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### Framing the European Union and Building the Media Agenda: The 2004 European Parliamentary Elections in the Spanish Daily Press

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# **Framing the European Union and Building the Media Agenda: The 2004 European Parliamentary Elections in the Spanish Daily Press**

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*This article uses the analysis of the 2004 European elections in the Spanish press as a case study that can be broached from the agenda building and framing theoretical frameworks. We seek to compare the media agenda in the 2004 and 1999 European elections by use of a content analysis in order to evaluate the impact of new real-world conditions (the March 11 Madrid bombings) and new strategies of political actors after the March 14 general elections concerning foreign affairs on the news coverage. The research also aims to advance framing research by identifying news frames (as the “conflict frame” and the “political game frame”) that can link this study with prior ones.*

**KEYWORDS** *agenda building, European elections, European Union, framing, political communication, Spanish media*

Agenda building studies usually include analysis of the relationships between changes in the real-world indicators, events, and strategies of political actors and the hierarchy of issues on the media agenda. The understanding of media content and its influence on public perceptions of the world also highlights the importance of centering the attention on the selection of frames in the coverage of political news. Framing is understood as the “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue

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is using selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard et al., 1991, p. 3).

This study explores the press agenda in the 2004 and 1999 European elections in Spain in order to evaluate the impact on it of national conditions after the Madrid bombings on March 11 and the strategies of the new government elected on March 14. The article also seeks to identify the main frames of the press coverage during the election campaign.

#### AGENDA SETTING, FRAMING, AGENDA BUILDING, AND THE EU ELECTIONS

The importance of the media in shaping political views of mass audiences and the elite has been confirmed in numerous studies and from different approaches. In the political communications field, agenda setting remains the predominant theoretical approach to analyzing the impact of media messages on audiences (Graber and Smith, 2005, p. 489). According to the agenda setting hypothesis, what the media chooses to cover influences the issues that the public finds most salient. The amount of media attention devoted to certain issues influences the degree of public concern for these issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting theorists also state that public views of the characteristics of political actors and political situations are shaped by mass media information (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, 1997). As Graber and Smith (2005, p. 489) argue, “mass media information is the basis for forming public opinions—the presumed wellsprings of governance in functioning democracies.”

Given the high level of complexity of European integration and given that this is an area in which knowledge and personal experiences are limited, the public is likely to look for guidance from the media in order to know the main issues under discussion as well as to interpret reality and form opinions. In fact, the media are the most important sources of information about European issues (Eurobarometer, 2002, report no. 56; Eurobarometer, 2004, report no. 61). As Norris (2000, p. 209) states, the information most citizens have about the European Union (EU) depends on media coverage. Given this dependence, in general, what is published in the media about foreign affairs influences citizens’ perceptions of the world more strongly than news about domestic politics on which citizens may have greater knowledge (Gavin, 1998; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Concerning the European integration process, research has shown that media influence is relevant for the specific case of citizen perceptions of European issues. Norris (2000) found a relationship between the tone of news and public support for EU membership and the Euro.

Some researchers include the concept of framing in the original definition of agenda setting. McCombs and Shaw (1993, p. 62) suggest that “Both

the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles... [that may] direct attention toward certain attributes and away from others." Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five frames in an analysis about the coverage of European politics in the media: conflict frames; human interest frames; economic consequence frames; morality frames; and responsibility frames. de Vreese (2004) also found the economic consequences and the conflict frames in another study that compared the coverage in the United States and Europe.

The roots of agenda setting theory are in Lippman's (1922) argument that citizens rely on the media because they try to understand a world that is too complicated and out of reach to the public. But agenda setting studies have often ignored that not all of the world is out of reach and that audiences also have direct experiences with real-world events. In this sense, Behr and Iyengar (1985, p. 40) stated that "it is imperative that indicators of national conditions be brought to bear on the relationship between news coverage and issue salience." These authors emphasize that the agenda setting analysis that ignores real-world conditions will arrive at "severely inflated estimates of media influence" (1985, p. 53). This idea implies a broader conception of the role of the media in the formation of public opinion: the agenda building approach.

Agenda building studies usually center their attention on two independent variables affecting the media agenda: first, real-world conditions and events and, second, activities of political actors (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005). As Sheafer and Weimann (2005, p. 349) assert, the first includes analysis of the relationship between changes in real-world indicators and events and the hierarchy of issues on the media agenda. The second includes relationships between the agenda or strategies of political actors and the media agenda.

This article uses the analysis of the 2004 European elections in the Spanish press as a case study that can be broached from the agenda building and framing theoretical frameworks. We seek to compare the media agenda in the 2004 and 1999 European elections by use of a content analysis in order to evaluate the impact of new real-world conditions (the March 11 Madrid bombings) and new strategies of political actors after the March 14 general elections concerning foreign affairs on the news coverage. The research also aims to advance framing research by identifying news frames that can link this study with prior ones.

## NEW REAL-WORLD CONDITIONS AND NEW GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

The Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 (in which 192 persons were killed), and the political crisis experienced in the following days had significant repercussions on the agenda of political parties, the media, and Spanish citizens in terms of domestic and foreign policy. These events contributed

**TABLE 1** Results of European Elections in 2004 and 1999

Parties	Seats (1999)	% of Votes (1999)	Seats (2004)	% of Votes (2004)
Popular Party	27	39.8	24	41.2
Socialist Party	24	35.2	25	43.5
Communist Party	4	5.8	2	4.1
Galeusca	4	6.1	2	5.1
Europe of People	2	2.9	1	2.5
European Coalition	2	3.2	0	—
Others	1	7.0	0	3.6
Total	64	100	54	100

to the election of a new prime minister in the general elections that took place 3 days later (March 14). The attacks brought on an increase in the turnout in the general elections. It went from 68.7 percent in 2000 to 77.2 percent in 2004.

The victory of the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* [PSOE]) in these general elections ushered in an important change in Spanish foreign policy. It meant reinforcement of Spanish relationships with European countries (mainly France and Germany) and a “cooling off” of United States–Spain bilateral relations. The slogan the PSOE chose soon after for the European campaign (“We return to Europe”) clearly showed their desire for rapprochement with those members of the EU who had opposed U.S. foreign policy in Iraq. The new foreign policy generated a new frame of issues under discussion in public opinion and in the media and provoked a change of strategies adopted by the parties for the 2004 European campaign. The campaign was interpreted by the Popular Party (*Partido Popular* [PP]) as a means to confirm their theory that the PSOE had won the general elections through lying and due to the effect of the terrorist attacks on voting behavior. On the other hand, a new victory for the PSOE would mean for this party that they had won the general elections fairly.

Thirty-two candidacies were presented in the 2004 European Parliamentary elections in Spain. These elections led to a new victory for the PSOE. As already mentioned, they had had an overwhelming victory in the Spanish general elections 3 months before, although this time they maintained only a narrow lead over the PP (Table 1).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The study anticipated that the impact of the Madrid bombings on Spanish public opinion and the change in Spanish foreign relations resulting from the March national elections would be associated with an increase in media coverage of European issues:

Hypothesis 1 (*agenda building*). European election issues will receive more media coverage in 2004 than in the previous 1999 election.

The new real-world indicators and the changes in political actors' strategies would also be associated with an increase in the importance given by the media to European elections issues:

Hypothesis 2 (*agenda building*). European election issues will be highlighted by the media in 2004 in comparison to 1999.

As discussed previously, international studies have found that European politics stories frequently have a conflictive frame. This frame was present in the 1999 European elections in Spain (Canel and Berganza, 2001). Given the controversy about the results of the general elections and the strategies of the two main parties, the conflict frame would be likely to appear:

Hypothesis 3 (*framing*). The conflict frame will be relevant in the media content in the press coverage.

Media coverage of European Parliament elections has generally been characterized by a focus on domestic issues (Berganza, 2005; Kevin, 2003; de Vreese, 2003). Thus, the elections do not exist so much to solve or debate European issues as to bring up questions of domestic policy and to act as a measuring stick for the popularity of national governments (Leroy and Siune, 1994, p. 59). This would also confirm the idea, tested in previous studies, that European Parliament elections are considered "second-order" elections both by political parties and the media (Reif, 1985; Berganza, 2005, p. 120; de Vreese, 2003, p. 113):

Hypothesis 4 (*framing*). Coverage of the EU elections in Spain will focus on domestic/national rather than on EU issues.

Nord and Strömbäck (2006, p. 199) have conceptualized this frame as the "political game frame." It characterized the European Parliament elections news in the Swedish media between 1995 and 2004. Nord and Strömbäck (2006, p. 199) describe this frame as follows: "Game-oriented news items are focused on opinion polls, the campaigns and how they are conducted, the strategies behind the parties' actions, and what the parties are doing in order to win more voters. The language of war, horse race, battle, or sports is a salient feature in these news items. Finally, person-orientated news items are focused on politicians as individuals, what they stand for, battles and conflicts between individual politicians, or scandals involving individual politicians. Thus, these news items treat individual politicians as being more important than both the political parties and the

substance of politics.” This frame will be tested in the present study. Its operationalization will be done in two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5 (*framing*). Individual politicians will be more important than the parties.

Hypothesis 6 (*framing*). Strategies and organization of the campaign and a horse race style of coverage will be relevant in the media content.

## METHOD

All political campaign texts published in the three leading Spanish national newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*) during the 2 weeks of the campaign were analyzed: from May 28 to June 11 both inclusive. Elections took place in Spain on June 13. The material was examined using the methodology of quantitative content analysis. The texts were content analyzed by two coders. Definitions and examples of each category were supplied to the coders. Intercoder reliability was calculated on a subset of 10 percent of the texts. Reliability was 0.95, using Cohen's kappa.<sup>1</sup> This study included the analysis of all campaign texts and graphics published: news articles, news analyses, interviews, features, editorials, letters to the editor, vignettes, headlines, bullets, pictures, graphs, or maps. In total, 467 items were coded.

Because public perception of issues depends greatly on the editorial slant of the media that people consume, this study selected three national newspapers, each with a different ideological tendency. *El País*, founded in 1976, is the newspaper with the largest number of daily readers (2,191,000 according to Estudio General de Medios, [EGM]).<sup>2</sup> Ideologically, it is situated close to the PSOE and social democrats (Reig, 1998). *El Mundo*, founded in 1989, is the second most frequently read daily newspaper (1,387,000 daily readers, according to the EGM).<sup>3</sup> It is characterized by the publication of research articles, by its criticism of the PSOE, and by its preference for the PP, the conservative party (Martín and Berganza, 2001; Fernández and Santana, 2000). Finally, *ABC*, founded in 1903, became a daily newspaper in 1905. It has 852,000 readers per day (data from EGM).<sup>4</sup> It is a right-wing newspaper very critical of the PSOE, close to the PP, and a defender of traditional values with a monarchic tendency (Alcover and Simón, 1998).

## RESULTS

During the 2 weeks of the electoral campaign, the three main Spanish newspapers published a total of 467 news items (234 appeared during the

first week of the campaign and 233 during the second). This means that on average 10 items per newspaper appeared daily (11 if we take into account only the articles published during the last week of the campaign). This reflects a notable increase in news with respect to what was published in the 1999 elections, confirming the first hypothesis. As Canel and Berganza (2001) mention, at that time only 111 items were published during the last week of the campaign (an average of 4 articles per newspaper per day). For the 1999 election, the authors examined the three above-mentioned newspapers plus the regional newspaper *Diario de Navarra*. Canel and Berganza (2001, p. 109) also analyzed other variables in the 1999 campaign in order to examine in detail how they varied in the different newspapers. When comparing these data with those of 2004, some differences are apparent, confirming the second hypothesis: in 2004, the percentage of items appearing on the front page is higher—6 percent in 2004 versus 4 percent in 1999 (there were no differences between the first and the second week of the 2004 campaign). On the other hand, as can be seen in Table 2, in 1999 a larger percentage of long news items and a smaller percentage of medium-length news items were published.

The main issues covered during the campaign (in terms of number of articles) were related to the organization of the campaign (34 percent). Here, issues such as the cost of events, anecdotes, campaign bus organization and preparation, candidate dropouts, campaign tone, and strategy are included.

The items based on public opinion polls (which are characteristic of the “horse race” reporting style) fell in second place (22.3 percent of the news). The prevalence of this style of coverage and the campaign-related issues confirms hypothesis 6.

The third set of issues covered most often by the press was related to questions of conflict on internal policy (13 percent of all items published): former Prime Minister Aznar and his party’s position on the war in Iraq; Spain’s war on international terrorism; and the validity of the March 14, 2004, general election results given the proximity of the March 11 bombings. The importance of this set of issues confirms hypothesis 3. All these themes

**TABLE 2** Length of News Items in 1999 and 2004 European Elections

Length	1999 Second week of campaign (N = 111)	2004 Second week of campaign (N = 233)	2004 2 Weeks of campaign (N = 467)
Short (to one column)	50.0%	45.5%	46.7%
Medium-length (between one column and half a page)	18.0%	36.9%	34.3%
Long (between half a page and one page)	30.0%	15.0%	17.1%
Very long (more than one page)	2.0%	2.6%	1.9%



set the scene for the crossfire of damaging remarks among the candidates, which made up the underlying current of the whole campaign. In fact, in this block of topics, more than half of the news items (6.9 percent) consisted exclusively of information about accusations and insults that candidates flung at each other.

In contrast with the 1999 campaign, when exclusively European topics of debate were relegated to the media and political agenda, these issues became quite important in the 2004 campaign (26.7 percent of the total news items). In fact, Table 3 shows that 12.4 percent of the information had political integration as its main topic. Within this block, information about the ratification of the EU Constitutional Treaty (5.6 percent of published articles) and about European Parliament reform (2.6 percent) were especially important.

The focus of 52.7 percent of the information analyzed was domestic. This is information that does not concern EU issues and that is not framed within a European context. Thus, hypothesis 4 was supported. Overall, 42.8 percent of the information had a European focus, and 3.6 percent had a nationalistic one (0.9 percent was not clear). In this last frame, the issues referring to pro-European demands from different Spanish regions were coded. These data show a notable increase in European rhetoric when it comes to dealing with issues, in comparison with what happened in the 1999 Spanish campaign. In the 1999 campaign, only 20 percent of the information had a European focus, whereas 80 percent was domestic (Canel and Berganza, 2001).

Another characteristic of the Spanish 2004 campaign was the strategy adopted by different parties to make party leaders as well as the prime candidates for the European Parliament stand out over parties during campaign activities. This fact confirms hypothesis 5. Also, as far as the news on national prime-time television is concerned, party leader screen time easily exceeded candidate time and party time (Berganza and Beroiz, 2006). This strategy points out the importance of personalization in politics and the game frame in modern democracies. The strategy is clearly observed when examining who is prevalent in news items. The main actors in the media campaign were from the two main parties (PP and PSOE): Mayor Oreja (PP candidate) obtained 14% of the news time; Rajoy (PP leader), 9%; PP party and other PP members, 3.5%; Borrell (PSOE candidate), 16.7%; Rodríguez Zapatero

**TABLE 3** Main Issues (N = 467)

Campaign organization	34.0%
Surveys and electoral participation	22.3%
Issues of internal policy conflicts	13.0%
Political issues of the EU/integration	12.4%
Social and cultural issues of the EU	6.0%
Economic issues of the EU	4.0%
Nationalistic demands related to the EU	4.3%
Other issues	4.0%

(PSOE leader), 12.9%; PSOE party and other PSOE members, 4.2%. As we can observe, the candidate rosters for these parties were headed by the current president of European Parliament, Josep Borrell (PSOE), and Jaime Mayor Oreja (PP).

## CONCLUSION

The three leading national newspapers with the widest audience paid more attention to the European Parliament election campaign in 2004 than they did in the 1999 campaign. They also featured election issues in comparison to 1999. These facts could be related to the new political conditions and public opinion climate resulting from the Madrid bombings: the perception of political parties (particularly the Socialist Party, the party of the Government), as well as of a large part of Spanish society, and of the need to both strengthen relations with the most powerful members of the EU (above all, those with Germany and France) and distance themselves somewhat from the U.S. position in Iraq and its war against international terrorism in the wake of the attacks of March 11. The increase in media attention in this election points out the importance of taking into account indicators of national conditions in order to define relationships between news coverage and issue salience.

In spite of greater visibility of the European elections in the newspapers examined, the political parties' campaign style as reflected in the news once again shows these elections being somewhat shoved into the background by political parties as well as by the press. An analysis of the most frequently debated issues during the campaign shows a the "horse race" reporting style to be quite widespread, as evidenced by the publication of a considerable number of articles based on public opinion polls. As in Swedish media, the "game frame" characterized European Parliamentary press coverage in Spain. The greater visibility given to individual politicians, making them more important than political parties, was also a factor contributing to this frame.

On the other hand, the debate over the most pressing European matters, such as the ratification of the Treaty for the European Constitution, which would happen in Spain a mere 8 months later, was not a priority issue for the press and the parties. The campaign was presented by the media in terms of political arm wrestling between the party in power and the opposition.

As other studies carried out in Spain and other European countries have shown, the "nationalizing" of the campaign (or the ethnocentric perspective of the European news) can be observed in the issues on which the campaign focused. If the campaign's focus was indeed of a domestic nature for the most part, an important increase of EU perspective in the news with respect to the 1999 campaign is noticeable. Given the low turnout registered (45.1 percent in Spain and a European average of 45.7 percent), it can be said that the 2004 European elections in Spain continued the tradition of second-order elections.

## NOTES

1. Cohen's *kappas* of 0.61–0.80 indicate substantial agreement between coders; values of 0.81–1.0 reflect almost perfect agreements (Cohen, 1960).
2. Daily readers between April 2004 and March 2005 (<http://www.aimc.es>).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

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