
“As it was in the beginning...”¹

The study of the role of television in the European parliamentary elections of 1979

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1 Introduction

For the then European Community, 1979 was a year of three ‘firsts’. Between the months of April and June of that year, campaigns were launched throughout its nine countries for the Members of its Parliament to be – for the first time – directly elected by popular vote. This was subsequently hailed as a “landmark”, a “major political event”, even a “revolutionary event” (Briggs 1982; Herman 1980; Palmer 1981). Considering that such a historic innovation must be academically investigated, the International Institute of Communications obtained substantial funding to enable a large-scale study to be mounted into the role of television in its presentation. That was the first of what became a series of quinquennial enquiries into political communication and the media in European parliamentary elections.² But that study was also the first piece of cross-nationally comparative political communication research, approaches to which were still in their infancy, to have been undertaken on anything like its scale – its nine-nation span having exceeded the three-nation reach of Sauerberg and Thomsen’s (1977) investigation of communication and voting in Denmark, Norway and Sweden; Blumler, Cayrol and Thoveron’s (1978) three-nation application of a uses and gratifications approach to Belgian, French and UK voters’ orientations to media coverage of their countries’ general elections; and Asp and Miller’s (1980) study of media usage for political learning in Sweden and the United States.

1 Taken from the Gloria Patri doxology.

2 The findings of the major research efforts appear for the 1989 election in Cayrol, 1991; for the 1999 election in de Vreese, 2003 and Wilke and Tangemann, 2004; for the 2004 election in de Vreese et al., 2006, Holtz-Bacha, 2005, and Maier and Tenscher, 2006; and for the 2009 election in Maier, Strömbäck and Kaid, 2011.

Much has changed since the results of the 1979 research were published (Blumler 1983a). The European Union has been enlarged beyond recognition by the admission of 19 more states, the economies, cultures and incentives for joint action of some of which differed greatly from those of the founder nations. European institutions have been modified by the adoption of five treaties. A Eurozone with a common currency has been created to manage some of the economic and financial affairs of most of the European Union countries. Issues with greater salience than before, some of them sharply contested and divisive – e.g. the environment and climate change, immigration, deficit reduction – have arisen for Europe-wide debate and attempted resolution. And uneven signs have appeared of a secular trend of less positive sentiment toward the Union than had previously prevailed among national electorates.

On the whole, attention in the literature to the 1979 research experience has been minimal and cursory – in some cases non-existent. We ask in this chapter whether (despite the changes mentioned above) anything significant can be gained by revisiting the approach that was adopted in the 1979 study and from the findings that resulted from it.

2 The 1979 event: What sort of election?

In order to appreciate features of the design of the research into the 1979 election, it is necessary to give some idea of how the event looked to us before its actual occurrence. Any retrospective view of a complex event of 35 years ago is bound to be partial, uncertain and at times hazy.

Our view was necessarily a broad and diverse one, since we hoped to discover new and unanticipated aspects as much as to faithfully confirm or reject some of our more well-founded expectations. In the following paragraphs, we outline some of the principal elements in our preliminary perspective.

The starting point was an awareness of the essentially undefined nature of the event, even as it was being shaped in the plans of its progenitors. One of the main outcomes of the election, we assumed, would be a clarification of its perceived meaning and relative significance amongst European voters. Our own source materials for imagining the main possibilities for meaning were diverse: known characteristics of national elections (in different countries); our knowledge of past (national) election campaigns and events; statements of purpose by European leaders; the literature on research into campaign processes, with attention to a diverse set of participants: voters, politicians and media practitioners in particular. This background knowledge

was the main basis for a selection of possible lines of enquiry, since it prepared us for a close attention to the role of the mass media and broadcasting especially. We were less concerned with recording what happened as a purely political event. In respect of the latter, we could not help being aware that the body to be elected had few, if any, real powers and could not rank highly as a political event in any single country, despite the appearance of its innovative significance.

However, these things could not be kept apart from one another. It was reasonable to expect that the election would serve a number of different purposes from the political point of view, as well as having a different range and distribution of perceived functions for individual voters. Any effects would also be diverse and possibly tentative and shallow. It was clear that the elections were an important part of the process and institutional arrangements whereby certain powers could eventually be exercised at a supra-national level for the common good of an association of nations. This much, and it was quite a lot, would not be all that easy to convert into candidate appeals, party policies and promises to voters. However, there was a general implication that limits would be set to certain activities currently under the control of national governments. An important aim of the elections was to legitimate in a general way the principle that powers can be exercised at different levels but still have democratic accountability. Such considerations would be rather theoretical for the average voter and were scarcely articulated at the time, although they still remain at the heart of the matter.

One of the least clear characteristics of the event to ourselves and probably to voters and many national politicians was the relationship between the new European political sphere and the familiar world of political parties in the daily competition for support. The energies and campaigning strategies of political actors would have to be mobilized as well as the beliefs and accepted duties of citizens in a democracy if the election was to work at all.

Another unclear feature was the degree to which the elections could be considered as an *international* event, despite arrangements made to synchronize arrangements and rules of engagement. An observer at the time would have concluded that it was probably a wish of the 'sponsors' of the European enterprise to use the elections as a means of increasing an awareness of a European identity and common interest amongst ordinary voters. This could be achieved, perhaps, by the acquisition of information and a sharing of commonly held concerns in a world of two other great powers at the time.

From this it is clear that the elections could not be considered 'normal'. In the past, in the different member countries, democratic accountability of governments was achieved, in theory at least, by way of elections driven from below by committed activists and the organized pressure of citizens. These features were not present in

the prospect of the 1979 election. It was not possible to escape from the strong sense that the coming elections were a somewhat artificial construction, put together at an elite level and sponsored by national political leaders with varying degrees of enthusiasm. This project was going to be exposed to the reactions of somewhat bemused voters in the nine countries, who, despite considerable support for the European Community at the time, had not particularly wanted it and would not have been sure what it was supposed to accomplish. No-one was claiming that the new Parliament would, to begin with, have much direct influence on everyday life and much specific power. The top-down character of the event, and in some cases, the fears caused by old national or political disputes, both complicated the way the elections would be received. These features presented challenges to campaigning politicians and to those responsible for national media that would be primary channels of communication, in the absence of much informal support at lower levels.

For our study, it was necessary to consider how the media might shape up to the task of reporting the campaign. Some underlying features of the case in prospect were clear or predictable. Firstly, at the time, and scarcely more now, there were few or no media with significant European (across borders) coverage, except for keen searchers. Pretty well everything at home and elsewhere would have to be constructed, carried and filtered through national lenses. Secondly, coverage of politics and political events in most democracies was carried out on a voluntary basis, as part of institutional tradition or evidence of potential audience demand. Political favoritism or allegiance could account for another set of motivations. So it could not necessarily be assumed that there would be a great deal of coverage of the campaign or much about campaigns in other countries. Thus, the role of the media would be unpredictable as to quality or extent. In the circumstances, it might be expected that the campaign would be more informative and activating in intent than competitive and emotionally involving.

This review of the main features of the case makes it clear just how much uncertainty there was for all those involved. Despite this, we chose to frame the study according to an internationally established model of competitive electioneering between organized parties. This established the essential common ground on which an inter-cultural study could be carried out.

3 **The 1979 research: Key features of approach and design**

The 1979 research was very much a collective effort – in its preparation and conduct and in the analysis and interpretation of its findings. Fifteen scholars took part in the study, led by nine national Directors, each of whom had been recruited for his or her previous contributions to the political communication field and for their familiarity with and acceptability to their national broadcasting organizations. Numerous team meetings were held, five of them preparatory, in Brussels, Strasbourg, Paris, Amsterdam, Lancaster, Oxford and Leeds, mainly funded by grants from the European Commission and the European Parliament. Thirteen of the participants authored comparative chapters of the resulting book.

An advantage of such a full involvement by the different members of an international team is that elements of cultural specificity will not be overlooked in the pursuit of comparative insights. But it creates problems of managing the heterogeneous conceptual commitments, research traditions and priority concerns that each academic will have brought to the work. As Swanson (1992) pointed out, "when international research groups are assembled, theoretical diversity arises as a concern that must be addressed" (p. 23). According to Swanson's typology of three ways in which comparativists could cope with this, the 1979 Euroelection research adopted a 'pre-theoretical strategy'. Although its approach was influenced by Blumler and Gurevitch's (1975) conceptualization of a political communication system, formal theory per se was initially set aside, in favor of defining, collecting and analyzing empirical data deemed relevant to certain over-arching themes, and was "brought into play later on to make sense of what had been observed" (Swanson 1992, p. 28).

A pause to consider here the two other approaches to the problem of theoretical diversity, which Swanson identified, may shed some light on how Euroelection research evolved after 1979. They were, respectively, 'metatheoretical' and 'avoidance' strategies. Going 'metatheoretical' would involve the prior adoption of a broad conceptual orientation under which a variety of theoretical perspectives could be accommodated. An example was the Franco-American comparison of election campaign communications, which Kaid, Gerstlé and Sanders (1991) had based on the proposition that political communication constructs reality for voters, and which was open to analysis from an array of theoretical traditions and standpoints—such as symbolic politics, rhetoric, reinforcement of ideological hegemony, and media effects. In contrast, an 'avoidance strategy' would side-step the problem by employing a team of theoretically like-minded scholars. In Swanson's view, however, this approach would be suitable only for relatively "narrowly drawn" research projects (1992, p. 32).

Developments both in the European Union and in theories of political communication seem to have made the adoption of an 'avoidance strategy' more common and more productive than Swanson would have anticipated, though a 'theoretically focused strategy' might be a more appropriate label for the approach. On the one hand, it would be impossible for a team of 28 nationally-based academics to agree the design of a coherent comparative research project in intensive, continual discussion. At best, such a scheme would have to emanate from a central research headquarter with international coordination facilitated by the Internet. Meanwhile, the relatively modest cupboard of political communication theory available in 1979 (dominated by hypotheses of mass media agenda-setting, on which Siune (1983) and Thoveron and Sauerberg (1983) did draw for their post hoc analyses of the project's media content and audience response data) had been superseded by a veritable mansion of many rooms. This may explain why the research of more recent comparative studies of Euroelections (and political communications generally) has often been based on selected countries and phenomena, designed to test for cross-national similarities and differences in such singular processes as political professionalization (Moring et al. 2011; Swanson and Mancini 1987); framing television news coverage of Europe (de Vreese 2003); the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2011); political communication cultures (Pfetsch 2013); and journalism cultures (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011).

We now turn from the 1979 enquiry's overall approach to describe its three most important design features. These tend to stamp the project as a methodologically near-unique piece of comparative Euroelection research, since none of the follow-up studies have adopted all of them in full combination.³

First, the 1979 research centered predominantly on a single source of campaign communication: television. Of course we were obliged to do so by the International Institute of Communications remit. But that focus gave us a useful unifying thread to line up the origins, flows and impacts of 1979 campaign communications. It was also justified by the widely accepted view that by the late 1970s television had become Europe's political medium par excellence. As Cayrol put it: "[...] we should recognize a single common factor that tends to structure all the politics of Europe. We refer to the importance of television coverage among all the European electorates" (1983 p. 164).

And its dominant role in the 1979 campaigns was fully confirmed by our research findings. As Blumler (1983b) summed them up:

3 ⁵ De Vreese (2003) comes closest to our model.

"Television emerged from this study as an election medium of universally pre-eminent reach. It was not only that in every Community country more people saw something of the campaign on television than followed it through any other channel...The supremacy of television was remarkably complete in a wide range of sample sub-groups as well...Similarly, at every level of professed interest in the campaign, the 'victory of television' was unchallenged [...] the cross-national results [also] underline the superior audience-delivery power of campaign television as a constant factor, regardless of sex, class, age, political affiliation and electoral motivation" (pp. 365-366).

Secondly, we strove to fashion a vertically integrated and comprehensive piece of Euroelection communication research. In other words, campaign communications were to be:

"[...] treated as a system of interconnected elements, including (1) its origins in the policies, intentions and attitudes of mass media and political party personnel; (2) its actual message features, as reflected in broadcast programmes; as well as (3) its corresponding electoral reception and impact" (Blumler 1983c, p. 26).

This was associated with a methodological design principle of cross-level equivalence of our instruments of data collection at each level – of communicating actors, of the dimensions and categories of election messages in program output, and that of the electoral audience response.

Thirdly, we decided to focus our cross-national and cross-level questioning on two main subject areas. One was that of campaign involvement. To what extent (we wished to ascertain) were politicians and broadcasters keen to fight and project the elections? How was their commitment, or lack of it, reflected in the amount, scheduling and styles of television programming? How far were electors interested in following it and taking part in what they were offered? The other area of investigation was the European-ness or otherwise of the 1979 campaigns, especially as perceived by the principal actors and discernable in TV's program content. This required an attempt to understand the interplay between national and European influences on the elections. How did politicians and broadcasters regard the event in those terms? How much of a Community or a domestic emphasis permeated the program presentations? On what basis did electors take their voting decisions? In their eyes, were their ballots cast on European grounds or for more domestic reasons?

4 The 1979 research: Principal findings

We present these as answers to five sets of questions that can be posed about communication in the 1979 Euroelection campaign.

Was it truly innovative? Structurally not – more like ‘new wines in old bottles’. In deciding how to organize the campaigns, the television planners fell back on their nationally established political broadcasting traditions. Campaign lengths, the distribution of party election broadcasts, presentation of campaign reports in the news – all resembled the countries’ respective general election patterns, albeit scaled down somewhat in most cases. Campaign discourse was ‘overwhelmingly’ dominated by national politicians and journalists (Kelly and Siune 1983, p. 55).

Two factors explained the appeal of national general election models. One was uncertainty about whether and how a Euroelection campaign might ‘swing’ amidst the prime actors’ priorities and voters’ responses. In the circumstances, the producers felt on relatively safe ground by resorting to familiar routines, instead of trying to fashion campaign coverage *de novo*. Another was the fact that in each of the countries more or less fixed arrangements and understandings prevailed between politicians and broadcasters over how general elections had been and should be presented on television. Sticking with them “avoided the adoption of potentially de-stabilizing policies” (Kelly 1983, p. 66).

What were its unique features? Ever since Reif and Schmitt (1980), Euroelections have been dubbed “second-order” ones. In terms of the authors’ definition (ones in which “there is less at stake” than at general elections), the 1979 event undoubtedly conformed to their classification. There is a danger, however, that acceptance of such a label may blind scholars to senses in which ‘second-ordered-ness’ may be a variable – across actors, participating countries and periods of time. Thus, the 1979 election may have been less ‘second-ordered’ than most if not all of its successors. The campaign coverage, though less extensive and prominent than for general elections in the Community overall (cf. Kelly and Siune 1983, pp. 48-55), varied greatly cross-nationally, and in three of the countries (Denmark, Germany and France), there was little deviation. Over the perceived importance of the event, a huge elite-popular split was evident. Whereas majorities of the interviewed party officials and journalists thought that the Euroelection campaign should receive at least the same amount of attention as a national election, surveyed voters who had taken only a “little interest” or “none at all” in their campaigns were in the majority in every country (ranging from 53 % in Germany to 71 % in Italy). This put many broadcasters in something of a ‘double bind’. For example, majorities of the interviewed journalists in six of the countries thought that the unification of Europe should be “speeded up” in the future (except for the British, Danish

and Dutch journalists), many of whom were also convinced that the 1979 election would accelerate that process. Yet 84 % of them also realized that their audiences would be "less interested" in the Euroelection than in a national general election. All this seemed to lay onto broadcasters (regarding themselves as *public service* broadcasters) a duty to awaken interest in the election among audience members and to explain its significance to them.

Compared with national elections, the 1979 Euroelection was unique in several other ways. The campaigns for it were sprung on electorates with little of that prior preparation, build-up and anticipatory excitement—in party declarations and media reports—which usually precedes general elections. According to our content analysis, television coverage of European affairs in the run-up period was scanty until the Euroelection campaigns themselves were officially launched. And during the campaigns, there was more information-giving (mainly about the Community and its institutions, including the Parliament) than opinion-exchanging (McQuail 1983); in most of the countries, conflict and controversy "were more often absent than present" (Siune 1983, p. 233); evaluative comments by speakers and reporters on campaign events and party positions, whether positive or negative, were lacking on the whole; and unlike general elections, presentations of the Euroelection campaigns were not at all personalized, since the topmost leaders appeared only rarely in their own party broadcasts or in television news.

A three-fold conclusion may be drawn from these features. First, the 1979 Euroelection evidently lacked many of those news-value factors, which would be "capable of producing a rousing campaign" (Schulz 1983, p. 343). Secondly, however, moved by a sense of duty to do justice to the election, public service television probably paid more attention to the campaigns than news-value judgements alone would have justified. But thirdly, that was very likely over the heads of, at odds with, how many ordinary Europeans felt about the event. In Thoveron's (1983, p. 147) words, "All the indications are that, rather than seeking out news and opinions about the progress, stakes and issues of the campaign, [European citizens] were subjected to them."

How transnational was it? More so than in subsequent Euroelection campaigns probably – but in a rather mixed way. Communicating speakers in campaign programs were preponderately national—90-95 % in six campaigns and 80 %-plus in two (Luxembourg was omitted from this and other analyses). Miniscule amounts of time were given to communicators of other EC countries (between 4 and 15 % in seven campaigns). A detailed ethnographic study of a campaign-long debate within the European Broadcasting Union, over how the election results should be organized and presented, between so-called 'maximalists', who wanted them to be focused primarily on the Europe-wide outcome, and 'minimalists', who mainly

wanted to facilitate a coordinated distribution of national votes, was won hands-down by the latter (Blumler and Petersen 1983).

On the other hand, much of the television output was relatively cosmopolitan in other respects. For example, only minorities of news items coded for geographical references were to "own countries" locations. And when the themes mentioned in TV campaign content were analyzed, European ones topped the lists in five out of eight national cases. When the analysis homed in on "visions of Europe" presented on television, the concept of European unity was treated in a positive light in all the national campaigns, as were Europe as a vehicle of influence in world politics, and Euroelections as a force for democratizing Europe, presently and prospectively. For their part, European institutions received much attention during the campaign, ranging from 21 to 27% of main themes in the television output of seven countries, mainly from journalists rather than politicians, however, and much of it informational in character.

But the data from European publics told a different story. In every country, more voters said that they had cast their ballots for domestic rather than European reasons (Germans having been most cosmopolitan by this criterion). And when it came to issue awareness, only German and Danish voters mentioned European ones more often than domestic ones. For most voters, issues to do with the economies and the agricultures of their own societies were far more salient.

Three conclusions may be drawn from these findings. First, 'European-ness' was evidently a cross-national variable in 1979. Secondly, they reaffirm that sharp elite-public divide, which we have previously noted. And thirdly, as McQuail and Bergsma (1983, p. 281) put it, the first direct elections to the European Parliament "might be termed an 'ethnocentrically European' exercise."

Did communication matter? In some ways, not much, but in one important respect, seemingly quite a lot. By and large, European citizens' attitudes toward the European Community itself were unaffected by their experiences of the 1979 election. For example, answers to Eurobarometre questions on whether their countries' membership of the Common Market was a good or bad thing and whether the process of European unification should be speeded up or not were broadly similar in most cases before and after polling. Cognitively, too, despite the broadcasters' sizeable investment in information provision, the campaigns seemed to have lacked impact. Panel studies in three countries (Germany, the Netherlands and Britain) produced few signs of campaign-period learning gain about the European Community and its institutions (Schoenbach 1983).

Turnout at the polls, however, seemed to be a different matter. Multivariate analyses suggested that the 1979 campaigns had "unleashed a miscellany of different forces, none very powerful in its own right but capable in concert of generating

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