



*Robert Schuman*

*The Content of European Parliament Election Campaigns:  
A Framework for Analysis and Evidence from Germany in 2004*

**- Louise K. Davidson-Schmich**



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# The Content of European Parliament Election Campaigns: A Framework for Analysis and Evidence from Germany in 2004<sup>‡</sup>

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## Introduction

The conventional wisdom on European Parliament (EP) election campaigns is that they are second-order *national* contests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh 1998; but see also Blondel et al 1998). That is, they are elections with low turnout that serve as referenda on current national governments rather than as a forum to discuss substantive European Union (EU) policy options or the performance of incumbent Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The European Union Studies Association newsletter's account of the 2004 campaign was entitled " 'Europe': A Side Issue in European Parliamentary Election Campaigns" and summarized, "domestic issues and quarrels dominated electoral campaigns in all twenty-five member states" (Kauppi 2004). This finding is echoed by other authors who have studied EP campaigns in a range of countries, years, and party families (Andeweg 1995, Bardi 1996; Blondel et al 1998; Butler and Westlake, 1995, 161-3; Lodge 1986, Lodge 1990, Lodge 1996, Lodge 2001, Sweeny 1984, van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

As a result of these nationally-oriented campaigns, voters vote in EP elections based on national-level criteria, not European issues (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). One reason why turnout in EP elections is low is that these contests appear to voters more an (unbinding) vote of confidence on the national government – where there is little substantive impact of the election outcome – rather than a race for a politically-salient European-level body. Chronic low turnout and lack of European content contributes to the oft-mentioned democratic deficit in the EU, because campaigns for the only directly elected European institution do not actually focus on the Parliament's record or policy domain (Andeweg 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Because national elections generally ignore these issues as well, there is no forum in which voters can register their preferences on policies within the EP's ever-expanding purview.

This paper seeks to explain the overwhelmingly national focus of European Parliament election campaigns. The first section reviews the plethora of oft-contradictory existing explanations for the national focus of EP campaigns, arguing that few of these explanations are both logically convincing and empirically supported. Second, the paper posits an alternative explanation for why parties may – or may not – choose to organize an EP election campaign around national rather than European themes. This alternative explanation predicts not only the primacy of national content in EP campaigns but also the exceptions to this rule – cases which other scholars write off as anomalies. The third section uses the 2004 EP campaigns by German political parties as a plausibility probe to investigate our hypotheses.

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## **I. Existing Explanations for the National Content of European Parliament Election Campaigns**

The most consistent observer of EP campaigns, Juliet Lodge, has produced edited volumes covering all six European elections and comes to virtually identical conclusions about the national focus of each:

In 1979: [N]ational concerns dominate[d] the elections from the moment that member governments negotiated and then approved the provisions ... to hold direct elections (Lodge 1982: 265).

In 1984: [N]ational issues seemed to eclipse the Euro-dimension of the EP election (Lodge 1986, 258).

In 1989: The 1989 Euro-elections were portrayed almost everywhere throughout the EC as referenda on national governments' records (Lodge 1990, 1).

In 1994: [N]ational issues dominated the agenda ... major European issues were eclipsed (Lodge 1996, 9).

In 1999: Criticism of the EU and Members of the European Parliament should have been the currency of the election debate. Constructive argument over policy options and possibilities should have assumed centre stage. Once again, they did not (Lodge 2001, 3).<sup>1</sup>

### Top-Down Explanations

Many explanations for the continued national focus of EP campaigns have been put forth. For our purposes it is useful to classify them into top-down and bottom-up approaches. The former focuses on the European Parliament itself as a factor causing the choice of campaign content. The latter focuses on the architects of the campaigns themselves – agents within national political parties. Some of the earliest top-down attempts at explaining the national focus of EP campaigns dealt with public perceptions of the Parliament. The first two sets of elections were set against a backdrop of low public knowledge about the EP and about the existence of direct elections (Lodge 1982). In 1984, in some countries less than a quarter of the electorate realized EP elections were going to be held (Lodge 1986: 19). In this setting Lodge concluded, “It is perhaps not surprising that national issues seemed to eclipse the Euro-dimension to the EP election and that party elites (because of ignorance or desperation) tried to enliven the debate and make it intelligible by putting it in national terms” (1986: 258; see also Lodge 1982: 265). A campaign focused on the EP seemed unlikely to inspire many voters.

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<sup>1</sup> Lodge's volume on the 2004 elections has not yet appeared in print.

While this explanation seems plausible, it is not confirmed by empirical evidence. While the national bent to EP campaigns is found across the Union, studies of European public opinion found widespread national differences in terms of both knowledge of the European Parliament and approval of the parliament across the member states (Niedermayer 1991, Niedermayer and Sinnott 1995, Gabel 2003). If public knowledge of, or support for, the EP were to determine the degree of European focus to EP campaigns, we would instead observe varying degrees of “Europeanness” to EP campaigns correlating to national variance in public attitudes and knowledge. As will be discussed below, there *are* some occasions when EP campaigns take on a European hue, and this trend often occurs in the United Kingdom. UK citizens, however, consistently have low levels of knowledge about the EP and an unfavorable impression of it (Niedermayer 1991, Gabel 2003) – the opposite of what this hypothesis would expect.

A second top-down theory about the cause of nationally-oriented EP campaigns focused not on popular knowledge about the Parliament but on its actual power. Because the European Parliament lacked power, some observers claimed, there was little reason to focus on the EP in elections because not as much was at stake at European level as in national politics (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Given the limited power of the EP in 1979 when the first direct elections were held, this thesis seemed plausible. Since then, however, the Parliament’s power has significantly increased (Kreppel 2002; Hix, Raunio, and Scully 2003), but the content of European electoral campaigns has remained stubbornly national in tone (Andeweg 1995). Indeed, although European issues have become more important to national political parties over time, this importance has not manifested itself in the campaign themes that these parties choose (Ray 1999).

More recently, others have argued that the second-order national election character of European campaigns persists because EP elections still do not change the executive make-up of the European Union (Blondel et al, 1998: 16; Bardi, 1996: 100). As a result, some observers recommend electing a President or giving EP power over the executive as a way to make European elections more “European” in character (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). The content of European campaigns did not change much when the EP received the power to approve the Commission or when it influenced the Commission to resign, however, so it is unclear whether such a change in election’s relationship to the executive would have a large impact either.

Furthermore, analysis of public opinion reveals that voters systematically *overestimate* the power of the Parliament, viewing it as much more similar to national parliaments than it actually is (Niedermayer and Sinnott 1995: 291). This also makes it unlikely that greater powers for the parliament would change the national nature of European campaigns. Moreover, the European public has clearly perceived the increase in the Parliament’s power (Niedermayer and Sinnott, 1995: 294), but the nature of European electoral campaigns have not changed as the Parliament has.

Still others argue that the electoral system used in European elections makes a campaign on European issues difficult. Initially, “the absence of a common electoral law, common election day, common parties capable of contesting the elections, common

provisions regarding voter eligibility... meant that the elections were largely construed as national elections to select Members to represent national interests” (Lodge 1982: 265). Later observers stressed that because fewer, and hence larger, electoral districts are used in EP elections, it is difficult for parties to foster personal connections between MEPs and the electorate (Jacobs, Corbett, and Shackleton, 1992, 19), so better-known members of the national parliaments assumed prominence in the campaigns. This has led some to favor proposals for electoral system change (Katz and Wessels, 1999: 216-7; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996: 379-80), including voting on a Tuesday or voting electronically (Lodge 2001).<sup>2</sup> In fact, in 1999 a common system of proportional representation was introduced for European elections to promote greater “European-ness.” EP election campaigns in 1999 and 2004 remained nationally-oriented, however. Furthermore, the Netherlands which has no difference in district size between national and European elections still sees very nationally-oriented EP campaigns.

There is, however, one component of the European electoral system that does seem fruitful in explaining the nationally-focused campaigns. All EP electoral districts are within a single country and, while transnational party federations write election manifestos and initially conducted voter-education campaigns, actual decisions about the content of European elections are made by national-level parties in a national arena.<sup>3</sup> As Simon Hix and Christopher Lord (1997: 84) put it, “The selection of candidates, the arguments of the campaign, electoral success or failure, and the label under which an MEP is elected are ... governed by domestic party politics...” If, as some proponents of electoral reform propose, transnational party federations were to control candidate selection and if voters would have to vote for European-wide or at least transnational lists, the focus of EP election campaigns would surely transcend national issues. While this is undoubtedly the case, it cannot explain why, given the current conditions, national parties choose to campaign on national rather than European issues.

### Bottom-Up Theories

Rather than focusing on the EP as an institution to explain the content of EP election campaigns, as do the arguments outlined above, it is more fruitful to look at those who actually conduct the European election and examine their motives for choosing campaign themes. Just as with the top-down approach, there are a number of bottom-up hypotheses which seek to explain the behavior of national political actors.

When the first direct elections to the Parliament failed to produce European-centered campaigns, some observers simply blamed national political actors’ ignorance of, or disdain for, the EP or the EU itself. Van der Eijk and Franklin claim the “myopia of national party leaders” blinds them to European themes (1996: 10). Lodge criticized,

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<sup>2</sup> See also Jacobs, Corbett, and Shackleton, 1992, Chapter 2 for a history of attempts at European electoral reform.

<sup>3</sup> In 2004 the Green party family for the first time conducted similar Europe-wide campaigns.

Parties can hardly expect to mobilize the electorate ... if they do not imbue their activists first with a sense of the EP's importance and legitimacy... countering ignorance of both the EC and the EP's functions, powers and role.... [I]t is all too obvious that national governments by and large treat both the EP and the Commission... with scarcely concealed contempt. Thus national political elites appear to lack respect for the EC. It is not surprising then that some should make only a token effort to get out the vote in Euro-elections. Nor is it surprising that their campaigns should then come to focus (by design, accident, or simple neglect) on highly visible national issues.... (1986, 260).

While this might have been the case in the early years of direct elections, the growth in competencies not only of the Parliament but also of the EU itself, and the European Court of Justice in particular, it is difficult to believe that national parties across the twenty-five member states still remain ignorant of the EU or lack respect for its role.<sup>4</sup>

It has also been argued that it is not national parties' lack of respect, but fear, of the EP that causes national parties to avoid European issues in Euro-campaigns. Lodge attributed nationally-focused campaigns in Euro-skeptic Denmark and the UK to efforts of the parties to reassure voters that a directly elected EP would not try to usurp national parliaments' powers (Lodge 1986, 3). Again, however, while this might be true of some Euro-skeptic parties it is unlikely to explain campaigning trends of most parties across the Union.

More recently Mair puts forth the hypothesis that parties prefer to avoid discussing issues determined by European-level institutions in European elections so that "the party leaderships which emerge victorious from the contests... have the capacity to remain relatively insulated from electoral constraints and enjoy a relatively free hand to develop their appropriate policy alternatives as they themselves see fit" (2000, 47-8). If national parties' motivation for stressing national issues in EP campaigns were indeed to protect their freedom of maneuver, this strategy would seem to have backfired. The national focus of EP campaigns has created a situation where Euro-elections are interpreted as referenda on the incumbent government; this has opened national governments up to additional opportunities for voters to criticize their domestic performance and paved the way for new competitors in their party systems (Hix and Lord, 1997, 89-90; see contributions to van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

Other scholars have put forth arguments suggesting it is not ignorance, fear, or ill will that causes party leaders to stress national themes in EP election campaigns, but an inability to make European issues come alive with voters. Blondel et al write, "European issues have little salience.... At the 1994 elections, for instance, efforts were made by some to give a European-wide profile to some questions such as the situation in former Yugoslavia or unemployment: the first of these matters was quickly shown to raise little interest while the second was not sufficiently orchestrated, for whatever reasons, and never had a real impact as a European-wide problem" (1998: 15-16). It strains the imagination, however, to believe that issues surrounding jobs or war cannot be made

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as will be outlined below, there is a strong pro-Europe consensus across most mainstream parties.

interesting to the public. If national parties can frame these issues in national terms in a national election, it seems highly likely that *if they so desired* they could also do so in a European election, especially given the growing reliance of national parties on professional advertising agencies which can seemingly sell anything to anyone (Farrell and Webb 2000; for Germany in 2004 see Grabow 2004).

Rather than assuming that political parties – shown to be relatively rational actors in the domestic arena – are somehow incompetent when it comes to running a European election campaign, it seems more fruitful to examine what rational reasons domestic actors might have to avoid European themes in an EP campaign. To date, three contrasting views have been brought forth to explain the way in which national parties across Europe view European issues. Each implies a different reason as to why domestic party leaders would want to avoid European themes in an EP campaign.

The first of these schools of thought argues that there is widespread consensus on European issues in the court of European public opinion. As early as 1970 Lindberg and Scheingold observed what they called a “permissive consensus” among the European electorate; they described “generally favorable orientations among elites and mass publics toward a broad range of integrative activities. This support seemed to be increasing as the Community developed” (p. 250). Against this backdrop, some argued, mainstream western European parties by and large agree over the issue of European integration. Mair (2000) found 66.4% of the vote in the EU of 15 going to parties “strongly pro-European integration” and only 8% of the electorate supporting “strongly anti-European integration” parties.<sup>5</sup> The remainder voted for parties with ambivalent stances vis-à-vis Europe. Ray’s 1999 expert opinion survey also concluded that parties had begun taking increasingly pro-European integration stances. Schmitt and Thomassen find that the main party groups represented in the EP have a good degree of consensus on European issues as well (1999, 206).

As a result, this school of thought argues, most political parties do not stress European integration in either their national or European electoral campaigns (Blondel et al, 1998, 16). Few votes are to be gained by stressing a valence issue (Lange and Davidson-Schmich 1995). While this explanation seems plausible as to why parties might not debate the issue of European integration or the existence of the EU, there still are many areas of disagreement among parties as to the content of EU policies – what role should the EU play in protecting workers from the vagaries of globalization, attracting international investment, or regulating immigration, particularly from Islamic countries? It is hard to imagine widespread cross-partisan agreement on such issues. Furthermore, the literature on EP election campaigns consistently notices that at some times some parties – especially but not exclusively in the UK and Denmark – do stress European issues (For a few of many examples see Hix and Lord, 1997: 91-2; Lodge 1986: 256; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996: 367; Jacobs, Corbett, Shackleton, 1992, 28). This line of thinking can explain the fact that UK and Danish EP elections do focus on European issues. In Denmark a different party system is used for EP elections due to the presence of anti-EU parties that do not contest national elections. In the UK the electorate is

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<sup>5</sup> See Taggart (1998) for a discussion of such parties.

widely Euro-skeptic. Because voters in these countries are so divided over Europe, it is not a valence issue and thus a logical issue for domestic parties to include in their campaigns (see case studies in Blondel et al 1996, Lange and Davidson-Schmich 1995). However, this approach cannot explain why parties in other countries with a widespread pro-integration consensus might at times address European issues in an EP campaign.

A second and contrasting line of reasoning regarding political parties' views of European integration has also been brought forth. This school of thought argues that political parties fail to stress European integration in campaigns not because of widespread pro-European sentiment but because their membership is divided on the issue. As a result, party elites play down "Europe" in campaigns to downplay division within the party (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Hix 1999). This hypothesis clearly applies to some parties within Europe (Hix 1999, Taggart 1998) – most famously the British Conservative Party – but the level of (dis)agreement over European integration varies widely among parties and most parties are relatively united (Ray 1999). So while this explanation can shed light on why *some* parties might want to avoid European issues, it cannot explain why *on the whole* EP election campaigns are national in tone.

## **II. An Alternative Explanation**

In order to understand parties' decisions about European election campaign content, a third approach is more useful. This approach to national parties' stances on Europe, spearheaded by Gary Marks and fellow researchers, argues that rather than being consistently divided over, or united on, European integration, party families have distinct stances on Europe that differ from country to country depending on the social and historical cleavages present (Marks and Wilson 2000; Marks, Wilson, and Ray 2002; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson, 2002; see also Ladrech (1999) and van der Brug and van der Eijk (1999, 153) on transnational parties). Research in this school of thought is based on a broader definition of what constitutes "European" issues than are the above two schools. Thomassen and Schmitt's (1999) three-fold typology of European issues clarifies this point. First, there is the question of national sovereignty vs. power for the European Union. Second, if power is to be given to the EU, what form should the latter assume? In other words, what roles should be played by the Commission, the Parliament, and the Council? It is to these two types of questions that the above schools of thought refer. The widespread pro-European consensus among mainstream parties mentioned above refers primarily to the desirability of transferring certain powers to certain actors. Similarly, the divisions in parties such as the Tories result when the electorate (or party) is split on the desirability of integration as a whole.

Once integration is assumed (or actually occurs), however, a whole new range of "European" issues emerge. Thomassen and Schmitt explain, "Once the Union has the competence to pursue its own policies in a particular area, the question remains what the content of that policy should be. Suddenly, the relevant conflict dimensions do not necessarily differ from those at the national level" (1999, 259). Social Democratic parties can be expected to use the European level to push for greater protections for workers in a globalizing economy, parties of the right to push for greater liberalization, and Green

parties to use the EU as a platform for greater environmental regulations (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002).

Given the presence of such profound partisan differences over the uses to which the EU should be put, arguments that EP campaigns do not focus on European issues because parties do not understand or respect the EU, or that European issues are boring or uncontroversial, do not seem plausible. While some parties may prefer to avoid discussing the EU because they are divided over its very desirability, this is clearly not the case for most political parties. Another explanation is needed. Our belief is that most parties could potentially benefit from discussing Thomassen and Schmitt's third type of European issue in an EP campaign and that most parties could clearly articulate compelling positions on such issues to voters if they chose to do so.

So why do national campaigns usually fail to focus on European issues? Our explanation is a relatively mundane one: the national parties that plan EP election campaigns are in business to win elections and there are more national elections than European ones. In addition, the more that EP elections come to be seen as a key part of national politics, the more pressure parties are under to focus on being as competitive as possible in terms of national issues (Hix and Lord, 1997: 90). From national parties' perspectives, it is more efficient to spend limited resources fighting on national issues because this kills two birds with one stone. Why should party organizations waste time on EU issues when they can campaign in EP elections on national issues and still win seats in the Parliament?<sup>6</sup>

We expect that the only parties choosing to stress European themes in their EP campaigns are those who prefer to avoid discussing domestic issues and believe they can better win votes in national elections by stressing European issues and/or diverting voters' attention from the national arena. There are several instances in which a party might make such a calculation.

- When a party's *raison d'être* is to oppose integration, i.e., when it has no domestic platform to campaign on or when it is severely divided on domestic questions (See Taggart 1998).
- When a party has a stance on Europe that differentiates it from virtually all other mainstream domestic parties. Since most European parties are pro-European integration, such a stance is usually overt opposition to European integration. Stressing this theme helps such parties gain votes from the anti-European segment of the electorate as well as protest votes.<sup>7</sup>
- When a large party is far from a national election, especially when the party is an incumbent whose domestic record is not strong or a large opposition party facing a popular incumbent. This hypothesis is drawn from van der Eijk and Franklin

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<sup>6</sup> Eventually the situation could reach a tipping point; if all other parties campaign on European issues and one party tries to skirt them, this party could be punished by voters. But that certainly is not the case at the moment.

<sup>7</sup> See contributions to van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) for examples of how EP elections have allowed such parties to gain ground in domestic party systems using this tactic.

- (1996) whose research shows that large parties far from a national election tend to suffer most in EP elections when these elections are perceived by voters as referenda on the incumbent government. Such contests offer voters a “safe” opportunity to punish large mainstream parties by voting for protest parties. If large parties can convince voters that EP elections deal with serious European issues they may be less inclined to view EP contests as opportunities for rebellion.
- When a party’s domestic organization and/or stances are more unpopular than its European side.
  - When a particular European issue is so contentious among the electorate that the issue is at the forefront of domestic politics and therefore needs to be addressed if a party is to succeed nationally.

Since the first two of these conditions usually apply only to small parties, the third condition only at times to large parties, and the last two conditions only irregularly, the primary thrust of EP election campaigns can be expected to be national. This framework does, however, provide a rationale for the occasional use of European themes in an EP campaign, and does not dismiss such incidents as inexplicable anomalies.

The following section provides a plausibility probe to see whether these hypotheses hold up in the face of empirical evidence from one recent EP election campaign: that held in Germany in 2004.

### **III. Empirical Evidence**

This case was chosen because it is a textbook example of an EP election campaign in terms of turnout, results, campaign intensity, and campaign themes.<sup>8</sup> Turnout was the lowest ever in a post-war German national election (43%) and in keeping with the low participation endemic to EP elections (Güllner 2004). The largest incumbent party, the Social Democrats (SPD), were punished severely, receiving only 21.5% of the vote, down from 30.7% in 1999. This was their worst showing in the post-war period. The largest opposition party, the Christian Democrats, did not lose as much, but their vote share fell 2.8% from the 39.3% they received in 1999. In contrast, small and/or extreme parties including the Greens, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), and the far right did quite well. The Greens were seen as the big winner of the elections. In the city of Freiburg they received their best showing ever, 36.8%, and in the state of Berlin they were the second largest party (“Union grübelt” 2004). Nationally, they increased their vote from 6.4% in 1999 to 11.9%. In contrast to 1999, the FDP broke Germany’s 5% threshold and received representation in the EP, increasing their vote share from 3% to 6.1%. The far-right Republikaner and National Democratic Party (NDP) saw their combined share of the electorate rise from 2.1% in 1999 to 2.8%.<sup>9</sup> The former East German communists, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), improved slightly from 5.8% in 1999 to 6.1%. An

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<sup>8</sup> One drawback to the German case is that there are no longer any German parties which exist primarily to oppose the EU, as did the Pro-DM party before the adoption of the Euro. Thus we are unable to test our hypothesis regarding such parties. The Danish experience – and pure logic – suggest, however, that parties that exist solely to oppose the EU will virtually always campaign on European rather than domestic themes.

<sup>9</sup> Several other very minor lists of far-right candidates increased the overall total to 3.5% (Langenau 2004).

additional 9.1% of the vote was divided among a collection of sixteen other lists including the Animal Rights Party, The Grays (*die Grauen*), and The Women (*die Frauen*). Gains for small or extreme parties and losses for large ones have been typical of EP elections since their inception (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) and were again the rule across Europe in 2004.

By all accounts, the German campaign was quite lackluster, as is typical of European contests. Media accounts stressed the campaign's "dull" (Weiland 2004) nature, the "especially low" (Hermann 2004) level of voter interest, and expected low turnout (Schaeffer 2004). Indeed, German parties spent only one tenth of what they spend on national election campaigns on their 2004 EP campaigns (Grabow 2004). In terms of the overall content, as is the rule in European elections, one typical journalist observed, "there are hardly any real European themes – the election is seen by the parties as more of a barometer measuring domestic sentiment" (Tillack 2004). Interviews with the mainstream parties' campaign managers confirm that they believed they could win votes in the EP election by stressing national issues. They viewed European elections as an opportunity to field test the campaign themes and techniques they planned to use in the 2006 national elections. For this reason, top party leaders, the parties' regular advertising agencies, and their professional media consultants all took part in running campaigns (Grabow 2004). Nonetheless, the campaigns received limited coverage in the major newsmagazines and newspapers. In the *Spiegel*, *Focus*, and Germany's newspaper of record, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, there was almost as much coverage of EP campaigns in other countries as there was of the German parties' campaigns. What coverage there was, was often insubstantial. A website featuring pictures of all German EP candidates and an opportunity for voters choose the best-looking candidate received extensive media attention – and 900,000 hits – while party platforms did not ([www.politik-digital.de/kand-o-mat/](http://www.politik-digital.de/kand-o-mat/)).

However, an examination of the main parties' platforms, a close reading of their detailed campaign materials, and attention to the (limited) media attention their platforms received<sup>10</sup>, are warranted here in light of the contrasting assumptions about national parties' stances vis-à-vis European integration. As expected by observers in the "permissive consensus" camp, there was a widespread consensus among the mainstream German parties that European integration was desirable (Grabow 2004) and that the EP should receive more powers to influence the Union's executive ("Wie sieht" 2004). Only the extreme right in Germany was overtly opposed to the EU. As a result, there was no widespread discussion in Germany of the first type of European issue (whether the EU was desirable) nor was there widespread discussion of the second type of issue (i.e., the Parliament's role within the Union's political system).

In contrast to the expectation that national parties are divided over the issue of Europe, mainstream German parties were by and large united over most of the European issues discussed above and to be discussed below. The only exception to this rule regarded the highly controversial issue of whether the European Council should open accession negotiations with Turkey. The Christian Democrats came out primarily against

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<sup>10</sup> For an especially thorough overview, see "Wer was" 2004.

full-fledged EU membership for Ankara, instead calling for a partnership that would fall short of membership. Former CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Ex-Defense Minister Volker R  he, who had favored Turkish accession while in office, disagreed. The Liberals too came out against Turkish membership, although their former Foreign Ministers Genscher and Kinkel were in favor (“Die Menschen” 2004). The leftist parties including the Social Democrats, Greens, and PDS all favored Turkish EU membership if/when the Copenhagen criteria are met, although some members of these parties, including former SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, vocally disagreed with their party’s overall stance (Schneider 2004). As a result of these divisions, none of the mainstream parties planned to focus on the Turkish issue in their campaigns (Grabow 2004); however, as will be discussed below, this topic proved difficult to avoid in practice.

Aside from this broad pro-integration consensus and the divisions over Turkey, German parties had clear-cut stances on a range of European issues, stances with which by-and-large most party members agreed and which were quite different from party to party. As expected by Marks et al, the parties disagreed on major issues confronting the European Parliament in much the same way they disagree on domestic issues. For example, the parties disagreed over the question of whether the EU should require member states to have a minimum tax rate to prevent “tax dumping” being used to lure foreign investment (“Zu niedrige” 2004). The Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and former communists all agreed on the need for a minimum tax rate while the Greens believed, at least in the short run, low tax rates in Eastern Europe were justified because they helped new member states’ economies. The liberals Free Democrats vigorously defended European-wide competition to attract investment and staunchly opposed any attempts to set a minimum tax rate. Similar disagreements arose over questions regarding the percentage of the EU’s budget to be devoted to internal and external security. The CDU called for more spending on police, border guards, and for the creation of a European army; the FPD agreed on the latter point. Parties of the left, including the SPD, Greens, and PDS, all stressed a more peaceful EU foreign policy including the creation of a civilian peace corps. The former communists further called for the end of EU military spending in favor of foreign aid to address the sources of global unrest (“Gemeinsame” 2004). Finally, the parties disagreed over agricultural issues. The Christian Democrats and PDS strongly favored continued high agricultural subsidies in the EU’s budget, the SPD and Greens favored drastic reductions to these subsidies, and the Liberals called for funds to be taken away from agriculture and put toward higher education as well as toward research and development (“Wie viel” 2004).

Three of the major parties’ lists were headed by veteran MEPs whose records in the Parliament could have been addressed in the campaign (“Who is who” 2004). Hans-Gert P  ttering, the Christian Democrats’ lead candidate, has been an MEP since the first direct elections and has served as the head of the European People’s Party-European Democrats’ parliamentary party group, the largest in the EP. Some consider him a candidate for higher EU office in the future. During the campaign he made over eighty public appearances; however, he was regularly overshadowed by Angela Merkel, the CDU’s national party leader, who usually appeared at his side. The SPD’s lead candidate, Martin Schulz, was similarly well known for his disputes with Silvio Berlusconi in the

Parliament, in which Berlusconi recommended a film role for Schulz as a concentration camp guard. The PDS's lead candidate, Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann, had served as an MEP since 1999 and was active in drafting the EU constitution. Again, however, these MEPs' records were completely ignored in the campaign.<sup>11</sup> The Greens' lead candidate, Rebecca Harms, served as a staff member for a Green MEP between 1984 and 1989, but less was made of this role than her role as an anti-nuclear activist in Lower Saxony's state legislature. The Liberals' lead candidate, Silvana Koch-Mehrin, who had no experience in the Parliament, did receive considerable media attention and will be discussed below.

In addition to these European issues directly in the EP's purview, there were several other European-level issues over which German parties clearly disagreed. On the question of when citizens from the new EU member states should be allowed to work in Germany, the Christian Democrats favored pushing this date seven years into the future, the latest date established by the federal government. In contrast, Social Democrats and Greens called for speeding up this timetable and allowing eastern workers to come to Germany in 2006. The Liberals and PDS called for immediate approval of their working in Germany ("Wann sollen" 2004).

The parties also disagreed both over the content of the European Constitution and over the process Germany should use to ratify it ("Europa" 2004). The former communists opposed the current version of the constitution, deeming it too militaristic (Bortfeldt 2004), the Greens believed it should be passed but then significantly amended, while the other parties agreed more or less on its contents. The Christian Democrats called for a mention of Germany's Judeo-Christian tradition in the constitution whereas the Social Democrats, Liberals, and former communists opposed this formulation. The Greens called for a compromise wording mentioning "god" in the preamble, but not specifying which one. Finally, the Liberals and the PDS called for a national referendum on the constitution, the Greens for a European-wide plebiscite, the SPD remained ambiguous calling only for its "speedy adoption," and the CDU explicitly rejected a referendum.

The above discussion makes clear that, with the notable exception of Turkey, German party members were relatively united when it came to European issues.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the parties disagreed in significant ways over these issues. Public opinion polls showed that 74% of voters believed Germany's ability to preserve its welfare state was a "very important" or "important" political issue and 73% of the electorate identified the war in Iraq as such. Both issues had direct connections to the economic and security-related issues mentioned above. Further, almost half of the electorate (49%) believed the aforementioned Turkish question was an important one. Thus European issues were not ones which were uninteresting or foreign to German voters (Weiland 2004). Finally, most parties had lead candidates with European experience whose records could have been a

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<sup>11</sup> A close look at detailed SPD campaign material found brief references to the EP's success in keeping soccer matches off pay-per-view TV and in protecting consumers' rights when travel plans went awry or when purchased goods were defective. Similarly, PDS party newsletters stressed the roles played by all six of the parties' MEPs. These messages were not widely publicized, however.

<sup>12</sup> The FDP's former Foreign Minister Dietrich Genscher, however, opposed his party on the question of a referendum for the EU constitution.

campaign issue. Thus, if they had chosen to, German parties could have easily mounted an effective electoral campaign focusing on European issues.

However, these parties' campaign strategies, with some exceptions as expected by the hypotheses above, generally focused on domestic issues. Most European of all were the campaigns run by the extreme right. As these parties had significantly different stances on Europe in comparison with the mainstream parties, this focus helped them carve a unique niche for themselves both in national and European politics. The Republicans sought to call attention to a newly-released expose by a former *Spiegel* journalist exposing MEP's extensive perks (Gottlieb and Carvajal 2004, Carvajal and Gottlieb 2004). Their main poster<sup>13</sup> stated boldly, "Stop the Rip-offs." This slogan went along well with their platform calling for reducing MEPs' salaries, keeping political power in national parliaments rather than giving it to Brussels, maintaining the primacy of national law, and returning to the Deutsche Mark. The rip-off slogan also served double duty in that it reminded voters that Berlin is a net payer into the EU and other countries receive more benefits than Germany. A second Republican poster featured the slogan "Europe without Turkey." This set them apart from even the Christian Democrats who favored some type of partnership with Turkey. The other main far right party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), focused their campaign against Turkish EU-accession in an overtly racist manner. Their main campaign slogan was "Germans Defend Yourself" – the same slogan used by the Nazis in 1933 in conjunction with their boycott of Jewish businesses. This slogan was accompanied by the image of an Islamic crescent eclipsing the EU's circle of stars, set against a backdrop of burning cities, police cars, and minarets. These parties' willingness to overtly criticize Europe and express anti-Islamic sentiment set them apart from the mainstream parties and this focus on European issues proved a good way to capture protest votes in the EP election. The Republican's campaign newsletter was even entitled "Time for Protest."

The other main party stressing European over national issues was the incumbent Social Democratic Party. After six years under Chancellor Schroeder, who barely won a second term in 2002, Germany's chronic unemployment had not improved and many within his own party opposed Schroeder's attempts to liberalize the German economy. Any attention paid to domestic issues was likely be detrimental to the SPD, so the party attempted to divert the public's opinion to the European level. The director of one of Germany's leading polling agencies called the campaign strategy, "a desperate attempt by the SPD to do damage control" (Bennhold 2004). This tactic was similar to that pursued by the SPD in 2002 when Schroeder successfully whipped up anti-American, anti-war sentiment over the U.S. invasion of Iraq. As a result, the SPD's primary campaign slogan was "*Friedensmacht*" or "a power for peace" and its poster campaign repeatedly stressed the word peace. The party decided not to picture the unpopular Schroeder on the posters (Hermann 2004).

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<sup>13</sup> Although German parties receive free TV time following the evening news on public television, all German parties viewed posters on billboards as their most important campaign activity. This was followed by public meetings and newspaper coverage (Grabow 2004).

The SPD had not planned to stress the Turkey issue, in part because the relationship between ethnic Germans and those of Turkish descent are quite tense in Germany and because there is widespread anti-Turkish sentiment among the SPD's working class constituents ("Generalprobe" 2004). Nonetheless, the Turkey issue came up repeatedly in the campaign. One of the top SPD candidates for the EP was the naturalized German citizen of Turkish origin, Vural Oeger, the head of a large tour bus company and an outspoken proponent of Turkish EU-accession. In May, Oeger made public comments suggesting that German families should have more children to solve Germany's demographic crisis. These remarks immediately prompted outrage from the right, leading to comments about Oeger having a harem and criticisms both of Turkish immigrants' treatment of women and of their failure to "integrate" into German society ("Die wollen" 2004). This conflict made headlines, as did the far right's campaign, and most media attention given to the campaign came to focus on the issue of Turkey's future in the EU and the parties' attitudes toward Turks living in Germany. While the SPD did not intend for this to be a key campaign issue, the party was ultimately happy to send Oeger – rather than their lead candidate – to talk shows and other public appearances to divert attention from national issues.

Both the incumbent Greens and the opposition Free Democrats claimed to run European-focused campaigns (Grabow 2004) and after their strong showing in the EP elections, both claimed their Euro-focused campaigns were the cause of their electoral success ("Schwere" 2004; "SPD erleidet" 2004). The FDP had strategic domestic reasons for stressing European issues in their campaign – their domestic leadership was divided, scandal-ridden and unpopular. In contrast, their top European candidate Sylvana Koch-Mehrin, was popular (and considered very attractive – she ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in the on-line appearance poll). A young blonde working mother, Koch-Mehrin studied in Paris, married an Irishman, and worked in Brussels in a consulting firm devoted to helping companies comply with EU regulations. She was never active in the German FDP but instead in the party's ex-patriot organization in Brussels. With her multi-cultural business background, Koch-Mehrin embodied both European and liberal ideals. By placing Koch-Mehrin on posters and arranging frequent media exposure, the FDP was able to run a European campaign simply on the basis of personality.<sup>14</sup> In addition to pictures of their lead candidate, however, the FDP ran on the slogan "We can do Europe better!" – better, assumedly than the incumbent domestic government. Both the party and Koch-Mehrin consistently criticized the level of bureaucracy present in Brussels. This strategy successfully allowed the liberals to divert attention from their lackluster domestic party leaders but still stress their core domestic theme: neo-liberal economic policies.

While the Greens claimed to run a purely European-focused campaign and much was made of the pan-European organization of the Greens' EP campaign, a closer look at the German Greens' campaign reveals it to have quite a mixed focus. On the one hand, one of their most common posters featured a large picture of Joshka Fischer, the Green Foreign Minister and one of Germany's most popular politicians. As Fischer was not an

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<sup>14</sup> EP campaigns are often criticized for a lack of substance because they focus on personalities such as porn stars or racecar drivers. Koch-Mehrin provided a substantive contrast – a popular personality with a political platform.

MEP candidate, this poster was clearly national in scope. Another such poster featured an unflattering picture of CDU leader Angela Merkel along with Silvio Berlusconi with slogan “you decide!” On the other hand, further Green posters did feature overtly European themes including one with Gerhard Schroeder, Tony Blair, and François Mitterrand’s faces atop skeletons and the slogan “for more transparency.” Another internationally-focused poster similar to the SPD’s had multiple versions of the same photo of George Bush and the slogans “don’t give clones a chance.” While the remainder of the Green campaign can be considered European in that it did not overtly discuss domestic politics such the governing coalition’s position on economic issues, the poster themes raised by the Greens were quite vague and largely parallel to their domestic environmental platform. One featured a mushroom cloud and the slogan “for a Europe without mushroom clouds.” A second showed tomatoes and the saying “good foods, not genetically modified foods.” A third featured the Greens’ national party symbol, a daisy, and the slogan “for a better climate in Europe.”

In contrast to the above parties, the remaining mainstream parties ran typically domestically oriented campaigns. Most nationally-oriented of all was the CDU’s campaign. Their main slogan was “Germany can do better” (*Deutschland kann mehr*), often accompanied by images of the party’s head – and presumed candidate for Chancellor in 2006 – Angela Merkel. She was not an MEP candidate. One Christian Democratic campaign poster featured the image of a red (social democratic) and green apple with a worm coming out of it. Another showed a heart-shaped piece of gingerbread, with “trust me” written on it, broken in half and headlined with the slogan “love was red and hope was green.” A third asserted, “Better for Germany: Vote against Red-Green Chaos in the June 13 European Election.” CDU campaign brochures featured unflattering comparisons of German unemployment, school quality, and apprenticeship programs before and after the SPD-Green coalition took office. The Christian Democrats’ only overtly European poster contained a picture of an older woman sitting alone on a bus and the slogan “for a secure Europe,” stressing not only the party’s call for increased EU spending on internal security but also their domestic law-and-order platform. Experience and polls made clear that the large, incumbent SPD, with its weak economic record, was vulnerable in this European election and the Christian Democrats did all they could to portray the EP election as a referendum on the incumbent government.<sup>15</sup>

While the CDU, like the Social Democrats, did not plan to stress Turkish accession to the EU in its campaign, the need to counter the far right’s populist appeals on the topic combined with the opportunity to gain the support of some anti-Turkish SPD supporters helped the party overcome its divisions on the issue. In media appearances Christian Democrats stressed their plan for a “privileged partnership” rather than EU membership for Turkey. Ultimately, however, their statements regarding Turkey often

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<sup>15</sup> The CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), unsurprisingly had a less nationally-focused and more regionally-focused campaign. Its main slogan was “CSU – A Strong Voice for Bavaria in Brussels.” The CSU’s second focus in the campaign, however, was its opposition to Turkey’s membership in the EU. The party was more united on this front than the CDU and was happy to oblige the media’s interest in the issue. Some observers argued that the CSU stressed the Turkey issue rather than placing emphasis on the Red-Green government’s economic record as the CDU did in order to divert voter attention away from the CSU-led Bavarian government’s budget cutbacks (Schaeffer 2004).

moved into a discussion of the domestic role of Turkish immigrants living in Germany, a longstanding national political debate.

The final opposition party, the PDS, pursued a similarly domestically-focused campaign.<sup>16</sup> Their most prominent campaign poster featured the slogan “Enough is Enough!” implicitly referring to the incumbents’ cuts to the German welfare state. Domestically, the PDS stressed an “Agenda Social” in contrast to the Schroeder government’s neo-liberal “Agenda 2010.” The former communists’ other European posters repeatedly stressed the need for a “Social Europe,” reinforcing their domestic campaign (Bortfeldt 2004). Given widespread voter concern about the future of the German welfare state and dissatisfaction with the red-green government’s performance in this regard, this thrust was likely to serve the PDS’s domestic agenda well.

#### **IV. Summary**

Thus, although the 2004 EP campaign in Germany was low-key compared to national contests, and although the Christian Democrats, former communists, and to a degree the Greens, stressed national rather than European issues, the campaign had more European content than the conventional wisdom on EP elections would expect. Furthermore, the parties that did not stress European issues did so not out of ignorance, fear, or stupidity, but because they thought they could perform well in both the EP campaign and subsequent domestic campaigns by criticizing Germany’s unpopular red-green government, (or in the case of the Greens by playing up their popular Foreign Minister.) In addition, rather than being anomalies, the occasional stress on Europe in this campaign was a strategic decision by strategic parties trying to do well both in European and future national elections. The far right capitalized on its uniquely anti-EU, anti-Islamic position to protest voters. The SPD and to an extent the Greens tried to divert attention from their disastrous domestic record. Finally, the Free Democrats sought to play up its popular European candidate, rather than its fractured domestic leadership, while stressing its core domestic platform. The media forced all parties to address the question of Turkish EU membership, likely because this European theme was closely related to the broader high-salience political debate in Germany regarding the role played by Turkish immigrants in German society.

The content of these campaigns can best be explained not by the overall role of the European parliament, nor by German parties’ widespread consensus on European integration or their disagreement over Turkish membership, but rather by campaign managers’ strategic decisions about which issues would serve their parties best in domestic political competition and by the media’s estimation of what would attract readers or viewers.

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<sup>16</sup> The PDS did, however, stress European themes in a poster calling for “Europe on the side of the UN, not in the shadow of the US.” Given the importance German voters placed on opposition to the war in Iraq this focus was sure to win votes nationally as well.

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