communication, and subsequently, of a European public sphere.

Research Questions and Method

EP elections have frequently been criticised as having little significance for voters. They are often qualified as “second order national contests,” and tend to attract less attention by all political actors – parties, interest groups, candidates, voters – and the mass media (Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). As a result, the 2004 EP campaign in all three countries included in the study was relatively short and mainly concentrated during the last 10 days.⁴

In this situation, it is particularly important for political parties to maintain websites as means of communication with supporters and the electorate at large so they can compensate for the lack of communication about Europe by the mass media. Also, it offers parties the possibility to circumvent “interpretative reporting” of the mass media (Gulati, Just and Crigler 2004), and to inform citizens directly and systematically about their positions on EU policy and legislation for the upcoming period (Ward, Gibson and Nixon 2003). Also, as argued before, it offers producers the possibility to prioritise particular pieces of information, by putting them on the homepage. In the last decennium, the Internet has increasingly become an object of study in empirical investigations of the public sphere, especially because of this new possibility of direct and unfiltered communication. This study contributes to this field of research.

Research Questions. The study involves content analysis of political party websites, and will lead to answering the general research question: *What differences and similarities can be observed in the manner in which French, British and Dutch political parties present Europe on their websites during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign?* More specifically, the following research questions are posed:

- a. *To what extent do parties mention the issue domains interests, identity and values on their websites?*
- b. *To what extent do parties employ a European or national focus?*
- c. *To what extent do parties express a positive or negative attitude towards Europe?*
- d. *Can variation be observed between the manner in which parties present Europe on their central pages, and within their entire online communication about Europe?*

Table 1: Political Parties Examined in the Study

Party name	Country	Website	Election website/section	Seats	Group
CPNT	FR	www.cpnt.asso.fr/	section	0	ID
Front National	FR	www.frontnational.com/	www.europeennes2004.com/	7	N.I.
MPF (Liste Villiers)	FR	www.autre-europe.org/	www.villiers2004.com/	3	ID
LCR	FR	www.lcr-rouge.org/	section	0	GUE*
Les Verts	FR	www.les-verts.org/	http://elections.lesverts.fr/	6	Green*
Lutte Ouvrière	FR	www.lutte-ouvriere.org/	section	0	GUE
Parti Communiste	FR	www.pcf.fr/	-	2	GUE
Parti Socialiste	FR	www.parti-socialiste.fr/	www.europesocialiste.org/	31	PES
RPF (Liste Pasqua)	FR	-	www.europe-des-nations.com/	0	UEN
UDF	FR	www.udf.org/	www.udf-europe.net/	11	ALDE
UMP	FR	www.u-m-p.org/	www.ump-europeennes2004.org/	17	EPP*
BNP	UK	www.bnp.org.uk/	-	0	N.I.
Conservative Party	UK	www.conservatives.com/	section	27	EPP
Green Party	UK	www.greenparty.org.uk/	section	2	Green
Labour Party	UK	www.labour.org.uk/	section	19	PES
Liberal Democrats	UK	www.libdems.org.uk/	-	12	ALDE
Plaid Cymru (Wales)	UK	www.plaidcymru.org/	-	1	EFA*
SDLP (N.I.)	UK	www.sdlp.ie/	-	0	PES
SNP (Scotland)	UK	www.snp.org/	http://voteforscotland.snp.org/	2	EFA
UK Independence Party	UK	www.independenceuk.org.uk/	-	12	ID
UUP (N.I.)	UK	www.uup.org/	section	1	EPP
CDA	NL	www.cda.nl/	http://europa.cda.nl/	7	EPP
CU-SGP	NL	www.christenunie.nl/			
		www.sgp.nl/	www.eurofractie.christenunie.nl/	2	ID
D'66	NL	www.d66.nl/	www.zondertwijfelvooreuropa.nl/	1	ALDE
Democr. Europa	NL	www.democratischeuropa.nl	-	0	EFA
Europa Transparant	NL	www.europatransparant.nl/	section	2	EFA
GroenLinks	NL	www.groenlinks.nl/	section	2	Green
Leefbaar Europa	NL	www.leefbaareuropa.nl/	-	0	ID
LPF	NL	www.lijst-pimfortuyn.nl/	section	0	ID
Nieuw Rechts	NL	www.nieuwrechts.nl/	www.michielsmit.nl/	0	N.I.
Partij vd Dieren	NL	www.partijvoordedieren.nl/	-	0	ID
PvdA	NL	www.pvda.nl/	section	7	PES
SP	NL	www.sp.nl/	http://europa.sp.nl/	2	GUE
VVD	NL	www.vvd.nl/	-	4	ALDE

* Abbreviations:

GUE = GUE-NGL

Green = Greens-EFA A (constructed group)

EPP = EPP-ED

EFA = Greens-EFA B (constructed group)

Selection of Research Material. In France and United Kingdom, the 2004 EP election was organised at the regional level; for France there were 8 electoral districts, for the United Kingdom 12. In both countries, most parties participated in only some of these electoral districts. Included in the study are political parties that participated in most districts (7 out of 8 in France, 11 out of 12 in the UK), and/or

that were expected to obtain seats in the EP in this election, based on previous election results and opinion polls. As a result, for the United Kingdom some parties are included that participated in only one district, such as *Plaid Cymru* in Wales, and *Ulster Unionist Party* in Northern Ireland. In contrast to the French and British situation, in the Netherlands parties competed at the national level in the 2004 EP election campaign. For this country, all participating parties (except for two fringe parties) are included in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the 34 parties and their websites included in the study.

This study focuses on the online texts plus images that accompany the text, produced by the party especially for the site in which they elaborate on their issue positions and argumentations on Europe. This means that articles originally produced by press agents placed online by the party in the news or press section of the websites have not been included. Some parties place their offline magazines (weekly/monthly) on their websites; these are also not included. Weblogs maintained by the party leader and/or the campaign team, which usually report on campaign activities and not on the party's position on Europe, are also not included. Included in the study is all other online content only present on the websites: e.g. news articles produced by the party (as of 1 January 2004 – date of archiving), formal elaborations on party positions (usually a short version of the more extensive, “offline” party manifesto), and informal deliberations on particular aspects of the EU or European integration.

Coding Procedure and Analysis of Coding Results. A content analysis of French, British and Dutch political party websites was conducted. Online communication was divided into coding units; each separate webpage was considered a syntactical coding unit.⁵ Yet, in some cases, content present on a page was again divided into thematic coding units.⁶ This was because every website producer designs sites differently: some put much text on one page; others construct a new page for every part of one narrative or explanation. Herein, we have followed the layout the producer has used in composing the text.⁷ In this manner, we believe, it is possible to draw comparisons between sites more equally, besides retaining the original characteristics of the material as much as possible. Each coding unit was coded in an interpretative manner.⁸ This means that the coder needed to determine for each coding unit whether: (1) a particular issue domain is addressed,⁹ (2) a European or national focus is employed,¹⁰ and (3) whether a positive or negative attitude towards Europe is expressed by the party.¹¹

In the analysis, percentages were calculated per party that stand for the degree of presence of an issue domain within the entire online communication of each party; these percentages were calculated separately for European and national focus. For the second presentation “attitude towards Europe,” a mean score on a scale ranging from 1 to 3 was calculated per party. Aggregated country percentages and scores were also calculated. Parties' central pages, defined as the main site home page and the election site/section home page,¹² were analysed separately and in a more exploratory manner. Here, quotes are taken from these pages that provide more insight into the nature of the presentations investigated in the study; for each party the results of this exploratory analysis were compared to the percentages for the entire online communication.¹³

In total, 1701 coding units were included in the study; 618 for France, 425 for United Kingdom and 658 for the Netherlands. Numbers of coding units per party vary between 8 (*British National Party*, UK) and 130 (*Partij van de Arbeid*, NL). Comparisons are drawn along national basis and political orientation of the political parties included in the study. Political orientation is determined by party affiliation with one of the 8 political groups in the EP, which unite national delegations (parties) into groups of similar political orientation. For newcomers at the European level, we estimated the political orientation at the European level on the basis of position in the respective national political spectrums.¹⁴

Results—Parties' Online Communication about Europe

A considerable number of parties only placed an announcement of the 2004 EP election on the home page of their main website; usually a hyperlink guided visitors from the party home page to the site or section where the election-related content could be found. Twelve of the 34 parties included in the study did not communicate about any of the three issue domains on their central pages; here, parties presented their candidates, announced particular election-related events, explained the procedure for the election, or criticised the campaign strategy of other political parties. Likewise, in 407 of the 1701 coding units no issue domain could be identified (24%).

Looking more closely at the 22 parties that mentioned issues within at least one of the three issue domains when communicating about Europe on their central pages, interesting patterns occur. First, interests issues were usually mentioned in combination with identity issues. Furthermore, interests issues with a European focus (European interests) were usually mentioned in combination with identity issues with a European focus (European identity); interests with a national focus (national interests) were usually mentioned in combination with identity issues with a national focus (national identity). Also, regional interests, exclusively mentioned by British parties, were in all cases stressed in combination with regional identity issues. Values issues, exclusively with a European focus, were not often mentioned by parties on their central pages, and almost never solely (without mentioning either interests or identity issues). Regarding the attitude towards Europe, few parties expressed an explicit negative attitude towards Europe on their central pages; most parties expressed a neutral or positive attitude.

The remainder of this section focuses on the extent to and the manner in which these patterns appear within the entire online communication of the parties included in the study; comparisons are drawn with results of the exploratory investigation of parties' central pages; quotes are taken from these pages. Table 2 provides an overview of the extent to which parties grouped by country mention issues within the issue domains (interests, identity or values) in their entire online communication about Europe, indicated in percentages. Parties mainly mentioned interests when communicating about Europe on their websites – 63%, compared to 23% for values and 21% for identity issues; this ranking corresponds with that found by Eder, Kantner and Trenz in a study of mass-mediated representations during the year 2000: 85% interests, 38% values and 27% identity (Trenz 2004, 309-310; see also: Eder, Kantner and Trenz 2000, 2002). However, especially the overall mean for interests turned out to be much lower in our study than in the study by Eder,

Kantner and Trenz; this can be explained by the fact that in 24% of the coding units included in our study parties solely announced particular election-related events or presented their candidates without mentioning issues within the issue domains. In this context, the overall mean for identity issues mentioned by political parties in their online communication about Europe should be interpreted as relatively high. This roughly corresponds to the results of the explorative investigation of parties' central page communication. Especially British parties mentioned a considerable number of identity issues on their central pages (39%).

Table 2: Issue Domains per Country*

Country	N	Interests (%)	Identity (%)	Values (%)
UK	425	64	39	18
NL	658	63	13	24
FR	618	62	8	26
Total	1701	63	21	23

* Each coding unit may involve more than one issue domain.

The remainder of this section differentiates between European, national and regional interests, and between European, national and regional identity issues (European vs. national focus). Table 3 provides an overview per party and the aggregated means per country. Additionally, means have been calculated for positive versus negative attitude.

European vs. National Interests

As shown at the bottom of Table 3 for the entire collection, the aggregated mean for European interests is 41% and 23% for national interests. Regional interests were only mentioned by a small number of parties, and almost solely by British parties; therefore, no aggregated mean for the entire collection was calculated for regional focus. When looking separately at the three countries included in the study, British parties mentioned the least often European interests: only 23%, compared to 31% for national interests and 16% for regional interests. Especially the British *UK Independence Party* often mentioned national interests in its online communication about Europe: 73%. On its main site home page, this party also mentioned national interests; it stated to be against the EU membership of United Kingdom and considered contributing financially to the EU "a waste of money." Dutch parties, in contrast, relatively often mentioned European interests: 42%, compared to 17% for national interests, which is below the overall mean. French parties mentioned most often European interests: 51%, and to a large degree national interests, 25%, which is well above the overall mean.

Considerable variation was however observed between the parties within each country, as can be seen in Table 3. Therefore, this section continues with reporting on cross-national similarities and differences observed among national parties holding a similar political position. First, the liberal parties, united in the European group *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe* (ALDE), mentioned relatively often European interests: 59% for the Dutch *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), 54% for the British *Liberal Democrats*, 51% for the French *Union Démocratique*

Française (UDF), and somewhat less often, 40%, for the Dutch *Democraten '66* (D'66). Especially the percentage for *Liberal Democrats* is remarkably high, compared to the British country mean for European interests: 23%. Without exception, by addressing advantages of European integration, these liberal parties all also mentioned European interests on their central pages. One of the most frequently mentioned advantages was the possibility to tackle terrorism and international crime in a strong, collaborative Europe. Also, these parties mentioned relatively less often national interests, all below the respective country means, except for *Liberal Democrats*, 31%, which is close to the British country mean for national interests.

Second, the Green parties, associated in the constructed European group Greens-EFAA (*The Greens/European Free Alliance*), also mentioned relatively often European interests: 40% for the British *Green Party* (which is quite high compared to the British country mean for European interests), 63% for the Dutch *GroenLinks*, and 49% for the French *Les Verts*. The last two parties also mentioned European interests on their central pages. For example *GroenLinks* stated Europe should prioritise people and the environment above “market and coin.” The Green parties mentioned almost no national interests in their online communication.

Third, most sovereign and extreme right-wing parties often mentioned national interests, although some of them also frequently stressed quite often European interests (but in a negative sense; see “attitude”). On their central pages, these parties all mentioned national interests; they spoke about the loss of national sovereignty, and about Europe being the cause of criminals and terrorists entering the respective country's territory. For example, *Mouvement Pour la France* (MPF) mentioned: “they have promised us a Europe that brings security; instead, illegal immigrants, carriers of drugs, mafia, and terrorists come and go as they like, benefiting from the dismantlement of our borders.” MPF mentioned national interests in 65% of its entire online communication. The other two French sovereign parties scored somewhat lower, 47% for *Rassemblement Pour la France* (RPF), and 32% for *Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions* (CPNT); the last percentage is only slightly above the French country mean. The extreme right-wing party *Nieuw Rechts* was even the only Dutch party mentioning national interests on its central pages. *British National Party* mentioned national interests in but 38% of its entire online communication. However, for this party only eight coding units were relevant; four of these coding units addressed no issue domain at all; of the other four, in three coding units national interests were mentioned, which is quite high. In two coding units, *British National Party* mentioned European interests. The extreme right-wing party *Front National* mentioned national interests in 74% of its entire online communication; this party also mentioned national interests on its central pages, as most other sovereign and extreme right-wing parties included in the study.

Fourth, some similarities have been observed among the social democratic parties united in the European group *Party of European Socialists* (PES). Especially the British *Labour Party* and the Dutch *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) often mentioned European interests, respectively 91% and 52%. These two parties also mentioned European interests on their central pages. *Labour Party* for example argued that “the enlarged EU will become the biggest trade block in the world.” *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) spoke about their propositions for a more efficient Europe, in proposing to “quit with the monthly waste of money ‘removal circus’ to Strasbourg.” In contrast, the French *Parti Socialiste* mentioned European interests in only 32% of its entire

Table 3: Interest, Identity and Value Issues in Online Communication of Political Parties in the UK, France, and The Netherlands (in percentage of all webpages produced by a party)

Party	N	Country		Interests (%)	Identity (%)	Values (%)	Attitude*
BNP	8	UK	European	25***	25	13	2.75
			National	38	38		
			Regional	0	0		
Conservatives	62	UK	European	34	8	19	2.49
			National	45	50		
			Regional	0	0		
Green Party	45	UK	European	40	11	45	2.03
			National	9	7		
			Regional	0	0		
Labour	35	UK	European	91	3	3	1.50
			National	34	26		
			Regional	0	0		
Lib Democrats	13	UK	European	54	15	46	1.40
			National	31	62		
			Regional	0	0		
Plaid Cymru	26	UK	European	19	8	27	2.00
			National	15	4		
			Regional	54	35		
SDLP	87	UK	European	23	20	18	1.41
			National	1	2		
			Regional	29	28		
SNP	21	UK	European	11	0	23	1.90
			National	0	5		
			Regional	62	67		
UKIP	90	UK	European	11	2	4	2.75
			National	73	44		
			Regional	0	0		
UUP	38	UK	European	24	11	8	2.12
			National	21	13		
			Regional	55	45		
UK total	524		European	23	10	18	2.15
			National	31	25		
			Regional	16	15		
CDA	95	NL	European	55	36	23	1.56
			National	33	25		
			Regional	4			
CU-SGP	36	NL	European	33	22	8	1.82
			National	3	6		
			Regional	0	0		
D'66	104	NL	European	40	35	33	1.56
			National	18	17		
			Regional	0	0		
DE	26	NL	European	50	4	46	2.41
			National	27	23		
			Regional	0	0		
ET	12	NL	European	33	8	58	2.89
			National	8	0		
			Regional	0	0		
GroenLinks	99	NL	European	63	7	18	2.14
			National	5	5		
			Regional	0	0		
LE	40	NL	European	35	3	20	2.29
			National	0	3		
			Regional	0	0		
LPF	19	NL	European	32	5	21	2.64
			National	32	16		
			Regional	0	0		
Nieuw Rechts	16	NL	European	56	25	31	2.50
			National	32	31		
			Regional	0	0		

PvdD	15	NL	European	47	0	7	2.25
			National	0	7		
			Regional	0	0		
PvdA	130	NL	European	52	16	19	1.71
			National	21	16		
			Regional	0	0		
SP	44	NL	European	73	7	32	2.79
			National	11	5		
			Regional	0	0		
VVD	22	NL	European	59	18	23	1.47
			National	18	0		
			Regional	0	0		
NL total	658		European	42	18	24	1.93
			National	17	13		
			Regional	1	0		
CPNT	54	FR	European	50	11	37	2.71
			National	32	20		
			Regional	0	0		
Front National	62	FR	European	21	11	5	2.97
			National	74	37		
			Regional	0	0		
LCR	12	FR	European	50	25	17	2.80
			National	17	0		
			Regional	0	0		
Les Verts	84	FR	European	49	27	36	1.86
			National	0	2		
			Regional	0	0		
Lutte Ouvrière	10	FR	European	40	0	30	2.71
			National	0	0		
			Regional	0	0		
MPF (Villiers)	17	FR	European	24	18	29	2.88
			National	65	88		
			Regional	0	0		
Parti Comm.	23	FR	European	91	52	52	1.74
			National	9	4		
			Regional	0	0		
Parti Socialiste	129	FR	European	32	25	24	1.78
			National	10	4		
			Regional	0	0		
RPF (Pasqua)	30	FR	European	53	23	43	2.79
			National	47	47		
			Regional	0	0		
UDF	89	FR	European	51	34	27	1.62
			National	9	10		
			Regional	3	2		
UMP	108	FR	European	40	23	15	1.54
			National	40	25		
			Regional	0	0		
FR total	618		European	51	24	26	2.08
			National	25	17		
			Regional	1	0		
Total	1701		European	41	18	23	2.04**
			Nationa	23	18		
			Regional	-	-		

* Attitude scale: 1 = positive, 2 = neutral, 3 = negative.

** Total N for attitude is 1294; in these coding units at least one issue domain was identified.

*** In 25% of all coding units produced by BNP (N=8) European interests were identified.

online communication. *Parti Socialiste* in general mentioned few interests issues: not much national interests were mentioned either by this party: only 10%. The other two social democratic parties scored around the respective country means for national interests. Parties holding a more extreme left-wing position, such as the French *Parti Communiste* and the Dutch *Socialist Party* (SP) also mentioned relatively often European interests, respectively 52% and 73%. Thus, *Parti Socialiste* seems to be the outlier among the left-wing parties; *Labour Party* and *PvdA* showed more similarities in their communication.

Finally, the centre-right parties united in the European group *European People's Party – European Democrats* (EPP-ED) also reflected some similarities. All three parties – British *Conservatives*, Dutch *Christen Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) and French *Union pour une Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) – mentioned 15-20% more national interests than the respective country means, respectively 45%, 33% and 40%. *Conservatives* and UMP also mentioned national interests on their central pages. *Conservatives* on its central pages claimed firmly to stand up for Britain's best interests in Europe; this party spoke about its unwillingness to "hand over powers to the EU," and about the "supremacy of EU law." On the other hand, *Conservatives*, like CDA, mentioned 10% more European interests than the respective country means; UMP mentioned European interests proportionally less European interests in its entire online communication, but mentioned European interests on its central pages, in contrast to *Conservatives*, which only mentioned national interests on its central pages. UMP argued both for "a protective, strong and independent Europe in service of peace" [European interests], and for "defending French interests in PAC"¹⁵ [national interests]. A mixed picture, in other words, emerges from these data.

European vs. National Identity

As shown at the bottom of Table 3, the aggregated mean for both European and national identity issues for the entire collection is 18%. French parties mentioned the most often European identity issues: 24%, compared to 18% for the Dutch parties, and only 10% for the British parties. It is also the British parties that mentioned the most often national identity issues (25%) and regional identity issues in the case of the regionally-oriented British parties; see, for example, the *Scottish National Party* (SNP, 67%) and *Ulster Unionist Party* (UUP, 55%). Some of these parties also mentioned regional identity issues on their central pages. For example SNP noted: "Voting for SNP will give us a strong voice in Europe."¹⁶ Dutch parties mentioned national identity issues in only 13% of the coding units, French parties in 17%.

Variations were observed, however, between the parties within each country, as can be seen in Table 3. Therefore, cross-national similarities and differences between national parties holding a similar political position are reported. First, the liberal parties UDF and D'66 relatively often mentioned European identity issues, respectively 34% and 35%. The other two liberal parties, *Liberal Democrats* and *VVD* mentioned less often European identity issues, respectively 15% and 18%; yet, these scores are still above or around the respective country means for European identity. However, only UDF mentioned European identity issues on its central pages, which is quite remarkable because of the general high percentage for European identity issues of the liberal parties. Here, UDF argued that "a strong Europe needs to have its own identity and its own borders." As concerns national

identity issues, especially *Liberal Democrats* scored high: 62%; the other three liberal parties scored much lower, 0% in the case of VVD.

Second, the Green parties did not mention identity issues often, either European or national identity issues. Only the French *Les Verts* scored relatively high on European identity issues: 27%, which is around the French country mean for European identity.

Third, the French sovereign and extreme right-wing parties mainly mentioned national identity issues, 47% for RPF, 37% for *Front National* and 88% for MPF. Also the Dutch *Nieuw Rechts* mentioned relatively often national identity issues: 31%, which is about twice as high as the Dutch country mean. On its central pages this party spoke about Dutch citizens feeling uncomfortable and not belonging to Europe. Also CPNT mentioned national identity issues on its central pages, in claiming for “the recognition of the uniqueness of traditional French products such as foie gras, cheese and wine, in order to prevent these to disappear through European integration.” However, *British National Party*, some French sovereign parties, and even *Front National*, quite remarkably, addressed some European identity issues. All these parties, in addressing the possible entry of Turkey to the EU, argued the Turkish religion, traditions and culture to be different than in Europe [European identity issue]. MPF and RPF placed such remarks on their central pages.

Fourth, for the centre-right parties similarities could only be observed for national identity issues. All three parties in this group, and especially *Conservatives*, mentioned relatively often national identity issues; 50% for *Conservatives*, and 25% for both UMP and CDA. *Conservatives* and UMP also mentioned national identity issues on their central pages. Here, *Conservatives* claimed that “*British* want to control their own lives.” In a similar manner, UMP mentioned “to defend France’s identity, its language, way of living and cultural diversity.” However, UMP and CDA also mentioned relatively often European identity issues (compared to the respective country means). This is in contrast to *Conservatives*, which hardly ever mentioned identity issues with a European focus.

Finally, for the social democratic parties, no clear pattern could be observed regarding the focus and extent to which parties communicated about identity issues. *Parti Socialiste* stressed in 25% of its online communication European identity issues, which is comparable to the high French country mean, and the high score of other French left-wing parties for European identity, such as *Parti Communiste* (52%) and *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR, 25%). *Parti Communiste*, for example, mentioned on its central pages: “progress, solidarity, and peace are the binding elements in Europe.” This party claimed to believe that these elements could counterbalance the ultra-liberal Europe proposed by right-wing parties. In contrast, *Labour Party*, stressed national identity issues in 26% of its coding units (comparable to the country mean), and almost no European identity issues. This party also mentioned national identity issues on its central pages. In response to *UK Independence Party* proposal to withdraw from the EU, *Labour Party* argued that: “withdrawing to the margins would be a disaster for our future prosperity and influence in the world.” *Parti Socialiste* on the other hand, stressed almost no national identity issues. PvdA scored around the Dutch country mean for European identity issues.

European Values

As shown at the bottom of Table 3, the aggregated mean for values for the entire collection of sites is 23%; these were all addressed with a European focus. Variation between the countries was not very high for this issue domain, however. French parties mentioned most often European values (26%), followed by Dutch parties: 24%, and British parties: 18%.

When looking at the parties separately within each country, slightly more variation could be observed. Therefore, cross-national similarities and differences found among national parties with similar political orientation are reported. First, *Liberal Democrats* often mentioned European values: 46%, in comparison to 33% for *D'66*, 23% for *VVD* and 27% for *UDF*, which is all still slightly above the respective country means. Also, three of these four liberal parties, except for *VVD*, mentioned European values on their central pages.

Second, *Green Party* often mentioned European values: 45%, compared to 36% for *Les Verts* and only 18% for *GroenLinks*. Both *Green Party* and *Les Verts* also mentioned European values on their central pages. Here, *Green Party* addressed human rights as being protected by EU law. *Les Verts* spoke about a shared Green vision on Europe among the various Green parties in Europe, namely “a democratic social and environmental Europe, which can create durable politics.” In contrast, *GroenLinks* solely mentioned interests on its central pages, which is consistent with the low percentage for European values in the entire online communication of *GroenLinks*. *GroenLinks* is the outlier here.

Third, for the sovereign and extreme right-wing parties, no clear pattern for European values could be observed. *RPF* often mentioned European values: in 43% of its entire online communication. *RPF* also mentioned European values on its central pages, although in a negative sense: *RPF* accused the European Parliament of rejecting European values. The other sovereign parties mentioned far less European values; *Front National* even mentioned almost no European values: only 5%, followed by *British National Party*: 13%. These two parties did not mention European values on their pages either.

Fourth, for the centre-right parties, *UMP* mentioned not very often European values: only 15%, which is considerably below the French country mean of 26% for European values. In comparison with *CDA* (23%) and *Conservatives* (19%), both of which score around the respective country means, *UMP* is a slight outlier. *Conservatives* also mentioned European values on its central pages, addressing the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights into EU law and the possible consequences of that Charter for Britain's asylum policy.

Finally, both the social democratic parties *Parti Socialiste* and *PvdA* scored around their respective country means regarding European values. *PvdA* also mentioned European values on its central pages, arguing for the need of the EU to become more democratic and transparent. Thus, *Labour Party*, again, is the outlier; in only 3% of the online communication of this party European values were mentioned. In contrast, the percentage for values of the regionally-oriented social democratic party *SDLP* was close to the British country mean.

Attitude towards Europe

Table 3 also indicates on whether a positive or negative attitude towards Europe is expressed by parties, on a scale from 1 to 3, in which 1 = positive, 2 = neutral and 3 = negative. Some variation could be observed between the country means for attitude: the British parties expressed the most negative attitude: 2.15; Dutch parties expressed the most positive attitude towards Europe: 1.93. The aggregated mean for French parties was 2.08.

Considerable variation could, however, be observed between the parties within each country. Therefore, cross-national similarities are addressed here. First, all four liberal parties expressed an explicit positive attitude towards Europe: 1.56 for D'66, 1.47 for VVD, 1.40 for *Liberal Democrats*, and 1.62 for UDF. These parties all also expressed a positive attitude on their central pages. Especially for *Liberal Democrats*, this is exceptional, since only two British parties expressed a positive attitude on their central pages.

Second, in a general sense, the Green parties were somewhat less positive than the liberal parties, expressing a more neutral attitude towards Europe. This could also be observed on the central pages of these parties. Yet, more variation was also observed between *Les Verts* (1.86) and *GroenLinks* (2.14). *Green Party* scored in between these two (2.03).

Third, the sovereign and extreme right-wing parties expressed, without exception, an extremely negative attitude towards Europe, ranging from 2.50 to 2.97. Most sovereign and extreme right-wing parties also expressed a negative attitude on their central pages, although some like CPNT expressed a neutral attitude.

Fourth, for the centre-right parties, a more diverse picture appeared: *Conservatives* expressed a much more negative attitude towards Europe (2.49) as compared to CDA (1.56) and UMP (1.54). Similar diversity was observed for these parties' central page communication (for *Conservatives* and UMP).

In contrast, the social democratic *Labour Party* expressed a more positive attitude towards Europe (1.50) compared to PvdA (1.71) and *Parti Socialiste* (1.78). *Labour Party* also expressed a more positive attitude on its central pages, compared to PvdA (no central page coding units for *Parti Socialiste*). As concerns attitude, *Parti Socialiste* and PvdA were not backed by the more extreme left-wing parties SP (2.79), *Lutte Ouvrière* (2.71) and *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR, 2.80), as was earlier the case when reporting on the European versus national focus in which the issue domains are addressed.

Conclusions

The study presented in this article was guided by the general research question: *What differences and similarities can be observed in the manner in which French, British and Dutch political parties present Europe on their websites during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign?* Based on the results we can first of all conclude that the typology developed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz covers a large part of the online communication about Europe produced by the parties included in the study: in 76% of the coding units, at least one of the issue domains was identified. Furthermore, parties address foremost issues within the issue domain interests when communicating about Europe. Values and identity issues were mentioned

less often by parties on their websites during the 2004 EP election campaign. All values were mentioned within a European focus.

The ranking of issue domains corresponds with the outcomes of the study performed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz, who investigated the appearance of the three issue domains interests, identity and values within a mass-mediated environment, as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, parties (in this study) seemed to mention relatively more often identity issues in comparison with the mass media (in the study by Eder, Kantner and Trenz) when communicating about Europe and European issues. This also became manifest in the explorative investigation of parties' central pages; relatively often, on these pages parties mentioned identity issues, usually in combination with interests employing a similar European or national focus for both. This could be interpreted as a sign of a higher degree of perceived attachment, and in the case of a European focus, of a sense of "belonging to Europe" of parties in comparison to mass media actors. We consider this an indicator of Europeanisation of political communication, and subsequently, of the existence of a European public sphere.

Comparing the parties included in the study along their national basis, a European focus – in which both interests and identity issues are mentioned – was particularly observed within the online communication of Dutch, and slightly less frequently, of French parties. British parties, generally speaking, more often mentioned national interests and national identity issues. British parties also expressed the most negative attitude towards Europe; especially Dutch parties expressed a more positive attitude towards Europe. These patterns in presentation of Europe by parties became also manifest in the explorative investigation of the parties' central pages. These national comparisons, however, are rough and generalised; much variation was observed between parties within each country. More similarities in presentation of Europe were observed cross-nationally among parties with similar political orientation.

Comparing the parties along their political orientation, similarities were especially observed among the following three groups of parties with similar political orientation:

1. The liberal parties mentioned relatively often European interests and, somewhat less frequent, European identity issues. These parties generally approved the focus on EU economic development, which became manifest in a positive attitude.
2. The sovereign and extreme right-wing parties mentioned relatively often national interests and national identity issues. These parties, in a general sense, oppose against European integration, which became manifest in a negative attitude.
3. The Green parties (*Green Party, Les Verts, GroenLinks*) relatively often mentioned values and only employed a European focus in their online communication about Europe, combined with a neutral or positive attitude.

More diversity was observed among the social democratic parties and the centre-right parties. It was mainly the British *Labour Party* and *Conservatives*, employing more often a national focus and expressing more often a negative attitude than their French and Dutch sister parties, that made these two groups more diverse. Also here, the central pages roughly provided the same picture; these pages seem

adequate representations of the overall manner in which parties present Europe within entire online communication.

These cross-national groups of parties represent the five largest political movements in Europe. Among three of them, we have found cross-national similarities in the manner in which they present Europe within their online communication. We can thus conclude that there exist certain common understandings of what constitutes Europe among political parties from various EU member states with similar political orientation and the political movements they represent in Europe. In our opinion, this can be considered an important indicator of Europeanisation of political communication, and subsequently, of a European public sphere.

The outcomes of the study presented in this article verify the results of the explorative investigation of French political party websites conducted by the first author (Van Os 2005). In this first study the applicability of the typology developed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz was demonstrated within an online environment. The study presented in this article, which reports on a larger number of political parties from three EU member states, provides more systematic and detailed evidence. In both studies similarities in the manner in which political parties communicate about Europe on their websites were observed.

In this article, we described two manners in which parties present Europe: in terms of focus and attitude. Yet, we believe that Europe can be interpreted and presented in more diverse manners than these two presentations. Further analysis should therefore focus on more diverse presentations of Europe. Furthermore, we consider it valuable to compare the online communication about Europe of political parties – as relatively institutionalised political actors in the public sphere – with the online communication of less institutionalised actors, such as NGOs and social movement organisations.

Notes:

1. Others refer to this approach as 'framing'. Roughly speaking, framing theory is concerned with the presentation of issues (Pan and Kosicki 1993). In a general sense, a frame, through emphasising some elements of a topic above others, provides a way to understand an event or issue (De Vreese 2005, 53).

2. Prior to this study, in a pilot study on French political party websites, conducted by the first author of this article (Van Os 2005), the typology provided by Eder, Kantner and Trenz was examined.

3. For a more extensive elaboration on social identities, see: Herrmann and Brewer (2004).

4. All websites included in the study were archived at least once in the specified period. Sites were archived with *Teleport Ultra* and *HTTrack*; see www.tenmax.com and www.httrack.com. In addition, we would like to thank Annie-Claude Salomon of the Pacte CNRS-IEP Research Centre in Grenoble, France, for providing access to their archive of party websites. Also, some sites were coded from the Internet Archive: www.archive.org.

5. Krippendorff defines a syntactical unit as "natural' relative to the grammar of a communications medium" (Krippendorff 1980, 61).

6. Krippendorff defines a thematic unit as "identified by their correspondence to a particular structural definition of the content of narratives, explanations or interpretations" (Krippendorff 1980, 62).

7. A clear 'start' of a document is acknowledged as being the beginning of a coding unit.

Succeeding coding units are distinguished when the producer has inserted a heading, or when various points or positions are listed. An image, related to the text, is also considered a separate coding unit.

8. All codings have been executed by the first author. We acknowledge the possibility that the results may have been influenced by this situation. Nonetheless, 60 randomly selected coding units (about 1/30 of the total number) have been coded twice; there was sufficient overlap between the two coding moments – ranging from 94 to 100% for the issue domains, from 86 to 100% for European vs. national focus, and 83% for positive vs. negative attitude. This indicates a high level of intra-coder consistency.

9. For identification of the issue domains within each coding unit, we have used the coding scheme developed by Eder, Kantner and Trenz (2000; 2002). We adapted their scheme slightly to new terminology and current developments in the European Union. The coding scheme was not defined/fixed a priori, but the result of an alternating process of induction and deduction. It contains a general description for each item, plus a listing of keywords.

10. In the coding scheme *focus* was questioned as follows: "To which entity does the party exactly refer to when mentioning an issue domain: Europe/the EU (in a more general sense), and/or the nation state (specifically)?" The coder was instructed to choose as much as possible between a European, national or, alternatively, a regional focus, and to only assign more than one focus if explicitly present within one coding unit.

11. In the coding scheme *attitude* was questioned as follows: "Does a party speak about Europe/EU/EU institutions/EU laws etc. in a positive, neutral or negative sense?" If attitude was not clear, or mixed, the code 'neutral' also ought to be assigned. Attitude was only determined within coding units in which at least one of the issue domains was identified.

12. Here, no differentiation was made between whether a party had created a separate election site or had put its election-related content within a (separate) section of the main site. These were treated on an equal basis.

13. Especially for the minor parties the percentages should be interpreted with caution, since these are based on low numbers. Still, for comparative purposes, it seems worth while mentioning percentages for every party.

14. For comparative purposes, the European group Greens-EFA is divided into two separate groups: the Green parties in one group (Greens-EFA A), and the 'Free Alliance' parties in another group (Greens-EFA B). Also, for the purpose of comparison, the Non Attached members have been put into one group too: it concerns the three extreme right-wing national parties *Front National* (FR), *British National Party* BNP (UK) and *Nieuw Rechts* (NL). All groups constructed for the study consist of at least of three national parties from at least two countries included in the study, except for the European group UEN; only the French party *Rassemblement Pour la France* (RPF) makes part of that group.

15. PAC = Politique Agricole Commune.

16. Emphasis in quotes not contained in original text.

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