

Advertising for Europe

TV Ads During the 2009 European Election Campaign in Four Countries

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Abstract

This study analyzes and compares party ads that were broadcast on television during the 2009 European Election campaign in France, Germany, Sweden and the UK. Even though electoral TV ads have never reached the same importance in European countries as in the US, such ads are to be regarded as an expression of the specific political culture of a country and therefore have relevance beyond election campaigns. An international comparison of ads produced for the same event is particularly suited to revealing similarities across cultures as well as national idiosyncrasies. Additionally, the present study demonstrates a methodological approach that defines a 'sequence' as the unit of analysis instead of the whole spot, and thus it is different from previous research on electoral advertising.

Keywords: electoral advertising, European election, content analysis, international comparison

Introduction

The 2008 US presidential election campaign for Barack Obama will be remembered as the first that fully embraced the Internet and the social networks in particular. However, Obama still spent most of his campaign money on television advertising, as did his opponent John McCain. During his campaign, Obama even broadcast half-hour-long commercials on the major US networks, which was quite unusual and cost him about six million dollars; since Ross Perot in 1992, none of the candidates has used this format due to the immense costs (Obama rules... 2008). Thus, for now TV ads have kept their role as the most important campaign channel in US campaigns. In Europe, TV ads have never reached the same relevance for election campaigns as in the US. Electoral advertising on radio and television, even though not prohibited in most countries, is regulated to varying degrees. Political advertising is mostly restricted to election campaigns and often allowed only during the last weeks before Election Day. Even after the introduction of commercial television, some European countries did not allow advertising time to be purchased. Still, several countries oblige some of their television channels to provide free airtime for the campaign advertising of parties or candidates.

Theoretical Background

Although TV ads do not play a dominant role in European election campaigns, an analysis of their style and content is of interest. In addition to serving a purpose for electoral communication, any kind of political advertising is an expression of a country's specific political culture. Moreover, electoral TV ads represent a means of communication that allows parties and candidates to present themselves and their programs to voters in the most direct way – without the intervention of journalistic changes and comments, or any other bias. The responsibility for the verbal and visual content of the ads lies in the hands of the political actors, and it is not in any way mediated or changed by the media. According to the classification of TV formats on the basis of the influence that either political actors or the media have on their contents (Paletz & Vinson 1994), the ads rank among the non-mediated formats, meaning that the media do not operate as a filter but only carry the candidates' messages to the voters. Thus, electoral advertising carries the unaltered messages of the political communicators and is therefore the best material on which to base an analysis of their campaign strategies.

To be effective, advertising has to resonate with its audience. Advertising must be meaningful to people, take up their norms and values and speak to their emotions (Mooij 2010: 41). Advertising can therefore be regarded as a mirror of its respective cultures, reflecting the cultural patterns of society and, over time, cultural change (Schmidt 1995: 41). At the same time, advertising – as any other media content – takes part in the construction of reality and the generation of meaning. This approach has its background in the sociology of knowledge as introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1980), who refer to the theory of everyday life proposed by Alfred Schütz (1932). The authors describe the integration of the individual into society and the constitution of social reality by interaction processes between the individual and others that make society the subjective reality. According to Habermas, culture constitutes the common stock of knowledge that provides individuals with interpretations of communicative action (1985: 209).

Similarly, political advertising is to be perceived as a mirror of the political culture of a country – a mirror that also participates in the construction of political reality. Political advertising is a reflection of the specific way a political system presents itself to the public. Political culture in this sense stands for the specific world view of a collectivity (Rohe 1990), a political code or 'mind set' that guides the thinking, feelings and behavior of its members (Elkins & Simeon 1979: 128). Political culture thus refers to a set of basic assumptions of the political, which are connected with operative ideas or norms that finally lead to specific behavioral patterns (Rohe 1990: 335-336). The characteristic features of a political culture translate into a specific political design. Political culture therefore comprises a content-related dimension referring to cognitive and normative aspects and an expressive dimension referring to affective and aesthetic aspects (Rohe 1990: 338; see also Dittmer 1977). Political culture thus becomes manifest in the verbal and visual styles of political communication and accessible through content analysis.

Against this background, political advertising is to be understood as a mirror of a political culture. Political ads thus lend themselves to an analysis of the specifics of a political culture (cf. Griffin & Kagan 1996; Holtz-Bacha 2003: 110). These specifics can best be assessed by comparing the design and the content of the ads across countries, because a comparative analysis "facilitates a view of both the similarities and the differences between systems, thus drawing attention to the shared characteristics of

political communication as well as to its culturally specific features in different societies” (Gurevitch & Blumler 1990: 309). However, in order to understand the specific characteristics, it is also necessary to consider “systemic variables, including a country’s political system, the electoral system, and the media system” (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid 2006: 4). As Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out with their three models of media and politics, the media landscapes in (Western) Europe are quite different. The Mediterranean states (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece) belong to the “polarized pluralist model” and are characterized by relatively weak public broadcasting systems and political actors who have a strong influence on the media. The northern and central European states (the Scandinavian countries, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium) represent the “democratic corporatist model” and have a long tradition of public broadcasting and strong institutions of media regulation that guarantee a high level of media independence. Finally, more liberal and market-oriented ideas dominate the media systems that follow the “liberal model” (UK, USA, Canada and Ireland). We can expect that the differences in the political and social structures that Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlight with their three models will also be reflected in political advertising, such as TV ads. This can be most clearly observed in the case of the US: the country not only has a very liberal broadcasting system, but there are also “no limits at all” (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid 2006: 11) on electoral advertising.

European election campaigns provide a particular opportunity to compare TV advertising in different countries. The European election takes place at the same time in all EU member states. Voters from each country elect their representatives to the European Parliament according to national electoral systems. Therefore, campaigns are run on a national basis, but for the same event. The common political event has led to a cooperation between parties across national borders that is unique in the world as well as to the foundation of a pan-European alliance: In February 2004, a network of European ecological parties and movements founded the European Green Party and later managed the first common European election campaign in the participating member states (History 2011). The national parties designed their electoral advertising according to common boilerplates. The claims (‘You decide’ was the main slogan) as well as the motifs on the electoral posters were the same in the 25 EU countries (Dillenburger, Holtz-Bacha & Lessinger 2005: 55; Holtz-Bacha 2007; Thimm & Hartmann 2008: 366). Thus, the European election and especially the common event can have an impact on the campaign itself, but party cooperation across countries nevertheless remains the exception – this is especially true regarding the production of television advertising.

The present study¹ compares television advertising that was broadcast during the European election campaign of 2009 in four West European countries that are among the older members of the European Union and have already lived through several European elections: France, Germany, Sweden and the UK. In addition to representing Hallin and Mancini’s three models of media and politics, these countries differ in their stance on the European Union, which is also reflected in their party landscape.

The overall German attitude toward the EU has long been more positive than the European average, but the popularity of the community has decreased considerably during recent years. The European Union and its institutions are seen more and more as ‘bureaucratic machines’ that limit the influence of the national governments. Nevertheless, although the German parties are varyingly critical, EU membership is not a

controversial topic among them. Low turnout in European elections should not only be regarded as an indicator of Euro-frustration, but also demonstrates that Europe has become something normal.

In France, the main political parties, such as the conservative UMP, the socialist PS or the liberal Mouvement Démocrate, can be classified as generally pro-European, while the smaller right- and left-wing political parties are much more critical toward the EU. It is not a coincidence that the right-wing extremist party Front National chose the slogan “Europe hurts” for its 2009 campaign. Even if the French “non” in the 2005 referendum on the European constitution can be seen as a symbol for some existing euro-scepticism, it is also important to remember the dissatisfaction with then president Chirac and his government at that time – rejection of the European constitution also was a rejection of his politics.

In comparative studies, Swedish citizens are among those with the most negative attitudes toward the EU. This skeptical view has been a significant part of the Swedish political culture since Sweden became a member in the mid-1990s (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2010). This skeptical view has also been manifested through the success of anti-Europe parties such as Junilistan. However, in the 2009 European election campaign, the picture changed somewhat. During the past decade, Swedish citizens have become less EU-negative, even though there is still no ‘Europhoria’ (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2010). Parties like the Green Party no longer demand a withdrawal from the EU. This change in the political climate also made the 2009 campaign somewhat different from earlier campaigns. The political debate changed from being for or against EU and focused more on political issues to be solved by working inside the EU (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2010).

In contrast to the three other countries included in the present analysis, the UK has not been part of any European integration project (e.g. the European Monetary Union, the Schengen Agreement) since introduction of the single European market in 1993. This is related to a historically prevalent pragmatic view, on the part of the British political class, of the European Union as a mainly economic community of interests (Sturm 2009). Even if the major parties have shown more pro-European lines in their strategies in recent years, several smaller parties have tended to represent nationalist and anti-EU points of view. British politicians traditionally demonstrate a comparably critical and skeptical view of the decisions and institutions of the EU – and so does the public. This EU skepticism is reinforced by a largely EU hostile mass media.

Altogether, the four countries chosen for the present study manifest different political backgrounds and have different profiles concerning their attitudes toward the Union. Also given the specific features of their media systems, they should provide variation in the content and style of electoral advertising.

On the other hand, as has been discussed in connection with the Americanization hypothesis, convergence of campaign styles can also be expected. Personalization in particular has been discussed as a global trend in political communication and was diagnosed even for party-oriented systems (for a recent overview cf. Adam & Maier 2010). However, personalization is not to be expected in European election campaigns, because the candidates for the European Parliament are usually less well known among voters than those in the national elections. In addition, the parties’ top candidates for the European election do not run for a high office because there is no government emerging from the parliament. Nevertheless, the 2004 European election campaign in Germany

showed that personalization does not only pay off in national election campaigns: The German Free Democratic Party (FDP) concentrated its campaign totally on their until then unknown top candidate, who at last became the second best-known candidate during the German European election campaign. The advertising agency responsible for the FDP's poster campaign even admitted that the candidate's attractiveness was a major factor underlying the decision in favor of running a personalized campaign (Niedermayer 2005: 70; Wiorkowski & Holtz-Bacha 2005).

The Regulatory Background

Although television in the EU member states – and television advertising in particular – is largely regulated by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (formerly Television without frontiers Directive, since 1989), there is no common regulation for political advertising. Therefore, regulation of political advertising on television remains a matter of national legislative competence, leading to a heterogeneous situation ranging from complete bans on electoral advertising to far-reaching freedom.

Among the four countries included here, France, Germany and the UK oblige their public service stations to provide free airtime for parties running for election. In the UK, commercial channels also make free airtime available to party advertising. Allocation of free advertising time follows the principle of equal opportunity, but nevertheless applies a graded system based on the parties' shares in former elections and thus gives bigger parties more airtime than the smaller ones. In France and Germany, parties already represented in the parliament get more airtime than smaller parties. In addition to free time provided by public service channels, German parties are allowed to purchase broadcasting time for their electoral advertising on commercial channels at cost. The combination of free airtime on public service television and the possibility for parties to buy additional advertising time on commercial channels make Germany the most liberal of the four countries. Sweden is the most restrictive, because parties do not get free airtime and can only buy advertising time at market price on commercial channels (see also Grusell & Nord 2010).

The parties are responsible for production of the ads. Countries differ, however, in their regulation of the visual and verbal content. While Germany and Sweden only require ads to observe the law, which mostly refers to criminal law and facts like incitement to racial hatred or violence, libel etc., France and the UK provide more detailed guidelines for the content of the advertising. In the UK, the Broadcasters' Liaison Group (BLG), which comprises representatives from the broadcasters that make airtime available for party advertising, has published "production guidelines" (Broadcasters' Liaison Group not dated) that all broadcasts are to comply with. The UK guidelines prohibit the use of recordings of parliamentary proceedings, archive material or news clips of members of other parties, actors, or members of the public. The French audiovisual regulatory authority, Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), publishes production guidelines for TV advertising for each election, and has given more and more leeway to the parties in recent years. Nevertheless, the CSA still strictly controls the ads before airing, notably checking on its prohibition of statements that might be considered offensive by other candidates or the public, and the prohibition on using national or European institutional symbols, institutions, buildings, or anthems (cf. Maarek 2007, 2011). For the production

of television spots for the European election in 2009, the guidelines obliged parties to produce at least 50 per cent of the overall ad campaign using the resources provided by the CSA and the corporation of the French public service broadcasters *France Télévisions* (Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel 2009).

Previous Research

The long tradition and overall relevance of campaign advertising in the US have also caught the attention of researchers and led to an enormous body of research analyzing the visual and verbal content of electoral ads as well as their effects (cf. the overview in Kaid 2008). Although electoral TV spots were introduced in some European countries as early as in the US (since the 1950s), the research in Europe began much later and has not yet produced a similar amount and variety of studies. Particularly the intensified discussion about worldwide convergences of election campaigns, which is inherent in the Americanization hypothesis (e.g., Holtz-Bacha 2004), prompted studies that compared political advertising internationally and from different perspectives.

A comparison of ads shown during national election campaigns in the US, France and Germany (Kaid, Holtz-Bacha & Johnston 1994) found overall similarities in the appearance and style of the ads, but at the same time pointed to their dependence on national cultures as well. In a study including various Western democracies, Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (1995:223) found some “striking similarities across cultures” in their concentration on issues and primarily positive focus. A similar study limited to “emerging European democracies” revealed the same commonalities in the electoral advertising of those countries. The findings were mostly confirmed again in 2006 with sample of countries from all over the world (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2006).

A content analysis of TV ads broadcast in ten countries during the 2009 European election campaign (Kaid et al. 2011) found that overall issues dominated the broadcasts and not candidates. In addition to the distinctive characteristics of electoral advertising in the individual countries, the researchers discovered “striking differences” (Kaid et al. 2011:105) between established (West European) and new (Central and East European) member states. The distinction indicates the number of years that a country has been a member of the EU and therefore also reflects different experiences with the Union, which may bring about different attitudes toward the election and the EU.

Although television ads seem to have lost something of their former popularity (Esser, Holtz-Bacha & Lessinger 2005; Holtz-Bacha & Lessinger 2006; Lessinger, Moke & Holtz-Bacha 2003), research in this field may become more important in the future, because the social changes in modern societies around the world “led to a weakening influence of once-powerful social characteristics and subsequent political predispositions” (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid 2006:4). It thus becomes more difficult to predict the behavior of voters, who nowadays tend more toward short-term voting and seem to have lost partly or completely their former party affiliation – these developments have been characterized using the term ‘dealignment’ (Dalton 2002). As a consequence, in the future parties may pay even more attention to their campaigns and to political advertising in general in an attempt to win over floating and last-minute voters. However, not much research has been done that relies on systematic content analysis using the same coding instrument and that also takes differences in political and electoral systems as well as specific

regulations for electoral advertising into account. The study presented here overcomes some of the shortcomings of earlier research by looking at a common event, using the same codebook and applying a methodology that is better suited to the characteristics of the European style of TV advertising.

Method

With the exception of France, which features a presidential system, the political and electoral systems in West European countries are mostly party-oriented, but nevertheless have shown a trend toward personalization. The right to broadcast ads during parliamentary election campaigns, however, generally lies with the parties, which produce the spots and thus determine the advertising strategies. Traditionally, West European campaign ads have been longer than what is typical in the US, which can be regarded as a consequence of the long dominance of European public service broadcasting, where advertising time for parties is usually free. Even after the introduction of commercial television, many European countries restricted campaign advertising to the public service channels and did not allow advertising time to be purchased. Due to the comparatively generous allocation of time and the fact that responsibility for the production of broadcasts lies with the parties, European campaign ads differ in format from the US ads. Because of their length, the European election broadcasts often combine several presentational formats within one spot and, as a consequence, cannot be assigned to just one analytical category. For the most part, they also treat several topics one after the other and, for instance, combine positive and negative contents. For this reason, and because the coding systems developed in the US largely concern candidates being presented in the ads, a new instrument was designed for content analysis that takes length into account and that is adapted to the specifics of European party-dominated advertising on television.

Instead of taking the whole spot as the coding unit, the broadcasts are coded at two different levels. In the first step, only structural data are coded for the whole spot. In the second step, formats and contents of the spots are coded according to spot sequences or scenes (for a more extensive description, see Holtz-Bacha 2000: 151-153). Adopted from film theory, a spot sequence is defined as a unit containing one or multiple takes (separated by cuts or superimpositions) that constitute a continuum according to several criteria. These criteria either refer to the visual content (e.g., a continuum of location, time, action, the constellation of actors, or the topic) or to other formal features (e.g., a continuum of sound, music, speaker). A sequence changes if the content and/or formal brackets change and another action and/or constellation of figures and/or another topic and/or other formal features dominate. One sequence is always separated from another sequence through a cut or a superimposition, but any cut is not necessarily the beginning of a new sequence. The primary reference of the analysis to the visuals also takes into account that TV ads are dominated by the visual aspect, while the verbal content is secondary: TV ads can never appear without visuals, but do not necessarily need text.

The central category for analysis of the visual strategies here is presentational style or format. Formats represent the dramatic means used to translate the political goals of a party or a candidate into the visuals (e.g., montage, video clip, candidate statement, interview). Instead of coding a format for the whole spot, the analysis assigns a presentational style/format to each sequence that serves as the unit of analysis. A change in

format always implies the beginning of a new sequence (scene), whereas the beginning of a new sequence does not necessarily imply a change in format. Here, ‘format’ is exclusively used as a formal category, while the content is coded independently. Making sequences the units of analysis also allows us to take into account the fact that spots from different countries differ in length according to the amount of airtime provided for party advertising. Where parties have to pay for broadcast time, spots are usually shorter than those that are produced for the free-time slots.

Table 1 provides an overview of the most important categories used for coding the spots. As described above, only a few categories (formal features like overall length, number of sequences and cuts) were applied to the whole spot, whereas most categories refer to the individual sequences.

Table 1. *Categories*

Dimension	Variables
Formal features	Length, number and length of sequences, number of cuts, presentational formats
Production techniques	Special effects, camera angle, music / sounds
Content	Topics, perspective of topics, evaluation of issues
Personalization	Presence and role of party representatives, characteristics, activities, appearance, party references
Style / argumentation	Speaker, style of speech, style of reasoning, humor, slogan
Visualization	Symbols, scenery, featured venues, actors, activities, use of colors

Findings

The sample included a total of 119 spots from the four countries (Table 2). This figure only refers to different spots and does not count repetitions of the same spots. Whereas the parties in France, Germany and the UK produced a comparable number of spots, only seven different spots from five parties were shown on Swedish television. The latter is due to the fact that political ads were used for the first time in the run-up for an election in Sweden. Obviously, the Swedish parties did not yet have the spots fully incorporated into their advertising strategy or into their campaign budget, as they had to pay for broadcast time. One reason for the lack of ads was also because the Social Democrats, Left Party and Green Party declared they did not want to use TV commercials. They claimed it would lower the quality of the public debate, increase costs and probably increase distrust in politics.

Table 2. *The Sample*

Country	Number of spots	Number of sequences
France	31	59
Germany	36	189
Sweden	7	23
United Kingdom	45	489
n =	119	760

Table 2 also shows the number of sequences that were used as coding units. The 119 spots were made up of a total of 760 sequences. Because the British parties produced the greatest number of election broadcasts and because they were also the longest among the four countries included here, it does not come as a surprise that they also featured the greatest number of sequences. On the other hand, France and Germany differed considerably in the number of sequences, even though the absolute number of spots and their average length were similar (Table 3).

Table 3. *Structural Data of the Spots*

	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
Number of spots	31	36	7	45
Average length of spots	109s	80s	32s	212s
Average number of cuts per spot	16.2	18.5	11.9	42
Average number of sequences per spot	1.9	5.2	3.1	10.9
Average length of sequences	56.5s	15.6s	9.8s	19.6s

The number of sequences per spot, their length and the number of cuts per sequence can serve as indicators of the ‘pace’ at which politics is presented in campaign advertising. A fast pace reflects information that is delivered in small bits and pieces, which is difficult to follow and gives a hectic impression. As Table 3 demonstrates, the French spots showed the slowest pace (1.9 sequences per spot) of the four countries. Spots in Germany (5.2 sequences/spot) and the UK (10.9 sequences/spot) were still slow-paced compared to Sweden with an average of only 3.1 sequences per spot, which is a rather fast pace considering the relatively short duration of the spots.

These findings are also reflected in the length of the sequences. With an average of 56.5 seconds, the French spots had the longest sequences by far. The spots in the three other countries consisted of much shorter sequences. These formal differences, and particularly the French exception, may be explained by the tradition of the French election spots, which are also still called ‘official broadcasts’. Electoral broadcasts in France originally started in the 1960s as hour-long broadcasts with candidates speaking directly into the camera. Apparently, the static style of these broadcasts still influences today’s political television ads in France.

The presentational formats assigned to the sequences were divided into two types according to the presence or absence of a party representative or candidate in the visuals. With 71 per cent of the sequences not showing a party representative, the German parties stood out with the least personalized strategy followed by the UK, where 48 per cent of the sequences featured presentational formats without and 52 per cent presentational formats with party representatives (Figure 1). French (61% with and 39% without party representative) and Swedish (60%:40%) spots showed the highest amount of personalization, when the appearance of a politician in the visuals is used as an indicator.

Among the presentational formats with party representatives present in the visuals, the most popular format was clearly the statement (Table 4). It accounted for 86 per cent of the sequences in French and Swedish spots. In German spots, 58 per cent of the sequences showing a party representative were statements and in the British spots statements constituted 40% of those sequences. The ‘statement’ can be considered a clas-

sical format in political ads, particularly in candidate-oriented systems. It has also been called the “talking-head format”, because it often shows the upper body of a politician, who is speaking directly into the camera. However, the format is also popular in party-oriented systems because of the low production costs. Therefore, it is preferably used by smaller parties that cannot invest much in their advertising campaign. It is, however, regarded as a boring format, because statements usually only show the speaker and little else happens in the visuals. The low production costs may also explain the ample use of the statement format in Swedish spots, where parties may have been uneasy about the new campaign channel.

As can be seen in Table 4, other frequently used formats with party representatives were the “montage”, the “interview” and the “testimonial”. The montage that adds a series of pictures or dissolves them into each other was relatively frequent in the British spots, where the proportion of statements was the lowest among the four countries compared here. Just as the statement, interviews and testimonials by politicians belong to the classical repertoire for campaign advertising that features party representatives.

Table 4. *Most Popular Presentational Formats (%)*

Presentational formats	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
<i>Without party representatives</i>				
Montage	48	29	11	27
Testimonial (citizens)	30	8	–	17
Packshot	13	35	56	23
<i>With party representatives</i>				
Statement	86	58	86	40
Montage	8	9	–	22
Interview	5	14	–	19
Testimonial	–	14	–	13

n = 760

The most common formats without a party representative were “montages”, “testimonials” by citizens and “pack shots” (Table 4). The pack shot is a category derived from commercial advertising and refers to the pictures of the product, often combined with a slogan or the brand name. In political advertising, the pack shot is defined as a sequence dominated by the party logo and is usually included at the end of a spot to make sure the audience knows who was responsible for the ad. Most spots included a pack shot and therefore it ranks high among the different presentational formats. The montage, however – with pictures of, e.g., beautiful landscapes, of well-known monuments or happy people – has traditionally been a popular format in political advertising. In fact, it was found in all countries in the comparison. Testimonials by citizens, who speak in favor of a specific candidate or a party, were also quite common in the 2009 European election campaign, but to a different extent, and were not used at all in Sweden.

The share of presentational formats with party representatives present in the visuals has already given us an impression of how personalized the European electoral ads were. In addition, there were differences among the four countries concerning the average number of candidates or other party representatives present in the sequences. The results show that

there were more party personnel present in the British (9.5 representatives) and French spots (3.4 representatives), whereas the German (1.8 representatives) and Swedish spots (1 representative) featured few politicians. This can be explained by the different electoral systems operating in the four countries. In the UK, the European election was held in constituencies and therefore several candidates per party ran for election. In France, though the electoral system was similar, the personalization of the ads varied across parties. In particular, the personalization of the ads was increased by the unexpected choice made by the centrist leader of the Modem, François Bayrou, and by the Socialist Party First Secretary, Martine Aubry, to systematically appear in most of their parties ads, as if they were conducting a promotional campaign for the presidential chair. The German and the Swedish parties only presented one nationwide top candidate and therefore the spots focused on these candidates, while other party members played minor roles, or no role at all.

For the analysis of the thematic structure of the spots, the most important topic was determined for each sequence. The dominant main issue in the spots of all four countries was the economy and financial policy, most notably in the German ads, where 47 per cent of all sequences focused on economic matters. In the French spots, the economy was the most important policy issue as well, with 29 per cent of the sequences treating such topics. The case is similar for the UK spots, where 22 per cent of the sequences dealt with economic issues. The Swedish spots featured the economy to a comparable amount (20% of the sequences), yet the focus here was on other political problems, most importantly agriculture (30%) and social policy (20%). At the same time, social policy figured as the second most important issue in the spots of all four countries (Table 5). The fact that economic issues dominated the spots in 2009 is not surprising in view of the wide-spread economic crisis in Europe at that time.

Table 5. *Most Important Topics (%)*

	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
Economy and finance	29	47	20	22
Social policy	12	26	20	12
Defense and security policy	2	7	20	1
Campaign related topics	36	4	—	30
Agriculture	—	2	30	3

Apart from policy issues another type of topic was coded under the generic term ‘campaign-related topics’, which included for instance appeals to get out and vote or emphasizing the significance of the European election. Campaign-related topics played a particularly important role in the French and British spots, where they constituted 36 and 30 per cent of the sequences and thus were higher in proportion than any other policy issue. The political cultures and attitudes of voters toward the European Union and its institutions in the two countries may offer an explanation for these findings. While in Germany and most notably in Sweden a ‘pro-European’ culture prevails in large parts of the party landscape as well as among the voters, political actors in France and Britain and the voters as well tend to have a more critical perspective on the European Union, its processes and institutions. This is reflected by the existence of a considerable number of anti-Europe parties, for instance the UK Independence Party or No2EU in the UK or the

nationalist French Front National as well as various other small EU-hostile groups and formations. Thus, the great prevalence of campaign-related issues could be explained by the fact that in view of these prevailing attitudes the major parties – usually with a moderate attitude toward the EU – felt compelled not only to court voters but also to advertise the EU, the election and their importance.

In addition to the question of what the most important topics were, the study also analyzed the perspective from which those topics were treated. A distinction was made between a mostly national perspective, a mixed perspective and a mostly European perspective. The findings imply that in a comparison of the four countries, Germany and Sweden form two extremes, with the German spots showing the most national perspective (in 52% of the sequences) and the Swedish spots conveying the strongest European perspective (in 67% of the sequences). A *Eurobarometer* survey from 2008 shows some interesting parallels to the findings on the TV ads. Citizens from the 27 member states were asked whether their voting decisions were based more on a candidate's party's positions on national or on European issues. The results show a great difference between the countries: While a clear majority of Swedish respondents (54%) stressed the European positions of the parties, the stands on European issues did not seem to play an important role for British voters (28%). The parties' positions on European issues also seemed to play a less important role for the voting decisions of French (45%) and German (43%) voters. Against the background of these findings, it is conceivable that the parties tried to fulfill voter expectations when producing their spots (The 2009 European Elections 2008).

The focus on a national angle in the German spots can be explained by the fact that the European election took place only a few weeks before the German national parliamentary election. As a consequence, German political parties regarded the European campaign as a warm-up for the national election, already speaking about policy issues of particular importance to Germany and from a national angle. This becomes even clearer when looking at the dominant perspectives in the other countries' spots: both in France (43% of the sequences) and in the UK (55%) topics were often discussed from a European perspective, yet a mixed perspective could also be observed in a notable portion of sequences (Table 6).

Table 6. *National or European Angle (%)*

	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
Only / mostly national perspective	20	52	33	20
Mixed perspective	36	18	–	25
Only / mostly European perspective	43	30	67	55

Table 7. *Evaluation of Main Topics*

	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
Positive	27	17	33	30
Neutral	5	35	–	6
Negative	68	47	67	64

How issues were evaluated was coded according to three dimensions: negative, neutral or positive. Overall, issues were mainly treated negatively in the four countries (Table

7). In French, British and Swedish spots two thirds of the sequences contained negative evaluations. One explanation for Sweden is of course the spot from Junilistan, which took an entirely negative stand on the EU and the issues presented. Another explanation is connected to the way in which EU-positive parties framed their spots – a negative frame regarding the EU, but with messages that the party wished to change decisions on social issues (effects of alcohol import regulations), agriculture (subsidies), and the EMU. In Germany, half of the sequences conveyed a negative perspective. Here again, the worldwide economic crisis might have had an impact because it is an inherently negative topic. A neutral position is only relevant in German spots (35%). Concerning the positive treatment of issues, again French, British and Swedish spots show similar tendencies: one third of all sequences feature a positive perspective on issues. A possible explanation could again be offered by the existence of anti-EU parties in France, Britain and Sweden, which might have had a bearing on how issues were treated in the election advertising. Yet this would not explain such a large share of sequences with negative evaluations. Obviously, the bigger and usually more moderate parties also took a partially negative stand on issues. However, in contrast to the anti-European parties, which typically condemn the EU completely, the major parties do accept the EU with its processes and institutions, but are beginning to see problems with EU policies and seem to feel under pressure by anti-Europe groups that have considerable support among some parts of the electorate.

Conclusion

As could be expected based on previous research, the analysis of electoral advertising in France, Germany, Sweden and the UK has revealed cross-country similarities and differences. Similarities can be attributed to what could be called archetypes of political advertising as well as to some common features of the countries included in the study. In particular, the findings for presentational formats have confirmed that there is not much variation and that parties everywhere concentrate their TV advertising on about half a dozen formats. Montages for spots that do not show a candidate and statements for spots with party representatives are the established and most popular formats across countries. They seem to characterize party electoral advertising, and the lack of creativity may have contributed to the ambiguous image of party spots in Europe: TV spots are used where political actors are able to advertise their candidates and their goals, but they do not invest much – in terms of money and ideas – in production of the spots. Future research should assess whether this kind of low investment is characteristic of European elections or indicates a general disenchantment with TV advertising.

Although the European election is about parties and their representation in the European Parliament and does not determine any kind of government, prime minister or president, the ads in all countries relied on personalization to a considerable extent. Personalization, as roughly indicated here by the appearance of politicians in the visuals, has definitely become a characteristic of advertising in party-oriented political systems as well, but the relevance of personalized advertising strategies is at the same time dependent on the electoral system. Where candidates cannot be voted for, personalization of electoral advertising is more reluctant and maybe more dependent on the personality and the popularity of the candidates. In France at least, the ‘genre’ of the European election seems less favorable to personalization, as proven by the bad or mitigated re-

sults obtained by the two parties that primarily placed their main national leader in the foreground: the Modern and the Socialist Party.

Among the country differences that stand out, some are generated by different regulations for electoral advertising on TV. Where free time is made available, parties (can) produce longer spots, whereas they limit themselves to short ads when they have to pay for broadcast time. The length of the spots correlates with the pace. In this respect, the role and tradition of electoral advertising in the different countries clearly had an influence on the editing.

Analysis of the main topics addressed in the spots demonstrated that the ads in the four countries focused on similar policy issues. This can be explained by the existence of common political problems in the EU member states, which usually have to be discussed and decided at the European level. The worldwide economic and financial crisis also imposed itself upon the national campaigns and offered the possibility for political parties to present themselves as problem-solvers by virtue of their competence in economic and financial policy (as did the liberal and right-wing parties) or as guardians of social security in economically tough times (as did the left-wing parties). At the same time, the emphasis on issues relating to the election and the European Union itself in the spots reflects differences among countries concerning the parties' and the voters' particular attitudes toward the European Union, its processes and institutions.

Overall, differences in electoral advertising can be traced back to specific political contexts, meaning the political situations and electoral systems in the four countries, the different party and media landscapes as well as cultural idiosyncrasies. Thus, the findings confirm the strong relationship between the style and contents of political advertising and the specific political culture of a country. Even with regard to the same election, it would be difficult to come up with a common advertising campaign to be used in different countries. The prevalence of the individual political culture could explain the fact that the parties plan and conduct national campaigns instead of working together on a real European campaign. In fact, even the Green parties, which made an attempt at a common campaign in 2004, did not repeat their joint venture in 2009. This too underlines the close connection between political advertising and a country's political culture.

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