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Developing Discourse?

National Referendums and News Coverage of the European Constitutional Process

Chiara Jasson

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ABSTRACT

In light of the current legitimacy crisis, the need to increase the visibility of the European Union in the mass media seems more urgent than ever. In practice, however, EU issues struggle to capture the media's attention and are covered only infrequently. Using interviews with Brussels correspondents and the content analysis of sixteen daily newspapers from four member states, this thesis shows that referendums can increase news coverage of European affairs both domestically and transnationally – prompting the emergence of a European public sphere.

Domestically, newspapers from countries that held a referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) published a greater number of articles about the Constitution. The presence of a referendum also increased the amount of analysis on this issue, improving the 'quality' of coverage. Interviews with EU journalists provide possible explanations for these findings. Scheduling a referendum augments citizens' need for information about European issues, helping to bring Europe 'home'. Because they are preceded by weeks of campaigning, referendums also create opportunities for the polarisation of political elites. This, in turn, raises the saliency and newsworthiness of EU issues.

More interestingly, the data show that scheduling a referendum in one country was sufficient to 'trigger' a debate in other member states, too. The patterns of coverage observed during the salient French campaign were similar across the four member states. Articles about the Constitution became more frequent, more analytical, EU-focused and polarised during this time.

Whilst provisional, these findings are important and indicate that there are times when a common EU discourse or public sphere may indeed emerge. The study also suggests that greater citizen participation through referendums may serve as a stimulus for EU debates in the mass media. By increasing the public's appetite for 'European' news and ensuring greater political investment, referendums may encourage the flow of information about the EU political process – helping to fill the current communication deficit.

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CHAPTER 1 – STUDYING EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The creation of a stable flow of communication about European affairs is one of the most pressing challenges facing the European Union today. In both academic and policy-making circles, there is a growing consensus that the European Union suffers from a 'communication deficit' (Meyer, 1998; Anderson and McLeod, 2004). While the gravity of this diagnosis varies across different schools of thought, symptoms such as shrinking levels of support for the European Union, decreasing electoral turnout and falling perceptions of EU legitimacy have caused concern across the continent. It is often claimed that the development of a participatory public sphere might partly redress these problems, providing citizens with opportunities to engage with the European project (Statham, 2007). In practice, however, European affairs still struggle to capture the media's attention. Even when they are covered, they seem to be reported predominantly at times of conflict, and from a negative angle (Norris, 2000; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). In sum, the current state of communication on the European Union appears to be part of the problem rather than the solution.

The study of European political communication is interesting for several reasons. Eurobarometer surveys tell us that the news media play a key role in informing the public about the EU (Eurobarometer 56, 2002). Citizens rely on the content of television programmes, radio, newspapers and the Internet to obtain news, commentary and information on Europe. There is also evidence that through their choice of messages, the mass media have the power to shape public perceptions (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2003), voting behaviour in referendums (Hobolt, 2005; 2007), as well as citizens' sense of European identity (Bruter, 2003; 2005; 2009). This makes analysing the supply of information available to the public critically important.

This thesis takes a different approach from many existing political communication studies. It does not measure how the media influence people or their vot5ing behaviour. Instead, it examines whether political contexts such as referendums can affect news coverage of European affairs. It focuses on referendums because they represent an opportunity for the expression of civic consciousness. As

such, they have the capacity to increase citizen involvement in EU politics and potentially combat growing levels of popular apathy (de Vreese, 2007).

Referendums are also commonly perceived as the democratic instrument 'par excellence', as a true manifestation of 'democracy by the people'. Because they are about the direct consultation of citizens, referendums are often seen as the 'more democratic' choice. However, as shown by the French and Dutch 'No' to the European Constitution in 2005 and by the more recent Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, direct democracy can be 'problematic', and does not always yield the outcome desired by political elites. In recent years, the use of referendums at the EU level has been the source of much controversy. It has also led to suggestions that European citizens may not be 'ready' for this level of engagement with European politics. The risk, it is argued, is that voters might misinterpret the question at stake, or use EU votes to express their dissatisfaction with national governments. The growing body of literature on this subject has focused on the effects of information on voting behaviour in EU referendums (Hobolt, 2005; 2007). However, little attention has been devoted to the effects of referendum campaigns on media's presentation of European issues.[1] To date, it remains unclear whether holding a referendum affects news coverage of the EU, not only domestically or in terms of volume, but also transnationally, across member states.

This dissertation examines whether referendums affect the emergence of a European public sphere. In doing so, it hopes to identify the key 'drivers' of EU media coverage. Drawing on a 'salience model', it considers the role of elite polarisation at referendum time and the presence of a link between the 'European' and 'domestic' levels as the key 'ingredients' or pre-requisites for EU media coverage. The study is motivated by a number of questions. To begin, if referendums are indeed a more democratic choice, do they lead to more open and democratic debates about Europe? Do they improve the quality of coverage, or simply affect its volume? Can referendums prompt the sort of coverage and debate that is focused on Europe? Or is news coverage of referendum campaigns – like that of European Parliament elections, simply a form of second-order national coverage? The need for more debate and

[1] For an important exception see Schuck and de Vreese, 2006.

communication about the EU is pressing. Can referendums be part of the solution in this respect, or are they simply a risky option? Finally, to their risks in terms of outcome outweigh the potential benefits of increased debate and communication on the European Union? Empirically, this dissertation aims to contribute to filling the gap for cross-national and longitudinal data on this subject.

The aim of this Chapter is twofold. Its first objective is to make the case for the study of European political communication, introducing the conceptual framework relevant to this dissertation. Second, through a review of current academic debates, it tries to highlight some of the key issues discussed in the existing literature. In doing so it touches upon several areas of research related to this study. The Chapter is organised into 7 sections. First, it briefly introduces the challenges of democracy and legitimacy in the European Union, discussing the importance of a mediated space for debate and opinion formation. Second, it highlights the role of the media in the EU political process, reviewing the most recent literature relevant to the scope of this study. In this context, it also discusses the role of the press as a potential agenda setter, reviewing accusations of declining standards of journalism and growing commercial pressures. Third, it moves on to the role of referendums and citizen participation in the process of European integration. The fourth section briefly summarises the conceptual framework of the dissertation, while the fifth one explains the focus of the study on referendums on the EU constitutional process. Finally, the Chapter sets out the study's research question and its various ramifications and provides an overview of the thesis, broadly outlining the content of each Chapter.

1.1 Setting the Scene: the Challenge of EU Democracy

1.1.1 *A democratic deficit*

Since the notion of democratic deficit was coined in the early 80's, questions about the European Union's democratic credentials have been brought to the forefront of academic research agendas. Scholarly research on this matter is divided in two key schools of thought. The first one holds that the 'Europe' does not need to be democratic. Given that the EU is a regulatory body, expecting it to fulfil

majoritarian standards of democracy would not only be misplaced, but actually limiting (Majone, 1998). It is also argued that the presence of directly and indirectly appointed representatives provides the EU with an adequate system of 'checks and balances' (Moravcsik, 2002). In contrast, members of the second school argue that while those institutional checks and balances ensure moderate European level policies, the lack of political debate and choice on these issues prevent the EU from being a true democratic polity, making it look more like a form of 'enlightened despotism' than a democracy (Hix, 2008).

The European democratic deficit has no universally accepted definition. Yet, one can identify five common claims associated with it (Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Hix 2008). In brief, they can be summarised as follows. The first accusation is that the process of European integration has led to a decrease in national parliamentary control, increasing the power of EU executive actors. The second claim is that the powers of the European Parliament – the only institution to be directly elected – are too weak. The third claim relates to the lack of electoral contest for either political office in the European Union, or the direction of the wider policy agenda (Hix, 2008). The fourth accusation is that its structural differences from domestic institutions make the EU too distant and removed from the average voter. Finally, the fifth standard or 'institutional' claim is that the four factors mentioned above widen the gap between what citizens 'want' and what they 'get' in terms of policy output (Hix, 2008). Whilst the validity of these accusations is not universally accepted (Moravcsik, 2003), there seems to be a consensus that more could be done to improve democratic transparency and legitimacy at the institutional level.

1.1.2 *Lack of debate, legitimacy and popular support*

Concerns about democratic governance in the European Union go beyond the institutional dimension. Recent years have seen a proliferation of other, perhaps less 'tangible' claims. Unlike institutional ones, these are more difficult to define, pinpoint, and ultimately address. In brief, they consist of the following, interrelated 'accusations'. First and foremost, is the notion that the EU suffers from a

communication deficit, characterised by a lack of public debate and information on the EU policy-making process (Meyer, 1999; Anderson and McLeod, 2004; Bijsmans 2007). Despite its growing impact on the lives of millions of citizens, the European Union and its institutions generally struggle to communicate their work to the public and the mass media. Second, opinion polls seem to suggest that levels of popular support for the EU have reached an all-time low. Data from Eurobarometer surveys, which have been recording fluctuations in public attitudes since the 1970's reveal that in absolute terms only half of all EU citizens perceive their country's membership of the European Union as a 'good thing' (Eurobarometer 66, Autumn 2006). This is significantly lower than in 1991, when this figure exceeded 70 percent (Eurobarometer 35, Spring 1991). A third ongoing challenge currently faced by the European Union is the widespread lack of citizen participation (Hix, 2008). This trend is reflected in the low levels of electoral turnout recorded in European Parliament elections. EP elections have been studied systematically since their beginning in 1979, and have been famously labelled 'second order national elections' (Rief and Schmitt, 1980). The pervasive apathy recorded in European elections is problematic first and foremost because the Parliament is the only directly elected institution in the EU. Also, as a growing number of competencies and powers are transferred to the EU level, one might expect to see more engagement on the part of EU citizens. Fourth, it has been argued that the EU is unlikely to reach the desired level of democratic legitimacy without the consolidation of a European demos or identity (Warleigh, 2004). The importance of identity for the legitimacy of a political entity is not a new idea (Weber, 1946). The past decades have seen an increase in the number of studies devoted to the development of a European identity (Gabel, 1994; Duchesne and Frognier, 1995; Dalton, 1996; Inglehart, 1997; Licata, 2000; Bruter, 2003; Risse, 2004; Bruter, 2005; 2009). While empirical studies have found evidence that a mass European identity has been developing since the 1970's, its establishment is very much dependent on regular political communication and the systematic exposure to good news about Europe (Bruter, 2005). Given that the EU is experiencing problems both with communicating itself effectively, and attracting regular (or positive) news coverage, the consolidation of this shared sense of identity is not something that can be taken for granted. In short, it appears that in additional to the 'standard claims' listed above, other 'symptoms'

such as the lack of debate and communication, falling levels of support, as well as popular apathy and disengagement may be aggravating the existing democratic deficit.

1.2 Filling the Void: The Need for a European Public Sphere

1.2.1 *Defining the concept*

As discussed, scholarly debates about EU democratic governance have turned to the importance for citizens of a mediated space for debate and opinion formation – commonly known as a public sphere. This is due to a growing consensus that popular participation need not be limited to voting. Citizen involvement can in fact take the form of political debate, resulting from a stable flow of communication between represented and their representatives (Benz and Papadopoulos, 2006). Research on the European Union has shown that the stability of this connection is precarious. As argued by Lord (1998), the current lack of open debate and contestation is a crucial problem in EU policy-making.

Because it rests on the principle that everyone can speak without restrictions, the concept of the public sphere is closely linked to democracy and, consequently, to the EU democratic deficit. This is mainly because the exchanges occurring in such a space provide citizens with the rights to contest the powers of the state (Taylor, 1995; Eriksen, 2007; Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). Whilst scholarly discussions on the democratising potential of communicative processes have proliferated in recent years[2], the exact definition of a public sphere remains hotly debated. Without launching into a lengthy normative exercise, it is important to identify some of the key characteristics of a public sphere. A public sphere may be viewed as a network for exchanging points of view (Habermas, 1990), or as a figurative place that emerges when people talk about common issues at the same time (Eriksen 2007). Simply put, it may be conceptualised as a space for the debate, analysis and criticism of a political system (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). A European public sphere can be understood as fulfilling three key functions (Trenz, 2005 in Vetters et al., 2009: 414). First, a transparency function – allowing debates about Europe to become visible, accessible and understandable to the public. Second, a socialising function –

[2] See Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007, for an overview of the theoretical debate.

enabling the interaction of actors and audiences. Third, a representation function – aggregating collective experiences and enabling the expression of shared norms, values and identity.

The presence of such a space and the possibility for cross-border communication and opinion-formation are considered essential pre-requisites for democratisation and legitimisation of the European Union (Grimm, 1995; Meyer; 2007). In other words, the consolidation of a EU public sphere is necessary if the EU is to be democratised as a state. Others have put forth a 'reversed causal mechanism' whereby the structures for debate and democratic practice lead to the development of transnational or European debates (Habermas, 2005 in Meyer, 2007:5).

1.2.2 *The European public sphere: one or many?*

Public spheres have traditionally been perceived as national communicative spaces dealing predominantly with the internal affairs of nation-states. As discussed, however, the evolution of European integration and the emergence of clear trans-national, sub-national and regional entities have challenged this perspective.

This changing political reality raises two important questions which have been recently tackled by both normative and empirical investigations. Is a European public sphere emerging? If so, at what level is it emerging? Scholarly debate on this issue appears to be divided into two competing schools of thought: the 'federal' school and the 'regulatory' school. The first one is based on the assumption that the EU shares the fundamental characteristics of a polity, which justifies thinking about a public sphere in relation to the Union's institutions. This first model presupposes the emergence of a single space common to all member states (Gerhards, 2000; Eriksen, 2005). However, the absence of a pan-European media system[3] as well as language barriers make this approach both impractical and unlikely.

The second model based on a regulatory union of European nation-states points towards the Europeanisation of national public spheres. The latter is based on the idea that a European public sphere may be found at the national level, with news coverage becoming increasingly 'Europeanised'

[3] With the exception of Brussels based newspaper *European Voice*, and television channels *Arte* and *3Sat*.

(Schlesinger, 1999; Trenz, 2004). While empirical evidence exists to support both models, nation-state-based conceptualisations of the public sphere appear to be generally more resilient (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007).

Recent years have seen the emergence of numerous studies dealing with the Europeanisation of media discourse (de Vreese et al., 2001 ; Meyer, 2002; Trenz, 2002; van de Steeg 2002; Hagen, 2003; Klein et al., 2003; Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2003; Koopmans, 2004a; Koopmans, 2004b; Eriksen, 2005; Peters et al., 2005; Latzer and Sauerwein, 2006; Langenbucher and Latzer, 2006; Liebert, 2007; Sifft et al., 2007; Vetters et al., 2009). Research from this field has aimed to establish whether deeper economic and political integration has coincided with the 'synchronisation' or convergence of domestic public discourses and prompted the emergence of a EU public space (Meyer, 2007). Interestingly, studies have drawn a distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' Europeanisation (Koopmans, 2004a; Sifft et al., 2007). The first refers to the intensification of cross-national or transnational debates. The 'strictness' of the requirements for 'horizontal Europeanisation' varies significantly. At 'base-level' we find the idea that topics should be covered at the same time, in more than one member state and with similar frames of reference (Eder and Kanter, 2000). Others have added that some form of 'discursive interaction' must also be present (van de Steeg, 2002), whilst scholars like Tobler have added that different domestic debates should also be characterised by 'reciprocal resonance structures' before they can 'qualify' as Europeanised public debates (in Meyer, 2007:6). On the other hand, the criteria for 'vertical' Europeanisation are somewhat more straightforward. Measuring the degree of 'EU-isation' typically consists of establishing the frequency with which European issues infiltrate domestic media agendas, as well as assessing their prominence or positioning within news programmes.

Empirical evidence exists to support the existence of both 'types' of Europeanisation. However, recent findings suggest that, whilst early signs of increasing transnational coverage were observed in certain circumstances (Tobler, 2001; van de Steeg, 2004; Wimmel, 2004), the degree of 'horizontal'

Europeanisation remains weak (Koopmans, 2004b; Peters et al., 2005).[4] With regard to 'vertical' EU-sation, aggregate-level data are comparatively more optimistic and highlight a longitudinal increase in the coverage of EU topics by the national media.[5] Recent years have in fact seen an rise in the number of newspaper articles referring to European institutions (Koopmans, 2004b; Peters et al., 2005) as well as a rise in the coverage of EU politics in general (Peters et al., 2005).[6]

Despite these early signs of Europeanisation, it is fair to say that at the start of this research news selection criteria were still largely dictated by domestic agendas. Whilst the increase in 'vertical' Europeanisation matching a rise in the number of EU competencies is certainly worth noting, it is still rare to come across 'horizontal' European debates that occur simultaneously across national borders and with similar frames of reference. This thesis is interested in those exceptional cases, and hopes to further our understanding of the conditions under which this might occur.

1.3 The Mass Media and the EU Political Process

The European Union is affected by a number of pressing challenges. As discussed, the absence of a stable flow of communication about European affairs could be widening the gap between citizens and their representatives in Brussels, creating a 'disconnect' between the national and European levels, and fuelling popular disengagement from the EU political process. Many scholars have called for the consolidation of a public sphere where debate and communication can occur on a regular basis (Bijsmans, 2007). In the absence of a single pan-European media system, research has looked has looked for a network of closely related and potentially Europeanised national public spheres

4 One exception has been found in the coverage of reform and policy effectiveness, where an increase in cross-national comparisons of the economic performance of different member states was observed (Meyer, 2005).

5 As underlined by Christoph Meyer (2007), the fact that the number of Brussels-based correspondents has more than doubled between 1990 and 2002 testifies to the increasing importance and prominence of EU news in domestic media agendas.

6 Whilst writing this thesis, a number of studies concerned with the emergence of a European public sphere have also focused on both the negotiation and ratification stages of the constitutional process (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Garry et al., 2006; Kurpas, 2007; Liebert, 2007; Maatsch, 2007). Their findings will be considered and discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the dissertation.

(Michailidou, 2008). The national media remain a key player in this network, acting as the vehicle of the public sphere. The idea that the media have a crucial role to play in the democratic political process is not a new development. This section will attempt to provide a brief overview of the core functions of the mass media, focusing on their role as agents of democracy and as potential agenda-setters. It will also touch upon their potential impact on electoral behaviour, and on the emergence of a European identity.

1.3.1 *Agents of democracy*

Public scrutiny and debate are fundamental aspects of functioning liberal democracies. At present, much of this debate still occurs through the mass media, making them the locus of the public sphere. The media are often perceived as the connective tissue of democracy (Mughan and Gunther, 2003). They have the power to confer political legitimacy to a polity by ensuring a stable and continuous flow of communication between citizens and their representatives (Benz and Papadopoulos, 2006; Bijsmans, 2007). Normatively speaking, the media are expected to fulfil a number of functions in the public sphere (Van Cuilenburg, 1993 in Bijsmans, 2007). First, they should serve an information-function, providing citizens with details about the formulation and implementation of public policy. Second, they are expected to carry out an expression function, reflecting the latest opinions within societies. Third, they are responsible for the provision of commentary, analysis and criticism of government policy.

Political communication scholars have proposed similar conceptions of the news media's role in representative democracies. The media should serve as a 'civic forum encouraging pluralistic debates about public affairs, as a watchdog against the abuse of power, and as a mobilizing agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process' (Norris, 2000:12). The importance of the news media also lies in its contribution to 'self-government' (Zaller, 2003). Citizens' ability to access independent political information affects their political behaviour and, consequently, the overall quality of the democratic system. Conversely, a lack of political information in the news may prevent citizens from performing their role in democracies. This is not to say that citizens necessarily form an

opinion on every single issue presented to them in the news. However, information published in the mass media coupled with discussions with friends, family, co-workers and other individuals with whom they share similar interests allows them to obtain the information they need to perform their civic duties at 'minimal cost' (Downs, 1957 in Zaller, 2003: 109-130).

It is hard to dispute that the media have an important role to play in the democratic political process. However, does all news have the same democratising value or potential? Does the quality of information have a role to play in this respect? Most importantly, how is quality assessed? In 'A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen', Zaller defines news quality on the basis of whether it provides a 'sufficiently rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work' (2003:111). Zaller also outlines three indicators of news quality: the informational needs of self-governance; feasibility; and critical potential. The first and most important criterion refers to the ability of a piece of news to provide citizens with the information they need to fulfil their civic and democratic responsibilities. The second criterion is based on the notion of proportionality. This suggests that there is little point in 'setting the bar' for standards of news quality so high that fulfilling it would require more than the available resources, or more than citizens are prepared to give (Zaller, 2003). Finally, critical potential refers to news quality standards that present both strengths and weaknesses, so as to constantly create new ideas about ways to improve it. In recent years, some commentators have offered the view that the media should communicate to the public in the manner of an attention-getting 'burglar alarm', alerting audiences about acute problems, rather than acting as 'police patrols' over vast areas that pose no immediate problem (Zaller, 2003). This approach, however, might not be suited to the EU where a more stable flow of information would be desirable.

It is also interesting to note that pessimistic commentators often attribute the malfunctioning of the public sphere to declining media performance (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Changing patterns of news consumption and growing commercial pressures are said to be preventing the media from fulfilling its democratic duties. The intense competition among media outlets has resulted in an overemphasis on entertainment at the expense of public affairs (Bijsmans, 2007). New technologies

and commercial pressures have also led to an increase in what is known as 'soft' news. Critics have also pointed out that growing numbers of citizens in western democracies tend to perceive the news as another form of entertainment. Quality newspapers and televised news programmes have been trying to make the reporting of political news more interesting to the general public by mixing it with elements of entertainment.

Yet, others have argued that speaking of the 'downward erosion in the standards of serious journalism' is inaccurate (Norris, 2000). Instead, developments occurring during the 1980s and 1990s have led to a diversified marketplace, in which sensationalist publications like 'The Sun' are found at the same newsstand as 'The Economist' (Norris, 2000). Whilst a general increase in the amount of 'soft news' and 'infotainment' is hard to deny, it has been coupled with a rise in quality coverage and communication. Moreover, Norris (2000) argues that the share of European citizens reading newspapers on a daily basis has almost doubled, indicating that the consumption of news may be increasing. Another problem with the media malaise argument is the notion that access to such a wide range of sources might be dissuading citizens from wanting to learn about politics and being more civically active or trusting of political leaders. This interpretation may in fact be problematic in its presentation of the public as a passive actor in the naive stimulus-response model (Norris, 2000: 15-17).

1.3.2 *Setting the agenda?*

> 'The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about' (Cohen, 1963).[7]

For decades now, scholars and policy-makers have sought to understand the dynamics of public agendas to grasp their extraordinary volatility. Issues make it to the top of agendas with the same speed with which they are forgotten. Every day, citizens are exposed to a wide range of messages on 'hot' political questions such as immigration, terrorism, elections, war and scandals. The only contact

[7] In McCombs et al. (1972): 176.

many citizens have with politics is through the mass media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This has prompted much enquiry into the precise role of the media in shaping political agendas, and opinions on the matter vary significantly.[8]

Ever since 1992 when Walter Lippman argued that that changes in public political agendas depended on transformations in the media's agenda, the 'agenda-setting' hypothesis has been refined and tested by a large number of scholars. Early studies concluded that television news is indeed a powerful tool, and that its influence is particularly strong within the least educated sectors of society (McCombs, 1976). Studies have also suggested that the mass media have the power to shape public agendas in a unidirectional manner (Behr and Iyengar, 1985). Similarly, others have argued that the press may be particularly powerful in influencing public perceptions (Benton and Frazier, 1976).

Overall, agenda-setting scholars generally agree that the extent to which the public is interested in political issues may be largely dependent on the amount of attention the media devote to such matters. In other words, the larger the number of newspaper articles and the greater the airtime devoted to specific issues, the more likely it is that the public will take an interest in them. Through their selection and presentation of news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political realities. Audiences do not only learn *about* issues, but also how much importance to attach to those issues from the information in a news story and its position (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The length, density, layout, headline size, and position of stories in newspapers and TV programmes are in fact indicative of their salience (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). In other words the longer and better placed a story, the greater its salience and, consequently, its potential effects on public opinion.

The extent of the media's power of persuasion was also explained by a second wave of studies dealing with agenda-setting, priming, and framing effects (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982; Iyengar 1990;

[8] There are more than 400 empirical studies conducted both during political campaigns and at other less salient times demonstrating a causal relationship between the media's agenda and public agendas. See McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 36.

Zaller, 1992; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez Escobar and Rey, 1997). However, while the empirical evidence from these works has indeed confirmed that the media have the potential to alter public agendas, attitudes and behaviour, one must bear in mind that the relationship between the media and their audiences in not unidirectional. The public has in fact a key role to play in shaping the content of news programmes. This trend might be accentuated by growing commercial pressures. News outlets are in fact increasingly concerned with publishing stories that their audiences will have an interest in – thereby increasing sales and ratings.

This short section has attempted to highlight one of the reasons why studying the content of news is important. Over the past decades, it has become increasingly clear that the news media have a key role to play in the political process, conferring legitimacy to institutions and providing citizens with information to fulfil their civic duties. While the relationship between the public and the mass media is not unidirectional, the role of information on public opinion and political behaviour is crucial and should be kept in mind.

1.3.3 *Fostering a common European identity*

Aside from playing a key role in the democratic process, potentially shaping voters' opinions and public agendas, the mass media can play a role in consolidating political identities. Early studies have looked at the effects of the media on national cultural identity (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1993). Gellner in particular conceptualised the media as 'boundary makers', affecting national and regional identities through the use of a common language and telling stories through movies, fiction and programmes with clear cultural references (1983). Yet, it was not until later that scholarly attention turned to the role of the news in affecting viewers' sense of cultural identification by discussing world events through a national perspective (Kevin, 2003). Moreover, the media may also actively engage with national culture by deciding how much and what kind of attention to devote to issues such as elections, state functions and ceremonies, major sporting events and so forth (McQuail, 1992). Furthermore, there is now empirical evidence to suggest that that being exposed to the messages of

the mass media can influence individuals' sense of party identification (Evans and Norris, 1999; Norris, 1999). Recent years have seen the development of new theories of identity connections which started to consider the possibility of multiple levels of identity. This led to the realisation that citizens could simultaneously identify with several communities (Duchesne and Frognier, 1995; Herrmann et al., 2004; Risse, 2004; Bruter, 2005). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that the exposure to good and bad news about Europe can affect citizens' levels of European identity (Bruter, 2005; 2009).[9]

The relationship between the mass media and the development of a European identity is important and relevant to the scope of this study for several reasons. The consolidation of a shared sense of identity is considered crucial to the emergence of a European 'demos' (Warleigh, 2004) which in turn is seen as a key pre-requisite for the legitimacy of the EU political order. This research is not directly concerned with studying the effects of media messages on the emerging European identity. As discussed above, this complex relationship has been examined in a number of recent studies. However, the salience of this topic and the fact that media messages have such an important role to play in shaping peoples' sense of civic and cultural identities (Bruter, 2003; 2005) provide an additional reason to study the content of news about Europe and try to identify the key 'ingredients' for increased coverage and debate.

1.3.4 *Covering Europe: current trends and challenges*

Europe's ongoing legitimacy crisis, coupled with low levels of electoral turnout and popular apathy have contributed to bringing the communicative aspects of European integration to the forefront of political communication research agendas. This has resulted in a number of studies dealing with the coverage of the European Union by the mass media. Research on this topic has identified three key trends or patterns. Firstly, the visibility of the EU in the news is low and irregular. Secondly, coverage

[9] It is important to note that the mass media are not the only source of political communication which, in practice, originates from the interaction between the media, institutions and other political actors. On the other hand, however, one must bear in mind that newspapers and television remain citizens' main sources of information about the European Union. Therefore, without exaggerating the role of the mass media, their importance in communicating Europe should be kept in mind.

of EU affairs is mostly negative. Finally, EU issues tend to be framed from a predominantly national perspective.

Visibility. In spite of its growing political importance, the European Union still struggles to place itself in the media's spotlight (Meyer, 1999; Gavin, 2000; Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2002). EU stories are seldom visible in the main evening television news and, generally speaking, the Europeanisation of national television news does not appear to be as advanced as that of the economic or political arenas (Peter, Semetko and de Vreese, 2003). The tendency of EU affairs to enter and vanish periodically from news agendas is widely recognised (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Scholars have also commented on the cyclical nature of EU news, which tends to peak mostly during key summits or events (Norris, 2000). For instance, a well-known study on the 1979 EP elections (Siune, 1983) showed that EU 'topics' did not enter television agendas until the start of the actual campaign. Even when they eventually did, coverage remained dominated by economic and domestic considerations.

Subsequent studies (Leroy and Siune, 1994) also found that by the second European elections of 1984, the 'novelty' of the event appeared to have 'worn off' (de Vreese, 2003), resulting in limited coverage of the campaign (Leroy and Siune, 1994). This has prompted scholars to talk about the 'invisible importance of EU affairs' (Peter, Semetko, and de Vreese 2003). Their data have in fact suggested that while EU stories were not necessarily longer than political stories, they were given a more prominent position within newspapers. This indicates a paradox, whereby EU issues are given less journalistic attention than political stories in spite of the fact that their prominent placing shows that they are perceived as important.

Domesticity. The second set of findings relating to news coverage of EU affairs has to do with the focus of coverage on domestic rather than European issues. The claim that domestic rather than EU-level stakes still dominate EU news stems primarily from the study of EP election campaigns. Since Rief and Schmitt (1980) suggested that EU elections are not about European issues but about national ones, the second-order election model has been tested and supported by a number of studies (see Marsh, 1998;

Oppenhuis, van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Building on this model, it has recently been shown that the media's presentation of the 2004 EP elections may be perceived as the 'second-rate' coverage of a 'second-order' event (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). In practice this means that news outlets devoted little attention to the campaign, and did so from a predominantly domestic perspective. The actors appearing in news coverage were largely domestic, as were the locations of coverage. This is consistent with earlier findings which had also shown that journalists covering EU issues referred far more frequently to their own country than to other member states and EU institutions (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; de Vreese 2003). Empirical evidence also indicates that the EU topics covered most frequently by the mass media have to do with the economic and political impact of integration on domestic politics (Goddard et al., 1998).

Bad news. Another key feature of European media coverage concerns the presentation of the EU in negative terms. Recent studies have in fact demonstrated that the tone of coverage tends to be neutral or slightly negative (Gerhards, 2000; Norris, 2000; de Vreese 2001a; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Interestingly, the tone of news does not appear to be correlated with member states' level of support for the European Union. For instance, during the 1999 EP elections, the tone of coverage was more negative in France and the Netherlands, which have historically been amongst the most pro-European member states (Peter, Semetko and de Vreese, 2003). Earlier analyses have suggested that this trend might be explained by the media's overall preference for negative news, used systematically to discredit political actors (Kepplinger 1998). Research has also highlighted the role of conflict as a key news-selection criterion (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1997). To this day, conflict frames have remained a major feature of EU coverage (Norris, 2000; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; de Vreese, 2002; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005).

1.4 Summarising the Conceptual Framework of the Dissertation

This Chapter has introduced some of the key concepts relevant to the study of European political communication and to the scope of this dissertation in particular. It has also tried to highlight the

importance of studying the media's coverage of European affairs. While doing so, it has reviewed the most recent thinking on a number of issues which serve as the theoretical backbone of this thesis. At first glance, some of the topics discussed in this Chapter might seem only loosely related. A closer look, however, reveals that the issues are closely connected. The 'picture' may be briefly summarised as follows.

The European Union is currently suffering from a communication deficit, which is part of the ongoing legitimacy crisis it has been experiencing. In both academic and policy-making circles it has become widely accepted that there needs to be more debate and communication about Europe. Increased debate would give citizens more opportunities to take part in the EU political process, and might help to consolidate emerging feelings of European identity. Given the absence of a pan-European media system, such discourse can be expected to take place within domestic public spheres, with national media outlets serving as its main vehicles. This is not a new concept. As discussed, the mass media are often portrayed as agents of democracy and, in this case, may even be seen as agents of Europeanisation. As mentioned earlier in the Chapter, the media's messages also have a key role to play in shaping public attitudes, behaviour, as well as citizens' sense of cultural and civic identification.

Despite their crucial function, however, the mass media seem to be rarely interested in covering European affairs. As suggested by previous empirical work, EU issues struggle to capture the media's attention, periodically entering and vanishing from volatile media agendas. In other words, EU politics generally fail to excite and are widely regarded as low-salience. Recent analyses have also suggested that when they are covered, EU issues are often framed as second-order national questions, with emphasis placed on domestic rather than EU-level considerations. In recent years it has also emerged that EU news seems to be presented predominantly in negative terms, particularly in member states with stronger Eurosceptic traditions. In light of these considerations, it has become clear that more coverage and debate about Europe in the mass media would be highly desirable, and a crucial step towards addressing the current communication deficit and legitimacy crisis. Section 1.5 will discuss

the focus of the thesis and its research questions. In doing so, it will explain this dissertation's choice to focus on the role of referendums in stimulating news coverage and debate about European affairs.

1.5 Focus of the Dissertation

1.5.1 *Referendums*

As discussed, European citizens may take part in the EU democratic process in several ways. At least in theory, they have opportunities to participate in EU political life through public debate (in the public sphere) as well as rallies, petitions and protests. Yet, electoral participation remains the most obvious channel for citizen engagement. Referendums are the direct democratic instrument 'par excellence', and are often presented as a means for improving the European Union's democratic track record. Unlike European elections – notorious for their lack of civic engagement, referendums may have the power to mobilise electorates and increase citizen participation in EU politics (de Vreese, 2007). This study focuses on referendums rather than other democratic 'occasions' such as EP elections for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because European elections have been the subject of a large number of studies in recent years. Secondly, because they are perceived as 'second' rather than 'first order' affairs, European elections rarely manage to generate EU-focused coverage. Referendums, on the other hand, have been the subject of fewer investigations. Moreover, because of their mobilising potential, referendum campaigns may be treated differently by the mass media, and could succeed in stimulating EU debates in the news. Last but not least, the fact that referendums on the European Constitution were held in some member states but not in others provided the ideal context for a 'natural experiment' of sorts. More specifically, it allowed me to study the possible differences in coverage between 'referendum' and 'non referendum' countries and as well as the variations observed before and during referendum campaigns.

The use of referendums is not a new phenomenon. In recent years, several referendums on EU integration have been held in individual member states on issues ranging from the reform of existing

Treaties, to the adoption of the single currency or enlargement.[10] Given that they are the most obvious way for citizens to express their satisfaction with the European Union, referendums are closely linked with European democratic governance. Their advocates have called for EU-wide advisory referendums to be held on the same day as EP elections as a means of increasing the visibility of European issues in the public sphere (Meyer, 1998; Schmitter, 2000).

This is not to say that the use of referendums cannot be problematic at times. One obvious challenge lies in the outcome of the vote. Out of the 33 referendums held between 1972 and 2005 on 'European' issues, 10 were rejected. While this figure amounts to less than one-third, the effects of a 'No' vote can often have drastic consequences for the course of European integration. The French and Dutch rejections of the Constitution in 2005 were one such example. The outcome of the two votes plunged the European Union into a deep political crisis, marking the beginning of a two-year period of reflection. On the positive side, however, these events have led to the realisation that European integration could no longer advance as a purely elite-driven process. Obtaining popular consent on its key milestones now seems to be more important than in the previous decades.

Having said this, referendums have numerous critics and have been described as 'crude and ineffectual mechanisms for expressing citizens' preferences on EU policy issues' (Hix, 2008: 11). What is really missing, it is claimed, is a more open debate about Europe, establishing a stronger link between citizens and the EU political process. Arguably, however, the real value-added of referendums lies precisely in the stimulation of communication and debate through increased citizen engagement. For instance, in the case of the European Constitution, media coverage and public interest rose during both the French and the Dutch campaigns (Schuck and de Vreese, 2006).

[10] It must also be said that not all referendums are 'born equal'. In other words, generalisations about them might be misplaced because of the different procedures and diverse political contexts in which they occur. Different typologies of referendums have been developed. The most useful one for the purpose of this study is perhaps Roberts-Thomson's (2001) classification of possible EU referendums (in Bijsmans, 2007). These are: non-treaty referendums (i.e. accession, special purposes and withdrawal); quasi-treaty referendums (i.e. on specific treaty provisions such as economic and monetary matters) and treaty referendums dealing, as the name suggests, with the ratification of European treaties.

In recent years, debates surrounding EU referendums have caught the attention of many political scientists and scholars of political communication. This is because political information plays a vital role in referendum campaigns. As discussed in Section 1.4.2, the availability and presentation of information may affect public attitudes and under certain circumstances voting behaviour and turnout (Zaller, 2002).[11] Drawing on evidence from the field of political psychology, studies have shown that by allowing individuals to become more certain of their opinions, political information reduces attitude uncertainty. Consequently, the amount of information available to individual voters is responsible for shaping the attitude-behaviour relationship in EU referendums (Hobolt, 2005). More specifically, voters' exposure to political information may determine the relative importance of individual attitudes at voting time.[12] There is also evidence to suggest that political learning and behaviour are dependent on the salience of a given issue within public debates (Franklin and Wlezien, 1997; Nicholson, 2003). Similarly, it has been shown that the effects of elite-cues are weaker in referendums, increasing the role of political information in the campaign (Le Duc, 2000). Moreover, there are data indicating that voters are more likely to make competent voting decisions based on their attitudes towards EU integration when referendum campaigns are more intense (Hobolt, 2005: 105).

This thesis focuses on the effects of referendums on media coverage for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because referendums are a direct manifestation of civic consciousness and engagement. In fact, they represent one of the few opportunities for citizens to have a direct say on the course of European integration. Secondly, referendums usually see the polarisation of political elites mobilising in favour or against a given measure. As discussed earlier in the Chapter, increased political competition on EU issues may be seen as a potential solution to some of Europe's current challenges. Most of the time, however, political bargaining and negotiations take place in Brussels at the ministerial level, behind closed doors. This means that opportunities for the public to witness or take part in political debates about European issues are currently scarce. Given referendums' potential role

[11] These so-called 'circumstances may vary significantly and can include individuals' value predispositions, to pre-existing preferences, degree or patterns of socialisation, as well as people's prior knowledge about the issues at stake.

[12] See Hobolt, 2005:87-88 for a detailed description of her model of decision-making in EU referendums.

in combating the popular apathy surrounding European affairs, and the importance of information in referendum campaigns, it seems interesting to test whether and how the decision to hold a referendum might affect the volume and nature of political debates in the mass media.

1.5.2 *The European constitutional process*

The European constitutional process was selected as the central focus of this thesis for several reasons. First and foremost, for its symbolic meaning and importance for the process of European integration. After months of fierce intergovernmental bargaining, European Heads of State eventually reached agreement on and signed the 'Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe'. The proposed European Constitution was intended to bring Europe 'closer to its citizens'. Its central aim was to lead the 'peoples of Europe . . . to be united even more closely to . . .forge a common destiny'.[13] From an institutional perspective, it was meant to increase the transparency of the EU, and generally simplify its decision-making process. Most importantly, its architects had hoped that the start of the convention process might see academics, analysts, citizens, members of the press and policy makers engaging in a debate on the 'Future of the Union'. The second reason for focusing on the European Constitution is that it provides an interesting benchmark for the study of EU political communication. Existing studies on EU media coverage have focused predominantly on European Parliament elections. It is therefore interesting to see whether similar patterns of coverage can be observed in a different context.

The third reason is that unlike EP election studies, which tend to deal with the two or three weeks preceding a single, isolated event, this thesis is concerned with a longer timeframe, enabling the study of contents over an extended period of time. The fact that the constitutional process took place over nearly three years allows us to consider changes in coverage over time. For instance, it lends itself to the comparative analysis of news published during the intergovernmental, signature and ratification stages, allowing us to establish how the flow and quality of communication changed during each of the

[13] Preamble, 'Draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe'.

key milestones. Analysing the media's coverage of the Constitutional process is important not just because it tells us about the themes and actors featuring in public debates; it is also important from a normative democratic perspective. It may in fact be argued that without some degree of cross-national debate or the presence of transnational issues or actors within the domestic public spheres, the legitimacy of the Constitution would be questioned (Meyer, 2007).

Last but not least, the adoption of different instruments of ratification results in different political contexts. The choice of parliamentary ratification versus referendum lends itself to more interesting cross-national comparisons. Most importantly, it allows us to study the extent to which citizen involvement affected political communication on this issue. Finally, existing studies have already highlighted the volatility of EU affairs, and their tendency to enter and vanish from media agendas very quickly. While the relative invisibility of EU affairs is in itself an interesting finding, it was felt that the purpose of this study would be better served by focusing on an issue that was likely to generate at least some interest and debate within the media and the public. The European constitutional project was considered important enough to generate coverage and debate, whilst distant enough for citizens to have to rely on the media for information on it.

1.6 The Overarching Research Question

The main research question that the study proposes to answer is: *did the presence of a referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) affect the media's coverage of the issue? If so, in what way?* In answering this multifaceted question, the study looks at both communication 'outputs' by means of a media analysis, and communication 'engineering' through interviews with Brussels-based correspondents. Doing so might not only contribute to our knowledge of the way the news media cover Europe, but also further our understanding of the 'drivers' of EU coverage. As discussed throughout the Chapter, this is important for several reasons. First, we know that Europe is currently affected by a growing communication deficit and a general sense of 'disconnect' between citizens and their representatives. Thus, the need for a European public sphere is clearer than ever before.

Because the national media are the main source of news about Europe and should serve as a bridge between citizens and the EU political process, it seems important to understand the mechanisms that affect the way in which they cover Europe. Given how difficult it is for the EU to enter the media's spotlight, a better understanding of how and when this may occur appears to be critically important.

While scholarly attention in recent years has turned to the dynamics of referendum campaigns, and to the effects of information on voting behaviour in European referendums, it seems interesting to draw on existing evidence from this emerging field to study their communicative aspects. Thus, the thesis examines whether these instruments of direct democracy affected news coverage of the EU Constitution, stimulating a debate about Europe.

This research studies the press' coverage of the EU constitutional process in France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected primarily because France and Spain held a referendum on the ratification of the European Constitutional Treaty, while Italy and the UK did not. The aim was to examine the cross-national differences in coverage across the four member states. Bearing in mind the importance of political communication for European democracy, did holding a referendum change the way the press presented the European Constitution? Were the volume, format, and focus of coverage affected by the campaign? Did articles become more polarised at referendum time? How were the two referendums covered both at home and abroad? Can any similarities be observed across the four public spheres?

Aside from cross-national variations, the analysis considers how coverage changed over time, looking at changes in the news over five key timeframes of the constitutional process. Most importantly, it measures any changes in coverage at referendum time. Last but not least, the study turns to the more idiosyncratic analysis of variations across media-outlets. Was coverage of the ECT different in left and light-leaning newspapers? Was the left-wing press more supportive of the Treaty? In order to answer these questions, this multi-method study relies on the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of newspaper coverage, as well as interviews with Brussels correspondents.

1.7 Plan of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. This introductory Chapter has hopefully 'set the scene' for this study, explaining the importance of increased communication and debate for the future of European democracy and the legitimacy of the EU political system. It has also touched upon the role of the media in the political process, describing their function as potential agents of Europeanisation. Finally, it has discussed the challenge of communicating Europe. Last but not least, it has talked about referendums and the European Constitutional process as the central case-study of the dissertation, and concluded with the study's research questions. Chapter 2, on the other hand, draws on the existing literature to develop a model explaining the effects of referendums on EU media coverage, highlighting the study's contribution to the political communication research agenda. The model discusses how referendums can influence news coverage through two main 'channels': first, by linking the European and domestic levels and secondly, by creating opportunities for the polarisation of political elites. The Chapter ends with a series of hypothesis to be tested in the empirical part of the thesis. Chapter 3 begins by presenting the data used to test these hypotheses, justifying the selection of countries, timeframes and newspapers included in the sample. The Chapter also discusses the advantages of mixed-method research designs, and describes the procedural steps undertaken during the content analysis and interview stages. Finally, Chapter 3 will go through the operationalisation of the theoretical variables developed in Chapter 2.

The empirical section of the thesis begins with Chapter 4, which presents the results of in-depth interviews with Brussels correspondents. This Chapter is concerned with understanding the perspective of Brussels correspondents covering the European Constitutional process. More specifically, it aims to present their views on the challenges of covering Europe, the pre-requisites for a more regular debate, and on the role played by referendums in helping achieve a greater flow of information about European affairs. By focusing on these three points, the Chapter hopes to achieve two main objectives. First, it qualitatively tests the proposition developed in Chapter 2 that referendums can affect the volume, format and focus of coverage, leading to a European public sphere. Secondly, it serves a theory-building purpose, assessing the plausibility of the study's theoretical

framework. More specifically, it helps to test the validity of the claim that referendums may affect press coverage by a) linking the European and domestic levels and b) polarising national political spectrums.

Chapter 5 begins by considering the effects of referendums on domestic coverage of the European Constitution, testing the hypotheses developed in the theoretical part of this thesis. Moreover, the Chapter seeks to establish whether the personal views and impressions of Brussels correspondents reported in Chapter 4 'fit' with the reality of coverage observed during the course of this study. The aim of the Chapter is to measure whether the presence of a referendum affected the press' coverage of the Constitutional Treaty, domestically. The Chapter is structured as follows. Section 5.1 begins by looking at the extent of elite polarisation on the Constitution across the four countries, although particular emphasis is placed on the French and Spanish campaigns. Section 5.2 will examine any variations in the structure of different newspapers at referendum time. The third, core, section presents the results of the content analysis, discussing variations in the volume, format and focus of coverage.

Chapter 6, on the other hand, will consider the emergence of a transnational or European public sphere at referendum time. In order to do so, it compares the effects of two different campaigns on news coverage of the Constitution in other member states. The Chapter starts with a section presenting quantitative, descriptive evidence, followed by qualitative evidence to corroborate these findings and provide practical illustrations of the nature and focus of media debates. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with a summary of the main findings of this dissertation, discussing their implications for EU political communication, democracy and legitimacy – highlighting avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2 - REFERENDUMS AND EU NEWS COVERAGE: A THEORETICAL MODEL

As discussed in Chapter 1, debates on European integration are essential for the democratisation and legitimisation of the European Union. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the ongoing communication deficit is fuelling popular disengagement with the EU political process. Improving communication flows about the European political process appears more pressing than ever, and might facilitate the necessary shift from output-oriented or elite-driven legitimacy to input legitimacy reflecting the will of the people (Lepsius, 1999; Adam, 2007). As outlined, these exchanges should occur through the consolidation of mediated space for debate and communication on European affairs – also known as a public sphere. This, it is argued, would provide citizens with opportunities to engage with the EU 'project' (Statham, 2007). Along with political parties and institutions, the mass media are one of the main actors in the public sphere, and should act as a bridge between citizens and the EU political process. Yet, EU policies, actors and institutions generally struggle to capture the media's attention (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2001a; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). EU politics are rarely perceived as 'sexy' or 'glamorous' enough to stimulate regular news coverage. This trend is worrying given that television programmes and newspapers are citizens' primary source of information about Europe.

These challenges are significant. Yet, the situation is not all 'doom and gloom'. There are in fact times at which European issues become very salient indeed, attracting the media's attention and sparking lively public debates. One such example was the French referendum on the European Constitution. The referendum of 29 May 2005 was preceded by weeks of intense campaigning. It also generated a lot of popular interest, with more than 200 000 copies of the Treaty sold in only four months.[14] The case of the French referendum is not an isolated example. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is in fact evidence to suggest that referendums may help to reduce popular apathy (de Vreese, 2007). Their potential impact in this respect is reflected in higher levels of voter turnout compared to European

[14] BBC News, 1 April 2005. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4401103.stm.

elections. Whilst some evidence exists which suggests that media coverage and public interest might increase at referendum time (Schuck and de Vreese, 2006), little is known about the effects of referendum campaigns on media coverage. Most of the literature on referendums focuses on campaign dynamics or the effects of information on voting behaviour and outcomes. While on the basis of these studies it seems plausible to assume that intense campaigns might substantially alter the volume, format and content of news programmes, these claims have yet to be systematically tested.

This Chapter develops a model explaining how referendums can affect media coverage of European affairs. The theory predicts that the presence of a referendum increases the salience of EU issues through two key channels. First, by bridging the gap between the European and domestic levels, increasing the relevance of the issue for national publics. Second, by providing opportunities for the polarisation of national political elites. These two factors raise the saliency of EU issues, affecting the way they are covered, domestically. In cases where the degree of polarisation is high and the likelihood of a crisis heightened, referendums can also be expected to affect coverage beyond the national level, leading to the emergence of a transnational public sphere. This Chapter elaborates on these mechanisms explaining why and how each might have an effect on the volume and nature of news coverage. The Chapter is organised into three sections. Section 2.1 talks about the role played by referendums in the process of European integration. Section 2.2 discusses why they might be expected to stimulate European debates, both domestically and transnationally. Section 2.3 develops a series of testable hypotheses and introduces the study's key variables. Finally, Section 2.4 concludes with a brief summary of the study's theoretical framework and expectations, linking them to the remaining parts of the dissertation.

2.1 Referendums and European Integration

Referendums have played an important role in the history of European integration. These instruments of direct democracy have been used 36 times since 1972, determining EC membership (Denmark, 1972 and Britain in 1975), the ratification of the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice treaties in several

member states and, more recently, the ratification of the EU Constitutional Treaty (ECT) in 2005 and that of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 and 2009. Often considered the more 'democratic choice', referendums are known for their potential to increase citizens' engagement with EU politics (de Vreese, 2007). Empirically, this is reflected in the fact that levels of voter turnout are often higher during referendums than during European Parliament elections. In addition to these considerations, there is evidence to suggest that, unlike European elections, referendums on European integration are not necessarily 'second-order' affairs. In situations where the issue is salient and the political spectrum polarised, referendums may be seen as 'first-order' events (Hobolt, 2005; Glencross and Trechsel 2007).

As discussed in Chapter 1, a key symptom of the current democratic malaise is the growing distance between citizens and the EU, which results in their disengagement from political life. It is often said that citizens feel a sense of political powerlessness, which European elections alone are not able to redress (LeDuc, 2003). In an attempt to address these concerns, scholars and policy-makers have called for more regular referendums as a complement to the existing democratic apparatus. The use of referendums has become popular in recent years due to the realisation that the historically elite-driven process of European integration can no longer advance without the people's consent. [15]

Referendums, however, have as many critics as they do supporters. As mentioned, they have been described as 'crude' and 'ineffectual' mechanisms for deciding the course of European integration (Hix, 2008). Referendums are often perceived as poor indicators of public sentiment, particularly when it comes to low salience issues (Moravcsik, 2008). The standard claims against referendums are as follows. First, direct democracy is said to be problematic because it reduces complex issues to simple 'Yes' or 'No' questions. While the idea behind this is to answer important questions as clearly and as speedily as possible, the outcomes of EU referendums often give rise to more doubts and ambiguity than they actually manage to resolve. Citizens might well have their say, but their message is often

[15] One must not forget that the use of referendums on European issues such as the ratification of EU Treaties might also be due to domestic legal provisions. See Suksi, 1993 in LeDuc, 2003 for an overview of the different types of referendums.

unclear. A recent example of this paradoxical mechanism is provided by Irish voters' rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 and by the French and Dutch 'No' to the European Constitution in 2005. Commentators point out that when unsure about an issue or when lacking adequate knowledge, voting behaviour in referendums can be dictated by a 'Don't know? Vote No' attitude (Moravcsik, 2008). In essence, the risk is that citizens might vote 'No' simply because they are unsure of their preferences, or because they lack sufficient information to form an educated opinion. Moreover, referendums are sometimes accused of 'hijacking' European issues – triggering a mechanism whereby voters reject a given motion as a way of punishing domestic governments.

The mass media are one of the key actors in referendum campaigns, and often become the 'battleground' for the struggle between 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns. Recent studies have shown that news programmes may modify their format at referendum time, increasing, for instance, the amount of time devoted to the campaign (de Vreese, 2007). Moreover, earlier studies have suggested that the presence of a referendum can affect the balance of political reporting, with the media attempting to represent both the 'Yes' and 'No' camps (Semetko, 2003). Despite the increase in public attention which might occur at referendum time, media debates preceding the actual vote are sometimes accused of being off-topic, dealing with domestic and other more salient, peripheral concerns. The uncertainty regarding the quality of deliberation raises questions on whether voters are sufficiently informed to make decisions on complicated and often technical European matters.

The preliminary evidence available to us suggests that, despite their potential limits and risks, referendums could significantly affect the way we 'talk' about Europe. Yet, the extent of these effects and the conditions under which this might occur remain unclear. Existing research on referendums has focused predominantly on opinion formation and change (LeDuc, 2007; Marsh, 2007); strategic contexts (Hug, 2007); the effects of information on voting behaviour (Hobolt, 2005; 2007); political participation and turnout (Kriesi, 2007; Trechsel, 2006); as well as on explaining outcomes and vote choices at referendum time (de Vreese and Boomgarden, 2007; and Oscarsson, 2007). This dissertation is concerned with measuring whether scheduling a referendum affected newspaper

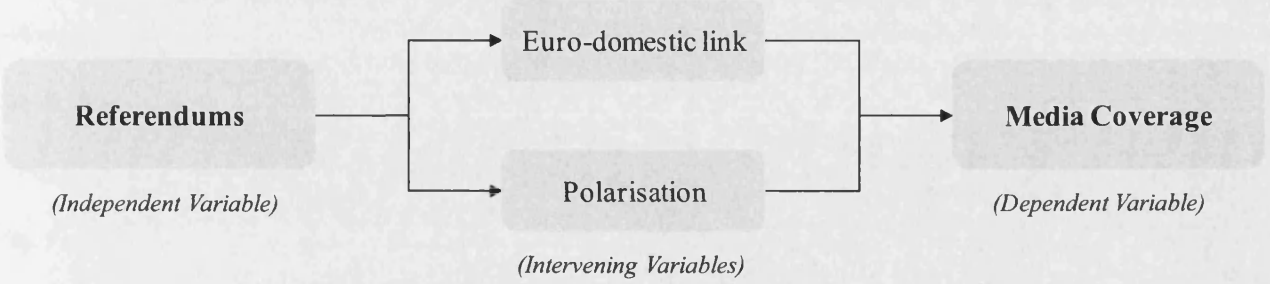
coverage of European affairs. If referendums are empirically shown to increase coverage and debate about Europe (rather than peripheral domestic issues), one might questions whether their benefits in terms of EU legitimacy and democracy could outweigh their intrinsic political risks. Section 2.2 will attempt to illustrate the mechanisms by which referendums are expected to affect EU media coverage. The theoretical validity of these assumptions will be tested empirically in Chapter 4, through a series of in-depth interviews with news correspondents working from Brussels.

2.2 Referendums, Issue Salience and News Coverage of the EU

Literature from the field of political communication has shown that relevance to the audience and conflict are two key news selection criteria (Schulz 1997). This principle applies to the European Union as well, where qualitative evidence has suggested that an obvious link to the nation-state must be present for the media to cover European affairs (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). The same study has also indicated that when they are covered EU issues tend to be framed predominantly in terms of conflict between political actors. Furthermore, well-known studies from the field of political communication have revealed the media's general preference for 'strategic framing' (Patterson, 1993; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), and their tendency to focus on 'horserace' or 'campaign trail' issues (Scammell, 2005: 205) rather than on more substantive matters. These trends provide further confirmation of the media's tendency to cover tensions amongst key political players.

The EU is commonly perceived as a consensus-seeking bureaucratic apparatus. This can be problematic, given that controversy and scandals typically increase the sale of newspapers. Despite the bargaining which takes place behind closed doors, the European Union is generally perceived as 'not political enough', which might explain why EU issues are low-salience and the media have few incentives to cover them on a regular basis (Hix, 2008). In this somewhat oversimplified picture, referendums may act as catalysts for EU coverage, raising the saliency or newsworthiness of European affairs (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Referendums and the Saliency of EU issues: Explaining EU Media Coverage



This research argues that referendums may affect newspaper coverage of European affairs through two key channels. First and foremost, by 'linking' the European and national dimensions. If relevance to national audiences plays a fundamental role in the selection of news, it seems plausible to assume that consulting citizens through a referendum might strengthen this link, making it more 'obvious' or apparent. This alone may offer the media additional reasons to cover EU issues more extensively. Secondly, referendum campaigns provide opportunities for elite polarisation and competition. As mentioned, the presence of conflict and disputes among political actors increases the 'news worthiness' of EU issues. Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that highly polarised referendum campaigns may be seen as particularly salient, thereby attracting more media coverage. These two 'variables' or 'mechanisms' are discussed in greater depth in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

2.2.1 *Bringing Europe home*

Newspapers would be short-lived if they were to be completely out of touch with their audiences. Growing commercial pressures and competition may result in more frequent editorial decisions to supply demand-driven news and analysis. Aside from their traditional 'watchdog' function newspapers write, first and foremost, for their audiences and with the interests of their readers at 'at heart'. As discussed, the perceived distance and complexity of the European Union has been used to explain its failure to attract news coverage on a more regular basis (Norris, 2000). Relevance to the audience, or presence of a link between the domestic and European levels appears to be the first prerequisite for EU news coverage. Initially argued by Schulz (1997) this point also seems to be supported by provisional empirical evidence which suggests that given that EU affairs are not

perceived as particularly newsworthy, a direct link to the nation-state might help to 'sell' a EU story (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005: 18). Other studies have also indicated that referendums may act as a bridge between EU level governance and European citizens (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004).

By directly consulting them, referendums bring EU citizens into the picture. The fact that citizens or readers are called upon to make a decision on a given issue makes it automatically relevant to them. When issues are relevant domestically they also become more salient. This, in turn, might be expected to increase the demand for EU news, making 'selling' a story to news editors 'at home' a less challenging task.[16] Through this mechanism, it may be argued that referendums reduce the perceived distance between the EU and national dimensions, increasing coverage in the news media.

Whilst crucial, the presence of a Euro-domestic link alone may not suffice to stimulate coverage of EU issues. In fact, one might argue that a majority of policies formulated in Brussels are directly relevant European citizens. Yet, only a small number of them become salient enough to 'make it in the news'. For this reason, this thesis argues that the second 'ingredient' of EU coverage is the presence of conflict between political actors, which might manifest itself at referendum time through the polarisation of political elites. The role of elite polarisation, along with its expected effects, is described in Section 2.2.2 below.

2.2.2 *Polarising political spectrums*

In recent years, it has become clearer that conflict and competition are important features of EU debates. It has in fact been suggested that the development of a EU political 'soap opera' by means of increased political competition at the EU level could act as a powerful media incentive (Hix, 2008). Despite their procedural differences, referendum campaigns resemble election campaigns in that they are 'real political contests in which money, organisation and the media all play an important role' (LeDuc, 2003: 189).

[16] As suggested by a recent study, news editors have a tendency to regard EU issues or events as being of secondary importance (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005: 228).

Existing research has also shown that when they are covered, EU issues tend to be framed in terms of conflict between political actors (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). This observation dovetails with subsequent findings, which indicate that the degree of elite polarization in EP elections may be a strong predictor of the volume of news coverage (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2005). In short, it appears that conflict and competition might stimulate the media's coverage of the EU.

Given that they are preceded by weeks of campaigning, with politicians mobilising in favour or against a proposal, referendum campaigns can be characterised by highly polarised political spectrums.[17] A polarised domestic political landscape sends out cues about the importance of issues. By deciding to mobilise, political elites determine the intensity of referendum campaigns and, consequently, levels of electoral turnout (Kriesi, 2007). If elites do not mobilise, citizens are less likely to participate – not because they lack a sense of civic duty, but because they are less aware of the stakes (Kriesi, 2007). A similar logic can apply to media coverage. When elites are not polarised, the issue is less salient and the media have fewer reasons to cover it. In other words, the time devoted by the media to a given topic is proportional to its salience (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). Moreover, it has been established that news selection criteria tend to be biased towards conflict rather than consensus (Schulz, 1997; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Consequently, it seems possible that a highly polarised or conflictual political landscape might affect the volume, format and focus of news.

This applies to domestic coverage. However, as mentioned at the start of this thesis, this research is also interested in establishing whether the presence of a referendum on the ECT affected the emergence of a European public sphere. There is in fact a growing body of literature suggesting that a transnational European discourse or public sphere might indeed be developing (Gerhards, 1992; Schlesinger, 1999; Koopmans and Statham, 2001; Eder and Trenz, 2003; Trenz, 2004; Statham, 2007).

[17] Superficially, one might argue that European Parliament elections could have the same effect. However, contrary to EP elections, referendums on European issues can be considered 'first' rather than 'second order' events. This has been shown by Glenncross and Trechsel (2007), who demonstrated that referendums on (the ECT) were not distorted by a 'veil' of domestic party politics.

However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the nature, 'locus' and prerequisites for such a space remain unclear. The current academic literature on the subject appears to be divided into two competing schools of thought: the 'federal' school and the 'regulatory' school. The first one is based on the assumption that the EU shares the fundamental characteristics of a polity. This justifies thinking about a public sphere in relation to the Union's institutions, and conceptualising it as a single space common to all member states (Gerhards, 2000). The second model based on a regulatory union of European nation-states points towards the Europeanisation of national public spheres. The latter draws on the idea that a European public sphere may be found at the national level, with news coverage becoming increasingly 'Europeanised' (Trenz, 2004). While empirical evidence exists to support both models, nation-state-based conceptualisations of the public sphere appear to be generally more resilient (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007).

If one views a public sphere as a space for the debate, analysis and criticism of a political system (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007), then a 'European' public sphere may be conceptualised as a figurative space where a debate *about Europe* can occur. The absence of a pan-EU media system makes the 'regulatory approach' more realistic. This means that a EU public sphere consists of several fragmented spaces defined by national boundaries (de Swaan, 2007). This thesis argues that whilst the national media remain the locus of communication about Europe; this does not preclude the emergence of a common debate on EU issues. In other words, the fact that the media in each country may adapt and interpret a given topic for their national audiences does not prevent the issue from being debated in more than one member state at the same time and with similar frames of reference. The term 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere may therefore be used to refer to this type of coverage (i.e. news coverage of the same issue by several member states, at the same time, and with similar focus). Having broadly defined what we mean by the term 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere, it must be noted that while salient EU issues are occasionally covered across member states, news selection criteria remain largely dictated by national media agendas.[18] It is therefore rare to come across genuine European debates that transcend national borders. This study is interested in

[18] See Eder and Kantner, 2000 on news coverage of the BSE ('foot and mouth') crisis.

those exceptional cases. Bearing in mind the theoretical considerations discussed above, the general expectation at the start of this research is that the degree of elite polarisation in referendum campaigns does not only affect the way the issues are covered domestically, but 'transnationally' as well.

Critics may question whether a situation where each country discusses the same issue separately really qualifies as a 'European' debate. While generally speaking a greater volume of coverage about Europe would be positive from the perspective of EU legitimacy and democracy, this research looks for the convergence of media debates, examining whether any of the arguments and issues present in one country also featured in others. For this reason, the study looks beyond the simple visibility of the issue, and considers the emergence of a EU public sphere at referendum time by looking at the visibility, the analytical capacity, the degree of polarisation, as well as the tone and focus of news. Moreover, it examines the focus of coverage to assess the convergence and Europeanisation of the four public spheres.

Why should elite polarisation in referendums affect the emergence of a EU public sphere? As argued above, polarisation may indeed be perceived as a form of conflict or disagreement among political actors. The notion that crises and conflicts hold significant news value is not a recent development. Earlier studies (Eder and Kantner, 2000) have found signs of a European public sphere emerging at times of conflict. Through a qualitative content analysis of national newspapers during the BSE ('foot and mouth') crisis, Eder and Kantner found evidence that the issue was communicated to national audiences in different member states not only at the same time but with similar frames of reference. This has prompted more recent enquiries into the role played by political crises in stimulating media debates, suggesting that conflict may increase the transparency of issues and actors across national borders (Berkel, 2004). The presence of conflict does not only hold significant news value, it also increases the need to communicate across borders to discuss possible solutions (Eder and Kantner,

2000).[19] Consequently, one could expect the event of a crisis induced by the possible rejection of a referendum to increase news coverage and debate across member states.

2.3 Hypotheses

In this thesis, I hope to show that through the polarisation of national political elites, and the domestication of EU issues, referendums can affect news coverage both domestically and trans-nationally. More specifically, this study tests how the presence of a referendum can influence the visibility, analytical capacity and focus of coverage along these two dimensions. Section 2.3.1 introduces the core hypotheses relating to the visibility of the Constitution. Section 2.3.2 discusses the study's expectations with respect to the degree of depth and analysis of coverage. Section 2.3.3 deals with the polarisation of articles. Section 2.3.4 deals with tone, whilst Sections 2.3.5 and 2.3.6 present my expectations with regards to the focus of coverage on a 'domestic versus European' and an 'economic versus political' scales.

2.3.1 *More visibility*

Each day, newspaper editors must select topics that are newsworthy and directly relevant to their readers. At times of growing commercial pressures, quality broadsheets might select a maximum of one or two European pieces per day, usually coinciding with key summits or events (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2003). The visibility of an issue or the amount of media attention it manages to attract is the clearest measure of its perceived importance (de Vreese, 2003). The volume of coverage devoted to an issue, combined with the story's position within the paper, conveys messages about its salience to readers.

Empirical studies have shown that the news media focus predominantly on highly salient EU topics (Norris, 2000). As discussed, relevance to national audiences and the presence of conflict raise the

[19] This applies to functional conflicts, characterised by divisions over common objectives (see Gerhards and Neidhardt,1991 in Berkel, 2004).

salience of EU issues. Given that both of these ingredients can be present at referendum time, my first expectation is that European affairs will be more visible in countries that held a referendum on the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty (**H1a**). Evidence from the study of EP elections has also shown that European affairs did not feature in the mass media's agenda before the beginning of the actual campaign (Siune, 1983), which suggests that campaigns may increase coverage per se. For this reason, I expect the visibility of the Constitution to increase when there is a referendum (**H1b**). Building on de Vreese, Lauf and Peter's finding that elite opinion polarisation may be a strong positive predictor of the amount of news coverage in European elections (2007) I also expect the volume of coverage about the Constitution to be proportional to the degree of campaign polarisation (**H1c**). As discussed in greater depth later on in the thesis, the degree of polarisation may be gauged by looking at vote share and party stances on the Constitutional Treaty.

Turning to transnational discourse, the visibility of an issue in the media is also the first pre-requisite for a EU public sphere. Clearly, a public sphere cannot exist if and when there is no coverage. Empirical studies have highlighted the correlation between the salience of issues and their visibility in the media (Norris, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 1, a polarised political spectrum sends out messages about the importance of issues (Kriesi, 2007). Also, it has been suggested that conflict and competition make EU affairs more interesting in the eyes of the media (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Hix, 2008), and may lead to the emergence of a transnational EU public sphere (Eder and Kantner, 2000; Berkel, 2004).

Bearing these theoretical considerations in mind, my expectation is that highly polarised referendum campaigns will raise the saliency EU issues not only domestically but trans-nationally as well, prompting an increase in news coverage in other member states. These effects are expected to be proportional to the degree of polarisation. The greater the intensity of a campaign, the higher the visibility of EU issues not only domestically but in the European press, too. More significantly, the highly polarised French referendum will be more visible transnationally than the less heated Spanish campaign **(H1d).**

2.3.2 *More depth and analysis*

While the visibility of an issue may be indicative of its relative importance, the volume and prominence of stories alone do not tell us much about the 'quality' of content. As suggested by Gleissner and de Vreese (2005), one of the key challenges faced by Brussels correspondents is having to communicate complex and often technical issues to relatively uninformed publics, forcing them to approach the topics from a sometimes basic level. This might lead one to wonder whether readers (voters) are provided with adequate knowledge to make informed decisions at referendum time.

Existing studies on EU media coverage deal predominantly with the visibility, tone and framing of news. However, the quality of EU news coverage, particularly during the EU constitutional process, has not been measured to date.[20] Recent debates about the possible erosion of news standards (Zaller, 2000) provide further justification for examining the quality of European political communication. Therefore, it seems interesting to study whether holding a referendum might prompt not only a greater volume of stories, but also more depth and analysis, providing potential voters with information that is sufficiently 'rich and engaging to make democracy work' (Zaller, 2003:111).[21]

Newspapers typically contain a 'blend' of news reporting and analytical pieces. Naturally, issues attracting large amounts of commentary and analysis are deemed to be particularly salient. We know that European affairs are often deemed 'low saliency' (Norris, 2000). As such, they rarely prompt extensive analysis, which means that the majority of European stories consist of 'straight news'. In other words, when it comes to European affairs the balance of coverage remains skewed towards factual news reporting.[22] This study argues that this might change at referendum time. Salient referendum campaigns might in fact provide journalists with an 'excuse' or 'opportunity' to cover EU

[20] For the purpose of this research, the quality of news coverage is assessed using two key indicators: the proportion of analytical articles and the overall depth of coverage.

[21] Focus on substantive issues (depth of coverage) rather than on more technical or strategic aspects of a campaign may be seen as a reasonable indicator of news quality (Scammell, 2005: 209).

[22] It is worth noting that this differs from coverage of domestic politics, where a growth in the so-called 'commentary industry' (McNair, 2000) as well as the mixing of comment with factual reporting have been observed (Lloyd, 2004 in Scammell, 2005: 211).

issues in greater depth. Thus, my second hypothesis is that the amount of analysis and the depth of coverage will increase when there is a referendum (**H2a**).

Based on Fossum and Schlesinger's definition of a public sphere as a space for the analysis, debate and criticism of a political system (2007), the amount of analytical coverage may be perceived as the second measure of a transnational public sphere. As with visibility, the volume of analysis is expected to be proportional to the degree of polarisation. For this reason, the number of analytical pieces published by British and Italian newspapers is expected to be higher during the highly salient French referendum than during the Spanish campaign **(H2b)**.

2.3.3 *The polarisation of coverage*

The fourth hypothesis tested in this thesis concerns the polarisation of newspaper coverage. As discussed, the campaigns preceding referendums are typically characterised by people 'taking sides'. Whilst the mobilisation of elites and the public may increase the saliency of EU issues and the amount of communication, it also raises questions about the balance and fairness of reporting (de Vreese, 2007). In fact, the media face the challenge of having to cover both the 'Yes' and 'No' sides of the campaign (Semetko, 2003). Therefore, it seems interesting to consider any changes in the polarisation of news at referendum time. The expectation here is that the neutrality of coverage will decrease during referendum campaigns (**H3a**). In other words, the tone of news on the Constitution might become less neutral, and more openly supportive of the 'Yes' or 'No' sides. Coverage that is less neutral or more politicised may also be indicative of greater public engagement and mobilisation. The fact that people care enough to take a clear stance on a 'European' issue may be a sign of greater participation. In addition, it is plausible that straight, 'neutral', news-reporting may contribute to public perceptions of the EU as a dull and overly bureaucratic apparatus.

Changes in the polarisation of coverage over time might also serve as indicators of a European public sphere. The question is whether scheduling a referendum in one country affects the polarisation of

news in other member states too. The polarisation of coverage may be seen as a sign of debate. If a European referendum in 'country 'A' leads to a debate in countries 'B', 'C', and 'D', then this could be perceived as an indication of the emerging public sphere. In line with the theoretical assumptions discussed throughout the Chapter, such a space may be more likely to emerge when elites are polarised and campaigns intense. Therefore, one might expect news coverage of the ECT in Britain and Italy to become more polarised during the salient French campaign (**H3b**).

2.3.4 *Negative or positive coverage?*

Previous studies have shown that news about the EU tends to suffer from a so-called 'negativity bias', which effectively means that Europe tends to be mostly framed in negative or slightly negative terms (Kepplinger, 1998, 2002; de Vreese, 2003; de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). Furthermore, we know from the findings of Gleissner and de Vreese (2005) that this trend was also present in the coverage of the convention phase by the British Dutch and German media. Therefore, it seems interesting to measure whether the same applied to other countries and to subsequent stages of the constitutional process. In general terms, it is interesting to test whether press coverage of the ECT was negatively biased also during periods that were marked by agreement and consensus rather than conflict. Therefore, in line with existing findings on this aspect of coverage, I expect the majority of articles on the ECT to be 'slightly negative' in tone (**H4a**).

Research on the second-order coverage of EP elections has shown that the tone of news and other characteristics such as the visibility or the domesticity of coverage do not appear to be correlated (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). However, it has been argued that the third characteristic of a public sphere is the possibility for the unrestricted criticism of a political system, or event (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). For the purpose of this research, the critical potential of coverage can be measured through the tone of articles. While I do not expect the tone of coverage to be affected by the presence of a referendum, similar patterns of 'good' and 'bad' news over time and across countries may indicate a convergence of coverage. For instance, an increase in negative messages in one country may be matched by a rise in negative stories in other member states too. This is more likely to occur in cases

where the campaign is intense and elites polarised.[23] Thus, the next hypothesis tested in this thesis is that the rise in bad news about the ECT during the French referendum campaign will also lead to more negative coverage in the British, Italian and Spanish press (**H4b**).

2.3.5 *A European or a domestic debate?*

After focusing on the visibility, format and polarisation of news, it seems interesting to look at what aspects of the Constitution were emphasised by the press. While measuring the volume and depth of coverage as well as the amount of analysis devoted to the issue provides key information on its perceived importance, the study of media contents and discourse would be incomplete without looking at the focus of coverage. By choosing to emphasise certain aspects over others, journalists and news editors determine how an issue is presented or framed.[24]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the presence of EU and 'foreign' actors and issues in domestic coverage of the Constitutional Treaty is important from a normative, theoretical perspective. It may even be argued that the presence of a European angle is a pre-requisite for the legitimacy of Europe's Constitutional endeavour (Meyer, 2007). As discussed, however, cross-national media debates remain the exception rather than the rule. Evidence from the second order literature has taught us that European Parliament elections are presented as domestic rather than European issues (Leroy and Siune, 1995). The dominance of domestic politics in the coverage of EP elections has also been

[23] Campaign intensity and elite polarisation are a measure of issue salience. It follows that the greater the salience of an issue, the higher its chances of generating interest outside the domestic public sphere.

[24] The subtle (and less subtle) 'tweaking' of cognitive structures and the emphasis on particular aspects of any given issue can alter the nature of messages. The pool of contemporary research on news framing is very diverse. Studies across a wide range of disciplines have focused on either the origins or the effects of news frames. In political communication, the process of framing is composed of two essential elements, known as frame-building and frame-setting (de Vreese, 1999; Scheufele, 1999; D'Angelo, 2002; de Vreese, 2003). The frame-building phase is essentially characterised by the interaction of elites, journalists (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979) and social movements (Cooper, 2002 in de Vreese, 2003) eventually resulting in specific frames the news. In contrast, frame-setting is about the effects of media frames on readers' existing knowledge of the issue (de Vreese, 2003). Measuring the effects of news frames on public perceptions of ECT goes beyond the scope of this research, which remains exploratory and descriptive-analytical. Yet, the both their origins and potential effects should be kept in mind when studying media coverage of this issue.

confirmed by more recent studies. These have shown that despite the increasing power and competencies transferred to the EU level over the course of the past decades, the media's presentation of the 1999 European elections was predominantly domestic in focus (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). Through a content analysis of news coverage of the election campaign in several member states, the authors of this study have found that coverage of these elections was in fact a sort of 'second order national coverage'.

The powerful second-order thesis has also been tested in the context of direct democracy. There exists, in fact, evidence that voting behaviour in referendums might be influenced by domestic considerations such as the degree of government policy approval (Franklin et al., 2004), as well as the extent to which voters' identify with parties in office (de Vreese, 2004). While there is robust empirical data to support the assumption that voting behaviour at referendum time may be dictated by national rather than supranational considerations, a number of other studies have supported the opposing, 'first-order' hypothesis (Siune et al., 1994; Svensson, 2002; Glencross and Trechsel, 2007). The mixed nature of the evidence suggests that, thus far, neither theory can be said to prevail over the other. Instead, it may be argued that the two approaches are becoming increasingly complementary (Hobolt, 2006a, in Glencross and Trechsel, 2007).

While much of the evidence from this field comes from single-country studies (Hobolt, 2006a: 154), a recent analysis has examined voting behaviour in the four countries that held a referendum on the European Constitution (Glencross and Trechsel, 2007). Results from the statistical analysis suggests that the outcomes of all four referendums was decided on the basis of 'first' rather than 'second-order' considerations, and that the campaigns were not distorted by the usual 'film of domestic party politics' (Glencross and Trechsel, 2007: 15).

With respect to news coverage of the Constitution, evidence from multiple periods in 2003 in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands has indicated that domestic actors were much more visible in the media than European actors (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Results on the perspective (domestic or

European) from which the Constitution was presented varied significantly across the three countries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the British media placed greater emphasis on the effects of the Treaty for Britain. On the other hand, the Dutch media stressed its importance for the EU as a whole, while evidence from the German case was rather mixed (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005).

These significant cross-national variations are indicative of a highly fragmented EU media landscape. This thesis examines the press' coverage of subsequent stages of the Constitutional process, focusing on other member states. More specifically, it looks at whether the focus of coverage about the Constitution became more domestic or European during referendums. In line with the findings of Gleissner and de Vreese, (2005) and Glencross and Trechsel (2007), it expects coverage of the Constitution to become more European when there is a referendum (**H5a**).

As discussed in Section 2.2, the focus of news may also serve as an indicator of a European public sphere. Like with the tone of coverage, similar changes in focus across member states on a 'European versus domestic' scale may be indicative of a transnational discourse. Thus far, my expectation with regards to a EU public sphere is that the French referendum will increase the volume and analysis of coverage. Also, I have hypothesised that a rise in negative coverage during the French campaign might prompt more negative coverage in other member states. Moreover, if news stories about the Constitution are expected to become more EU-focused during polarised campaigns, then it seems logical to expect that the French referendum will also prompt an increase in EU focused coverage across all of the cases included in this study. For this reason, I expect British and Italian news to become more EU-focused during the French referendum campaign (**H5b**).

2.3.6 *About politics or economics?*

After examining whether the EU constitutional process was presented as a European or a national issue, this study turns to the focus of coverage on an 'economic versus political' scale. This seems important given that studies have indicated that the 'economic consequences' frame often dominates

news coverage of the EU (Goddard et al., 1998; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).[25] Moreover, this variable allows us to gauge the media's perception of European integration as a political or a purely economic project.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a greater degree of politicisation is highly desirable from the perspective of EU legitimacy and democracy. In fact, it is argued that through increased competition, it might lay the foundations for the emergence of a EU media 'soap-opera' (Hix, 2008). Recent empirical work has suggested that the use of direct democracy may actually increase the politicisation of the European Union (Glencross and Trechsel, 2007). Consequently, one might expect to see EU coverage becoming more political when a referendum is scheduled **(H6a)**.

2.4 Summary and Conclusions

This Chapter has attempted to explain the mechanisms thorough which referendums can be expected to affect the media's coverage of European affairs. By bridging the gap between the European and domestic levels, and by creating opportunities for more political competition, the use of direct democracy may increase the saliency of EU affairs. Given that the mass media tend to focus exclusively on salient EU issues, referendums can affect news coverage both domestically and transnationally along several dimensions. Domestically, they are expected to increase the volume of coverage. Secondly, they might provide journalists with the opportunity to publish more analytical pieces and explore EU issues in greater depth. Transnationally, they might lead to the emergence of a EU-wide debate or public sphere. While much of the literature suggests that in the absence of a pan EU media system the national media remain the main 'locus' or 'vehicles' of EU debates, this does not prevent a

[25] Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) devised a framing typology comprising five generic news frames: conflict; human interest; attribution of responsibility; morality and economic consequences. As one might infer, conflict refers to tensions between people, institutions or member states; human interest has to do with the personal or emotional elements of a story; responsibility is about attributing blame or recognition to individuals, groups of people or governments; morality is about the interpretation of an event in terms of religion or values. Finally, the economic consequences frame is about the economic and financial impact of a given issue on individuals, groups of people, member states etc. Given its potential effects on the consolidation of a European public sphere, it is not only interesting but also important to look at the focus of news stories about ECT.

European discourse from occurring across national borders at the same time, and with similar frames of reference. Moreover, high degrees of polarisation may increase the uncertainty of the vote's outcome. In turn, this can augment the chances of a EU wide crisis, raising the saliency of the issue even further and prompting more communication and debate in the mass media. Under these circumstances, the media's discourse across several member states may not only increase in volume and analysis, but also become similar in terms of polarisation, tone and focus.

By testing the hypotheses discussed in this Chapter, this study hopes to contribute to the field of European political communication in the following ways. First and foremost, it aims to highlight some of the 'ingredients' of EU coverage, contributing to the existing knowledge of this complex process. Understanding what drives media coverage about Europe might also have the policy-level implications, and ultimately bring us closer to addressing the current communication deficit. Finally, the study also hopes to help fill the gap for cross-national comparative research in this field.

The next Chapter describes the research design and methodology used to test the hypotheses developed in Section 2.3. The empirical part of the thesis will then proceed to test these expectations. Chapter 4 will start by qualitatively measuring their plausibility by presenting the results of sixteen depth interviews with Brussels-based correspondents responsible for covering the EU constitutional process. Chapter 5 will move on to the statistical results of the quantitative content analysis, examining any changes in news coverage at referendum time across the four countries included in this study. The Chapter will focus exclusively on the patterns of coverage observed domestically, in the four public spheres. Chapter 6, on the other hand, will examine whether the French and Spanish referendum campaigns had any effects on the emergence of a transnational or European public sphere. This last empirical Chapter also takes a closer, qualitative look at the content of the sixteen newspapers examining their discourse in greater detail. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a summary of its main findings, discussing their implications for the fields of political communication and EU legitimacy, and highlighting avenues for further research.

CHAPTER 3 - DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter 2 has outlined a model of EU news coverage based on the salience of issues at referendum time and developed a series of hypotheses to be tested empirically in Chapters 4-6 of the thesis. This Chapter discusses the research design, introduces the data, and describes the tools used to test these hypotheses. Section 3.1 begins by defining the scope of this research. It describes and justifies the selection of the countries, timeframes and newspapers included in this sample. Section 3.2 moves on to the research design, beginning with a very brief overview the advantages of quantitative versus qualitative methodologies before justifying the study's decision to combine the two approaches. Section 3.3 moves on to an in-depth explanation of the methodological procedures as well as the operationalisation of the theoretical variables developed in Chapter 2. Separate sub-sections are devoted to describing the steps of the content analysis and interview process, covering ongoing challenges and measurement -related issues.

3.1 Case Selection - The Data

Along with selecting the appropriate research design, social scientists face the challenge of having to define the scope of their research according to clear criteria in line with the study's overarching objectives. Choices made at this stage are crucial and have fundamental repercussions on the research process and outcome. As briefly mentioned in earlier chapters, this thesis draws first and foremost on the study of newspaper content. Before the actual analysis could be undertaken, however, a text corpus had to be constructed bearing in mind what are known as the three key challenges of the sampling process: representativeness, size, and unitisation (Bauer, 2000).

The process of sampling in content analyses can be carried out in a number of different ways. Random sampling is widely recognised as the most common sampling technique (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorf, 1980; Bauer, 2000; Bauer and Aarts, 2000). Sampling criteria, however, should always be dictated by the nature of the research question or puzzle. In the study of media content, this might involve selecting certain countries, publications or timeframes at the exclusion of others, forming so-called

'cluster samples' (Bauer, 2000). Sections 3.1.1 – 3.1.3 explain the case-selection process which enabled the construction of the text corpus and dataset for this analysis. Section 3.1.1 covers the choice of countries. Section 3.1.2 introduces the sixteen publications, while Section 3.1.3 explains the selection of different timeframes, briefly discussing their political relevance and significance.

3.1.1 *Countries*

In order to measure the effects of referendums on news coverage of the European constitutional process and on the emergence of a European public sphere, this research had to be designed with a cross-national comparative component. The sample included four of the EU largest member states: Britain, France, Italy and Spain. Aside from their comparability in terms of size, these four countries adopted different procedures for the ratification of the ECT. Spain and France were the first two countries to hold a referendum; Italy was the first among the EU founding states to ratify the Treaty by parliamentary vote. The UK, on the other hand was a different case. It debated the possibility of having a referendum, but ended up not having one following the French rejection. Also, these countries are known for their different attitudes towards European integration, with Italy being the most pro and the UK the most anti European.[26] Britain is among the most Euro-sceptic member states, with traditionally negative news coverage of the EU (Esser, 1999; Norris, 2000). Spain, Italy and France are, albeit to varying degrees, traditionally pro-European countries. As discussed in Chapter 1, relatively little is known about the nature of their coverage of European affairs.

France and Spain, the two 'referendum countries' were chosen on the basis of both their differences and similarities. First of all, the media systems of both member states conform to what is known as the 'Mediterranean' or 'polarised pluralistic' model, characterised by relatively small circulation figures, a generally elite-oriented press, and a tradition of commentary-oriented journalism (Hallin

[26] Standard Eurobarometer Survey No. 60, December 2003.

and Mancini, 2004).[27] Secondly, both countries were by and large in favour of the European Constitution, with their governments campaigning unambiguously in favour of a 'Yes' vote.

Having said this, the two campaigns were fundamentally different, as were the degree of elite polarisation and ultimately the outcomes of the two referendums. French President Jacques Chirac had announced his intention to hold a referendum on the Constitution on 14 July 2004. However, the ratification question had sparked a lively debate within the Socialist Party (PS), following the opposition of former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius. An internal consultation was held on 1December 2004 and was won by the 'Yes' camp with 56% of the votes. Yet, this did not prevent a very vocal 'No' campaign from gathering a strong support base and ultimately winning the referendum of 29 May 2005 with 54.6% of the votes. The Spanish case, on the other hand, was very different. All major political parties – the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the socialist PSOE – had pledged their support for the ratification of the Treaty as early as during the March 2004 general election. Thus, the weeks leading up to the referendum saw the PP, the PSOE, as well as the Basque and Catalan nationalists campaigning in favour of the issue. The only opposition to the one-sided campaign came from the United Left (Izquierda Unida), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and the Galician National Bloc (Bloque Nacionalista Gallego).

France and Spain's similarities in terms of media systems and attitudes towards the European Constitution increase their comparability. Yet, the two campaigns were different enough in terms of their degree of elite polarisation to enable the study of the conditions under which referendums affect news coverage, examining any differences across the different political contexts.[28]

[27] Having said this, it must be noted that whilst the French media system fits with the general characteristics of the polarised pluralistic model, the mass-circulation press is more developed than in other countries (Hallin and Mancini. 2004).

[28] Another minor difference among the two referendums is that the French one was legally binding, whilst the Spanish was consultative. In the case of France, holding a referendum on the ECT required the revision of certain provisions of the French Constitution. The compatibility of the two documents had to be verified, particularly with respect to the principle of subsidiarity and the Treaty's compatibility with the Charter of fundamental rights (Barbier, 2006: 25). According to Art. 11 of the French Constitution, the decision to submit the ratification of ECT to a referendum could be based on either a government-initiate legislative proposal or on a joint proposal of the two Chambers. Spanish case was rather different. Art. 92 of the Spanish Constitution stipulates that all major political decisions should be subjected to a consultative referendum

Within the 'non-referendum' countries, Italy's media system fits, like France and Spain, with the 'Mediterranean' or 'polarised pluralist' model. According to this categorisation it, too, has a tradition of commentary-oriented and advocacy journalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 73). This should be kept in mind, particularly when measuring the relative amount of analytical coverage published in 'referendum' and 'non-referendum' countries. Italy was also similar to Spain in terms of the degree of polarisation on the Constitution. The Treaty was widely backed by all major political parties, with the exception of the extreme left (the Communist Party) and the extreme right (the Northern League), who had expressed concerns over the erosion of regional and national sovereignty (respectively). On 6 April 2005, the Constitution was ratified with an overwhelming majority (217 votes to 16) in the upper house of parliament (the Senate). This followed the approval of the Text by the lower house (the Chamber of Deputies) in January 2005.

The UK, on the other hand, was a significantly different case. To begin, its media system displays the key features of the 'North Atlantic' or 'Liberal' model, characterised by the mass circulation of newspapers, and by a commercially-driven and often partisan press (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 75). Aside from these differences, the British press is also notoriously more Euro-sceptic than that of the three Mediterranean countries described above. This, however, was not expected to affect the balance of the sample, particularly since the tone of coverage was not deemed dependent on the presence of a referendum. Having said this, it should be noted that ever since the IGC negotiations the UK had made no secret of its reservations and 'red lines' on several aspects of the Treaty. Among its key concerns were the preservation of unanimity in the Council, particularly with respect to fiscal policy, social security, and defence. Yet, in April 2004, Prime Minister Blair announced his intention to hold a referendum on the ratification of ECT. This controversial political move was seen as a way to pressure countries like France and Spain that were still undecided at the time, into submitting the Treaty to popular vote. A possible rejection by either one would have allowed Mr. Blair to abandon this difficult

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by all citizens (Barbier, 2006:28). Like The Netherlands, the UK, Portugal and Luxembourg, Spain has made use of popular consultations on EU issues only as a complement to Parliamentary ratification. After establishing the compatibility of ECT with the Spanish Constitution, a bill authorising the organisation of a consultative referendum was adopted by the Congress on 11 January 2005, followed by a Royal decree on 14 January.

option (Barbier, 2006: 27). Meanwhile, calling for a referendum allowed the PM to avoid domestic accusations of 'giving in' on Britain's red lines. The chances of the majority of British citizens voting in favour of the Treaty were very slim. Thus, it may be argued that the proposed British referendum served more as a smokescreen for a delicate political situation, than as a genuine manifestation of direct democracy. While the 'European Union Bill' authorising the Treaty's ratification by referendum was adopted by the House of Commons in January 2005, the French rejection of the Treaty at the end of the following May effectively stalled the British ratification process. Critics might question the decision to treat the UK as a 'non-referendum' country, particularly since it had officially intended to hold a one. However, this study is interested in looking at the changes in coverage occurring during the actual campaigns. Given that Britain did not reach the campaign stage and never even got to the point where it set a date for a possible vote, it was deemed more appropriate to place it into the 'non-referendum' category.

3.1.2 *Newspapers*

Four daily newspapers were selected from each of the four countries.[29] From the French press, quality broadsheets Le Monde, Le Figaro, L'Humanité, and Libération were chosen. From the Spanish media landscape, I focused on El Pais, El Mundo, ABC and Cinco Dias. The British sample included The Times, The Guardian, the Financial Times, as well as populist tabloid The Sun. Finally, Italian sources studied for the purpose of this thesis were Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, La Stampa, and Il Sole 24 Ore. Newspapers were chosen primarily on the basis of their net circulation figures (Table 3.1). The choice of newspapers was also carried out in an effort to represent as wide a range of political viewpoints as possible within each country. For this reason, each country's sample included at least one left and one right-leaning publication. It should be noted that this project focused exclusively on the print media. Whilst the inclusion of television programmes and the new media would have been both interesting

[29] Emphasis was placed on the 'quality' press. British tabloid 'The Sun' was the only exception to this rule. Its inclusion in the sample was justified by the extraordinarily high circulation figures. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of this decision for the consistency of the sample, I felt that excluding such a widely read publication may have called into question the representativeness of the British sample.

and useful it was felt that focusing on the press would have increased the comparability of the sample and avoided potential issues such as country-specific regulations about campaign advertising. Moreover, whilst television programmes are, according to Eurobarometer surveys, citizens' preferred source of news, TV programmes are subject to even greater commercial pressures and 'time constraints'. Consequently, it was felt that the print media might have been able to devote more space and analysis to EU issues, thereby providing a better snapshot of the nature of coverage on the Constitution.

Table 3.1 The Sample: Newspapers by Net Circulation Figures

Referendum				**Non Referendum**			
France		*Spain*		*Italy*		*UK*	
Le Monde	314 000	El Pais	435 000	CDS	615 000	The Sun	3 020 700
Le Figaro	134 800	El Mundo	320 000	Repubblica	586 000	The Times	635 800
Humanite	52 800	ABC	261 000	Il Sole 24 Ore	343 000	The Guardian	437 700
Liberation	32 500	Cinco Dias	59 000	La Stampa	333 000	FT	365 700

Net circulation figures, 2006

The French press sample or landscape comprises both traditionally left-wing or liberal newspapers such as Le Monde, Libération, and L'Humanité, and more right-wing publications such as Le Figaro. Le Figaro is France's oldest national daily. Slightly conservative, it appeals to the middle classes. By contrast, Le Monde has traditionally been the most important and well respected amongst France's left-of-centre. Le Monde is currently undergoing significant internal changes, following the acquisition in February 2005 by the media and defense conglomerate Lagardère of 15 percent of its shares. L'Humanité is strongly influenced by the French Communist party, who owns 40 percent of its shares. Finally, Libération was founded in 1973 by Jean-Paul Sartre to fill the need for an 'alternative outlook' to politics and social change in France. This paper, too, has traditionally been left-of-centre in terms of political orientation. However, there have been speculations as to whether this may have changed since its acquisition in January 2005 by businessman Edouard de Rothschild.

As for the Spanish press landscape, El Pais remains the most widely-read publication, and is centre-left in terms of political orientation (Diez-Medrano, 2003). It has traditionally been supportive of the

Socialist Party (PSOE). By contrast, El Mundo is positioned more to the centre, and has openly opposed previous socialist governments (i.e. that of Prime Minister Felipe Gonzáles) on corruption grounds (Kevin, 2000). ABC was chosen due to its conservative stance. Known as the 'quintessential conservative newspaper' (Diez-Medrano, 2003: 268), ABC has traditionally supported the conservative Partido Popular (PP). Finally, the decision to exclude regional publications led to the choice of leading financial daily Cinco Dias as the fourth Spanish publication analysed in this study.

With regards to the Italian media landscape, Il Corriere della Sera (CDS) remains Italy's leading daily publication. This is true both historically and in terms of circulation figures. The paper has traditionally leaned towards the centre-right. However, in recent years it has been very critical of the Berlusconi government's position on a number of issues, shifting increasingly towards the centre-left of the political spectrum. CDS is owned by the RCS publishing group, partly controlled by the Fiat Group. The business group also owns La Stampa – Italy's third largest newspaper in terms of readership and circulation figures. La Stampa has traditionally been centrist in terms of political orientation. By contrast, La Repubblica is Italy's major centre-left publication, and also enjoys high circulation figures. It is owned by L'Espresso group, controlled by industrialist Carlo de Benedetti. Finally, Il Sole 24 Ore is the country's leading national financial daily. It is owned by 'Confindustria', also known as the association of Italian industrialists.

Finally, the UK press landscape is one of the most diverse in Europe, and British citizens are amongst the largest 'press' consumers. While some critics have expressed concerns in recent years about the overall 'tabloidisation' and 'dumbing down' of British journalism (McNair 2003), others have argued that worries are misplaced, particularly since the development of 'soft news' has been matched with an increase in quality coverage (Norris, 2000). Between 1975 and 2002, British national dailies have more than doubled their number of pages. Despite a noticeable sales drop in recent years, the British press remains widely read, with eighty percent of the adult population buying at least one newspaper every day. According to the National Bureau of Circulation, thirty-two national newspapers were

registered in the UK in February 2005, with total net circulation figures reaching over twenty-seven million including the Sunday papers.

While there are no official links between newspapers and political parties, patterns of partisanship in the British press have emerged and fluctuated over the past fifty years. Interestingly, from the mid 1990's, the Conservatives started to lose the traditional newspaper support they had enjoyed since the end of the Second World War (Kevin, 2000). Despite a switch to the Labour party in the 1997 general election the mainstream British press remained largely Eurosceptic. By and large, The Times remained mostly conservative, while The Guardian predominantly liberal. Finally, while the Financial Times is technically an international publication, the UK edition plays a key role in elite opinion formation and therefore, was included in the sample. Despite the heterogeneity of the four media landscapes and traditions discussed above, the selection of four major daily newspapers in each country was expected to provide a good snapshot of national debates on the European constitution.

3.1.3 *Timeframes*

As discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis focuses on the European constitutional process for several reasons. First of all, the aborted Constitution was conceived to bring the EU closer to its citizens. Secondly, existing studies on EU media coverage have focused on key summits (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000); European Parliament elections (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007); and single referendums (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004; Hobolt; 2005). It is therefore interesting to examine patterns of coverage over a longer period of time. Finally, the choice of parliamentary ratification versus referendum produced different political contexts, lending itself to the purpose of this study. Deciding to hold a referendum is more than a merely procedural choice. Citizens acquire a direct voice rather than relying exclusively on elected elites. While the normative evaluation of referendums goes beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to investigate whether direct citizen involvement has any effect on the development of a European public sphere.

A multi-period sample was chosen to include several key milestones of the EU constitutional process, starting with the work of the Convention in the end of 2003 and ending with the French referendum of 29 May 2005.[30] The sample included all articles on the Constitution published during the five eight-week timeframes listed in Table 3.2. Each period was chosen for its political significance. More precisely, the first two timeframes were about the negotiation phase (IGC); the third one (the signature) served as a transition, marking the end of negotiations and the beginning of the ratification phase; while the fourth and fifth ones were specifically about the Treaty's ratification. The selection of the five timeframes was also dictated by the presence of conflict versus consensus. This was done primarily in an attempt to avoid biasing the sample towards 'negative' or 'positive' events.

Table 3.2 The Sample: Selected Timeframes and Political Significance

	Timeframe	**Political Salience**
	Negotiation	
1	Nov-Dec 03	IGC; Italian presidency; Naples Summit; collapse of negotiations
2	May-Jun 04	End of IGC; agreement on a draft Constitution at Brussels Council
	Transition	
3	Oct-Nov 04	Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe signed in Rome
	Ratification	
4	Jan-Feb 05	Spanish referendum campaign
5	Apr-May 05	French referendum campaign

As suggested by Table 3.2 (above), timeframe 1 was one of the most conflictual phases of the constitutional process. It was characterised by intergovernmental bargaining and disputes, which peaked around the Naples conclave of 28-29 November and the Brussels Summit of 12-13 December,

[3030] Previous research has shown that the visibility of EU affairs is high during key events and low in routine periods (Norris, 2000; Vreese, 2001a). While the relative invisibility of EU affairs is in itself an interesting finding, I felt that the purpose of this study would be best served by focusing on five of the most salient timeframes of the constitutional process (Table 2). The study's central objective, in fact, is to compare differences in coverage across countries, timeframes, political contexts and, to a lesser extent, newspapers. It also aims to measure the emergence of a trans-national EU public sphere. Both the degree of variance and the trans-national visibility of EU affairs are expected to be greater at times when the media have a reason to cover it. Hence the exclusion of low-salience timeframes, where coverage of the ECT was expected to be minimal and unevenly distributed across member states.

when Heads of State failed to reach an agreement on a draft Constitution. Timeframe 2 covered the weeks preceding the agreement of the Draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe at the European Council on 18 June 2004. It was largely characterised by 'positive' or 'consensual' developments. Similarly, timeframe 3 – which covered the weeks leading up to the signature of the ECT at the end of October 2004 – was marked by agreement and consensus and was presented as a historic turning point for the future of the EU. However, this time period also included the weeks preceding the internal referendum within the French Socialist Party (PS) held on 1 December. Finally, timeframes 4 and 5 coincided with the French and Spanish referendum campaigns. Albeit to varying degrees, both were expected to be marked by political debate and consequently, a mixture of conflict and consensus. In addition, timeframe 4 also coincided with the adoption of the ECT by the European Parliament in January 2005, as well as its ratification by the Greek parliament on 1 February 2005. In addition to the French referendum campaign, timeframe 5 also coincided with the Treaty's ratification by the Austrian parliament (the Nationalrat) on 11 May, and by the German Bundesrat on 27 May.

3.2 Research Design and Methodology

The battle between quantitative and qualitative research methods in the social sciences has a long history (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). Traditionally based on the belief that the two approaches were mutually exclusive, this peculiar 'war of words' was essentially fought between two different traditions of social enquiry. Proponents of the quantitative 'school' essentially use statistical models to makes sense of large volumes of data, looking for causal relationships. Advocates of this tradition stress the importance of generalisation and replicability (King et al., 1994). Also known as 'hard research', quantitative studies generally draw on the use of surveys, questionnaires, and the use of statistical software packages such as SPSS and STATA (Bauer, Gaskell and Allum, 2000). By contrast, qualitative or 'soft' research is about interpreting social phenomena and contexts. It relies on the analysis of words, interviews and texts to gain an in-depth understanding of a small number of events or a single historical turning point.

Following a recent wave of enthusiasm for qualitative research, scholars (Bryman, 1988; King et al., 1994; Bauer, Gaskell and Allum, 2000) have questioned the segregation of these two approaches, moving towards a new form of methodological pluralism. This development was prompted by the realisation that both methods hold inference as their key rationale and that both can be equally rigorous and scientific (King et al., 1994). This has opened up the possibility of combining both approaches based on the hypotheses to be tested, and the nature of the data to be analysed. The 'mixed method' approach allows researchers to enjoy greater freedom and flexibility. Rather than forcing a particular approach to all types of data and questions, social scientists can base their choice of method on the nature their research 'puzzles'. Efforts to separate qualification from quantification and statistical analysis from interpretation now seem both unnatural and unnecessary. As underlined by Bauer, Gaskell and Allum, (2000), one must understand the qualitative differences and characteristics of social categories before one can measure them. Along the same lines, one might call into question the value of statistical analysis alone, without interpretation. Equally, studies relying exclusively on qualitative methodologies are at risk of becoming 'didactic nightmares', particularly when researchers have access to limited methodological guidance (Bauer, Gaskell and Allum, 2000). Finally, while quantitative approaches are particularly useful for testing theories, qualitative methodologies are a valuable asset for developing theory through the generation of original data (Creswell, 2003). A similar conclusion was reached by a recent influential study on the value of 'mixed method' approaches in comparative research (Lieberman, 2005). Mixed method or 'nested' analyses essentially represent a 'best of both worlds' approach, by combining the statistical analysis of large bodies of data with the in-depth study of one or more cases. In a first step, a large N analysis (LNA) is carried out, followed by a small N analysis (SNA) which assesses the plausibility of the observed statistical relationships and generates theoretical insights (Lieberman, 2005). In essence, it can be said that LNAs enable theory-testing, while SNAs generally serve a theory-building purpose. Given that both 'steps' are essential components of any research design, combining the two approaches appears to make very much sense indeed.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, this study focuses on the media's coverage of the EU Constitutional process. More specifically, it seeks to test whether and how the presence of a referendum affected newspaper coverage of this issue. Its objective in doing so is twofold. First and foremost, it aims to gain a better understanding of the drivers of EU media coverage. Secondly, it hopes to contribute to a growing body of literature on EU political communication, helping to fill the existing gap for cross-national and longitudinal data. In order to meet these two objectives the study calls for a mixed-method design. In order to test the plausibility of the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, the study draws on in-depth interviews with Brussels correspondents, qualitatively assessing their perceptions of referendums as potential catalysts for EU debates. In a subsequent step these hypotheses are tested empirically by means of qualitative and quantitative content analyses. As discussed at length in Section 3 below, content analysis was felt to be the most appropriate way to study changes in newspaper coverage across countries, timeframes and newspapers. The content analysis (CA) of newspapers articles allows us to determine – with scientific rigour and accuracy – the nature of a country's political debate. By telling us what is discussed when and by whom, this technique enables the study of the presentation of EU issues in the public sphere. A dual approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques was felt to be most suited to the purpose of this study. The first, quantitative step enabled the systematic categorisation of recurring subjects in the news. The qualitative part, on the other hand, allowed us to take a closer look at the meaning and discourse of individual articles.

3.2.1 *Content analysis*

While technical definitions of content analysis as a methodology vary significantly, this technique is widely recognised as having the following characteristics. First and foremost, it involves a set of procedures to make inferences about the nature of a text, its audience, or senders (Weber, 1985). Through the application of categorisation rules (Paisley, 1969 in Bauer, 2000), content is transformed, allowing inferences to be made in an objective, systematic and quantitative manner (Berelso, 1952 in

Bauer, 2000; Holsti, 1969). The content analysis process entails the statistical handling of text units, in a way that is objective[31], systematic and, procedurally speaking, replicable (Bauer, 2000).

There are six key steps to a content analysis (Hansen et. al, 1998). First, the definition of the research problem, in which the analytical 'puzzle' and questions are set out. Second, the selection of media and sample. This is followed by the definition of analytical categories, and the subsequent construction of a coding scheme. Once these early steps are completed, the piloting of the coding schedule and reliability testing should take place to ensure cross-coder consistency. Finally, the data is prepared and ultimately analysed.

As a methodology, content analysis is accused of suffering from a number of potential limitations, which are mentioned here, pre-emptively. First of all, the fragmentation of textual wholes into smaller segments quantified on the basis of their occurrence can be problematic. The argument is that stripped of their context, words may assume different meanings and functions. This, however, is not entirely true. While texts are indeed deconstructed, they are transformed in order to create new information (Bauer, 2000). In doing so, the researcher must keep in mind his or her theoretical approach and research puzzle. Hence, claiming that words are stripped of context and placed in a vacuum would be inaccurate. Critics have also argued that the frequency with which an item recurs is not necessarily indicative of its perceived importance (Burgelin, 1972). Consequently, the importance of a theme stems from the fact that it is placed in opposition to another theme which may be absent or recurring less frequently. For instance, if an article of the European constitution focused on economic rather than political considerations, then the presence of the first would be at the expense of the other. While it is true that early attempts at content analyses were sometimes limited to counting the frequency of words (Holsti, 1969), decades of communication research have led to the realisation that the inferences drawn from the presence of given characteristics in media texts cannot be separated by contextual considerations (Hansen et. al, 1998). This has been coupled with the emergence of more

[31] The term objective does not stand for a one and only valid interpretation of a text. As pointed out by Bauer (2000), the validity of a content analysis is not to be measured in terms of a single 'true reading' or interpretation of a text, but on its grounding in a study's theory.

ambitious CA research designs, such as normative, cross-sectional, longitudinal analyses, as well as parallel designs involving the combination of multiple sources of longitudinal data.

A final, common criticism has to do with the 'objectivity' of content analyses. Clearly, this methodology is not exempt from human judgement. The very task of selecting a text corpus requires researchers to express some form of judgement. For instance, questions like 'what texts should be analysed?', 'which newspapers?', 'what timeframes?' and 'what aspects?' all require some degree of personal judgement on the part of researchers (Bauer, 2003). Yet, it must be remembered that these judgements do not take place in random isolation, but are dictated by the study's research questions and hypotheses. Also, one could argue that these concerns are common to most research designs. Moreover, there is growing consensus in the literature that the validity of a CA is determined by its systematic nature (Holsti, 1969), and its replicability (Krippendorf, 1980) rather than by its objectivity (which is difficult to measure).

After considering the advantages and disadvantages of CA research designs, it was still felt that looking at what newspapers actually wrote was the most appropriate way of gauging the nature of media debates on the Constitution as well as changes in coverage across countries and newspapers at referendum time. In addition, one must not forget that a written text corpus essentially constitutes an expression of several national political communities (Bauer, 2000). Section 3.2.2 describes the process which led to the definition of the study's analytical categories and coding scheme. Sections 3.2.3 to 3.2.5 talk respectively about the actual coding procedure as well as piloting and reliability testing, before finally discussing the measurement of the study's dependent variables.

3.2.2 *Analytical categories and coding scheme*

The process of coding is about the classification of sampled texts, based on a study's theoretical framework. The process itself can be time consuming. The construction of a coding frame based on a set of codes or questions with which the texts are analysed, is in fact a multi-stage process.

Researchers are expected to allocate time for piloting, making subsequent changes and for training additional coders (Bauer, 2000). The identification of analytical categories in a content analysis can take place inductively or deductively. Traditionally, these two approaches were considered mutually exclusive. The first one involves the analysis of contents without a previously defined set of categories in mind (Gamson, 1992; Neuman, 1992). This approach allows categories to emerge 'spontaneously' from the texts during the course of the analysis. Among the key advantages of an inductive approach is precisely the lack of a rigid set of frames imposed on what may be very different types of texts. One could even argue that approaching texts deductively might allow researchers to identify what they are looking for at all costs, potentially overlooking key messages or even distorting the meaning of content (de Vreese, 2003). Yet, inductive approaches have been criticised for relying on excessively small samples and being difficult to replicate (Hertog and McLeod, 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; de Vreese, 2003). Instead, political communication scholars have advocated the use of a pre-defined coding scheme to serve as the backbone of content analyses. Doing so helps ensure that the analysis remains driven the study's research questions and hypotheses.

This research combines elements of both approaches by following a two-step method for the development of a coding scheme. To begin, I read through 10% of the total sample, making sure to cover a similar proportion of news stories from each of the countries. Particular emphasis was placed on the focus (subject) of each article, noting what issues emerged 'spontaneously' from the texts. While time-consuming, this was a necessary step which allowed me to get 'a feel' for the material, the arguments, the issues, the actors and so forth. Following this first inductive step I then proceeded to develop a coding scheme based on the operationalisation of the variables and hypotheses developed in Chapter 2. This scheme was then deductively applied to the entire text corpus (see Appendix 3A).

The coding frame comprised a total of six categories: country; newspapers; type of articles; length; timeframe and focus.[32] Each code was assigned a finite number of possible values, some of which were ordinal while others categorical. Every article was assigned one value only on each code, with the

[32] Focus stands for the main subject of the article, namely 'whom' or 'what' it was about.

exception of focus, where it was possible to select two possible values. For instance, each article could focus on more than one issue; covering the Treaty in 'depth' (focus 1) and emphasising its economic consequences (focus 2). A total of 75 possible codes were identified for the focus variable. These were derived from my theoretical hypotheses, and can be grouped into 8 different categories. The first one included codes that were specifically about the Treaty (its impact, specific provisions, support or opposition for, revision, etc). The second and third ones were respectively about the IGC negotiations (agreement, disagreement, compromise, success, failure) and about the ratification process (method and date, referendum, information campaign). A fourth category was about broader European issues (enlargement, EU democracy, citizenship, foreign policy, the future of Europe etc). The fifth one was about national issues (such as national sovereignty; national values, identity and symbols, language, national interests, democracy etc). The sixth and seventh ones were respectively about EU actors (EU institutions, the Commission's president etc) and national actors (national politicians, political parties etc). Finally, the eighth and final category included miscellaneous codes such as science, human rights; political participation, agriculture etc.[33]

3.2.3 *Coding procedures*

The process of coding can be carried out manually, or with the assistance of specialised computer packages. Both techniques are equally valid, and both have a number of advantages and disadvantages. Researchers following the traditional 'paper and pencil' approach follow the instructions dictated by their codebook and coding sheets, (Bauer, 2000). Coders note their judgement for each code in the box next to it. Once the coding process is complete, the sheets are collated and the data is entered into a computer in preparation for analysis. A key advantage of specialised software is that it allows coders to enter their judgements directly into the computer, eliminating the use of data sheets (Bauer, 2000). Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that manual coding techniques can sometimes be preferable to computer-assisted content analysis (CATA), because they allow for the extrapolation of meaning and context, going beyond the simple recurrence

[33] See Appendix B for a complete list of focus codes

of words (Althaus et al., 2001 in de Vreese, 2003). The choice of manual over computer-assisted analysis was also dictated by the fact that the raw data was in several different languages.

A total of 2821 newspaper articles were manually coded by a single researcher to ensure consistency across the four languages. Each story was treated as an individual unit of analysis and coded accordingly. In the final stage of the content analysis, all collected data were manually entered into a data file using computer programme SPSS (Stastistical Package for the Social Sciences). While small datasets may be manually analysed, the relative magnitude of this sample meant that doing so was not a viable option.[34]

3.2.4 *Piloting and reliability*

Reliability in content analyses often defined as the level of agreement among coders. Verifying reliability can be done in two possible ways. First, the same coder may double code a sub-sample after a substantial time interval. The second option is to have two or more persons code (or re-code) the same material simultaneously (Bauer, 2000). In both cases reliability can be assessed using the alpha index, yielding a scale ranging between 0 (no agreement) and 1 (perfect agreement) (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980; Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). Reliability is usually considered *acceptable* at 0.66 or above; *high* at 0.80 or above and *very high* at 0.90 or above (Bauer, 2000). Before embarking on the analysis of the data, a subsample of 282 articles or 10% of the total sample was blindly double-coded by a trained multi-lingual coder using the same codebook. Overall, 86% of all coding decisions were identical.

[34] Furthermore, the use of specific software greatly facilitated the handling of data, increasing both the reliability and speed of the analysis (Hansen et. al, 1998:121).

3.2.5 *Measurement*

Chapter 2 has introduced a number of concepts relating to the effects of referendums on media coverage of the European Union. This section discusses the operationalisation of these concepts and their translation into a series of dependent variables that were systematically studied.

Visibility. As discussed, the relative visibility of an issue is one of the most crucial aspects of news coverage. The amount of media attention received by an issue is commonly perceived as a measure of its salience (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Hobolt, 2004). Conversely, research from the agenda-setting school has shown that the amount of attention devoted by the media to a particular issue determines the extent to which citizens consider it important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Rössler, 1997). For the purpose of this research, the visibility of the European Constitution in the press was measured by looking at the volume of coverage (i.e. the number of articles) published. In order to be selected, articles had to contain references to the Treaty in the opening paragraph and in two or more independent sentences. To ensure consistency all news stories were extracted from the online edition of newspapers and their respective archive services.

The visibility of the Constitution in the press was also measured by looking at the length of articles. Three possible options were identified: short, medium and long stories. 'Short' articles comprised a maximum of 300 words; 'medium' ones between 301 and 800, while all stories containing more than 801 words were classified as 'long'. While it would have been interesting to add information such as page number and section of publication as additional indicators of the visibility of the issue, the use of electronic archives meant that this information was not available for all of the articles. For this reason, and to ensure consistency across the sample, the analysis had to be limited to the volume and length of stories.

Depth and analysis. As discussed in Chapter 2, the share of analytical articles as well as the relative depth of coverage were treated as two possible indicators of the overall 'quality' of coverage. The analytical capacity of coverage was measured in terms of the aggregate numbers stories expressing a

judgment or opinion versus those limited to the factual reporting of news on the ECT. Analytical pieces were easily distinguishable from news reporting by their positioning in the different sections of newspapers, notably in the 'opinion', 'comment' or 'analysis' sections. In addition, they were recognisable for their evaluative tone.

The balance between the coverage of 'substantive issues' and more trivial or matters may be perceived as a plausible indicator of news quality (Scammell, 2005: 209). For this reason, the depth of coverage was considered as another indicator of the quality of the media's discourse on the Constitution. Readers may in fact be influenced not only by the number of stories published on a given issue or by their length, but also by the degree of depth with which information is presented. The 'depth' variable was operationalised by examining the focus of coverage on substantive, detailed aspects of the Constitution as opposed to stories that contained more 'superficial' references to its signature, ratification and so forth. This process basically consisted in adding up all articles focusing on general aspects of the ECT (such as its signature or the method and date of its ratification). In a second step, the number of stories dealing with substantive issues or detailed aspects of the Treaty (like specific provisions or its impact on national institutions) was subtracted from the number of general ones. This created a scale ranging from -2 (most general) to +2 (deepest).[35]

Tone. The tone of coverage was measured by looking at negative and positive evaluations of the Constitution. This variable was operationalised by examining actors' direct quotes in reference to the Treaty; by assessing whether journalists' language and phrasing was predominantly negative or positive; and generally by evaluating whether the stories expressed a negative, positive or neutral judgement. Following this first qualitative step, the tone of news was measured through the focus of coverage (Appendix 3B). The first step of this process consisted in adding up all positive references to the Treaty. In a second step, all negative references to the Treaty were subtracted from the positive ones. This created a summative index scale ranging from -2 (very negative) to +2 (very positive). The scale was used to calculate the average tone of coverage for each country and timeframe.

[35] See Appendix 3B for details on the operationalisation of depth and focus of coverage

Polarisation. The polarisation of coverage was gauged by looking at changes in the standard deviation (SD) of the tone variable described above. The higher the standard deviation; the farther from neutrality and the greater the degree of polarisation in the news.

Focus. As discussed in Chapter 2, measures such as the volume and length of stories may provide a first indication of the salience of issues. Also, it seemed important to establish how much analysis the issue managed to attract, and assess the degree of depth and the tone with which it was presented. However, for a study of content to be thorough one also needs to assess what issues or subjects captured the media's attention. As mentioned, this information does not only provide a useful indicator of the quality of a debate (Scammell, 2005), but may also be interpreted in light of the recent literature on 'second-order coverage'.[36] For the purpose of this study, the focus of coverage was coded for its two main subjects (i.e. what and whom) out of a list of 75 topics (see methodological Appendix 3B). Using the same procedure described for the 'depth' and 'tone' of coverage, each possible focus was considered on two important scales: 'European versus national'; and 'economic versus political'. Summative indices constructed on a scale from -2 to +2 allowed me to gauge how European, domestic or economically focused each article was (Appendix 3C).

4. Interviews

Following a description of the content analysis, this section turns to the interview 'part' of this study. To begin, why interview Brussels correspondents? The aim of the interview section was twofold. First, it served a theory-building purpose, assessing the plausibility of the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. More specifically, its objective was to test the validity of the claim that referendums can affect press coverage through two key mechanisms: a) by acting as a bridge between the European and the domestic levels, and b) by helping to polarise domestic political elites, increasing political competition and the potential for crisis. Secondly, it aimed to qualitatively test the robustness

[36] e.g. in the case of 'domestic versus European focus'.

of the statistical results, providing explanations for the patterns of coverage observed in the content analysis.

The choice to focus exclusively on EU correspondents was dictated primarily by the fact that they are directly responsible for covering European affairs. Whilst domestic news editors may play an important role in determining what pieces get published, Brussels-based reporters enjoy a significant degree of editorial freedom and are responsible for both proposing and framing EU topics. A preliminary conversation with one British correspondent revealed that whilst the overall 'line' of individual newspapers is decided in editorial meetings, individual journalists are in charge of actually choosing what to cover. In addition, the importance of Brussels-based journalists has increased in recent years – with their numbers almost doubling between 1990 and 2002 alone (Meyer, 2002). This is indicative of the increased importance of EU affairs on the domestic news agendas and has marked a change from the 'old days' in which reporting from Brussels was about the simple reporting of technical (and often dry) information (Meyer, 2007).

Returning to the explanation of the interview process, it must be said that qualitative interviewing is famously known as a 'technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are perspectives or viewpoints on events other than those of the person initiating the interview'.[37] As a research methodology, interviewing has several advantages. For instance, it enables researchers to investigate the research questions and context in greater depth, allowing individual attitudes and perceptions to come to the surface. Moreover, it is particularly versatile, and may be used as 'an end in itself, providing an in-depth description of a specific phenomenon (Gaskell, 2000). Also, it may be employed to generate a theoretical framework for further research, and may serve as a tool to generate empirical data by qualitatively testing hypotheses.

Researchers typically have a choice between 'individual' versus 'group' interviewing. Usually, however, social scientists and academics choose 'individual' or 'in-depth' interviews, whilst 'focus

[37] Farr, 1982 in Gaskell, 2000.

groups' are more commonly used in commercial research (Gaskell, 2000). In-depth interviews basically consist of one-to-one conversations between two individuals lasting an average of one hour. Often, however, this is not the case and questions are asked 'on the spot'. Trust between the two parties is an essential component of the interview process, and researchers typically devote the first and last minutes of the conversation to putting the respondent at ease, thanking him or her, providing information on confidentiality, recordings and so forth. In-depth interviews usually generate large volumes of data, with scripts sometimes running to 15 pages per session (Gaskell, 2000). Because of this, individual researchers usually limit their sample size to a maximum of 15-20 respondents

Bearing in mind these methodological and practical considerations, I chose to use in-depth interviews to qualitatively assess whether and how referendums could be expected to affect news coverage of the EU. In addition, interviews with Brussels correspondents would allow us to find out more about journalists' opinions on the current state of EU reporting, assessing their perceptions of the widely-debated 'communication deficit'. These discussions, it was hoped, would also allow us to establish whether journalists view the current state of communication about Europe as problematic. Finally, I was also interested in establishing what correspondents perceived as the main 'drivers' of the European public sphere, understanding what it would take for Europe to feature more regularly in the media's agenda.

In order to gain a better understanding of the 'ingredients' of EU debates, in-depth interviews were carried out in Brussels with sixteen political correspondents – four from each of the countries included in this study. The sample included journalists working for the following newspapers: The Times, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Sun; Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, L'Humanité; El Mundo, El Pais, ABC, Cinco Dias; as well as Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica; La Stampa; and Il Sole 24 Ore. [38] While the degree of seniority ranged from two to twenty years of experience, all of the journalists had had first-hand experience in covering the European constitutional process between 2003 and 2005. It is worth noting that the majority of correspondents were men, with a minority of women from Spain

[38] With the exception of British tabloid 'The Sun' which did not have a Brussels-based correspondent at the time of interview.

and Italy. While gender-based representation can be an important demographic consideration, it was felt that the purpose of this research would be best-served by ensuring representation across the sixteen newspapers, irrespectively of whether correspondents were male or female.

Table 3.3 The Interview Sample: Brussels Correspondents

Interview	Gender	Country	Source	Length
Journalist 1	Male	France	Monde	55 min
Journalist 2	Male	France	Liberation	90 min
Journalist 3	Male	France	Figaro	54 min
Journalist 4	Male	France	Humanite	50 min
Journalist 5	Male	Italy	CDS	62 min
Journalist 6	Male	Italy	Repubblica	65 min
Journalist 7	Female	Italy	Stampa	50 min
Journalist 8	Female	Italy	Sole 24 Ore	48 min
Journalist 9	Female	Spain	Mundo	62 min
Journalist 10	Male	Spain	Pais	52 min
Journalist 11	Male	Spain	ABC	56 min
Journalist 12	Male	Spain	5 Dias	45 min
Journalist 13	Male	UK	Times	60 min
Journalist 14	Male	UK	Guardian	50 min
Journalist 15	Male	UK	FT	47 min
Journalist 16*	Male	UK	Sun	40 min

* Note: no permanent Brussels correspondent; interview carried out in London

The interview process took place on two separate visits to Brussels. All of the interviews were conducted face to face and were semi-structured. This means that the overall structure was dictated by a number of questions guiding the conversation. Yet, the discussion was flexible enough to allow interviewees to elaborate on any collateral points that they felt were relevant to the topic. The interview questions were designed to serve as a framework for the discussion, guiding it in the desired direction and keeping it relevant to the scope of the project. The questions were organised into three main categories. The first set of points was fairly general and concerned the journalists' background. Aside from providing useful contextual information these were designed to put respondents at ease and initiate the conversation. The second set of questions were aimed at getting a better understanding of the drivers of EU coverage, drawing on the existing literature and generally focusing on any obstacles or barriers to greater political debate and communication. Questions in this section

were also designed to gain a better understanding of journalists' role and degree of responsibility in this complex process. Finally, the third set of questions were aimed at 'digging deeper' into journalists' work perceptions of the European Constitution. In particular, they were designed to explore the relationship between referendums and news coverage of the Constitution. Bearing this in mind, some of the questions were modified and tailored to suit individual national contexts (Appendix 3D)

The conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed. In a subsequent step, transcripts were processed by means of a qualitative content analysis involving several stages. These consisted of an initial reading of the texts, during which salient statements were highlighted and prepared for further explanation and analysis. A selection of the salient excerpts was then organised thematically. For instance, all statements dealing with the French referendum campaign were clustered together, essentially 'condensing' large volumes of data into key categories or 'highlights'. Finally, the themes which emerged from this process were organised so that they would 'tell a story'. The key findings from this multi-step process are presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

5. Qualitative Content Analysis

The quantitative content analysis discussed above was the main methodological tool used to test the study's core hypotheses. However, it should be mentioned that a qualitative content analysis was also carried out on a subsample of the data (see Chapter 6). This was done in an attempt to 'dig deeper' into the content of individual newspapers during the two referendum campaigns. The purpose of this analysis was to corroborate the statistical findings deriving from the quantitative part of the thesis, whilst at the same time taking a closer, qualitative look at the presentation of the Constitution in the press. The need for this type of analysis emerged from the statistical findings presented in Chapter 5, particularly with regards to the emergence of a trans-national discourse during the French referendum.

This part of the thesis focused exclusively on news coverage of the ECT during timeframe 4 and 5, which coincided with the French and Spanish referendum campaigns. The analysis focused on a 10% subsample of news stories drawn from each of the countries and for each of the two timeframes (T4 N = 81; T5 N = 87). The multi-step process involved reading through the entire text corpus, highlighting and extracting significant passages. In a second step, the relevant excerpts were organised on the basis of the variables described in Chapter 2. Thus, the information was structured so as to provide a qualitative illustration of any changes in terms of visibility, analysis, tone and focus of coverage during the Spanish and French referendum campaigns.

6. Conclusion

This Chapter has explained the research design and methodology used to test the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2. The thesis follows a mixed-method approach to combine the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The empirical part of the thesis essentially draws on three distinct but complementary methodologies: in-depth interviews, as well as a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis. The data for the content analysis consisted of news stories about the ECT, published during five salient phases of the Constitutional process by four British, four French, four Italian and four Spanish newspapers. Two of the timeframes coincided with the IGC or negotiation phase of the process; one – the signature – acted as transition, while two additional timeframes were drawn from the ratification phase, covering the Spanish and French referendum campaigns.

The Chapter has started with a description of the data and sample, attempting to justify the selection of the countries, newspapers and timeframes studied in this thesis. The subsequent section has dealt with the choice of a mixed-method approach or research design, while the remainder of the Chapter has described the three methodologies in greater depth. This Chapter concludes the first part of this dissertation. As a reminder, Chapter 1 has introduced the importance of studying European political communication, linking it to the current EU democratic malaise. Aside from discussing the key

theoretical concepts and background, the first Chapter has briefly defined the scope of the present research and specified the overarching research question of the dissertation. Chapter 2, on the other hand, has proposed a theoretical explanation of EU news coverage, explaining the mechanisms by which referendums are expected to affect the media's coverage of EU affairs. Chapter 2 has also introduced a set of testable hypotheses and theoretical variables, the operationalisation of which was outlined in the present Chapter.

Part two of the thesis will present the results of the empirical analysis carried out to test the hypothes developed in Chapter 2. The empirical part of the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 4 will present the results of the interviews carried out with Brussels correspondents, qualitatively testing the validity of the theoretical assumptions and exploring journalists' viewpoints on a number of 'patterns' of coverage. The idea behind it is also to a get an 'insider's perspective' on the drivers of EU coverage, testing whether the presence of a referendum affected their work on the constitutional process. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings from the quantitative content analysis, comparing patterns of coverage in 'referendum' and 'non-referendum' countries, and reporting any differences in terms of the visibility, quality, tone and focus of coverage across the different newspapers and timeframes. Building on these results, Chapter 6 of the thesis will take a closer, qualitative look at the content of coverage during the French and Spanish referendum campaigns, examining the emergence of a trans-national media discourse during the French referendum. Finally, Chapter 7 will conclude the thesis with a summary of the key findings and their possible implications for our understanding of European political communication and European legitimacy and democracy.

CHAPTER 4 – JOURNALISTS, REFERENDUMS, AND EU NEWS COVERAGE

'I am trying to write more about Europe, but I have to make it "sexy". If it's not "sexy" it won't sell'

~Journalist 7

This Chapter is concerned with understanding the 'work perceptions' of Brussels correspondents covering the European Constitutional process. More specifically, it aims to present their views on the challenges of covering Europe, the pre-requisites for a more regular debate, and on the role played by referendums in helping achieve a greater flow of information about the EU. By focusing on these three points, the Chapter hopes to achieve two main objectives. First, it qualitatively tests the proposition developed in Chapter 2 that referendums can affect the volume, depth, format and focus of coverage, leading to a European public sphere. Secondly, it serves a theory-building purpose, assessing the plausibility of the theoretical framework of the dissertation. More specifically, it helps to test the validity of the claim that referendums may affect press coverage by a) linking the European and domestic levels and b) polarising national political spectrums.

This Chapter is organised into three parts. Section 4.1 begins by discussing the dynamics and characteristics of Brussels-based 'pack journalism'. Section 4.2 moves on to the results of the sixteen interviews, focusing on the more general aspects relating to EU media coverage. Section 4.3 focuses on journalists' experience of covering the European constitutional process. This section highlights the effects of referendums on the volume and 'quality' of communication during the Treaty's ratification. Finally, Section 4.4 provides a brief overview of the main findings, discussing their relevance for the EU political communication research agenda and linking them to the remainder of the thesis.

4.1 The Brussels Press Corps

Brussels-based journalists play an important role in the EU political process. They are in fact responsible for presenting EU news to their audiences 'at home', acting as a bridge between the European and domestic levels. For this reason, Brussels correspondents are sometimes presented as

agents of Europeanisation (Lecheler, 2008). The Brussels press corps is also unique for its access to first-hand news and information about the EU political process (Gerhards, 1993; Baisnée, 2002). These among other factors have contributed to a growing interest in their work, which explains the recent increase in the number of academic studies on the subject.

Yet, with a few notable exceptions (de Vreese, 2001b, 2003; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005) much of the existing evidence comes from single-country studies, lacks a cross-national comparative element, or is limited to a very small number of cases. Nonetheless, early studies (Morgan, 1995; Gavin, 2001) have suggested that the relationship between correspondents and EU institutions is often problematic and exacerbated by the technical nature of the issues and lack of orientation training offered to correspondents. The working dynamics of the Brussels press corps have also been examined by Schudson (2003) who argued that their work differs from that of the Washington press corps because journalists face the challenge of covering decisions taken by a supranational entity. While in 'pack journalism' reporters have a tendency to emphasise similar angles and viewpoints, Brussels correspondents differ significantly from Washington correspondents. The major difference between these two types of pack journalism lies in the necessity to balance the perspectives of their news organisation and audiences, with their personal standpoint on European integration (Schudson, 2003). While these are important considerations, they do not account for the diverse journalistic style in which issues are portrayed.

Examining perceptions of Europe 'in the newsroom', de Vreese (2003) found that the complexity of EU issues, the general lack of interests by both journalists and audiences, as well as the public's limited knowledge on the EU were amongst the most challenging aspects of EU reporting. Moreover, his analysis concluded that tensions between elites as well as clear political or economic consequences were the main news selection criteria in the British, Danish and Dutch media. While limited to these three countries and focused on the 1999 EP elections, his findings also suggested that European elections were not deemed to 'have sufficient intrinsic importance or interest to yield coverage per se' (de Vreese, 2003: 75). With regards to the news coverage of the European Constitution, the only

available evidence on the news production process comes from the work of Gleissner and de Vreese (2005), which looked at coverage of the Convention process by the British, Danish and German media. Whilst it draws on a small sample of journalists (N = 4) their analysis points to the role of 'key events' and a 'clear linkage to the nation state' as vehicles to bring the EU into the media's spotlight. This is consistent with earlier findings (de Vreese, 2003), which had suggested that news editors' perception of EU affairs as 'non-issues' might partly explain their low visibility in the news.

In line with earlier studies (Morgan, 1995; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005), the journalists interviewed for this research confirmed spending most of their day in close proximity to the 'EU headquarters' in Brussels, notably the area surrounding Place Schumann. The majority of the press agencies visited during the two field trips to Brussels were based within the international press centre known as the 'Residence Palace', located across the road from the European Commission building, Berlaymont. This, it was claimed, allows them easy access to their official source of information – the European Commission. There, journalists are invited to attend a daily press Conference, jokingly referred to by one correspondent as the 'midday mass' (Journalist 7). Also referred to as an 'information bazaar' (Baisnée, 2002), the conference basically consists of a detailed news briefing, during which all the correspondents are presented with the day's news on policy and other matters. The process is commonly perceived as quite 'detailed' and 'boring' (Journalist 6), except for the Q&A portion of the session, during which journalists have the opportunity to 'dig deeper' and ask any country-specific questions they might have. Yet, even the so-called 'question time' is perceived as rather dull by a majority of correspondents, who reported having to 'sit through' the discussion of issues that they may not be interested in (Journalist 9).

Despite these observations, correspondents generally felt that the lunchtime briefing was a useful starting point, providing them with the basic facts on which to base their stories. However, the fact that everybody has access to the same information is perceived as somewhat problematic in that it does not make for 'very interesting journalism' (Journalist 14). Journalists leave the briefing with the task of finding an 'interesting twist' or an angle that might differentiate their story from that of their

colleagues. In order to do so they rely on the contacts and sources they have developed over the years (Journalist 2).[39] As stated by another correspondent, one needs to 'get out' and get his or her 'hands dirty' if one wants to write a 'half-decent' story (Journalist 7). Given that EU pieces are intrinsically hard to sell and generally fail to excite the masses, going the 'extra mile' to find an interesting angle typically 'pays off' by increasing the chances of the story being accepted for publication (Journalist 13). This might explain why since the 1990's major newspapers have had permanent correspondents posted in Brussels. As pointed out by one of the journalists, newspapers who don't have someone in Brussels either get second hand information, or 'sit at their desks and write about what they think would sell, such as "straight cucumbers", "bananas" and so forth' (Journalist 14). It is also worth mentioning that many of the journalists interviewed during this study reported being in based in Brussels 'out of passion' and 'personal interest', because the post is generally not perceived as particularly exciting or rewarding. Despite the fact that Brussels-based journalists benefit from a close social network, life in Brussels is often seen as 'safe' and 'pleasant' but somewhat 'predictable' and 'boring' (Journalist 6).

In terms of demographics, only four of the journalists included in this sample (25%) were under 40 years of age. The remaining majority was older, and 80% of correspondents had been based in Brussels for three years or more. This suggests that a majority of EU journalists are quite senior, and that despite the supposedly 'unexciting' nature of the job, the position holds some degree of prestige.[40] After a brief overview of the key characteristic of the Brussels press corps and a discussion of some of the 'logistical' aspects of their working conditions, the next two sections will present the key findings related to their coverage of EU affairs and more specifically, of the Constitutional process and its referendum campaigns.

[39] For instance, during an interview with one of the correspondents he received a phone-call from one of his sources alerting him to an unexpected but interesting development. The journalist said this was quite common and a much-preferred source of information to the daily briefings.

[40]Having said this, it is worth noting that during the second visit to Brussels I had the opportunity to attend a conference organised by the International Press Centre for young reporters aspiring to a career in Brussels. This might indicative of a growing interest in the EU from young people and professionals from many of the member states.

4.2 Covering Europe: General Trends

4.2.1 *The Euro-domestic link*

Journalists explicitly stated that European issues had to be perceived as 'directly relevant' to national audiences in order to make it into the paper. When asked about their news selection criteria, correspondents reported focusing exclusively on matters that were directly relevant to their readers and had an impact on citizens' lives. As noted by one Spanish correspondent:

> We don't tend to cover the EU *per se*. For us [journalists] to talk about [Europe] there needs to be some kind of angle linking it with national politics. That is because people get bored of things that are not directly relevant to them. They don't want to hear about the internal workings of EU institutions.[41]

This was also picked up on by one British correspondent, who argued that readers' appetite for issues relating to institutional architecture had dissipated since the early days of European integration.[42] If they want to write about European affairs, journalists 'should' talk about issues that directly affect the people. This trend might be partly explained by a growth in demand-driven news,[43] but also by journalists' own perceptions of their role as 'EU correspondents'. As illustrated by the words of a senior British correspondent:

> The debate is and should be about how the issues here [in Brussels] relate to the national public. We are here to report and interpret EU news for a national public. The question is whether we write following a domestic agenda or vice versa.[44]

A similar view was shared by Italian journalists, who also acknowledged the impossibility of having a 'European' debate untangled from national issues. Unlike British correspondents, however, Italians

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[41] Journalist 9.

[42] Journalist 3.

[43] Journalists generally stressed the importance of 'writing with your audience in mind', and added that 'some' news selection is natural. One senior Italian correspondent (Journalist 7) also referred to a speech by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, in which he argued that journalists and editors are too 'out of touch' with their audiences, and that if one does not follow what readers want one risks endangering the entire news broadcasting profession. This view differs greatly from the traditional perceptions of the role of journalists as 'watchdogs' of the democratic process.

[44] Journalist 13.

did not see this as desirable, and expressed their frustration with 'Europe' being regularly manipulated and distorted to 'further national political objectives'. In their opinion, this trend has been exacerbated by globalisation, which has revamped existing protectionisms and nationalistic tendencies (Journalist 8). Italian correspondents also offered the view that there can be no real debate about 'Europe' until the EU takes the 'quality leap' from economic to greater political integration (Journalist 7).

One Italian journalist expressed his frustration with constantly having to over-emphasise this Euro-domestic link and stated that:

> The fact that fifty percent of decisions taken in Brussels become national legislation should be 'enough of a link' for EU issues to be seen as relevant to citizens... This alone should be enough for EU issues to be treated as national rather than foreign policy issues. This is the heart of the matter, and this is what should be explained. If you want to write with your readers in mind, then you should write about what Europe is doing for them.[45]

On the whole, the journalists interviewed for the purpose of this study generally acknowledged the difficulty of covering the EU in itself. All agreed that national newspapers focus almost exclusively on stories that are perceived as directly relevant or interesting for their national audiences. While some recognised that this 'Euro-domestic' link is intrinsic to most EU policies, the majority acknowledged that 'mixing' EU news with controversial national issues prompts more coverage and debate.

It was also interesting to hear that according to correspondents, pressure to emphasise the link between the EU and domestic levels seemed to come from editorial decisions taken 'back home'. As pointed out by one British correspondent, journalists based in Brussels have a tendency to 'go native' after spending some time in the EU capital (Journalist 13). This can be quite inconvenient, particularly for certain publications. For instance, some years ago British tabloid The Sun had decided to appoint a permanent correspondent to Brussels. However, the decision was reversed after merely six months,

[45] Journalist 7.

reportedly because the journalist's pieces had become significantly less negative and sensationalist – something that did not fit with the paper's editorial line and commercial objectives.

4.2.2 *European or national coverage?*

As suggested in Section 4.2.1, in order to make it into the press EU issues have to be perceived as relevant to the nation-state and to audiences at home. This difficulty to cover European affairs 'per se' is sometimes presented as problematic. For instance, recent studies (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007) have suggested that news coverage of the 1999 EP elections was a 'second rate coverage' because the actors featured in the news were predominantly national, as were the locations from which the news was reported. As discussed in Chapter 2, this research is interested in finding out whether this also applied to coverage of the Constitutional process. During the interviews, Journalists were asked to comment on whether and why they felt the need to apply a 'national lens' to their coverage of this issue. Yet, many seemed somewhat surprised that a distinction should be made between the two levels (EU versus national). As stated by a senior French correspondent:

> I don't think the distinction between the European and national levels is appropriate. The two are really the same thing, and can perfectly well co-exist. Europe is made of nation states . . . so it is only natural for us to talk about Europe in a way that interests people and is directly relevant to them (Journalist 1).

Along the same lines, a British correspondent added:

> I don't think there is such a thing as a 'European' debate. Europe is made of nation-states. It is ridiculous to expect national issues, people and actors to be absent from the debate (Journalist 14).

In another journalist's view, the fact that the EU institutional set-up is still evolving makes reporting on the EU per se particularly difficult. Brussels is 'not as a place to report from, but as a process to report on' (Journalist 15). Similarly, another British journalist expressed his frustration:

> You ask me why European issues are framed nationally, but how else is it supposed to be? Also, what do people mean when they say there is no debate about Europe? What kind of Europe are we talking about? The Commission? The Parliament? The Council? I would say there is a debate about Europe but it is tangled up with national issues. And that is ok. I do not think that is likely to change. At least in Britain (Journalist 14).

Generally speaking, journalists found it difficult to distinguish between EU and domestically-focused coverage. Working for national publications makes the intertwining of the two dimensions a necessity. This finding is quite interesting, and raises several questions. First, it leads one to wonder whether the second-order model is really realistic. In other words, can one really expect to see expect to see a 'type' of coverage focused exclusively on European issues? While this might emerge over time as national public spheres become increasingly Europeanised, expecting media debates to be dominated by EU-level issues and actors might be premature. Also, is it more desirable for the EU political process to be covered in conjunction with national consideration, or not debated at all?

4.2.3 *'If it's not sexy it won't sell'*

Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 have indicated that in order to capture the media attention, EU issues must be relevant to national audiences. Evidence has also suggested that journalists do not see the 'intertwinement' of EU and national topics as problematic. Instead, they argue, this facilitates their job, prompting greater coverage. While this is an important point, it fails to explain why coverage of the EU political process remains so irregular. In other words, if relevance to the citizens were the sole criterion for the selection and publication of EU stories, then one might expect to see a greater volume of coverage, especially given that most of the policies formulated at the EU level have a tangible effect on the national dimension. Thus, the presence of this 'Euro-domestic' link appears to be merely *one* of the 'ingredients' for greater media coverage of the EU political process.

Results from the in-depth interviews with European journalists suggest that if EU stories are not 'sexy', they will not sell. It follows that if they do not sell, they will be effectively rejected by news editors and, consequently, will not be published. As noted by one Italian correspondent:

> If you think people are interested in policies you are seriously mistaken . . . the biggest challenge is how to make Europe sexy. It is ok for the Commission to be boring; it is there to make the machine work. However, if your aim is to have a debate then you have to find a twist, an interesting angle . . . otherwise it won't sell, and if it doesn't sell it won't make it into the paper (Journalist 7).

This point was also touched upon by a senior Spanish correspondent who stated that one of the reasons behind the limited media coverage of the EU political process is that:

> EU politicians are not very 'glamorous'. This is understandable because they are consensus-seeking figures and consequently they tend to be very 'safe', diplomatic individuals. Take Prodi or Barroso . . .they are hardly glamorous. We have to find a way to inject more controversy into the EU political process. The EU is mostly about consensus . . . but what sells is controversy (Journalist 10).

As noted by a British correspondent 'complaining about this is like complaining about the weather'. Several other journalists appeared resigned to the fact that 'that is simply the way journalism works' (Journalist 15).[46] Others found the situation frustrating, arguing that the fact that EU stories are under constant pressure to be colourful and accessible leaves little room for a discussion on the things that 'really matter' (Journalist 3). [47]

Correspondents also criticised the general lack of popular interests in the EU political process, arguing that its technical nature does not make for interesting stories. One French journalist went as far as maintaining that the European Union is portrayed as a technical, bureaucratic machine because people

[46] As argued by one British journalist, a possible way around this problem might be communicating Europe through lobbies and interest groups. The EU has a potential for increased communication, but it should 'look at making headlines in *Farmers' Weekly*, rather than in *The Sun*.

[47] An example of this cited by the correspondent in question is that nobody ever 'bothers' to talk about how cooperation across EU member states has drastically decreased unemployment across member states.

are too afraid to talk about the 'real thing'. In his opinion, the lack of political will to get to the heart of the matter (i.e. the vision of a federal political union) means that the Europe is reduced to a soul-less, regulatory body (Journalist 2). Moreover, since the European Union lacks 'controversial politicians who get caught with prostitutes, we end up talking about "straight bananas and cucumbers" and all that nonsense' (Journalist 13).

4.2.4 *Elite polarisation, conflict and politicisation*

As discussed, there seems to be a consensus amongst journalist that in order to be covered and debated in the national media, EU issues such as the ECT need to have a) a national angle or link, and b) they need to be 'sexy'. This prompts the question: what makes Europe 'sexy' – or at least more interesting? Perhaps unsurprisingly, journalists unanimously cited conflict or the polarisation of political actors as the key drivers of EU press coverage. As stated here by a French correspondent:

> Polarisation makes our job easier because it makes the issue more interesting. It is also good because it gives us a chance to cover both sides of the coin. Aside from referendums and key Summits, this does not happen very often. Most of the time, it is difficult to write about Europe because it is not political enough . . . It is not that the media are not 'bothered' . . . The problem is that people are not interested in Europe unless there is some sort of conflict, or two sides fighting (Journalist 1).

This might be partly explained by the fact that correspondents find it easier to sell a negative story. British journalists in particular complained about newspapers being increasingly interested in commercial news rather than quality journalism. As reported by one correspondent, the current media ownership structure, increasingly driven by financial considerations, is not doing 'Europe' any favours (Journalist 14). Also, according to the same person, the principle that 'good news is no news' now holds truer than ever.

It was also interesting to note that, French, Italian and Spanish journalists felt the need to cover the 'human side' of Brussels. One Italian correspondent maintained that it is important to show that there is more to Europe than bureaucratic institutions. In her view, people have a tendency to forget that

Europe is about people; that it is 'about men and women . . .who mess up and make mistakes . . . but are united by a common vision of peace across the continent' (Journalist 7). While European institutions might provide the relevant framework or 'skeleton' for a piece, it is people who really 'make a story'. The idea that conflict and competition between high-level actors or individuals makes Europe more interesting was also stressed by a senior French correspondent:

> Technical Europe is boring. It doesn't inspire, it doesn't sell. No one cares about directives. I talk about people. Men and women, who argue and fight. People are under the illusion that Europe is not political but they are wrong. Europe is about competition, and it can be very political. It is not just a bureaucratic apparatus. People, money, power, competition . . . this helps. This is what people are interested in (Journalist 2).

The French, Spanish, Italian and British journalists interviewed in this study acknowledged that EU coverage and debate become intense in circumstances when 'Europe' becomes more political. Generally, however, it was felt that these opportunities are presently scarce. A British correspondent conceded that:

> More politicisation and competition would definitely help. At the moment, for instance, there is 'bugger all' happening. Sometimes even Commissioners have to be dragged – kicking and screaming – to their weekly meeting because there is so little going on and the stuff is so boring. There is definitely a need for more controversy, more conflict (Journalist 14).

Despite calls for a greater politicisation of the European Union and greater controversy, it must be said that journalists generally reported not being interested in portraying 'Europe' in negative terms. This was felt particularly strongly by Italian and Spanish correspondents. While they acknowledged that conflict and the polarisation of political actors makes news more interesting, they also admitted that Spanish and Italian newspapers (like their respective political elites) rarely publish negative stories about Europe – sometimes to the extent that there is very little debate.

4.3 Covering the European Constitutional Process

As discussed at the start of this Chapter, the second set of interview questions dealt specifically with newspaper coverage of the ECT.[48] Particular emphasis was placed on the ratification stage of the constitutional process, focusing on variations in coverage between different political contexts. Nested within a broader discussion on EU coverage, this second group of questions focused on explaining possible variations between 'referendum' and 'non-referendum' countries. Their aim was also to understand why the French and the Spanish referendum campaigns were covered so differently both domestically and by the international press.

4.3.1 *Referendums and the visibility of the Constitution*

The qualitative evidence presented in Part 1 of this Chapter has suggested that a link to the nation-state and the degree of elite polarisation are the two strongest predictors of EU press coverage. When asked whether a holding referendum on the ratification of the ECT had any effect on the amount of attention devoted to the issue, journalists stated that indeed, direct citizen involvement affected coverage in the following ways. First and foremost, journalists perceived referendums as one of the 'most obvious' or 'strongest' link to the nation-state level. In other words, directly consulting citizens meant that the ECT went from being portrayed as 'another treaty' to a topic that directly concerned readers. When asked whether the debate in France would have been so heated without a referendum, a senior political correspondent stated:

> No way. The fact that citizens were involved gave us a reason to talk about Europe. Having a referendum on the Constitution meant that the question was automatically relevant to French citizens. This is not something that can be taken for granted as it is rarely the case with EU issues (Journalist 1).

This was also felt by Spanish and British journalists, who confirmed that 'bringing voters into the picture' is a way of connecting Europe to national audiences. Moreover, it was argued that the presence of this link provides an opportunity to write more about EU issues (Journalist 9). It is

[48] See Chapter 3 for a complete list of interview questions.

interesting to note that correspondents felt the need to 'justify' covering the EU and reported needing an 'excuse' or 'pretext' to get European stories into the papers.

Journalists also explained that holding a referendum on the ECT increased the volume of coverage because the polarisation of political elites organised in a Yes and a No campaign created a political context in which debate could occur. As stated by a French correspondent, 'the great thing about referendums is that you have a Yes and a No campaign . . . you have people taking sides'.

> When you hold a referendum you have a lot more political investment from all sides. The issue becomes more salient. On the other hand, when you simply put it through parliamentary ratification channels it is more likely to "sail through" – so there is little talk about it. Look at Italy and Germany – papers only devoted a tiny paragraph to it (Journalist 1).

The need for more political engagement was also felt by British journalists, one of whom accepted that while the print media had a key role to play in informing the public on the issue, the 'burden' of this task should be shared with national politicians. Explaining the Treaty (as well as EU issues in general) was perceived to be primarily the responsibility of politicians, who 'should be sending out varied and balanced messages on what the issue is about'. The absence of 'political will' from national politicians was seen as a primary cause for the temporary and sporadic nature of EU press coverage. As emphasised by one Spanish journalist, 'EU correspondents can write as much as you want, but if there is no political will to continue the discussion at home, the debate is likely to die' (Journalist 10).

4.3.2 *Referendums and the quality of coverage*

As suggested in Chapter 2, by explicitly drawing a link between the Constitution and their audiences and engaging political elites, referendums may increase the visibility of the ECT in quality newspapers. The evidence presented thus far in this Chapter has confirmed that referendums may indeed raise the saliency of EU issues, providing journalists with an opportunity to write more about them. Chapter 2 had also hypothesised that holding a referendum would influence the 'quality' of news about the Constitution, prompting more analysis and a greater depth of coverage.

When asked to comment on the plausibility of these assumptions, journalists began by explaining that news reporting remains the primary focus of their work as correspondents. In the words of a Spanish journalist, 'most days it's just straight news' (Journalist 9).[49] This, however, appears to change when citizens are brought into the picture (i.e. during referendum campaigns). As stated by a French correspondent:

> When citizens are involved, there is a greater need for analysis and explanation. Detailed provisions of the Constitution can be quite technical and dry, so we make a special effort to simplify them for our readers and explain them in greater depth (Journalist 4).

Similarly, a Spanish journalist elaborated on the distribution of news reporting versus analysis by adding that:

> When there is something big like a referendum, we publish a double page. We report on the issue, and then add another analytical piece, or a Q&A – something to help citizens understand it better. The rule during referendums is: 'one descriptive piece, one analytical piece'. Most other days it's just factual news. There needs to be a pretext for more analysis; a valid justification for it (Journalist 9).

It was interesting to note that during their respective referendum campaigns, French and Spanish journalists' perception of their function as correspondents shifted from pure news reporting to a more explanatory or 'educational' role. In other words, journalists recognised the importance of balancing 'straight news' with greater depth and analysis in order to encourage readers' understanding of the issue. This was based on the realisation that 'if people need to vote on the issue, they should have enough information to form an opinion' (Journalist 1). In addition, correspondents felt that directly consulting citizens through a referendum meant that the issue became more immediately relevant and interesting to them. In turn, this increased their 'tolerance' for more detailed accounts of the EU political process. As succinctly put by one French correspondent, during referendums readers have a

[49] While the volume of coverage might be indicative of an issue's salience it appears intuitively reasonable to assume that the quality of coverage (analysis and depth) might play a key role in promoting public understanding of European affairs.

'higher threshold' and a 'bigger appetite' for deeper or more technical EU stories (Journalist 2). As suggested by a Spanish journalist, this is not something to be taken for granted because:

> Normally people are not interested in reading about the EU political process. This, changes during key summits and referendums, when there is a need for more detail, analysis and explanation. Because they are preceded by weeks of campaigning, referendums give us a chance to dig deeper and try to explain how the EU really works and what the issue is about (Journalist 10).

Generally speaking, interviewees welcomed referendums on the ECT as an opportunity to 'dig deeper', uncover controversy and discuss any unusual or interesting angles. In sum, evidence from in-depth interviews seems to support the claim that the 'referendum option' raised the saliency of the Constitution and consequently its visibility and depth on the pages of national broadsheets.

4.3.3 *Elite polarisation and the emergence of a European public sphere*

As hypothesised in Chapter 2, the French and Spanish referendum campaigns were expected to be treated differently by the press in other member states. More specifically, due to the higher degree of intensity and polarisation, French campaign was expected to prompt the emergence of 'trans-national' debates. Findings from the interviews suggest that indeed, the degree of polarisation may have a key role to play in this respect, and that the French campaign was perceived as more exciting than the Spanish one by Spanish newspapers.

Spanish journalists admitted to reporting more on the French vote because 'in Spain there was little conflict, tension, or competition' (Journalist 11). According to Spanish correspondents, this was due to the fact that the Spanish media, like national political elites, have a tradition of being very 'pro European' (Journalist 9). As a result, the possibility of Spain rejecting the ECT was never really taken seriously. The referendum was perceived as an 'easy win' (Journalist 10). As noted by one correspondent working for a major Spanish broadsheet:

> In Spain we had a lot of coverage but it was mostly one-sided and generally positive. That is because there was no real political debate to speak of. Rarely do we [Spanish journalists] publish negative coverage on Europe. Spain has benefited so much from European integration, that it feels some sort of 'allegiance' towards it. This might change over the next few years as we see EU subsidies going 'East' (Journalist 10).

Interestingly, correspondents attributed the one-sided nature of the Spanish campaign to the absence of engagement on the part of national politicians, rather than to a lack of interest or commitment on the part of the media.

> The problem is at home, not here. We wrote a lot, but then there was no political will to continue the debate at home. In Spain, all major political parties agreed on the issue. Also, both the government and the opposition don't care much about foreign policy – and the EU is still perceived as a foreign policy issue, not as a domestic one (Journalist 10).

On the whole, however, even Spanish journalists recognised that by comparison, politicians were far more mobilised during the referendum campaign than during the other timeframes of the constitutional process included in this study. Another correspondent pointed out that Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero is generally 'not very interested in Europe' and that even at Summits he 'does not bother to talk to his colleagues' (Journalist 10). While he was comparatively 'more active and involved during the referendum campaign', the absence of any real political opposition on this issue prevented the emergence of any real debate that could be sustained over time.

The French referendum campaign was different. The weeks preceding the referendum of 29 May 2005 gave rise to a lot of interest in the Treaty. More than 200 000 copies of the Constitution were sold in merely four months and political elites remained highly polarised even after the internal vote of the Parti Socialiste (PS) in 2004. According to one established French correspondent, the referendum marked the first real debate about Europe. Ironically, however, this led to the Treaty being rejected. In his view, the debate on the European Constitution in France was not a 'second order' debate. Also, it was not 'hijacked' by national issues.

> The debate preceding the 2005 referendum focused on the 'real issues' for the first time. That is why the Treaty got rejected. For the first time, people sensed what the 'real' Europe was about and said 'No' to what hadn't been said before. They said 'No' to the end of protectionism, to further political integration. People are not ready, and the 'real thing' terrifies. Aside from Chirac's personal unpopularity . . . this explains why the 'No' campaign was so strong . . . because it leveraged people's fears about what Europe really is (Journalist 2).

Playing 'devil's advocate', this particular correspondent went on to add that more debate about Europe might not necessarily lead to greater EU legitimacy. This may be due to the fact that citizens are not be prepared to 'face the truth' regarding the real nature of European Union, or put short-term personal interests aside to further a common vision of integration and peace across the continent. However, he conceded that whilst it may be too early to have a 'high-level' debate about the vision of Europe, a greater flow of information and communication could be part of the 'solution' to Europe's problems. This point was also underlined by one Italian correspondent, who stated that 'the objective is not to get people to write nice things about Europe. The goal is to get people talking full-stop' (Journalist 7).

Evaluating the reasons behind the French rejection of the ECT goes beyond the scope of this study.[50] What is interesting, however, is the possibility that the debate which preceded the French referendum might have transcended national borders, prompting the emergence of a European public sphere. While this proposition remains to be tested in Chapter 6, it was interesting to hear journalists' remarks that until the salient French referendum there had been very little talk about the details of the Treaty itself (Journalists 1,2,6,7 and 14). As argued by some, the likelihood of a French rejection meant that the issue went from being perceived as a French domestic matter to one of Italian (and Spanish and British) concern (Journalist 7).

In the words of an Italian correspondent:

> The French campaign was really controversial, and that made it interesting. Also, it opened people's eyes to the fact that the Treaty's ratification could no longer be taken for granted. I think the polls really 'hit home' and for the first time people engaged with it. Readers wanted

[50] See Hobolt, 2005; de Vreese, 2005 for an analysis of the outcomes of the two votes.

> to know what the big deal was about . . . This gave us a chance to talk about both sides of the coin, and be more analytical about it (Journalist 8).

As underlined by another correspondent, 'in Italy Europe is like religion; it is simply not questioned . . . we do not have a debate *about* Europe, but a debate *with* Europe . . . that is not very interesting, and it is very difficult to talk about Europe when things are this murky' (Journalist 6). Again, the lack of competition and political will were seen as 'the biggest obstacles' to more frequent European debates (Journalist 8). This was perceived as stemming from the 'ignorance of politicians' and the fact that they are generally 'supportive' of the European project whilst simultaneously using the EU as a 'scapegoat' for everything that goes wrong domestically. To put it differently 'when something goes wrong it is Europe's fault. When something goes well they take all the credit' (Journalist 6). Many described the changes instigated by the French referendum as 'refreshing' and suggested that while their outcome may be 'problematic' for Europe, more referendums and generally more politicisation and polarisation would be highly desirable (Journalist 14).

As was the case in Italy and Spain, the French referendum campaign also prompted a change in the nature and amount of coverage published by British newspapers. In-depth interviews with British correspondents revealed that the French campaign may have been more visible internationally because it 'raised the stakes'. Prime Minister Blair had announced his intention to let the British people decide on the ratification of the Constitution by holding a referendum. However, by May 2005 the date of the ballot had yet to be set. According to one British journalist, the fact that the fate of the British referendum depended on the outcome of the French vote made the French campaign particularly interesting for British audiences. In his words, 'the outcome of the French referendum concerned us directly' (Journalist 13).

During the interviews, a British correspondent also noted that:

> While the French referendum was did not have a positive outcome for Europe, the fact that the campaign was so divisive and the outcome so uncertain got people interested. This is almost never the case (Journalist 14)

Thinking along the same lines, a second British correspondent also added that:

> Referendums in general are great because they create a political context which favours debate. The French campaign was a perfect example of this, and it worked in terms of getting people involved (Journalist 15).

On the whole, conversations with Brussels journalists suggest that the degree of elite polarisation may indeed play a key role in affecting news coverage across national borders, possibly leading to the emergence of a European discourse or public sphere. These results are encouraging and provide an initial, qualitative test of the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2. While further evidence will be presented in Chapter 6, it appears that the French campaign may have been covered more systematically by the press in other member states because it was more divisive. Moreover, the possibility of a rejection and the fact that so much was at stake in the outcome of the French vote raised the saliency of the issue beyond the French public sphere.

4.4 Discussion and Conclusions

Interview results provide some initial support for the proposition that holding a referendum can affect news coverage of European affairs, not only domestically but beyond national borders. According to the journalists interviewed for the purpose of this dissertation, scheduling a referendum can result in political contexts which are more conducive to coverage and debate. More specifically, referendums and their preceding campaigns appear to 'enshrine' the two key ingredients of a European public sphere: a direct link to the nation-state and polarised political spectrums.

With regard to the first 'ingredient', correspondents were explicitly clear that EU issues *must* have a direct link to national audiences in order to make it into the paper.[51] Holding a referendum on the ECT meant that the Constitutional issue became directly relevant to (e.g. French and Spanish) citizens, who were asked to vote on its ratification. This gave journalists an opportunity or 'excuse' to write more about it. Interestingly, the presence of a referendum also appeared to affect journalists' perceptions of their own role as Brussels correspondents, which shifted from a more traditional news reporting function to a more educational role. This also prompted an increase in analytical pieces and stories dealing with detailed aspects of the Treaty. Journalists generally agreed that referendums acted as a bridge between the national and European levels, raising the saliency of the issue and prompting more coverage and debate.

As mentioned, the presence of conflict and tensions between political actors was the second key 'ingredient' of EU coverage. Correspondents confirmed that by creating opportunities for the polarisation of national elites ('Yes' and 'No' campaigns) referendums on the ECT brought a much-needed element of 'glamour' to a rather 'dull' EU Treaty. The issue became 'sexier' and according to journalists 'sexiness' is what ultimately sells a story. The importance of competition also echoes with the work of de Vreese, Lauf and Peter (2007) who argued that the degree of elite polarisation may serve as a predictor of the volume of EU coverage. Moreover, it highlights the need for a greater politicisation of the EU political process, making the development of a 'EU political soap opera' even more pressing (see Hix, 2008).

In sum, the investigation into the perspectives of Brussels correspondents provides additional support for the finding that the European Union *per se* is rarely considered news worthy (de Vreese, 2003; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Journalists perceive the EU as a 'dull, distant and bureaucratic' apparatus which fails to interest or 'inspire' people. The role of conflict in making the EU more

[51] While one could argue that the majority of policies formulated at the EU level have direct consequences for the national legislative picture, this link must be clearly visible to the public. The issue must be perceived to be relevant to the people.

'glamorous' also provides a possible explanation for the prevalence of the 'conflict frame' and the overall 'negativity bias' observed in recent content analyses (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2001a).

The importance of elite polarisation highlighted another important point. Journalists attributed the irregular nature in EU press coverage to a lack of political will on the part of national actors. Reportedly, however, holding a referendum meant that political elites on both sides had to engage with the issue for several weeks (or months) at a time. This, they argued, gave them another opportunity to cover the topic in a more balanced way, approaching it from a variety of different angles.

To recapitulate, journalists 'complained' about the EU not being glamorous or 'sexy' enough to attract coverage on its own. The EU as a 'soulless' regulatory bureaucracy fails to 'sell'. In order for a EU story to be published, it must a) be perceived as relevant to national audiences, and b) involve some degree of conflict between political elites (the greater the tension, the better). According to correspondents, referendums are examples of situations where both of these conditions are simultaneously present. This, in turn, increases both the amount of media attention devoted to the issue and the share of analysis, as journalists feel the responsibility to explain the topic in greater detail to allow citizens to make an informed decision at voting time.

Brussels-based journalists also found it plausible that the highly salient French referendum campaign had an effect on the emergence of a trans-national EU coverage. In other words, the French referendum affected the way the issue was covered by British, Italian and Spanish correspondents. This was true in terms of the volume, depth and tone of coverage. The correspondents interviewed for the purpose of this research reported following the French campaign very closely first and foremost because of its divisive nature, and secondly because the possibility of a French 'No' had a very clear consequences for their respective national audiences. Because the outcome of the vote had the power to influence the course of the ratification process, the issue went from being a French domestic matter to one of British, Italian and Spanish concern, too. In this sense, referendums might indeed act as a

vehicle for a EU public sphere. However, it must be noted that journalists were sceptical about the notion of a genuinely 'European' debate. In their view, removing the current national lens from news coverage of EU issues is premature and unlikely to happen for as long as Europe is 'made of nation-states'. Also, if 'relevance to the nation-state' and the polarisation of national political elites are the main criteria governing news selection, expecting national issues and actors to be absent from the debate might be unreasonable. This is an interesting point, which requires further investigation and interpretation in light of the 'second-order' model. This observation also points towards a 'catch 22' situation and leads one to wonder whether it is better to have a debate about Europe that is 'tangled up' with national issues or no debate at all? Somewhat paradoxically, there is evidence to suggest that the closest thing resembling a EU-wide, trans-national debate was observed during the French referendum, at a time when the 'euro-domestic' link was felt most strongly by the journalists of the four countries included in this study.

In conclusion, this first empirical Chapter has provided valuable insights on journalists' perceptions of the current state of EU political communication. It has started with general observations on the working conditions of the Brussels press corps. Then, it has discussed journalists' opinions on the challenges and pre-requisites for a EU media discourse. Finally, it has presented their views on their work on the Constitutional process, focusing on the effects of referendums on newspaper coverage. The evidence presented in this Chapter appears to support the theoretical model developed in Chapter 2. Moreover, it provides some initial backing for the hypotheses that citizen engagement through referendums may affect the 'visibility' and 'quality', of EU coverage both domestically and trans-nationally. Whilst it seems to provide some backing for the theoretical framework of this dissertation, the qualitative data discussed up to this point is far from conclusive. Further empirical tests of the study's hypotheses are required and will be presented in Chapters 5 and 6 of the dissertation.

CHAPTER 5 – REFERENDUMS AND DOMESTIC COVERAGE OF THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUON

Chapter 4 has indicated that Brussels correspondents perceive a link to the nation-state and the presence of conflict and competition amongst political actors as the key prerequisites for EU coverage. When these conditions are not met, European affairs are rarely perceived as 'glamorous' or 'sexy' enough to capture the media's attention or warrant regular coverage. Due in part to growing commercial pressures, the mass media appear to be increasingly concerned with publishing stories that are perceived as strictly relevant to their readers, helping to sell large numbers of newspapers. According to the journalists interviewed in this study, referendums provide them with opportunities to write more about Europe, not only in terms of volume but quality-wise, too. The fact that citizens are called to vote on European integration makes journalists feel a greater responsibility to explain the issues in detail, enabling voters to make informed decisions in the polling booth. Perhaps most importantly, the polarisation of national elites at referendum time can raise the saliency of EU affairs, and the presence of a 'Yes' and 'No' campaign gives correspondents the chance to cover both sides of the debate.

This Chapter quantitatively tests the hypotheses developed in the first part of the thesis. Also, it measures whether the personal views and impressions of Brussels correspondents presented in Chapter 4 fit with the reality of coverage during the Constitutional process. The Chapter focuses exclusively on the effects of referendums on *domestic* coverage of the European Constitution. In other words, it examines whether they prompted any changes within the four national public spheres studied in this dissertation. Section 5.1 begins by measuring the degree of elite polarisation on the Constitutional Treaty across the four countries. Section 5.2 analyses changes in the format and style of the sixteen newspapers, assessing their differences and similarities in terms of average size, number of political stories, and EU pieces. This serves as a measure of their overall comparability and will provide crucial contextual information used to assess the effects of referendums on variables such as the volume and analysis of coverage. Section 5.3 presents the results of the content analysis, examining the volume, length, analytical capacity and focus of coverage.

5.1 Elite Polarisation and Party Stances on the European Constitution

As discussed in Chapter 2, aside from linking the EU and the nation-state levels, referendum campaigns create opportunities for the polarisation of national elites. We know that conflict and competition make EU issues more salient and that polarisation may be seen as a form of tension between two or more actors. Thus, I had expected that a polarised political spectrum would affect the amount and nature of news about the Constitution. Before examining changes in coverage, however, it is worth looking at the degree of polarisation observed in the four countries around the EU Constitution. Measuring the degree of polarisation is particularly relevant when assessing changes in coverage from a comparative perspective, examining the effects of the French and Spanish campaigns on the discourse of British and Italian newspapers.

Spain

Spain was the first member state to hold a consultative referendum on the ECT. While 76% of voters unambiguously approved the Constitution, electoral turnout on this occasion reached an all-time low (46%). The referendum of 20 February 2005 marked the first time Spanish people were directly consulted on the course of European integration since Spain's accession in 1986. Given Spain's relative lack of experience with EU referendums and direct democracy, the vote represented an opportunity to hold a public debate about Europe which involved citizens, elites, parties and the mass media. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Spain had traditionally been pro-European. By the 1990's, however, early signs of dissent began to be voiced by relatively minor political parties such as the extreme left Izquierda Unida (IU), which called for referendums to be held on the Maastricht and Nice Treaties. The possibility of holding a referendum on European integration, however, did not manifest itself until the conservative incumbent Partido Popular (PP) announced that Spanish citizens would be consulted on the ratification of the ECT. By February 2005, the conservative government was replaced by a socialist PSOE government led by President Zapatero. By being the first country to vote on the issue, Spain had intended to lead other countries 'by example'. The possibility of the Treaty not going through appeared minimal, given that public opinion as well as all major political parties largely endorsed the Constitution. Despite an increase in Euro-sceptic arguments in the 1990's, Spain

remained amongst the most pro-European member states. This position is often attributed to factors such as the economic benefits that the Country had derived from EU membership, historical and cultural reasons, or the strong political consensus on the advantages of EU membership (Ruiz Jimenez, 2005; Sánchez Cuenca, 2000 in Crum, 2007).

Elite support for the ECT remained consistently high throughout the campaign. The incumbent Socialist Party (PSOE), the opposition's People's Party (PP), as well as the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ–PNV) and the Catalan Nationalist Convergence and Unity (CiU) all supported the Treaty. The only parties campaigning for a 'No' vote were the United Left (IU); the Catalonia Greens (ICV); the Galician National Block (BNG); the Social Democratic Aragonese Council (CHA); the Basque nationalist Eusko Alkartasuna, as well as the major trade unions. While the incumbent PSOE was unambiguously pro-Constitution – possibly due to the symbolic benefits which it hoped would derive from Spain's speedy ratification, the PP had expressed concerns over Spain's relative loss of power on the EU stage and had gradually become more critical of the Treaty. However, perhaps due to the fact that the Aznar government had been responsible for negotiating the Treaty prior to the PSOE's election, waging a strong opposition campaign against the Constitution was not really an option. Consequently, the PP embraced a clear pro-Constitution stance, joining the 'Yes' campaign.

'No' arguments on the left side of the political spectrum (IU and ICV) basically centred around the Treaty's alleged overemphasis on the economic aspects of European integration, and its resulting neglect of 'social' issues. The two parties were also internally split over the benefits of Europeanization. Finally, the issues raised by the Basque, Catalan and Galician nationalist parties revolved around issues like regionalism and the role of regional languages in the Constitution.

Table 5.1 Spain: Vote Share and Party Position on the European Constitutional Treaty

Party	Party Group	Vote Share	Position
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	PES	43%	Yes
People's Party (PP)	EPP-ED	38%	Yes
Democratic Convergence of Catalunia (CDC)	EUL-NGL	3%	Yes
Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV)	ELDR	2%	Yes
United Left (IU)	EG/EFA	5%	No
Republican Left of Catalunya (ERC)	EG/EFA	2%	No

Note: Vote shares based on the 2004 General Election available at www.electionworld.org. Party positions from the EPIN Ratification Monitor (Crum, 2007)

On the whole, the 'key players' in the Spanish political spectrum presented a united front throughout the ratification stage of the Constitutional process, campaigning in favour of the Treaty (Table 5.1). Examining the stance of the major political parties towards the Constitution, and their relative vote share in the 2004 general election suggests that, despite the above-mentioned dissent within the extreme-Left and nationalist parties, overall levels of elite polarisation on this issue were minimal.

France

The French campaign was rather different. At first glance the official party stances shown in Table 4.2 indicate that both governing parties (UMP/UDF) and the opposition (PS) supported a 'Yes' vote on the Constitution. In this sense, the degree of polarisation of the French political spectrum does not appear to be overly dissimilar from the Spanish case discussed above. Both countries could be said to fit the 'collusive model', characterised by both government and opposition on the 'Yes' side, and minor or 'protest' parties positioned on the 'No' side of the campaign (see Crum, 2007).

Table 5.2 France: Vote Share and Party Position on the European Constitutional Treaty

Party	Party Group	Vote Share	Position
Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)	EPP-ED	34%	Yes
Union for French Democracy (UDF)	ELDR	5%	Yes
Socialist Party (PS)*	PES	24%	Yes/No
The Greens (Verts)	EG/EFA	4%	Yes
National Front (FN)	NA	11%	No
French Communist Party (PCF)	EUL-NGL	5%	No

Note: Vote shares based on the 2002 General Election available at www.electionworld.org. Party positions from the EPIN Ratification Monitor (Crum, 2007)

* French Socialist Party internally split

However, a closer look at the French case reveals significant differences. While President Chirac's UMP was unquestionably in favour of the Treaty, the stance of the PS was not as clear-cut. The party was deeply divided on the issue and has come to represent the most 'notable' case of party 'factionalisation' over the Constitutional Treaty (Crum, 2007:73). On an ideological level, the party was organised into different 'courants' (factions) proposing different policy motions voted on at the party's federal meetings (Wagner, 2008). Since the Dijon congress held in May 2003, five main factions had emerged, giving voice to a variety of arguments which also included strong anti-EU and Eurosceptic positions based on soft, policy-based socialist arguments (Wagner, 2008).[52] However, the debate surrounding the European Constitution went beyond these clear cut factional lines, and was divided not only amongst but also within the different 'courants'. The most obvious illustration of this was the split between party leader Francois Hollande and former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius. Along with a prominent group of socialists Fabius began campaigning for a 'No' vote. The group's position acquired significant visibility in the mass media, with the publishing of a 'founding document' known as 'Ambition Socialiste pour l'Europe' in leading newspaper Le Monde on 6 August 2004 (Wagner, 2008:261). While framed as ideological differences, these divisions had much to do with the party's internal strategic objectives (Crum, 2007), particularly given that the structure of these

[52] The major 'courants' were federalist, integrationist motion supported by party leader Francois Hollande; followed by smaller Eurosceptic motions portraying the process of European integration as the 'Trojan horse' of capitalism (motion C) or as a 'free trade' area lacking any political or diplomatic power or real 'social project' (motion D). See Wagner 2008 for a more detailed overview.

'courants' plays a major role in the selection of presidential candidates (Crespy, 2008 in Wagner). These intra-party strategic motives increased the salience of the 'Hollande versus Fabius' struggle, which extended far beyond the internal referendum held in December 2004 and decided the party's position on the Treaty's ratification. It may also be argued that creating this deeply divided political picture had been part of Chirac's plan from the start. President Chirac had in fact hoped that holding a referendum might have caused a rift within the opposition, bringing the Left's divisions to surface (Marthaler, 2005). This, it was hoped, might have weakened its chances in the 2007 general election. Having said this, in an attempt to settle its disputes the PS called for an internal referendum on the issue, held in December 2004. Despite the fact that 59 percent of PS members voted in favour of the Constitution, the vocal 'Fabius faction' continued to voice its reservations throughout the campaign. Presidential hopeful Laurent Fabius was also skilfully able to liken voting 'Yes' to the Constitution with saying 'Yes' to President Chirac. This was a particularly sensitive point for left-wing supporters, and for an electorate which had become increasingly disillusioned with the government's performance.

In addition to a conspicuous minority of the Socialist Party, the hardened 'No' campaign also enjoyed the support of the main trade unions, the Communist Party and the extreme right party Front National headed by controversial politician Jean-Marie Le Pen. It must also be said that despite their subsequent change in party stance, the Greens were also internally divided on the issue, with four MPs voting in favour and three voting against the Constitution at a joint congressional session held on 28 February 2005 (Hobolt, 2005). On the whole, the political context surrounding the French referendum campaign was far more polarised than that of the Spanish campaign. Despite the official party stances shown in Table 5.2, it is difficult to envisage a more divided political spectrum.

UK

The position of British political elites vis-à-vis the Constitution was less ambiguous. The incumbent labour government headed by Prime Minister Tony Blair had played an active role in the Treaty's negotiation and was, therefore, clearly in favour of its ratification. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats

broadly supported the ECT. The main voice of dissent within the opposition came from the Conservative Party (see Table 5.3) whose leaders repeatedly pressed the Blair government to hold a referendum on the issue.

Table 5.3 UK: Vote Share and Party Position on the European Constitutional Treaty

Party	Party Group	Vote Share	Position
Labour Party	PES	35%	Yes
Liberal Democrats	ELDR	22%	Yes
Conservative Party	EPP-ED	32%	No

Note: Vote shares based on the 2005 General Election available at www.electionworld.org. Party positions from the EPIN Ratification Monitor (Crum, 2007)

As mentioned in Chapter 3 the Labour government eventually conceded to this, tentatively scheduling a referendum for the late spring of 2006. Quite conveniently, however, a British campaign never came into being due to the outcome of the French and Dutch votes, which halted the ratification process in its tracks. On 6 June 2005, UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw announced that Britain would no longer be planning a referendum on the Constitution, because he could see 'no point' in going ahead. Nevertheless, the Foreign Secretary stated that he would support the 'piecemeal' adoption of parts of the Treaty, something which later prompted accusations by the Conservatives of trying to 'sneak' the Constitution in through the 'back door'. [53]

The fact that the government and the opposition adopted different stances on the Treaty suggests that, had a referendum actually occurred, the British political scene might have been polarised along the competitive model of party behaviour.[54] However, while the UK's political spectrum was to a certain extent divided, the fact that the constitutional issue was placed on the 'backburner' prevented a large scale or sustained debate from taking place. While polarisation might be a fundamental 'ingredient' of EU media coverage, the stalling of ratification meant that the constitutional process may have no

[53] Article available on EurActiv website at: http://www.euractiv.com/en/future-eu/straw-sees-point-holding-uk-referendum/article-140545.

[54] See Crum, 2007 for an overview of the competitive and collusive models of party behaviour in referendums.

longer been perceived as 'directly relevant' to British citizens. Arguably, this meant that the issue became less salient, giving the media fewer incentives to cover it systematically.

Italy

Italy, on the other hand, was a different case altogether. Both of the 'ingredients' discussed in Chapter 2 appeared to be absent, with no direct Euro-domestic link and no virtually political polarisation around the European Constitution. As shown in Table 5.4, all major political parties supported the Treaty's ratification, with only the extreme right's Northern League and the extreme left's Rifondazione Comunista openly against it. The Northern League was also the only political party to openly call for a referendum on the issue. However, the option was never taken seriously, not least because it would have required amending the Country's constitutional law, which does not allow for the use of referendums for the ratification of international treaties.

Table 5.4 Italy: Vote Share and Party Position on the European Constitutional Treaty

Party	Party Group	Vote Share	Position
Forza Italia	EPP-ED	29.4%	Yes
Democracy is Freedom (The Daisy)	ELDR	14.5%	Yes
National Alliance (AN)	AEN	12%	Yes
Italy of Values	ELDR	3.9%	Yes
Communist Refoundation Party	EUL - NGL	5%	No
Northern League	ELDR	3.9%	No

Note: Vote shares based on the 2001 General Election available http://elezioni.interno.it/

Possibly due to the challenges encountered during the intergovernmental phase of the Constitutional process during which the Italian presidency had struggled to broker an agreement among member states, Italy's government was keen to proceed with ratification as speedily as possible. This, perhaps coupled with Italy's traditional pro-European stance, meant that there was little dissent and debate on the issue. On 7 April 2005, the ECT was backed by an overwhelming majority in the Senate (upper house), and ratified by 217 votes to 16.

5.2 Newspapers Size and Format: Changes at Referendum Time?

After looking at the degree of elite polarisation around the Constitution, it seems important to examine any differences in the format of the sixteen newspapers to gauge their comparability. This short descriptive analysis is expected to provide important contextual information that will be taken into account when measuring the effect of referendums on both domestic and 'transnational' coverage of the European Constitution. This section examines the typical format of the sixteen newspapers, taking into account their size and structure, as well as the average number of political and EU stories published each day.

The study of newspaper format was based on a sample of 10 hard copies of each newspaper, selected from each of the five timeframes included in this study.[55] 'Political' stories could be either 'domestic' or 'international' in focus, while 'EU' stories had to contain specific references to the European Union.[56] This short descriptive section also considers the publication section of articles about the Constitution. In other words, it looks at whether the sixteen newspapers created specific sections devoted to the Constitution, and whether the issue was treated as 'domestic', 'European' or 'international' news. Particular emphasis is placed on any observable differences in format between 'referendum' and 'non-referendum' countries.[57]

[55] Two copies for each of the five timeframes (n = 160).

[56] As with the coding of stories about the Constitution, European articles had to contain a reference to the EU in the leading paragraph an in at least two independent sentences.

[57] The study of publication sections was originally intended to be a key variable of the content analysis. However, the fact that this information was not available for all articles across the five timeframes studied in this dissertation made this difficult. Therefore, to ensure consistency across countries, timeframes and newspapers, this information had to be drawn from a smaller sample of stories.

Table 5.5 Average Newspaper Size and Format – Number of Pages and Stories

Country	Newspaper	Pages	Political	EU Stories
France	Monde	30	23	2
	Figaro	41	22	2
	Liberation	40	21	2
	Humanite	40	22	2
Spain	Pais	48	22	2
	Mundo	56	22	2
	ABC	90	23	2
	Cinco Dias	40	20	2
Italy	Corriere della Sera	40	24	2
	Repubblica	38	23	3
	Stampa	51	22	2
	Sole 24 Ore	48	21	2
UK	Times	79	22	2
	Guardian	73	21	2
	FT	70	23	3
	Sun	56	6	0

Note: average number of pages, political stories and EU stories per day

Le Monde

Starting with the French media landscape, Le Monde comprised an average of 30 pages. These were structured into a number of different sections, starting with editorials on page 2, followed by a 'focus' section, a further two-page special on the most salient issue of the day. These initial pages were followed by an 'international news' section; a 'Europe and France' section; a 'portrait' section on key personalities; a 'debate' segment featuring opinion pieces and letters; an 'obituary' page, followed by 'culture' then 'cinema'; a 'readers' pages with personal ads and finally a 'weather' and an 'agenda' page. Le Monde published an average of 20 political stories, and 2 EU related stories per day. Throughout the Constitutional process, articles about the Constitution were typically found in the 'European Union' and 'debates' sections of the newspaper. During April and May 2005, in the weeks leading up to the referendum, Le Monde created two additional sections: 'the referendum of 29 May' and 'Yes/No: the arguments to choose' and 'the Treaty in 40 questions'.[58]

[58] In French these were, respectively: 'Le référendum du 29 Mai'; 'Oui/Non : Les arguments pour choisir'; and 'Le Traité en 40 questions'.

Le Figaro

The content of the second French newspaper was divided into three separate sections: a main body; an 'economics' section; and a separate insert 'Figaro et vous'. The core part of the paper typically began with a 'recto-verso' section consisting of the key editorial pieces. This was followed by domestic political news; by an 'international' section, and by a further 'France and society' section. The remaining segments of the newspaper included sections like 'science and medicine'; the day's 'agenda'; as well as 'opinions' and readers' 'letters'. The main body was followed by a substantial 'economics' section comprising an average of 10 pages. Finally, the remaining space was devoted to the 'Figaro et vous' supplement, which typically dealt with issues relating to culture, travel, music, arts and topics of general interest. In total, Le Figaro featured an average of 41 pages, 22 political articles and 2 EU stories per day.

Le Figaro chose to publish its pieces on the Constitutional Treaty in the 'International/Europe', 'France/politics' or the 'debate/opinion' sections. In general, stories that focused on Brussels or on international actors tended to fall into the 'Europe' section, while articles dealing with the position of French politicians, as well as detailed aspects of the campaign were typically published in the 'France' section. Interestingly, this layout did not seem to change significantly during the French referendum campaign and unlike Le Monde, Le Figaro did not create any additional section during this time.

Libération

Similarly to Le Figaro, left-leaning Libération comprised an average of 40 pages structured as follows. The paper typically began with a four-page section focused on the day's main stories and events, followed by a page ('le contre journal') with the readers' interpretation of the headlines; then another four pages on average dealing with a salient theme (such as immigration for instance); followed by a news digest; a 3 -page 'world' section; a slightly longer 'France' section; an 'environmental news' section; followed by 'sports', 'fashion', 'travel', a 'classified' page, and at last a 'weather and games' section. Libération published an average of 21 political stories and 2 EU pieces per day.

In terms of publication section, Libération published its pieces on the EU Constitutional Treaty in a number of different sections. These were: 'politics'; a 'vu d'Europe' section discussing the issue from a 'European perspective and a 'rebonds' section. During the referendum campaign the paper created two additional sections. The first one was called 'event/referendum' and the second one was consisted of a 'special news' section specifically devoted to the Constitution.[59]

L'Humanité

Like Libération, left-wing L'Humanité published an average of 40 pages per day. The core body of the newspaper was divided into the following main sections. Editorials were usually found on the second page of the newspaper, which then continued with a section ('l'événement'), devoted to the day's main events. This was followed by a general 'politics' section, which included political news about Europe; then by an 'international' section dealing with foreign news and current affairs. The remaining pages of the newspaper were structured into 'society'; 'culture'; 'comments and opinion'; 'media' and 'sports' sections. As with many of the other papers studied in this dissertation, l'Humanité published an average of 22 political stories per day, devoting an average of 2 articles per day to EU-related issues. In terms of publication section, l'Humanité did not significantly alter its format over the five timeframes, consistently placing articles about the European Constitution in its 'political news' section ('rubrique politique).

El Pais

To begin, Spanish left-leaning newspaper El Pais contained an average of 48 pages, broken down into the following sections. The paper typically opened with an 'international news' section; followed by a 10-page section on Spain. Both of these featured primarily political news. This was followed by an 'economics' section, and by a space devoted to 'opinion' pieces. The remaining sections of the newspaper dealt with 'life and arts'; 'culture'; 'trends'; 'people'; 'obituaries'; the 'weather' and, finally, with 'sports' and 'TV listings'. On average, El Pais published a total of 22 political stories and 2 EU

[59] Cahiers Spécial: Constitution.

pieces per day. It is also worth noting that articles about the Constitution published by El Pais typically appeared either in the 'Spain', 'opinion' or in the paper's 'main' section ('sección única').

El Mundo

Leading Spanish newspaper El Mundo comprised an average of 56 pages. Unlike El Pais, El Mundo typically opened with an 'impression' page, followed by an average of 6 pages of 'opinion'. These pages usually preceded a longer 'Spain' section focusing on domestic news, followed by a 'world' news section; a substantial 'economics' section; 'sports'; 'culture'; 'interviews'; two 'TV listings' and 'agenda' pages and, finally, by the 'weather and games'. Similarly to most other newspapers included in this sample, the average number of political stories published by El Mundo was 22, 2 of which were EU-specific. With respect to the placement of stories about the ECT, it is interesting to note that unlike El Pais, El Mundo created a separate section during the referendum campaign ('Referendum 20F'). Stories about the Constitution written in during the weeks preceding the February referendum were also placed in the 'Spain' section, particularly if they included references to domestic politics or actors. During the previous stages of the constitutional process, on the other hand, news about the Treaty were more commonly placed in the 'international' or 'world' news sections.

ABC

Conservative newspaper ABC had a slightly different format. It began with a 'summary' section, recapitulating the day's main headlines and linking the main stories with their online version or additional commentary available on the paper's website. This was followed by two pages of editorials or key features, and by an additional 3 to 4 pages of 'focus' section, highlighting the day's most salient topics. This part was followed by an 'opinion' section; as well as a 'Spain' and an 'international' section dealing with news from Europe and the rest of the world. The paper also had substantial 'economics' and 'business' section, which preceded its 'regional news'; 'agenda'; 'classifieds'; 'culture and shows'; 'science and future'; 'sports'; 'interviews'; 'games'; 'weather' and 'TV listings' sections. On the surface, ABC appeared to be larger than many of the other newspapers included in this sample, typically comprising around 90 pages. However, it should be noted that on average 10 of these were full-size

pages of publicity advertisements, scattered across the whole publication. Also, the average number of political pieces was similar to that of the other newspapers, with 23 political articles and 2 EU stories per day. Stories about the Constitution published by ABC were typically positioned in either the 'Spain' or the 'international' sections of the paper.

Cinco Dias

Last but not least in the Spanish media landscape, daily financial newspaper Cinco Dias was organised as follows. Lengthwise, the paper comprised an average of 40 pages. These were typically divided into 8 main sections. Following the headlines on the first page, the paper opened with a 'second' page section which followed up on the editorials and generally covered the day's leading story. This page was followed by a 13-page 'companies and business' section; a 'commentary and opinion' section; a 10-page 'finance and market' section, an 'economics' section; a 'politics' section, and finally a concluding page dealing with the weather and a bullet-point news digest. Despite its clear emphasis on business and financial news, Cinco Dias still published an average of 20 political stories per day. It also published an average of 2 EU- stories, albeit usually tailored to a business readership. Somewhat unsurprisingly perhaps, stories about the Constitution published by financial daily Cinco Dias commonly emphasised the Treaty's economic and financial implications. As such, they were commonly placed in the 'markets', 'economics' and at times in the 'opinion' sections of the paper.

Corriere della Sera

Moving on to the Italian media landscape we can see that in terms of length, Italy's leading newspaper published an average of 40 pages, structured as follows. Editorials were commonly found on the front page of the newspaper, followed by a 'focus' section aiming to zoom in on the day's most salient issues – be they domestic or of international concern. This section was followed by a 'foreign news' section, by 'opinion and comment', by several pages dealing with the 'domestic' political arena; and another section focusing on less-salient domestic non-political events. Then came several pages of 'economic' news and analysis; as well a page devoted to 'readers' letters' to the editor; a 'culture' section; and finally a 'sport' section, a 'weather' page and at last the day's 'TV guide and games'. Corriere della Sera

published an average of 23 political stories per day, as well as an average of 2 EU stories. Articles on the Constitution published by Il Corriere during the first four timeframes studied in this dissertation could be placed in the 'Europe' or 'foreign news' sections of the paper. However, it was interesting to note that during the fifth period – which coincided with the French referendum, articles were also placed in the 'focus' section ('primo piano') and treated as particularly salient.

La Repubblica

The left-leaning newspaper was similar in size to Corriere della Sera, with an average of 38 pages divided into the following sections. Editorials were usually published on the first page of the paper, followed by a 'focus' section dealing with the day's most salient affairs. The paper then dealt with a variety of issues in a 10-page 'news' section, subdivided into separate headings such as: 'politics and justice'; 'European Constitution'; 'Environmental emergency' and so on depending on the day's agenda. This part was followed by a 'domestic politics' section; a 'world' and then a 'national' news section; a 'culture' section; a 5-page 'economics and business' section, and finally two pages featuring 'commentary and readers' letters. The paper also comprised an additional 'R2' insert dealing with issues like food, culture, arts, and further zooming in on the day's salient topics. On average, La Repubblica published a total of 23 political pieces and 3 European stories per day. Throughout the five time periods studied in this dissertation, La Repubblica chose to place its pieces on the Constitution in the 'foreign politics' section of the paper.

La Stampa

As with the other Italian papers included in this sample, La Stampa typically opened with an average of 7 'focus' pages dealing with the day's most salient matters. This section was usually followed by a 'politics' section dealing with the domestic political agenda; a 'world' section focusing on international news; a 'cronaca' section dealing with local news such as crime and murders; as well as by an 'economics' section; 'letters and comments'; 'culture and shows'; 'sports', and finally by a 'weather an games; section. Out of an average total of 51 pages, La Stampa typically published 22 political pieces per day as well as 2 EU-focused articles. Similarly to La Repubblica and Il Corriere, stories about the

Constitution published by 'La Stampa' could be placed in either the 'Europe' or the 'foreign politics' sections of the newspaper.

Il Sole 24 Ore

Length-wise, Italy's financial daily Il Sole 24 Ore published an average of 48 pages. Like the British Financial Times it had a main body and a separate section devoted exclusively to 'finance and markets'. Similarly to other Italian newspapers, Il Sole typically published the main news headlines and editorials on page 1, and then devoted the following 7-8 pages to the day's most important issues. This first 'focus' section preceded several 'world news' pages; followed by a 'comments and enquiries' section; a 'politics and society' section; an 'economics and society' section; as well as by an average of two pages of 'legal' or normative issues situated prior to the separate 'finance and markets' part. Despite the paper's focus on economic and financial news, Il Sole's main body typically published an average of 21 political stories per day, as well as 2 European pieces. As was the case for other Italian newspapers such as La Stampa, stories about the Constitution published by Il Sole were typically placed in the 'world news' section of the paper. As expected, whenever articles dealt with the Treaty's economic impact then they tended to feature in the 'economics' segment instead.

The Times

Looking at The Times' format and publication style, one can see that the average length of the newspaper was 79 pages. This number can be broken down into a 'leading articles' section, followed by a 'general news' section, an 'opinion' section focusing on commentary, analysis, and letters to the editor; a 'daily universal register' focusing on the day's highlights in terms of travel, news, birthdays, saint's day, web searches, dream homes and so on. This short section was typically followed by a 'world affairs' section; by 'business and economic news' pages; a 'register' dealing with culture, shows, reviews etcetera; a brief 'archives' section, and finally by 'travel' and by a ten-page 'sports' section. The Times published an average of 35 promotional ads, plus an additional three pages of ads in the travel section. Most importantly, however, The Times published an average of 22 political stories per day, as well as an average of 2 EU pieces. With respect to the preferred publication section, stories about the

ECT commonly appeared in the 'features' section of the newspaper. When articles dealt with other member states or EU-level actors they could also be placed in the 'overseas news' section, whilst stories featuring domestic politicians were typically placed in the 'home news' part of the newspaper.

The Guardian

Turning to the overall structure of The Guardian, the paper was typically divided into four main sections: first, a core section of about 73 pages on average. This was followed by a 10-page 'sport' insert; a 48-page 'society' insert, and finally by a 36-page G2 dealing mostly with culture, food and art-related issues. The core section of the newspaper was in turn divided into the following parts. 'Leading articles' or editorials featured on the second page, followed by a 'general news' page, a ten-page 'national news' section; an 'international' section; a 'financial' section, and 4-5 pages of 'comment and debate'. The remaining pages of the core part dealt with 'obituaries', 'reviews', and finally with the 'weather and games'. Like in the case of the Times, the Guardian published an average of 21 political stories a day, as well as 2 articles about the European Union. When it comes to publication section, stories about the Constitution published by The Guardian were also published in the 'features', 'national news' or 'foreign news' sections. This rather logical categorization was, like in the case of The Times, dictated by the articles' focus on domestic or international actors.

The Financial Times

The Financial Times, by contrast, was typically divided into two separate sections reaching an average total of 70 pages. The first or 'core' section was followed by the 'companies and markets' insert, which deals specifically with business news and financial analysis. The paper's core section typically opened with an average of five pages of 'national news', followed by 'global financial news'; general 'world news'; and a section on 'business life'. The remaining pages usually consisted of the well-known 'letters to the editor'; 'comment and analysis'; finally followed by a 'fashion' page, and an art and TV page with the day's listings. The average number of political stories published by the FT was 23. Finally, the quality financial daily also published an average of 3 EU stories daily. Similarly to The Times and The Guardian, articles on the ECT published by the FT were found in the 'national news' or

'world news' sections of the paper. However, the FT also placed stories about the Constitution in a special 'Europe' section. Whenever it was mixed with commentary, news about the Treaty could also be placed in the 'comment and analysis' section of the paper.

The Sun

Lastly, the format and style adopted by best-selling tabloid The Sun, was unsurprisingly, very different from that of quality newspapers, and also more difficult to analyse systematically. The paper typically opened with a mixture of the day's news and gossip and the national weather forecast on page 2. This is followed by the renowned 'Page 3' section featuring a topless girl reporting 'the news in briefs', as well as other celebrity gossip. This page was typically followed by 4 or 5 pages of largely sensationalistic news, and then by more pages of celebrity news, columns, business and, finally, sports. Interestingly, however, every page featured a mix of 'serious' stories, with 'lighter' pieces such as scandal, celebrity gossip and photo shoots. Perhaps unsurprisingly The Sun relies heavily on advertising revenues, which explains the conspicuous presence of ads across the newspaper. As expected, the average number of political stories published daily by the tabloid was far lower than in the quality press, reaching an average of 6. Equally, the average number of daily EU articles was nil. Whilst the overall structure of The Sun was somewhat more difficult to establish, stories about the Constitution typically featured in a section called 'The Sun Says', consisting of 'leading articles' as well as letters and in the 'news in briefs' segments.

Overall, the short descriptive analysis presented above indicates that the format of newspapers varied significantly not only across media systems, but also within the countries themselves. Interestingly, out of the sixteen newspapers included in this sample, Le Monde, Libération, Il Corriere della Sera and the FT were the only publications to have a 'Europe' section. Arguably, this might suggest a greater degree of Europeanisation compared to other publications.[60] Having said this there were obvious in the overall structure of newspapers. With the exception of British tabloid The Sun, all of the publications appeared to be organised in clearly identifiable sections which, generally speaking,

[60] This assumption, however, remains to be tested more systematically.

resulted in a blend of editorials, breaking news; commentary and opinion; letters; domestic politics; international politics and events, as well as culture, sports and the weather.

On average, British newspapers were longer than their French, Italian or Spanish 'counterparts'. Arguably, this might be explained by the differences in the two media landscapes. While the British media system typically fits with the North-Atlantic or liberal model, the other three Mediterranean countries belong to the polarised pluralist media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). As discussed earlier in the thesis, the 'liberal' model is characterized by even greater commercial pressure and competition – which might explain the comparatively higher share of advertisements scattered throughout the papers. Despite this variance in terms of size, newspapers from the four countries were actually very similar in terms of their daily average number of political stories, which typically ranged between 23 (Le Monde, ABC, La Repubblica, and the FT) to 19 (in the case of Cinco Dias). It was also interesting to note that with the exception of the Financial Times, La Repubblica (3) and the Sun (0) all other newspapers published an average of 2 EU stories per day. Similarities in terms of the average number of political stories and the average number of European stories increase the comparability of the sample. Moreover, they help us rule out the possibility that variations in the volume of coverage about the Constitution might be better explained by endogenous factors inherent to the size or style of individual newspapers than by the presence of a referendum.

With regard to the positioning of EU articles in the sixteen newspapers, it was interesting to note that the majority of French papers devoted specific sections to this issue in the weeks that preceded the May referendum. With the exception of L'Humanité, which continued to place its stories in the 'rubrique politique' section, the French press introduced special 'referendum', 'event', 'European Union', 'debate' or 'Treaty' sections devoted entirely to the presentation of news and analysis on the Constitutional issue. This trend was less marked in the Spanish press, where only El Mundo had a 'referendum'-specific section. It was, however, interesting to note that in newspapers like El Pais and 5 Dias, the issue went from being placed in the 'international news' section during the intergovernmental phases of the process to being positioned in the 'home news' and 'opinion' sections

at referendum time. The changes in format observed in referendum countries seem to suggest that voting on the issue generally increased its saliency. Also, it is possible that holding a referendum may have altered the press' perceptions of the Constitution, leading it to be perceived as an issue of domestic concern rather than another distant international Treaty. On the other hand, examining the format of newspapers from non-referendum countries indicates that with the exception of Il Corriere della Sera and the Financial Times, the British and Italian press generally placed its coverage of the EU Constitutional debate either in the domestic or foreign news sections – depending on the articles' focus on national or international actors and events. Generally speaking, there seemed to be a smaller 'variety' of possible publication sections as well as fewer longitudinal variations.

5.3 Referendums and Domestic Coverage of the Constitution

After discussing the different degree of polarisation across the four countries and the structure and relative comparability of the different newspapers, the remainder of this Chapter now turns to the results of the content analysis. More specifically, it tests the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2 that holding a referendum can affect the volume, analysis, depth and focus of press coverage on the Constitution. As mentioned at the start of the Chapter, this part of the comparative analysis focuses exclusively on those patterns of coverage observed domestically in the four countries. This is because the possible effects of referendums on transnational coverage or the emergence of a EU public sphere will be dealt with in Chapter 6. Section 5.3.1 of this Chapter begins by looking at the volume and length of coverage. Section 5.3.2 talks about the share of analysis as well as the depth of coverage, whilst Sections 5.3.3 and 5.3.4 evaluate the focus of coverage on a 'domestic versus European' and an 'economic versus political' scales.

5.3.1 More visibility? Volume and length

The first findings concern the hypothesis that referendums increase the volume of coverage on the European Constitution. Results from the content analysis are unequivocal. The number of stories on the Treaty was far greater in member states that held a referendum on its ratification (Table 5.6). Overall, French and Spanish newspapers published more than twice as many stories about the ECT than Italian and British ones. Combined articles from El Pais, El Mundo, ABC and Cinco Dias totalled 1200. French broadsheets were not too far behind, with a total of 802 stories published on this issue. However, the Treaty was far less visible in the Italian and British press.

Table 5.6 Number of Articles on the European Constitution – by Country and Newspaper

Referendum				Non referendum			
France		**Spain**		**Italy**		**UK**	
Monde	317	Mundo	356	CDS	242	FT	132
Figaro	155	Pais	427	Repubblica	92	Times	115
Liberation	171	5 Dias	116	Stampa	46	Guardian	77
Humanite	159	ABC	301	Sole	59	Sun	56
Total	**802**	**Total**	**1200**	**Total**	**439**	**Total**	**380**

At the start of this research I had expected the volume of coverage to be affected by the degree of elite polarisation. However, this hypothesis seems to be only partly confirmed by the content analysis. The issue was indeed more prominent in France and Spain where the referendum campaigns appear to have prompted more coverage about the issue. As shown in Section 1, the French campaign was more intense and divisive than the Spanish one. All major Spanish political parties – the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the socialist PSOE – had already pledged their support for the ratification of the ECT during the March 2004 general election. The French campaign was very different. While the largest parties – President Chirac's UMP, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Green Party – were in principle supportive of the Treaty, internal tensions particularly within the opposition (PS) produced a highly fragmented political landscape. The Fabius-led 'No' side was particularly visible throughout the campaign, publicly contrasting President Chirac's efforts to rally support for the Treaty. In light of these considerations, one might have expected the overall visibility of the ECT to be higher in France than in Spain. Yet, as shown by the data in Table 5.6, this did not appear to be the case. However, as

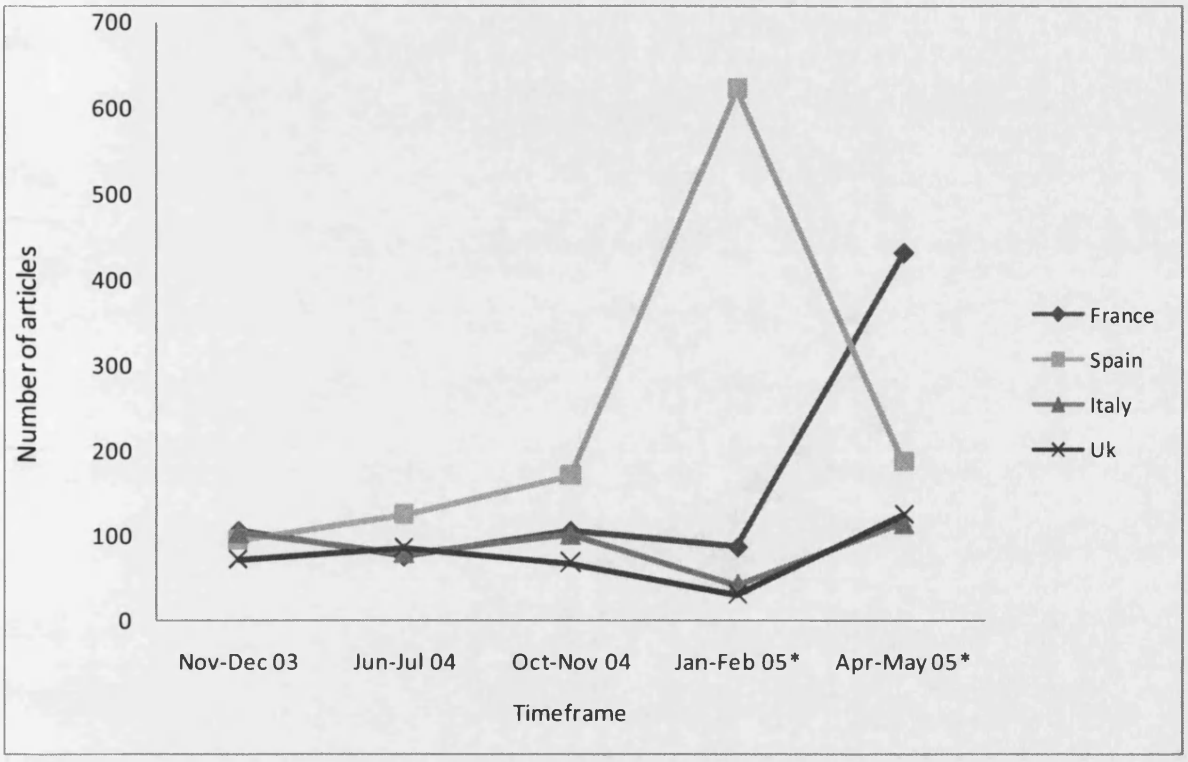
indicated later on in the Chapter, this result may have been due to the fact that Spanish papers wrote more prolifically about the Constitution over the five timeframes – not just during their campaign (Figure 5.1).

It was also interesting to note that some newspapers published significantly more stories than others. For instance, in the French media landscape, Le Monde published almost twice as many articles about the Constitution than other newspapers. In the case of Spain, the volume of coverage on this issue was greatest in El Pais, whilst in Italy it was biggest-selling paper Corriere della Sera that devoted the greatest amount of coverage to the issue. These differences were less pronounced in the British media landscape. However, the Financial Times and The Times wrote more prolifically about the Constitutional Treaty than the other newspapers included in this sample. It is worth noting that these variations did not seem to be dependent on the size of newspapers – which appeared to be similar across the four media systems. Equally, these differences do not seem to be due to individual newspapers' higher 'appetite' for political news, either. As show in Section 5.2, the average number of political pieces published by the quality press also seemed to be comparable across the four countries. A possible explanation for this pattern may be found in newspapers' perceptions of their readers' interests.

Having said this, looking at aggregate numbers of articles published during the five timeframes does not tell us very much about the overall effects of a referendum on news coverage of the issue. However, examining fluctuations in the number of articles published over time (Figure 5.1), suggests that the volume of coverage in France and Spain increased dramatically during their respective referendum campaigns. A total of 51.8% of Spanish articles was published in January and February 2005 during the weeks preceding the referendum that was held on 20 February. As indicated by the data in Figure 4.1, the number of Spanish stories increased very gradually from the collapse of the IGC in December 2003 to the agreement on a Draft Treaty in June 2004, until the Treaty's signature in October 2004. This gradual trend was followed by a sharp increase in the volume of communication during the campaign and by a return to pre-campaign levels after the referendum. Similarly, 53% of

French coverage was published during April and May 2005. Like in the case of Spain, fluctuations in the volume of articles were minimal until the sharp increase prompted by the French campaign (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 Number of Articles on the European Constitution – Changes Over Time[61]



It is interesting to note that a large share of Italian and British coverage was published during the highly polarised French campaign (26% and 33% respectively).[62] With the exception of The Sun, which published 34% of its articles in November and December 2003 around the collapse of the IGC, most of the stories published by Italian and British newspapers were written during the French referendum. These figures suggest that, even despite differences in publication style or national media landscapes, changes in the amount of coverage may have been prompted by the degree of campaign intensity rather than by editorial decisions or the political orientation of individual newspapers.[63]

[61] Note: * indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

[62] The effects of the two campaigns on the emergence of a European public sphere will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6.

[63] As discussed later on in the Chapter, this applies to the highly salient French campaign, underlining the importance of elite polarisation and competition.

With respect to the length of stories, most of the articles published across the four countries were 'medium' in length.[64] However, French and Spanish newspapers published a higher number of 'long' stories. Looking at the distribution of 'long' articles over time, one can see that in both countries most of the longer pieces were published at referendum time (Table 5.7). This finding suggests that the Constitution was not only more visible in terms of the volume of stories it attracted; it was also devoted more 'space' within newspapers.

Table 5.7 Length of Articles on the Constitution – Over Time

	Nov-Dec 03	Oct-Nov 04	Jun-Jul 04	Jan-Feb 05	Apr-May 05	Total
France	15	24	8	16	74	137
Spain	28	47	29	149	61	317
Italy	18	7	23	16	30	94
UK	16	3	20	18	23	80

Note: number of long stories published, over time

5.3.2 *More analysis and more depth*

Hypothesis 2 stated that the share of analysis and the relative 'depth' of coverage about the Constitution would be higher in countries that held a referendum on the Treaty's ratification. Similarly, it had expected that the amount of analysis and the depth of coverage would be proportional to the degree of campaign intensity. As with volume and length, the theoretical assumption behind this was that both the amount of analysis and the depth of coverage would increase as the issue became more salient during the campaign. As discussed in Chapter 4, journalists maintained that holding a referendum on the Constitution gave them both the opportunity and a responsibility to be more analytical about the issue, discussing the more detailed aspects of the Treaty. According to the correspondents interviewed in this study, the fact that readers were asked to vote on the issue increased the need for detailed coverage and explanation. This represented a significant change from

[64] As a reminder, the length of stories was measured as follows. 'Short' articles comprised up to 300 words; 'medium' ones between 301 and 800. All stories containing more than 801 words were classified as 'long'.

their 'routine work' which typically revolves around the provision of facts and 'straight news' about Europe.

Table 5.8 Share of 'Analytical' Articles on the European Constitution

	Referendum		**Non referendum**	
	France (N = 802)	Spain (N = 1200)	Italy (N = 439)	UK (N = 380)
Analysis	43	35	27	23
News Reporting	51	62	70	67
Interview	5	2	2	2
Letter	1	1	1	8

Note: percentage of coverage, 'type' variable

Results presented in Table 5.8 indicate that, on the whole, newspapers from referendum countries published more analysis on the Treaty than those from non-referendum countries. As expected, the share of analytical pieces was higher in France, where the campaign was more heated. In fact, 43.8% (N = 802) of French coverage of the ECT was in the form of commentary or opinion. So was 35% of Spanish coverage. The relative amount of analysis increased at referendum time, when it reached 66.4% in France and 57.4% in Spain. These figures are high, particularly if one considers that EU journalists' traditional or 'core' function typically revolves around news reporting.[65]

Looking at the relative percentage of analysis published by each paper, it is hard to see an overall pattern along the left-right political dimension. In France, it was left-leaning L'Humanité and centre-left Le Monde which published the greatest percentage of analysis. In Spain, it was financial daily 5 Dias and conservative ABC. In Italy, it was financial daily Il Sole 24 Ore and centrist Corriere della Sera, while in the UK media system left-leaning The Guardian was by comparison the most analytical newspaper in the sample. Whilst they may not represent a key finding, these variations may be

[65] See interviews with EU correspondents, Chapter 4.

interpreted as further confirmation that country-level differences in the share of analytical coverage were in fact due to the presence of a referendum.

Table 5.9 Percentage of Analytical Articles on the European Constitution – by Newspapers

Referendum				Non referendum			
France		**Spain**		**Italy**		**UK**	
Monde	47	Mundo	16	CDS	30	FT	19
Figaro	35	Pais	26	Repubblica	25	Times	20
Liberation	38	5 Dias	46	Stampa	35	Guardian	27
Humanite	52	ABC	39	Sole	48	Sun	12

Note: percentage of analytical coverage, breakdown by newspaper

Aggregate-level data also indicated that holding a referendum also affected the depth coverage on the Constitution (Table 5.10). As explained in Chapter 3, the 'depth variable' considered the extent to which articles dealt with the actual content of the Constitution, rather than simply describing the Treaty's ratification, signature, and other 'general' aspects. Average index scores indicate that the depth of coverage was slightly higher in Spain (M=0.13) and France (M=0.12) (Table 5.10). They also suggest that on average Italian newspapers covered the Treaty in less depth than the other countries studied in this dissertation (M = 0.002), opting to focus on the more 'general' aspects of the Treaty. It may even be argued that this was partly due to the fact that Italy never really considered holding a referendum on the ECT, opting instead for parliamentary ratification. This could have resulted in less debate on the issue and in fewer incentives for the media to cover the topic in significant detail.

However, the data presented in Table 5.10 also suggests that, albeit to a lesser extent, UK papers covered the Constitution in significant depth (M= 0.99) - which does not 'fit' with what had been expected at the start of this research. Moreover, no evidence was found to confirm that the depth of coverage actually increased at referendum time. This is, in itself, quite an interesting finding, particularly if interpreted in the light of the interviews with Brussels correspondents presented in Chapter 4. This could suggest that correspondent were wrong about referendums increasing the depth of coverage. Alternatively, it may help to qualify their statement. In other words, when journalists spoke about referendums offering them a chance to explain the issue to their readers, covering it in greater detail, they may have referred to more analysis. Also, analytical pieces contained

more detailed references to the actual contents of the Treaty. The finding also questions the validity of the theoretical distinction between the 'depth' and 'analysis' variables. It may in fact be that the latter provides a better measure of the overall extent to which the issue was explained to citizens, giving them access to better 'quality' information.

Table 5.10 Average depth of coverage - by Country

	Referendum		**Non-referendum**	
	France	Spain	Italy	UK
Mean (M)	0.12	0.13	0.002	0.1
SD	0.51	0.54	0.52	0.52

Note: Depth of news on a scale from - 2 (very general) to +2 (very deep)
N = Fra (802); Spa (1200); Ita (439); UK (380)
A one-way ANOVA was used to test the significance of mean differences F (7.08) = 5.88, p = .000

5.3.3 *A European or a national debate?*

As discussed at length in Chapter 2, a key question debated in the literature on EU referendums is the extent to which their outcome is determined by domestic rather than European political considerations. Advocates of the widely-tested 'second-order' model (Franklin, Marsh and McLaren, 1994: 470) have argued that EU referendums often reflect choices about short-term domestic issues such as, for instance, the performance and popularity of the incumbent government.[66] On the other hand, critics of the 'second-order' school have shown that this need not be the case, and that genuine 'issue voting' based on voters' true preferences may indeed take place in EU referendums (Svennsson, 2002; Garry et al., 2005; Glencross and Trechsel, 2007). This, it is argued, might be the case in situations where voters have had the opportunity to develop sufficient knowledge and strong enough preferences on the issue (Ray, 2003a). Given the controversy of the question and its implications for the European public sphere and the legitimacy of the EU constitutional process, this research set out to

[66] Schneider and Weitsman (1996:583) have referred to this mechanism as the 'punishment trap'. According to the authors by voting in favour of a proposal or agreement, citizens reward a government that might have performed poorly domestically. Alternatively, voters might choose to reject the Treaty in question, effectively punishing the government responsible for negotiating it.

measure whether the focus of news was predominantly national or European. As explained in detail in Chapter 3, this was measured on a scale from -2 (very national) to +2(very European).

Table 5.11 Average Focus of Coverage on a 'Domestic versus European' Scale

	Referendum		**Non-referendum**	
	France	*Spain*	*Italy*	*UK*
Mean (M)	0.71	0.63	0.58	0.49
SD	0.89	0.96	0.91	1

Note: Average focus of news on a scale from - 2 (very national) to +2 (very European)
N = Fra (802); Spa (1200); Ita (439); UK (380)
A one-way ANOVA was used to test the significance of mean differences F (21.08) = 57.18, p = .000

Looking at Table 5.11, one can see that the overall focus of coverage was close to the 'slightly European' mark. As expected, this was marginally more so in referendum than in non-referendum countries. Interestingly, the focus of coverage was more European in France (M= 0.71) than in Spain (M= 0.63). It is also worth noting that the UK press was comparatively more domestically-oriented than the other newspapers studied in this dissertation. Looking at variations between left and right-leaning newspapers one can see that across the four countries, left-leaning publications appeared to be slightly more European in focus than conservative or financial publications. This finding is in line with the fact that support for European integration is generally higher among parties that can be classified as green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) than in ones characterised as traditional/authoritarian/ nationalist (TAN) (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2004).

Table 5.12 Average Focus of Coverage on a 'European versus Domestic' scale – by Political Orientation of Newspapers

	Referendum				**Non-referendum**			
	France		Spain		Italy		UK	
	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right
Mean (M)	0.56	0.80	0.69	0.59	0.81	0.60	1.00	0.48
SD	0.95	0.84	0.91	1.00	0.90	0.92	0.77	1.00

Note: Average focus of news on a scale from +2 (very European) to - 2 (very national)

5.3.4 *Debating the European Constitution: about economics or politics?*

The results of the content analysis have suggested that focus on economic versus political issues did not seem to be in any way correlated to the presence of a referendum. The focus of coverage was significantly more political in Italy (M = 0.31). On the other hand, Spain (M=0.25) and the UK (M = 0.23) were fairly similar in terms of their score on the 'economic versus political' focus scale, while French articles appeared to be the most 'economic' in focus (M = 0.17). This could be explained by the fact that much of the 'No' campaign's rhetoric objected to the consolidation of a so-called 'neoliberal' Europe, which was perceived as a threat to France's traditional 'social' model. This will be discussed further in Chapter 6, which will examine the focus of coverage in greater detail and take a closer look at the nature of the arguments presented during the French campaign.

Table 5.13 Average Focus of Coverage on an 'Economic versus Political' Scale

	Referendum		**Non-referendum**	
	France	*Spain*	*Italy*	*UK*
Mean (M)	0.17	0.25	0.31	0.23
SD	0.74	0.58	0.57	0.62

Note: Average focus of news on a scale from - 2 (very economic) to +2 (very political)
N = Fra (802); Spa (1200); Ita (439); UK (380)
A one-way ANOVA was used to test the significance of mean differences F (5.47) = 5.56, p = .000

Again, looking at differences in the political orientation of newspapers, the picture appears fragmented and subject to significant cross-national variations. Contrary to what one might have expected, there seemed to be no obvious pattern across the left and right sides of the political spectrum. In France, it was left-leaning publications that placed greater emphasis on economic issues. Again, this might be explained at least in part to their fears for the future of the so-called 'Europe sociale', threatened by the supposed shift towards the 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'neo-liberal' economic models resulting from the ratification of the Constitution. By contrast, in Spain and Italy differences in terms of 'economic' or 'political' focus between left and right-leaning broadsheets did not appear to be very significant.

Finally, in the British case it was the more 'conservative' publications such as The Times and The FT that placed a greater emphasis on economic issues.

Table 5.14 Average Focus of Coverage on an 'Economic versus Political' Scale – by Political Orientation of Newspapers

	Referendum				**Non-referendum**			
	France		Spain		Italy		UK	
	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right
Mean (M)	-0.10	0.20	0.20	0.30	0.20	0.35	0.90	0.30
SD	0.78	0.55	0.50	0.60	0.50	0.55	0.23	0.60

Note: Average focus of articles by Left and Right -wing newspapers on a scale from -2 ('very economic') to +2 ('very political')

5.4 Discussion and Conclusions

The evidence presented so far in this thesis has provided some empirical support for the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2. Both the in-depth interviews with Brussels correspondents and the quantitative content analysis have indicated that holding a referendum may indeed affect the way in which Europe is presented in the print media. This Chapter began by examining the degree of elite polarisation on the Constitution. The French political spectrum was by far the most divided on the issue, while the Spanish one was largely characterised by agreement and consensus. The data has also suggested that the relationship between referendums and the polarisation of national elites may not be as straightforward as one might think. The Spanish case was an example of this, with elites largely supportive of the Treaty. However, as suggested by the content analysis the presence of a 'Yes' and 'No' campaign and the fact that citizens were called to vote on the Constitutional Treaty seemed to be sufficient to trigger large volumes of coverage on the issue. At first glance, one might attribute the higher volume of coverage published by the French and Spanish press to the fact that both countries' media systems belong to the 'Mediterranean' or 'pluralised' model identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Other factors such as the countries' histories and their positions towards European integration could also be seen as plausible explanations (see Diez-Medrano, 2005). Yet, none of these accounts seem to explain why Italy – also similar to France and Spain in terms of media system, newspaper size, and historically positive attitudes towards the EU displayed substantially different

patterns of coverage. Also, British publications, which were comparatively larger in size, talked less about the Constitution than their Mediterranean counterparts. As shown in Section 5.2, the four countries were also comparable in terms of their daily average number of political and EU stories. Again, this increases the likelihood that the observed differences in the volume of coverage may indeed have been due to the presence of a referendum rather than to independent factors.

In line with the views of Brussels correspondents, holding a referendum also seemed to increase the share of analytical coverage published about the Constitution. As indicated by the results of the content analysis, French and Spanish broadsheets were more analytical about the Treaty than Italian and British papers. Following the Hallin and Mancini model (2004), one might attribute this finding to the fact that pluralised media systems have a stronger tradition of commentary or opinion-driven journalism. Again, however, this approach fails to explain why the same trend was not observed in the Italian press, which should be similar to that of France and Spain in this respect.

Finally, the content analysis has suggested that newspaper coverage was slightly more EU focused in referendum countries than in those that did not have a debate on the Constitution. The fact that British articles were more domestic in focus than French or Spanish stories also seems to be consistent with the findings of Gleissner and de Vreese (2005), who found that during the Convention period, British coverage of the Constitution had a stronger domestic component than that of the German or Dutch media. While the preliminary results presented so far seem encouraging, changes observed on a 'domestic versus European' scale at referendum time will be considered in greater depth in Chapter 6.

On the whole, the evidence presented in this Chapter has suggested that, despite the numerous limits of direct democracy, greater citizen participation in the EU political process through referendums might be beneficial in terms of political communication. In fact, holding a referendum seems to have had some effect on the volume, analysis, depth and focus of coverage. Thus far, the analysis has been limited to domestic coverage of the Constitution, focusing exclusively on patterns of coverage observed within the four public spheres. Instead, Chapter 6 will focus on 'transnational' or 'European'

coverage of the issue. In other words, it will consider whether citizen involvement had any effect on the emergence of a European public sphere, assessing the development of a common EU discourse at referendum time. The Chapter will focus on news coverage of the Constitution during the two referendums, assessing whether the French and Spanish campaigns had any impact on press coverage of the issue in Britain and Italy.

CHAPTER 6 – REFERENDUMS AND THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

As discussed at the start of this thesis one of the key objectives of this research was to examine not only whether holding a referendum affected news coverage of the ECT domestically, but also whether it had any effect on the emergence of a transnational or EU public sphere. As mentioned in earlier Chapters, the absence of a pan-EU media system means that citizens continue to rely on the national media for the provision of information about the European political process. Whilst there are signs that news coverage may have gradually become more 'vertically EU-ised' in recent years (Meyer, 2002; Koopmans, 2004b; Trenz, 2004; Peters et al., 2005), the extent of 'horizontal' Europeanisation appears to be lagging behind. Early studies have suggested that there are times when EU issues become salient enough to stimulate 'transnational' media debates. Such times tend to be characterised by intense political conflict (Eder and Kantner, 2000; Berkel, 2004; Liebert, 2007). Other research focusing on single, salient case-studies such as tax policy (Tobler, 2001), the Austrian elections and the Haider controversy (van de Steeg, 2004) as well as Turkey's possible EU accession (Wimmel, 2004) have indicated the 'potential for transnational communicative reciprocity and common discursive frames' (Meyer, 2007:6). Having said this, evidence suggesting a marked increase in transnational debates is currently limited.

As discussed at the beginning of the thesis, this research set out to measure whether the Constitutional debate was at all marked by transnational coverage or by discursive interaction across the four member states. In other words, were there times during the Constitutional process when a common debate emerged in several member states? Was the Treaty presented through similar 'lenses' by the different media systems?

The main expectation at the start of this research was that referendums might act as vehicles for the emergence of a transnational EU discourse. Their effects, however, would be dependent on the degree of campaign polarisation, responsible for increasing the saliency of EU issues. So far, interviews with Brussels correspondents (Chapter 4) have confirmed that holding a referendum can indeed serve the purpose of making EU issues more 'glamorous'. This provides journalists with a 'reason' to write more about the issue at stake explaining it to readers or voters in greater detail. Also, the quantitative

evidence presented in Chapter 5 seems to be in line with this expectation, and has shown that both the volume of coverage and share of analysis on the Constitution increased at referendum time. Preliminary evidence from the content analysis has also indicated that press coverage was slightly more European in referendum countries – rather than focused on domestic considerations as European elections. These findings are interesting, and suggest that despite their intrinsic political risk, referendums might encourage greater communication about Europe. The data presented thus far in this thesis, however, has focused exclusively on changes occurring at the domestic level. In other words, it has not told us much about the possible role played by referendums in stimulating 'European' debates.

This Chapter tests whether the French and Spanish campaigns led to the emergence of a EU public sphere, prompting a convergence in the media's discourse. More specifically, it assesses how the two campaigns were covered by the other member states studied in this dissertation. In other words, it looks at how the French and Spanish campaigns were presented by British and Italian newspapers. Did the two 'events' have similar effects on newspaper coverage of the constitutional issue? Also, can a 'cross-pollination' or convergence of issues be observed across the four public spheres? In order to answer these research questions and test the hypotheses developed in Chapter 2 the Chapter relies on both quantitative and qualitative evidence from the content analysis described earlier in the thesis. In doing so, it draws on the definition of a public sphere as a 'space for the debate, analysis and criticism of a political order' (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). The terms 'European' or 'transnational' are used interchangeably to denote a debate occurring simultaneously in more than one member state and with similar frames of reference.[67]

Bearing this in mind, the Chapter tests for an emerging public sphere during the French and Spanish referendum campaigns. This is done by looking at the volume of coverage (1); the share of analysis (2); the polarisation of news (3); the tone of coverage (4); its degree of Europeanisation (5); as well as

[67] As discussed in the theoretical part of the thesis, the terms 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere are not used here in reference to a single 'supranational' or 'pan-European' debate. Instead, they stand for debates characterised by the Europeanisation of national public spheres, interrelated due to their coverage of the same topic, at the same time, and with emphasis on similar topics or angles.

the convergence of issues in the press (6). Section 6.1 begins by presenting quantitative, descriptive evidence. Sections 6.2 and 6.3 take a closer look at press coverage of the French and Spanish campaigns, highlighting changes in the presentation of the issue in different newspapers. Lastly, Section 6.4 concludes the Chapter with a brief discussion of its key findings.

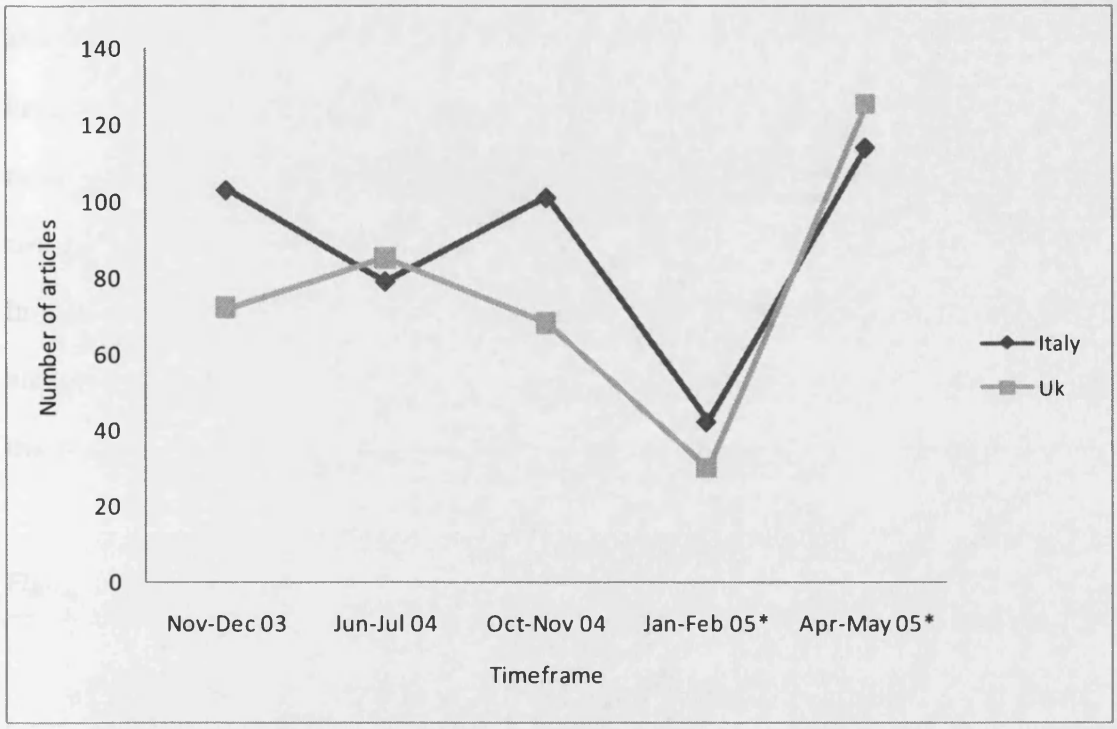
6.1 Different Campaigns, Different Reactions: Quantitative Evidence

6.1.1 *Campaign intensity and the volume of coverage*

With respect to the volume of coverage published about the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT), the data presented in Chapter 5 have shown that the issue was far more visible in member states that held a referendum on the Treaty's ratification. Overall, French and Spanish newspapers published more than twice as many stories about the Constitution than Italian and British ones. As expected, the vast majority of both French and Spanish articles on the Constitutional process were published at referendum time. Aggregate-level data also suggest that the majority of articles were published during April and May 2005. With the exception of Spanish newspapers covering their own campaign in January and February 2005, most French, Italian and British stories appeared during the French referendum. This finding provided some initial support for the hypothesis that elite polarization and competition play a role in stimulating news coverage of European affairs. However, the first key finding regarding the possible emergence of a EU public sphere at referendum time concerns the hypothesis that the degree of elite polarisation would affect the relative visibility of the two referendum campaigns in *other* member states. Looking at fluctuations in the volume of coverage in non-referendum countries, one can see that the French and Spanish campaigns had very different 'effects' on British and Italian coverage (Figure 6.1). The visibility of the Constitution in the British and Italian press actually dropped during the Spanish campaign. Conversely, it peaked during the French referendum, following a similar pattern in the two countries. This suggests that the uncertainty of the outcome and the polarization of the political spectrum made the issue more salient, increasing the amount of media attention devoted to it. What it also seems to indicate is that whilst the presence of a

referendum might in itself be sufficient to stimulate domestic debates, the absence of conflict and competition can limit its transnational effects.

Figure 6.1 Volume of coverage over time – non-referendum countries[68]



With respect to the length of articles, the data presented in Chapter 5 have shown that the number of 'long' pieces on the Constitution increased at referendum time. The results of the quantitative content analysis also indicate that Italian newspapers published more long stories about the ECT during the French (n= 30) than during the Spanish campaign (n= 16). Interestingly, however, the same did not apply to the UK media landscape, where the majority of 'long' articles appeared in June and July 2004, when agreement was finally reached on the draft Treaty, and in October and November 2004 when it was signed.

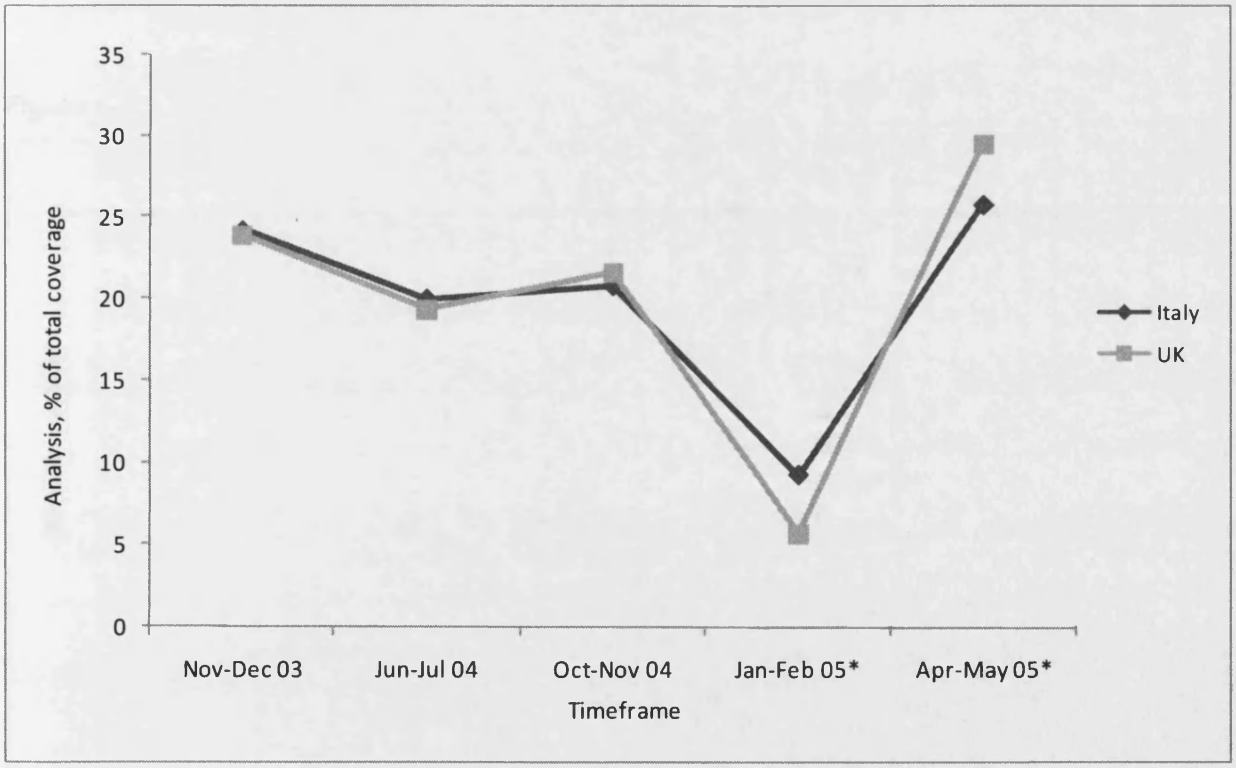
6.1.2 *Analysing the issue*

The second key finding concerns the format of news. According to the model discussed in Chapter 2, the share of analytical coverage in the European public sphere was expected to be proportional to the

[68] Note: * indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

degree of elite polarisation. As suggested by the data in Figure 6.2, the French campaign appeared to have prompted a greater share of analytical pieces in the Italian and British press. The pattern presented in Figure 4 is striking. Fluctuations in analytical coverage by Italian and British papers were virtually identical over the five timeframes. Similarly to the volume of coverage, the percentage of analytical pieces published by British and Italian newspapers increased dramatically during the salient French campaign. As with the volume of coverage, they decreased sharply during the Spanish referendum. The extent of the similarity between British and Italian newspapers is unexpected and is consistent with the hypothesis that a EU public sphere emerged during the EU constitutional process. In fact, the data suggests that whilst it peaked during the French referendum campaign, the share of analytical coverage published by British and Italian newspapers was surprisingly similar throughout the five timeframes analysed in this study.

Figure 6.2 Share of analytical coverage over time – non-referendum countries[69]

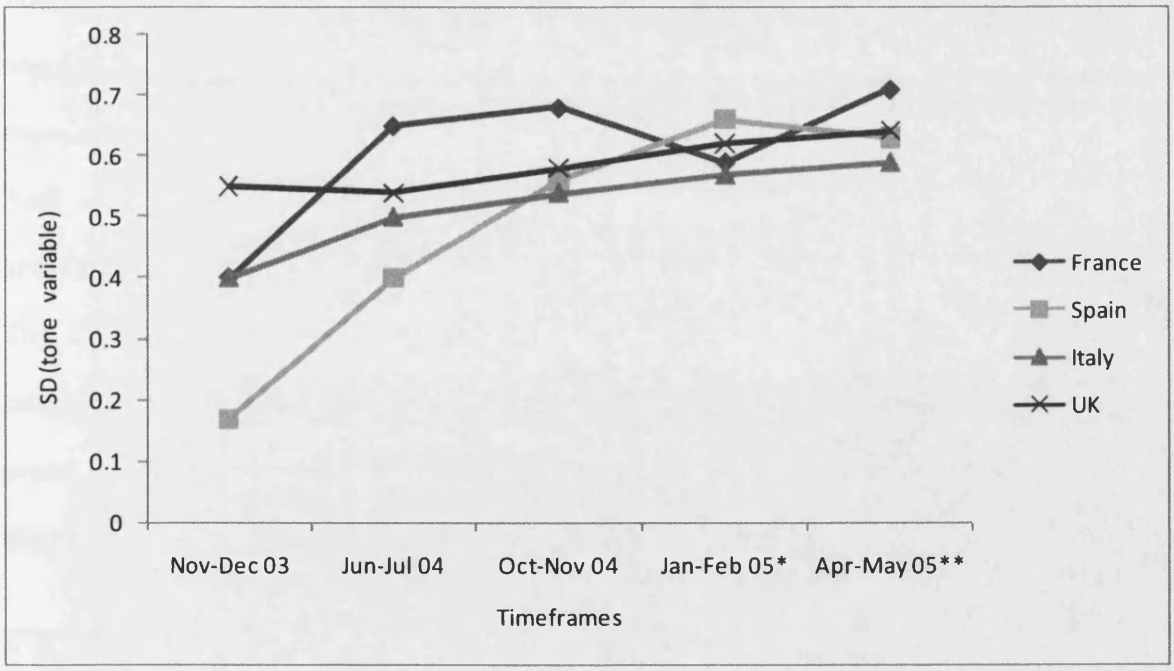


[69] Note: *s indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

6.1.4 *The polarisation of news: less neutrality, more 'drama'*

In Chapter 2 I had hypothesised that newspaper coverage of the European Constitution would become less neutral during referendum campaigns. The results of the content analysis are consistent with this claim, and indicate that both French and Spanish papers polarised during their respective campaigns. The evolution of polarisation over time suggests that the tone of news on this issue became progressively less neutral. Instead, it increasingly consisted of 'taking sides'. In other words, actors who were sympathetic to the Treaty became increasingly vocal about its merits. As indicated in Section 1.3, the same can be said of negative evaluations, which became more frequent particularly during the French campaign. It is interesting to note that changes in the polarisation of coverage were less obvious in France. This may have been due to the fact that scheduling a referendum early on in the Constitutional process led the media to polarise sooner than in other countries. As discussed in Chapter 5, the split within the French Socialist Party (PS) featured highly on political and media agendas since the end of 2004.

Figure 6.3 The polarisation of newspaper coverage, changes over time[70]



[70] Note: *s indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

With regard to the convergence of coverage, it is even more interesting to note that the salient French referendum seems to have prompted the polarisation of coverage in *other* member states, too. The polarisation of news in the British and Italian press took place continuously over the five timeframes, peaking during the French campaign. This is interesting, given that the referendum took place in France rather than in their respective countries. The fact that news coverage became less neutral, and increasingly 'dramatised' not just where the referendum took place but in the rest of Europe as well could be indicative of a 'cross-pollination' of coverage and points towards the emergence of a European public sphere. A rise in polarised news also suggests that elites, the media and the public 'cared' enough about a European issue to take a clear stance on it. This may be seen as further evidence that salient referendums may lead to greater public engagement with the EU political process.

6.1.4 *More bad news: the convergence of coverage*

As discussed, coverage of the Constitution became less neutral during the French referendum. Therefore, it is interesting to consider whether articles published during this time were predominantly negative or positive. The prevalence of negative or positive stories about the Constitution was not expected to be dependent on the presence of a referendum.[71] However, similar emphasis on 'good' or 'bad' news across the four countries may indicate a convergence of coverage. Changes in the tone of articles about the Constitution may therefore serve as a further indicator of a European public sphere. The data presented in Figure 6.3 suggests that an increase in negative news during the French campaign also coincided with the publication of more bad news by the British, Italian and Spanish press as well. This may have been due to the increasingly pessimistic climate produced by the likelihood of a French 'Non'. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the possibility of a rejection may have

[71] Previous research has shown that news about Europe tends to suffer from a 'negativity bias' (Kepplinger, 1998; Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2003; de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2005). This finding is only partly confirmed by this content analysis, which shows that with the exception of Britain, news about the constitutional process was mostly neutral or 'slightly positive' (Figure 6.3). The prevalence of a 'slightly negative' tone in British coverage of the issue is consistent with earlier findings (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005), which indicate that during the Convention process, the average stance of actors commenting on the Constitution was, overall, negatively biased.

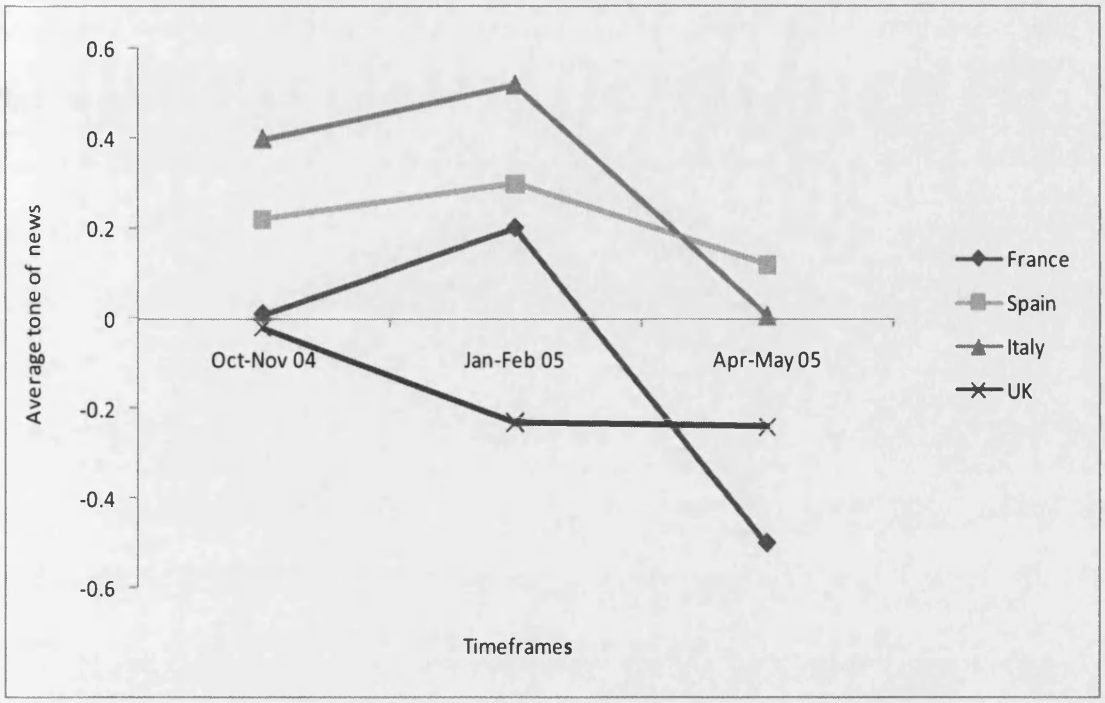
raised the saliency of the constitutional issue, increasing the need for cross-border communication and reporting.[72]

Interestingly, the rise in negative coverage observed during the French referendum was particularly marked in Italy, where the average tone (on a scale from -2 to +2) went from 0.4 in October-November 2004 and 0.5 in January-February 2005 to 0.008 in April-May 2005. Similarly, albeit to a slightly lesser degree, the average tone of Spanish news went from 0.22 in October-November 2004 and 0.3 in January-February 2005 to 0.1 during the French campaign. Section 6.2 will consider qualitative evidence to explain changes in the tone of coverage during the French campaign in greater depth.

It was also interesting to note that with the exception of British newspapers which presented the Treaty in slightly negative terms throughout the constitutional process, the tone of news stories from France, Spain and Italy gravitated around the 'slightly positive' mark until the controversial French campaign. Whilst the issue requires further investigation, parallels in the tone of coverage observed in the three countries until April and May 2005 may have been due to similar attitudes towards European integration, to historical reasons or to similarities in media systems. However, a closer qualitative look at the content of coverage (Section 6.2 below) indicates that negative coverage published during the French campaign were indeed due to the controversy surrounding the referendum.

[72] The chances of the Treaty being rejected meant that the French vote could no longer be perceived as a domestic matter. A French rejection would halt the ratification process and have tangible repercussions for all of the Union's member states.

Figure 6.4 Changes in the tone of coverage during the French and Spanish campaigns on a scale from -2 (very negative) to +2 (very positive)[7374]



Note: a bivariate regression indicates that the differences in means are significant at the 0.05 level
N=*Oct-Nov 04*(Fra)105; (Spa)171; (Ita)101; (UK)68. *Jan-Feb 05* (Fra)86; (Spa)622; (Ita)42; (UK) 30. *Apr-May* 05 (Fra)431; (Spa)187; (Ita)114 (Uk)125).

On the surface one might argue that whilst consulting citizens might indeed stimulate EU coverage, the rise of bad news at referendum time may not do Europe 'any favours'. Yet, it must not be forgotten that from the perspective of European democracy and legitimacy, the aim is not to 'sell Europe' but to encourage public debates and the flow of information about Europe.

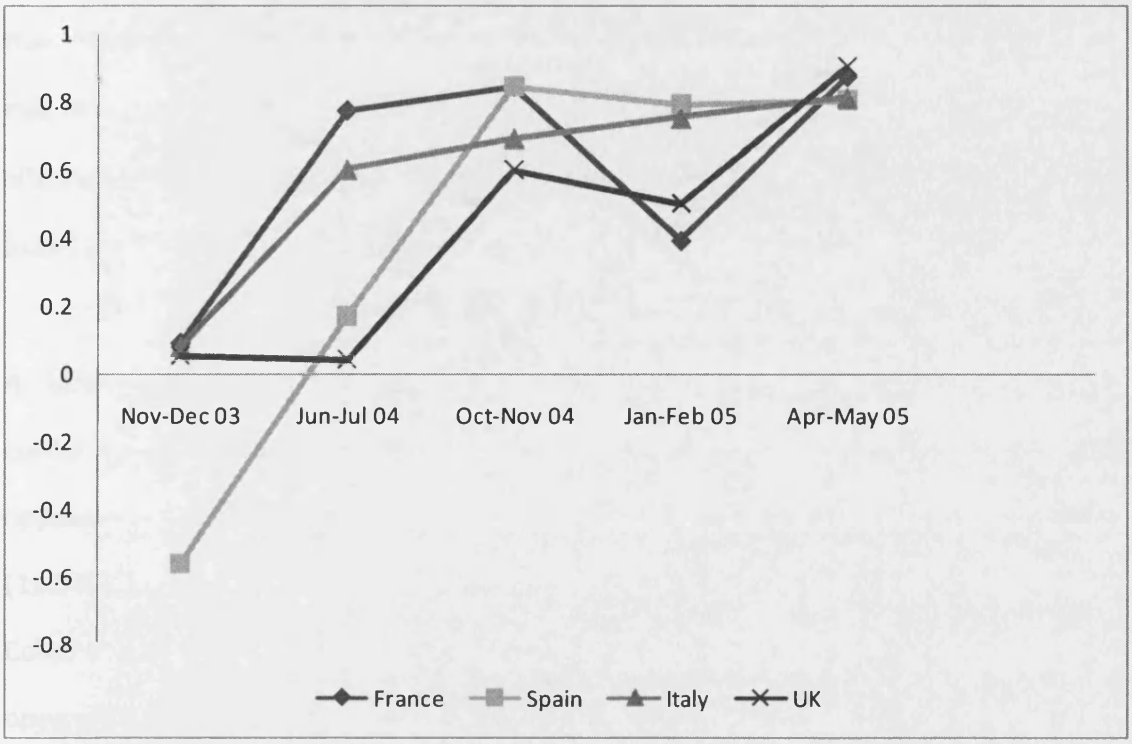
6.1.5 *Europeanised debates*

After examining the degree of polarisation and the tone of coverage, this study turned to the focus of news on a 'domestic versus European' scale. This was done by looking at the actors and topics featured in articles about the Constitution. The results presented in Chapter 5 have indicated that the focus of news was slightly more EU-centred in 'referendum countries'. As suggested by the interviews

[73] Note: *s indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

with Brussels correspondents this may have been due to the fact that scheduling a referendum increased the need for information about *Europe.*

Figure 6.5 Changes in the focus of coverage on a national (-2) versus European (+2) scale – over time[75]



Note: a bivariate regression indicates that the differences in means are significant at the 0.05 level
N= *Nov-Dec 03*:(Fra)105; (Spa)95; (Ita)103; UK (72). *Jun-Jul 04* (Fra)75; (Spa)125;(Ita)79; (UK)85. *Oct-Nov 04*(Fra)105; (Spa)171; (Ita)101; (UK)68. *Jan-Feb 05* (Fra)86; (Spa)622; (Ita)42; (UK) 30. *Apr-May* 05 (Fra)431; (Spa)187; (Ita)114 (Uk)125).

Looking at changes in 'domestic versus European' focus over time, it is interesting to note that coverage became more European during the French referendum (Figure 6.4). This trend was most evident in the French and British press. However, Spanish and Italian broadsheets, which had been more EU focused than the other countries since the Treaty's signature in timeframe 3 also became slightly more European in focus during the French campaign. These changes are interesting and may be explained by the likelihood of a crisis initiated by a possible French rejection, which prompted a greater emphasis on the future of Europe. The emphasis of coverage on domestic and European considerations is discussed in greater depth in Sections 6.2.2 below.

[75] Note: * indicate the Spanish (January-February 2005) and French (April-May 2005) referendum campaigns.

6.1.6 *Converging issues in the public sphere*

The evidence presented so far in this Chapter has suggested that a European public sphere may indeed have emerged during the French referendum. The intense French campaign may in fact have prompted a convergence of news across the countries included in this study. The data have suggested that this took place along the following dimensions. To begin, the French referendum coincided with a rise in the volume of coverage and in the share of analytical and polarised pieces. In addition, it affected the focus of articles about the Constitution, which became more Europeanised in May and June 2005.

A closer look at the focus of news during the French referendum also highlights a convergence of issues across countries. As shown in Table 6.1, French newspapers focused predominantly on opposition to the Treaty (27.6%); support for it (19.3%); on the dynamics of the referendum campaign (15.3%); the consequences of a 'No' victory (11.4%), as well as concerns over the threat that the Constitution could pose to a so-called 'social Europe' (10%). Newspaper articles also contained opposition to globalisation (8.8%). Moreover, stories discussed the negative impact that a rejection of the Treaty might have for the future of Europe (5.1%). Finally, they talked about the ongoing clashes amongst and within French political parties (4.9%), and about President Chirac's efforts to rally support for the 'Yes' campaign.

Table 6.1 Focus of News Coverage in April and May 2005, % of Stories

	France (n = 802)			Spain (n = 1200)			Italy (n = 430)			UK (n = 480)	
1	Text, opposition	28	1	No victory, consequences	26	1	No victory, consequences	27	1	No victory, consequences	29
2	Text, support	19	2	Text support	20	2	Future of Europe, negative	15	2	Text, opposition	22
3	Campaign	15	3	Ratification	19	3	Text support	13	3	Future of Europe, negative	17
4	No victory, consequences	11	4	Future of Europe, negative	16	4	Chirac	12	4	Text support	9
5	Public Opinion	10	5	Public Opinion	13	5	Public Opinion	11	5	Chirac	7
6	Social	10	6	Text, opposition	13	6	Text, opposition	8	6	Public opinion	6
7	No globalisation	9	7	Chirac	12	7	Referendum	6	7	Ratification	6
8	Future of Europe, negative	5	8	Referendum	8	8	Ratification	5	8	Referendum	5
9	Party clash	5	9	Party clash	6	9	Party clash	2	9	Party clash	2
10	Chirac	4	10	Social	4	10	Social	1	10	Social	1

Note: Most recurrent focus of articles. Percentages out of 200%

Looking at the 'top ten' issues featured in the British, Italian and Spanish news (Table 6.1), one can see that in all three countries, the primary focus of coverage was on the consequences of a possible 'No' victory in France. Papers from all three countries also talked about the negative impact that the Treaty's rejection might have on the future of Europe. This finding is particularly interesting and provides further support for the idea that coverage during this time was predominantly Europe-centric, rather than focused on domestic considerations. British, Italian and Spanish newspapers covered President's Chirac's efforts, the clashes between political elites, fluctuations in public opinion throughout the campaign, as well as the perceived threat to what the French called *'Europe sociale'*. It was also interesting to note that while papers from all four countries covered both the 'Yes' and 'No' sides of the campaign, French news appeared to be the most 'balanced' in this respect, with a more even share of articles supporting and opposing the Treaty. In general terms, French and British broadsheets devoted more space to arguments against the Treaty, whilst Italian and Spanish newspapers placed greater emphasis on the 'Yes' side. While British results may come as no surprise given the media's traditional negativity bias (Norris, 2000), the trend observed in France might seem somewhat surprising, particularly given widespread popular beliefs that the media had unanimously supported the Treaty.

6.2 The French Referendum and the European Public Sphere – Qualitative Evidence

After examining the quantitative-descriptive data on the emergence of a European public sphere at referendum time, this section turns to the results of the qualitative content analysis. The evidence presented thus far in this thesis has indicated that holding a referendum can affect newspaper coverage of European affairs. With EU issues becoming more salient at referendum time, the national press seems to have more incentives or reasons to cover them in greater detail. The quantitative findings discussed in Section 1 have also suggested that under certain conditions, the presence of a referendum in one country might also affect coverage in other member states, encouraging the emergence of a transnational or European public sphere. This seemed to be the case during the highly-polarised French campaign, which triggered changes in the volume, format and focus of articles

published by British, Italian and Spanish newspapers. This qualitative section hopes to corroborate these findings by taking a closer look at how newspapers portrayed the constitutional issue during the French referendum campaign.

6.2.1 *More stories, more analysis*

To begin, it is interesting to observe that the highly polarised French campaign provoked a shift in the way the issue was covered in other member states. The case of Italy is perhaps the most obvious example. The controversy surrounding the French referendum appeared to trigger a sort of 'awakening' within the Italian press, which began to write more about the issue. The final weeks of the French campaign actually prompted the polarisation of Italian political elites. This is interesting, given that up to that point both the press and politicians had almost unanimously supported the Treaty.[76] In fact, the actual ratification of the ECT by the Italian Senate on 7 April 2005 attracted little coverage, and very little analysis. The event was given a 70-word paragraph in the 'foreign affairs' section on page 33 of La Repubblica (7 April 2005); and a short article in on page 22 of Corriere della Sera (7 April 2005). In both cases, the parliamentary ratification of the Treaty was reported in positive terms, possibly due to the highly consensual political picture. All groups – with the exception of Rifondazione Comunista (extreme left) and Lega Nord (extreme right) voted in favour of the Constitution. 'The definitive 'Yes' was welcomed by the applause of both the majority and the opposition, who rose to their feet to salute the event' (La Repubblica, 7 April 2005).

By the final weeks of the French referendum campaign headlines like 'Italian politics splits over France's 'No' to the European constitution' (La Repubblica, 30 May 2005) had become increasingly common. The French campaign appeared to have served as a 'wake-up call' for Italian papers, triggering not only more coverage, but also more analysis on the merits and problems of the Treaty. For instance, coverage from Italy's leading paper Il Corriere della Sera went from celebrating the Treaty's signature with headlines such as 'A Great Day for Europe. Moving on to Speedy Ratification' (CDS, 29 October 2004) and 'Fireworks and Truckloads of Roses for the European Constitution' (CDS,

[76] See Chapter 5.

23 October 2004) to noting that 'if we Italians do not engage in a collective discussion [on the Constitution], we risk being Europhiles more by tradition than by conviction' (CDS, 9 May 2005).

With regard to Spain, we have seen that newspapers covered their own referendum extensively. Whilst the presence of a referendum coincided with high levels of visibility, analysis and EU-centred coverage, Spanish journalists complained about the one-sidedness of the campaign and the absence of a genuine political debate. As discussed, the French referendum had generated some initial interest from the Spanish press already in January and February 2005, possibly in an attempt to stress the importance of the constitutional issue not just in Spain but in other major EU 'players' as well. Whilst limited, such early references included headlines like:

> France Will Adapt its Constitution to the European Treaty Before the Referendum
> El Pais, 4 January 2008

> Chirac Warns that there is No Plan B if the Constitution is Not Approved
> 5 Dias, 18 January 2005

> French Socialists Ask that the Campaign Last at Least Two Months
> 5 Dias, 21 February 2005

During April and May 2005 Spanish broadsheets compared the two referendums, highlighting the differences among the campaigns. The Spanish one was described as a 'pure political marketing' exercise (Mundo, 19 February 2005), during which Prime Minister Zapatero and the Socialist Party (PSOE) consistently called for a 'Yes' vote as 'an answer of solidarity towards the European Union' (El Pais, 5 February 2005; ABC, 20 April 2005). The one-sided nature of the Spanish campaign was picked up on by several commentators. The French campaign, on the other hand, was associated with 'excitement', 'passion' and welcomed as a change from the frustrating experience of the Spanish vote.

> I have been following the debate that the French referendum on the European constitution is provoking . . . I must confess my excitement for its fate, given the bitter frustration of the voting experience in Spain, where the debate was neither big nor passionate.
> El Mundo, 24 May 2005

Spanish broadsheets, like Italian and British ones, closely followed the dynamics of the French campaign, covering fluctuations in public opinion, the battle between the 'Yes' and 'No' camps, and the positions of key political actors. As shown in Section 1, much attention was given to the efforts of President Chirac, who seemed to enjoy more visibility than his main opponent Laurent Fabius.

> The French Government is Incapable of Halting the No to the European Constitution
> ABC 14 April 2005
>
> The Campaign for a 'Yes' to the European Constitution Gains New Ground in France
> El Pais, 4 May 2005
>
> French Political Rivalries Threaten the European Constitution
> ABC, 18 May 2005
>
> Chirac in Last Ditch to Win Yes Vote
> Guardian 28 May 2005

6.2.2 *A European debate*

As suggested by the statistical results presented in Section 6.1, the focus of coverage in British and Italian papers became more European during the French referendum. Aside from references to the key French actors involved in the campaign, topics in the news were mostly European. Most importantly, the issue was portrayed as a European question rather than a French domestic matter. This represents an important development, given the EU's tendency to be reported predominantly from a national perspective. Spanish, Italian, and British newspapers focused on analysing the implications that a French rejection would have on Europe as a whole. Arguments presented by French and Spanish papers dealt with the consequences of a 'No victory' for France, arguing that the Country would be 'sidelined' and 'silenced', losing its standing as one of the 'big players' in the EU (El Pais, 30 April 2005). Italian newspapers were even more dramatic in this respect, arguing that negative outcome would 'erase France from the history of Europe' (Corriere della Sera, 27 April 2005).

Paris, Europe Scares: the 'No' Front Continues to Grow
La Repubblica, 13 April 2005

France Terrorises Europe
La Repubblica, 17 April 2005

It's as if the French had to answer the question: are you satisfied? The answer is no. But that is not the question. The [real] question concerns Europe
Corriere della Sera, 27 April 2004

Without the Constitution, Europe has no Future
La Repubblica, 30 April 2005

I am wondering what would happen if the French said 'No'... the shock would be dramatic, for the entire European Union
Corriere della Sera, 10 May 2005

If Europe Loses we will all be Weaker
Corriere della Sera, 14 May 2005

The 'Yes' front is struggling due to a campaign built essentially against the 'No'; a campaign which failed to explain the importance and advantages of voting for Europe
Sole 24 Ore, 22 May 2005

More France, Less Europe: the No Campaign's Sick Dream
Corriere della Sera, 29 May 2005

We must choose between nationalism and Europe. We can't turn our back to a process that started 50 years ago
La Repubblica, 29 May 2005

As suggested by the headlines and excerpts above, Italian journalists covering the French referendum were critical of the Chirac-led campaign, and expressed their frustration at French citizens' inability to realise that the vote was about Europe rather than their satisfaction with the government's performance. As shown by the quantitative part of the content analysis, Italian coverage had been

largely EU focused throughout the constitutional process. However, it was not until the French referendum that the press engaged in a debate about the Treaty's meaning for Europe, going beyond the simple reporting of the challenges of the intergovernmental conference (IGC), the success of the Treaty's signature, or the fact that it had 'sailed through' parliamentary ratification. For the first time, Italian papers acknowledged that the Treaty's ratification could not be taken for granted. The possibility of a crisis initiated by a French rejection led them to actually consider the pros and cons of the Constitution and analyse the meaning and effects of its rejection not just on Italy or France but on Europe as a whole.

Through their choice of semantics and, for instance, the argument that voting on the basis of their satisfaction with the Chirac government was off-topic, Italian journalists expressed clear value judgements on the voting intentions of the French public – referring to the 'No campaign' as a 'sick dream'. Moreover, similarly to the Spanish press, Italian articles seemed keen to steer the debate back onto Europe and away from French domestic considerations.

The debate on the effects of the French rejection on the future of the European Union was also particularly pronounced immediately after the vote. Results were portrayed as a 'shock' and a 'slap' to Europe, and even as the Union's 'death'. Again, it must be noted that the tone adopted by the Italian press was particularly dramatic. Yet, even the Spanish and the British media described the event as 'grave' and as a precursor for a EU-wide crisis.

The French 'No' to the Constitution Leaves the EU Hanging in Midair
El Pais, 30 May 2003

Future of Europe: Resounding 'No' Shocks European Leaders: Vote Reduces Prospect of British Poll
Guardian 31 May 2005

The Death of Europe. The Gauche's 'No' Has Killed the EU
Corriere della Sera, 31 May 2005

Europe Fails to Inspire
Il Sole 24 Ore, 31 May 2005

Referendum: France is Engulfed by the 'No'
France: a Slap to Europe
La Repubblica, 30 May 2005

What matters most is the [single] currency. . .markets have reacted with relative calm to the French rejection of the European Constitution
Cinco Dias, 31 May 2005

EU Fears for Future as French and Dutch Threaten No Vote
Times, 25 April 2005

Euro Seen Falling if French Vote No
FT, 18 May 2005

France Delivers its Judgement and Europe is Plunged into Crisis
Guardian, 30 May 2005

Several articles also argued that the outcome of the French vote was indicative of a blurring of the boundaries between the EU and national dimensions. The key argument was that it had become increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between the two. Voters could in fact reject European referendums as a way to criticise their governments and oust their politicians when they disliked particular EU policies. This, they argued, suggests that the level of political integration is deeper than many think, and that citizens have understood the complex dynamics of the EU policy-making process better than it is generally assumed (Corriere della Sera, 31 May 2005). Others argued that the fact that politicians use the EU as a scapegoat is confusing to voters, who see pictures of Heads of State smiling in pictures at Brussels summits one day, only to hear them blame the EU for everything that goes wrong at home the next day (El Pais, 30 May 2005). Given that this 'perverse' mechanism has been at the heart of European integration for decades, it should be hardly surprising that voters find

themselves confused over what issues are really at stake in EU elections and referendums. Again, this line of thought resonates with the concerns expressed by Brussels correspondents in Chapter 4.

6.2.3 *Negative coverage: a common trend?*

The descriptive evidence presented in earlier parts of this Chapter has shown that the tone of coverage was not affected by the presence of a referendum. In general, Italian and Spanish papers were more positive about the constitutional process than the French or the traditionally Eurosceptic British press. However, Section 6.1.4 also indicated that an increase in negative coverage during French campaign triggered more negative evaluations in other member states. In the midst of a pessimistic climate this may seem hardly surprising. However, one must not forget that it is unusual for the media in several member states to be discussing the future of Europe not only at the same time, but with a similar tone or frame of reference.

This shift is interesting given that the tone of Italian and Spanish newspapers had been positive in previous timeframes. Yet, during April and May 2005, the tone of news became more negative, as the press reported on the dynamics of the French campaign and the 'No' camp leading opinion polls by 54% (Corriere della Sera, 24 May 2005). The previously supportive Italian press went from portraying the Treaty as the 'best possible agreement', and a 'landmark document of historic significance' to arguing that 'the constitution [was] excessively long and inaccessible for ordinary people and for a disgruntled European electorate' (Corriere della Sera, 10 May 2005). Equally, headlines such as 'For a 'No' to the European Constitution' (ABC, 24 April 2005) and 'The Current European Constitution is Dead' (Cinco Dias, 30 May 2005) became increasingly frequent.

The Italian press also echoed the French in criticising the Treaty for endorsing a 'kind' of Europe that was 'too liberal and not social enough' (La Repubblica, 18 May 2005). The recurrence of themes such as the threat to 'social Europe' which featured so prominently in the French campaign provides further evidence of a convergence of coverage across member states. In other words, newspapers from different countries were not only writing about the same topic at the same time, but with a similar tone, emphasising similar angles and issues.

Despite these similarities, it is worth noting that whilst Spanish and Italian broadsheets seemed almost regretful about the outcome of the French campaign, British papers commented that the French 'No' would have been much bigger had it not been for the 'survival of France's traditional belief that Europe is a good thing' (Times, 12 May 2005). Moreover, the British press argued that France's rejection would be greeted with relief in that it could 'save Tony Blair from the embarrassment of his own referendum on the European Constitution' (Guardian, 23 May 2005). Even according to the Guardian – one of the most pro-European British papers, a possible British referendum would have been 'doomed to defeat'. Interestingly, the press seemed to acknowledge the importance of its role in shaping eurosceptic public opinion, by adding that no matter how 'relentless and sophisticated a 'Yes' campaign Blair [ran]', he would 'never convince the Eurosceptic press to mute its opposition nor, and this is the most important factor, [could] he [have] hoped to change the minds of readers after years of negative EU coverage' (The Guardian, 23 May 2005). The Financial Times took a similar view on this matter, and reported that opponents of the Constitution in Britain were preparing to 'kick-off a cross-party campaign for a 'No' vote in a referendum' in case the French 'backed the Constitution on 29 May', claiming that 'the Treaty [would] hand more powers to Brussels and make the EU less accountable to the public' (Financial Times, 19 May 2005).

Generally speaking, the UK press seemed to place more emphasis on the No campaign, devoting more attention to negative developments and to arguments *against* the Treaty. The ECT was referred to as 'an Orwellian nightmare in the making' (Financial Times, 20 May 2005). Other papers argued that the French 'Resistance' looked 'set to sabotage the referendum', seemingly linking the Treaty's rejection with an act of patriotism (The Times, 12 May 2005). The Guardian went on to greet the French result by adding that it was 'sorry [that the UK would] not have a referendum on the European Constitution. I would have voted no with great enthusiasm (The Guardian, 31 May 2005). True to its traditional Eurosceptic position, British tabloid The Sun welcomed the rejection of the Constitution with headlines like 'Non, Non Non' and '57% say 'Non' to a EU Super-state' (30 May 2005).

6.3 A 'Yes' Without Passion: Covered at Home, Invisible in Europe

The evidence presented in Section 6.1 has indicated that the French referendum affected newspaper coverage of the Constitution not only at home, but in other member states too. Yet, the results of the descriptive content analysis have also shown that this did not occur during the Spanish referendum. As discussed, the Spanish campaign was almost invisible outside the domestic public sphere, and actually prompted a drop in the amount of coverage published by Italian and British papers. This trend is unexpected, and deserves some attention. This short section looks for possible explanations for this finding in the discourse of Spanish newspapers. Gauging how the campaign was presented domestically may help us to understand the way in which it was treated abroad, too. Establishing why the two campaigns were covered so differently by the 'European' press is relevant to the scope of this study and may bring us closer to identifying some of the pre-requisites for a EU public sphere.

Before addressing the failure of the Spanish referendum to spark much debate in other member states it must be said that, as shown by the data presented in Chapter 5, the campaign was covered intensely at the domestic level. Studying Spanish newspaper coverage confirms that, aside from increasing the volume of articles, holding a referendum on the Constitution also coincided with a greater share of analytical pieces on this topic. Spanish newspapers published more stories which analysed the contents of the Treaty in detail, explaining its complexity to readers. For instance, in the days leading up to the referendum El Mundo published a series of articles breaking down the contents of the Treaty into its key articles and provisions (e.g. El Mundo, 17-18 February 2005). Similarly, ABC's pieces became more analytical, presenting a case for a 'Yes' to the Constitution (e.g. 'Twenty Elementary Reasons to Vote Yes', 19 February 2005). Other newspapers focused on explaining the effects of the Treaty's ratification (e.g. 'Spain's Yes to the European Constitution: the Author Analyses its Significance for the European Union', Cinco Dias, 28 February 2005).

With regards to the focus of coverage, a number of articles tried to link the 'EU' and 'national' dimensions by explaining what the Constitution could do for Spain. Headlines like 'A United Europe Means a United Spain' were common and indicate an effort to explain the effects that the Treaty would

have, domestically (El Pais, 12 February 2005). Overall, however, Spanish news coverage in January and February 2005 was predominantly European in focus. Ratifying the Constitution was presented as an act of support towards *Europe*. Again, papers tried to convey why 'saying Yes to Europe' was important (ABC, 22 February 2005). Among the main arguments was that supporting the ECT 'would strengthen Europe's voice around the world' (Cinco Dias, 17 February 2005). Ratifying the Constitution was framed as a 'reaffirmation of Spain's commitment to Europe' and as 'the ratification of [Spain's] European vocation' (ABC 17 February 2005).[77] Finally, it is worth noting that European actors featured regularly in Spanish coverage.[78]

In 'defence' of the Spanish case, the campaign coincided with a rise in the volume of articles about the Constitution, and an increase in the share of analytical pieces. As we have seen, news coverage was predominantly EU-centred during this time. This suggests that scheduling a referendum may have succeeded in stimulating EU coverage and debate, *domestically*. So why was the Spanish campaign almost invisible outside the domestic public sphere? Why did the first referendum scheduled on the ECT fail to generate more interest abroad? One possible answer lies in the relative lack of elite polarisation around the Treaty. The lack of political investment and debate on this issue made the outcome of the referendum fairly predictable. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the likelihood of the French referendum being rejected meant that the issue went from being a domestic matter to one of European concern. Arguably, the low intensity of the Spanish referendum prevented this 'shift' in perceptions from taking place. In addition, the consensual nature of the campaign may have made for less 'exciting' news to report on.

Interestingly, the lack of political competition around the ECT featured regularly in the coverage of Spanish newspapers. Journalists commonly complained about the one-sidedness of the campaign,

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[77] Europe, Naturally!', ABC, 11 February 2005; 'With Europe', ABC, 6 February 2005; 'The First with Europe', El Pais, 10 January 2005; A'Very European' Triumph', El Pais, 21 February 2005.

[78]. During the weeks leading up to the Spanish referendum the most visible actors were Valery Giscard d'Estaing - also known as the 'father' of the Draft Constitution, French President Jacques Chirac (who was also preparing for his referendum campaign) and finally, Commission Presidents Romano Prodi and his successor Jose Manuel Barroso.

arguing that the government's communication strategy had 'not led to a debate over the Treaty or its content . . . [Instead] it [had] been a publicity stunt' (Mundo, 20 February 2005). El Mundo also added that the campaign had been overly 'simple', based on demonstrating that the Treaty was 'good' and that being left out of Europe would be 'bad' for Spain. These arguments - the paper suggested, had a significant effect on the electorate, particularly on the older generations. El Mundo also accused the government of exploiting the Spanish people's 'inherent sense of inferiority vis-à-vis other Europeans, framing the Treaty's ratification as a matter of 'allegiance' to the EU (Mundo, 21 February 2005). In other words, it accused the Zapatero government of presenting voters with an oversimplified offer comprising only two options. 'Spain is the problem; Europe is the solution'. One either votes 'Yes', and is European, or 'No', and rejects the EU project as a whole (Mundo, 21 February 2005).

Newspapers such as El Mundo, El Pais and ABC criticised the Spanish elites' presentation of the Constitutional issue as a matter of solidarity. The argument put forth by the government was that Spanish voters ought to show their allegiance and gratitude to the EU, particularly after having benefited so significantly from cohesion funds since the end of the 1970's.[79] ABC also framed the Treaty's ratification as 'an act of patriotism' (ABC, 25 January 2005) and published headlines such as 'Everyone Should Vote 'Yes' to the European Constitution' (ABC, 01 February 2005). Despite some 'passing the buck' on the limits of the campaign, electoral disengagement, and the lack of political will to have a 'proper' debate, Spanish political elites largely maintained that voting 'Yes' was the right thing for Spain and for Europe.

As already indicated by the quantitative content analysis, references to the Spanish referendum in the British, French and Italian press were limited. Newspaper coverage focused predominantly on the outcome of the referendum (e.g. 'A Yes without passion', Le Figaro, 21 February 2005). This is perhaps unsurprising, particularly if one considers the one-sided nature of the campaign, the limited polarisation and the relative predictability of the outcome. Aside from covering the outcome of the

[79] Zapatero had conceded to the signature of the European Constitution in Rome out of solidarity' ABC, 20 May 2005; 'The PSOE affirms that 'Yes' is an answer of solidarity towards the European Union', El Pais, 5 February 2005.

vote, the European press also focused on the low levels of turnout (e.g. 'Spanish leaders fights indifference on EU . . . Mr Zapatero's main adversary has been indifference, rather than the colourful cast of characters who reject the EU constitution', FT, 14 February 2005).

As explained earlier in the thesis, the Spanish referendum did indeed have an effect on domestic coverage of the constitutional treaty. Yet, the low intensity of the campaign and the resulting predictability of the outcome limited its visibility in other member states. A qualitative look at the discourse of newspapers during January and February 2005 has in fact identified some recurring themes in the discourse of the Spanish press. Among these was the failure of national politicians to stimulate a 'real' debate on the issue. Framing the Treaty's ratification as an act of allegiance or solidarity towards Europe did not leave much room for discussion. Equally, arguing that voting 'Yes' was simply the 'right thing to do' (ABC, 11 February 2005) was not conducive to a 'transnational' debate. The relative predictability of the outcome may have also made for less interesting news, decreasing the chances of the issue being 'picked up' by the media in other countries. As discussed at the start of the study, the presence of conflict has been shown to increase cross-border communication and debate aimed at identifying possible solutions (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991; Berkel, 2004).[80] As seen in Section 6.2, this seemed to have occurred in France, where the political spectrum was deeply polarised around the issue. In Spain, where elites were almost unanimously supportive of the Treaty, this did not take place.

6.4 Discussion and Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative evidence presented in this Chapter has provided further empirical support for the hypothesis that referendums can affect news coverage of EU affairs. More specifically, the Chapter has shown that these effects may, under certain conditions, extend beyond the domestic public sphere – prompting the emergence of a 'transnational' or 'EU' discourse. Analysing news

[80] This applies to 'functionalist' conflicts characterised by common goals and objectives.

coverage of the French and Spanish campaigns has suggested that the degree of polarisation and the likelihood of a EU-wide crisis may have a key role to play in this respect.

The quantitative analysis of newspaper coverage has in fact indicated that the highly-polarised French campaign led to an increase in the volume of coverage and the share of analysis published by British and Italian newspapers. Sceptics might argue that changes in the visibility of the Constitution and in the format of coverage were due to independent factors other than the presence of the controversial French referendum. Yet, the analysis has shown that these patterns were accompanied by changes in the focus of coverage. The final phase of the French campaign also prompted a decrease in neutral stories about this issue, leading to the polarisation of news not only in France, but in other member states, too. Coverage of the Constitution in the four countries also became more EU-focused during this time. Finally, the quantitative data presented in Section 6.1 of this Chapter has indicated that newspapers from the four countries emphasised similar issues during the French campaign, focusing on the race between the 'Yes' and 'No' sides, the possibility of the referendum being rejected, and the impact of a negative outcome on the future of Europe. These findings point towards a convergence of coverage, and suggest that a EU public sphere can indeed emerge at times of crisis.

These results are also consistent with the theoretical assumption that functional conflicts hold significant news value (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1997). As argued by the journalists interviewed during this study, the European Union tends to be perceived as a bureaucratic, unexciting, consensus-seeking apparatus. This common perception is problematic in terms of media coverage because consensus does not 'sell newspapers'. Given that conflict and political competition make Europe 'sexier', correspondents generally find it easier to publish EU stories during such times. This finding also resonates with previous empirical work which found evidence of a common EU public sphere at times of crisis (Eder and Kantner, 2000). Last but not least, it may also be argued that the possibility of a EU-wide crisis caused by a 'No' victory in France altered public perceptions of the issue. It is in fact plausible that the referendum of 29 May 2005 went from being perceived as a French domestic issue to one of Spanish, Italian and British concern, too. In other words, British, Italian and Spanish newspapers may have taken such a keen interest in the French vote partly because the issue

had become so 'big' domestically, and partly because the outcome of the referendum concerned them all in a very direct manner.[81]

Evidence of this shift in public perceptions was also found in the qualitative data presented in this Chapter. The French campaign seems to have served as a 'wake-up call' for Italian newspapers which had previously published fewer articles and fewer analytical pieces on the Constitution. Similarly to Spanish broadsheets, the Italian press had previously been almost unquestionably supportive of the Treaty, comparing opposition to the Constitution to a rejection of the European project as a whole. The French campaign, however, seemed to have altered this perception. Italian coverage became increasingly analytical, and somewhat more critical of the Treaty. News discourse during this time dwelled on the analysis of the French situation, exploring similar arguments to those presented by the French media. Having said this, Italian coverage remained largely supportive of the Constitution, maintaining that French voters had mistaken what was at stake in the referendum, and that the Treaty's rejection would have negative repercussions on the future of Europe. As suggested in Section 6.2, Spanish articles 'confessed' their interest in the French debate, which seemed more exciting than the uneventful Spanish campaign. The referendum of 20 February 2005 had captured the media's attention, domestically, and prompted a large volume of articles and a high share of analysis. However, whilst the presence of a referendum increased the amount of domestic coverage the limited politicisation made for a less exciting debate.

The evidence from Chapter 5 indicated that greater citizen involvement in the EU political process through referendums appears to affect domestic coverage of the EU affairs. However, as shown in the present Chapter, when it comes to the convergence of coverage and the consolidation of a 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere, citizen involvement alone may not be enough. The fact that the French and Spanish campaigns were treated so differently by international newspapers shows that the degree of polarisation has a crucial role to play in this respect. The relative role of these two 'ingredients' in stimulating EU coverage and debate is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 7. This

[81] By affecting the course and fate of the ratification process.

final Chapter will also evaluate the policy-level implications of these empirical findings and explain their contribution to the field of European political communication.

CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The European Union is experiencing a profound identity crisis. Through the so-called 'period of reflection' which followed the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in 2005, the role of citizens in shaping the course of European integration has become more salient than ever. As discussed at the start of this thesis, this issue is closely related to the notions of democratic legitimacy, openness and transparency – all of which dominate public discussions about the future of the Union. The importance of dialogue and debate for the democratisation of the EU has become increasingly obvious, and has prompted a number of initiatives at the institutional level.[82] Efforts to reconnect EU citizens with their institutions and representatives in Brussels may yield the desired results in the long run. Despite recent institutional initiatives to move away from top-down communication exercises and work towards the consolidation of a two-way dialogue about Europe, increasing the visibility of European affairs remains a key priority. The democratic accountability of the EU political process is highly dependent on the public's awareness of the decisions made in Brussels by their representatives (Statham et al., 2005). At present, we know that the national media[83] remain citizens' preferred source of information about the EU. The absence of influential pan-European newspapers or television channels has emphasised the importance of moving towards a network of closely-related, Europeanised domestic public spheres. Increasing the domestic visibility of the EU in the domestic media might significantly improve the extent of its democratic legitimacy and accountability (Weiler, 1996; Habermas, 2004; Eriksen and Fossum, 2004; Michailidou, 2008). What's more, being exposed to regular and positive news about Europe has been shown to increase citizens' sense of European identity (Bruter, 2003; 2005).

The reality 'on the ground', however, is that the media have few incentives to cover Europe on a regular basis (Hix, 2008). Much of the empirical evidence available to us indicates that the visibility of

[82] One such example is the introduction by the European Commission of its 'Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate' shortly after the 2005 'constitutional debacle'. Other initiatives have sought to encourage the shift from the unidirectional provision of information, moving towards a two-way dialogue between citizens and EU policy-makers (see Michailidou, 2008).

[83] As opposed to the very few existing European media sources.

the EU in the news remains limited and irregular (Norris, 2000). What's more, stories about Europe are commonly presented in neutral or slightly negative terms (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2001a), and from a domestic rather than European perspective (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). Recent work has also suggested that the ongoing 'communication deficit' may be the result of a 'participation deficit' – whereby citizens have few opportunities to have a direct say on European matters (Michailidou, 2008). Hence the importance of creating more frequent occasions for citizen engagement with the EU political process.

Referendums remain the most obvious form of direct participation and are presented by many as the more democratic 'choice'. On the other hand, however, the use of referendums on European integration has proven somewhat controversial. The French and Dutch rejections of the Constitutional Treaty have plunged Europe into an unprecedented identity crisis. Critics of direct democracy at the EU level have argued that referendums are 'crude' and 'ineffectual' mechanisms for determining the course of European integration (Hix, 2008). Moreover, there is a real concern that citizens may not have access to sufficient knowledge to make informed decisions at voting time – which may lead the public to 'vote No' when in doubt (Moravcsik, 2008).

Given the importance of this chain of 'communicative linkages' for European legitimacy and democracy (Statham et al., 2005; Michailidou, 2008), this project was designed to investigate the extent to which citizen participation in EU referendums has shaped EU newspaper coverage. More specifically, the study examined whether holding a referendum on the European Constitution had any effect on the way it was covered by the press in a number of EU countries. In doing so, it set out to test whether direct citizen engagement prompted any changes in the volume, format, polarisation and focus of coverage published about this issue. By doing so, it aimed to work towards two main objectives. First, it hoped to contribute to our understanding of how the Constitutional Treaty was covered by the press, thereby helping to fill the gap for cross-national and longitudinal data on the subject. Secondly, through the analysis of news production and contents, the study sought to shed light on the emergence of a European public sphere, helping to identify its main drivers. Given the importance of communication and debate for the future of Europe, the need to understand what

stimulates EU coverage seemed more pressing than ever. Similarly, it seemed useful to assess whether greater citizen engagement really can make a difference in this respect, changing the way we talk about Europe.

This final Chapter aims to tie the theoretical and the empirical parts of the study togehter. By doing so it hopes to answer the research questions set out at the start of the thesis, highlight the significance of its findings and explain the study's main contribution to the field of European political communication. Section 7.1 begins by looking at the production of EU news, discussing journalists' perceptions of referendums as potential stimuli for increased coverage and debate. It then turns to the study's main findings regarding the effects of referendums on domestic coverage of the European constitutional process and on the emergence of a European public sphere. Section 7.2 brings these observations together into a single 'recipe' for EU coverage. Section 7.3 discusses whether, on the basis of the evidence presented in this thesis, referendums are part of the problem or the solution to Europe's communication deficit. Finally, Sections 7.4 and 7.5 conclude the Chapter by talking about the study's limitations, highlighting its implications and avenues for future research.

7.1 The Study's Key Findings

7.1.1 *Covering Europe: the perspective of Brussels-based correspondents*

In-depth interviews with correspondents based in Brussels have provided valuable insights as to why EU affairs typically struggle to capture the media's attention. From these conversations, it appears that both journalists' working conditions and their perceptions of the European Union may be partly responsible for Europe's limited and sporadic visibility in the news. To begin, Brussels was criticised for not being a 'particularly exciting' place to report from. Instead, it is seen as a complex and technical process to report on. What's more, it is a process for which audiences have, by and large, little appetite. This is particularly true of the more technical aspects of European integration. This lack of interest might seem paradoxical, given that decisions made in Brussels have a direct and tangible impact on readers' lives 'back home'. Yet, perhaps due to the fact that the 'European Union' is still evolving, or to the fact that its decision-making process is perceived as bureaucratic and not always

transparent, EU news *per se* fails to excite. Europe is not (perceived) as 'glamorous' enough to warrant regular coverage. Journalists also added that because it is not 'sexy' it does not 'sell'. It follows that at times of growing commercial pressure and competition, news that is not perceived as being of interest to readers and that will not help 'sell' newspapers is likely to be 'vetoed' by news editors at home. Therefore, whilst correspondents are typically free to write about EU topics of their choice, ultimately it is news editors who are responsible for deciding whether or not a story is published. Journalists also stressed that the 'uneventful' nature of EU news is accentuated by the way in which it is presented at its source. According to journalists, the daily press conference or 'midday mass' organised by the European Commission does little or nothing to make the day's news more appealing. Also, the fact that the entire Brussels press corps has access to the same information means that journalists must 'dig deeper' through their own 'private channels' to uncover any 'scoops' or interesting angles.

When asked to elaborate on the reasons why EU news stories are perceived as 'low-salience', journalists offered a number of similar explanations. These can be broadly encapsulated by the (perceived) lack of politicisation surrounding EU affairs. Correspondents argued that both the EU decision-making process and the Union's leaders are (perceived) as consensus-seeking. Current Commission President Barroso was cited as the obvious example of a highly competent but 'not very glamorous' or controversial politician. This is problematic because conflict, scandals and competition are generally seen as far more newsworthy than consensus. The apparent lack of competition at the EU level is compounded by a lack of political will on the part of domestic politicians to encourage European debates at home. Yet, Europe is conveniently hijacked to further personal political agendas, and used as a 'scapegoat' whenever things go wrong.

Aside from concurring that more politicisation would increase the saliency of European affairs and, consequently, their visibility in domestic media agendas, journalists also underlined that when reporting the news, they wrote with their audiences in mind. Thus, relevance to domestic audiences was consistently cited as a key news selection criterion. Correspondents also stated that their job is to explain how policies and developments in Brussels relate to their readers at home. Their role is to

transmit and interpret EU news for national publics. As a result, many journalists seemed perplexed that one would distinguish between 'European' and 'domestically-focused' coverage. Until 'Europe' remains a union of nation-states and debates continue to take place in the national media, it is 'natural' for both EU and domestic elements to feature in the media's discourse. This observation is interesting and suggests that the conceptualisation of the European public sphere offered by the 'regulatory' school (see Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007) may be more representative of the current situation. In other words, it may be more feasible to expect to see a Europeanisation of several interrelated national public spheres than the consolidation of a single, pan-European space. Moreover, if – as argued by journalists –the European and national dimensions are so closely intertwined, it may be unreasonable to expect EU actors or issues to be absent from the media's coverage.

In-depth interviews with Brussels-based correspondents also provided qualitative evidence consistent with the hypothesis that holding referendums on the European Constitution affected the media's coverage of the issue. Both the French and Spanish journalists interviewed during this study claimed that the presence of a referendum affected their work in the following ways. First, it created opportunities for more polarised political contexts, with elites mobilising – albeit to different degrees, around the constitutional issue. Journalists argued that this made their job easier, because it gave them a chance to cover both sides of the campaign. The mobilisation of domestic politicians sent out signals about the importance of the issue, thereby increasing the amount of space and attention devoted to it by individual newspapers. Aside from increasing the volume of coverage, holding a referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty also affected the work perceptions of Brussels correspondents. The vote also provided journalists with reasons to cover the Treaty in greater detail. This was reflected in a shift from the provision of 'straight news' to a greater number of detailed, analytical pieces. Correspondents also commented on the differences between the French and Spanish campaigns. Spanish journalists in particular acknowledged the fact that whilst holding a referendum was enough to affect the debate domestically, the fact that political elites were almost unanimously supportive of the issue limited the intensity of the campaign. On the whole, however, the presence of a

referendum was perceived as 'beneficial' because it led to more political investment, which contributed to make Europe 'sexier'.

7.1.2 *More coverage at home*

The second empirical Chapter measured the extent to which the presence of a referendum affected domestic coverage of the Constitution. The aim of Chapter 5 was to study news coverage in the four countries, focusing on the differences between referendum and non-referendum countries. The Chapter began by looking at the degree of elite polarisation, outlining parties' position on the European Constitution as well as their relative vote share. This information, it was hoped, would serve as a useful indicator of the divisiveness and salience of the issue. Moreover, it allowed us to gauge how different the French and Spanish political landscapes really were. Unsurprisingly, the data confirmed that the degree of polarisation on the Constitution was greater in referendum countries, where elites mobilised in favour or against the issue during the weeks of campaigning. However, significant differences were observed between the French and Spanish contexts – with the first one being far more divisive than the latter. Whilst the Italian landscape was highly consensual, it was interesting to note that the UK was significantly more polarised, with the Conservative party firmly opposed to the Treaty. This suggests that, had there been a referendum, the campaign could have become highly divisive.

The next set of descriptive findings emerging from this Chapter concerned the size and format of the sixteen newspapers. To begin, the data presented in Section 6.2 showed that newspapers from the 'Mediterranean' model were by and large comparable in terms of size (number of pages). Whilst British broadsheets were typically about 30 pages longer than their French, Italian and Spanish 'counterparts' they also featured a greater number of advertisements scattered across the different sections. Either way, the added length of British newspapers did not seem to have an effect on the number of stories about the Constitution. Most importantly, with the exception of The Sun, all of the newspapers published similar numbers of political and European pieces each day. This finding is

important because it is indicative of the comparability of the sample, which ensured that the observed cross-national variations were due to the presence of a referendum rather than to differences in the publication 'style' of individual newspapers. The analysis then turned to changes in newspaper format at referendum time. Holding a referendum appeared to affect the format of some (but not all) publications. For instance, the majority of French papers (with the exception of L'Humanité) introduced special 'referendum', 'European Union', 'Debate' or 'Treaty' sections devoted exclusively to the Constitution. Similarly, El Mundo also devised a special 'referendum' segment in the weeks preceding the vote. The creation of special sections is interesting and may be seen as indicative of increased issue salience at referendum time. Yet, other newspapers continued to place their pieces on the Constitution in either their 'domestic' or 'foreign news' sections – depending on whether the story focused more prominently on national or European aspects and actors.

Analysing the content of news about the Constitution during several key timeframes between 2003 and 2005 revealed that holding a referendum affected the press' portrayal of the issue in several ways. First and foremost, newspapers from countries that scheduled a referendum on the European Constitution published more than twice as many stories on this issue than those from countries that did not get to vote on the Treaty. A closer look at French and Spanish coverage throughout the constitutional process indicated that the volume of articles increased drastically during the two campaigns. It must also be noted that French and Spanish newspapers published a greater number of 'long' stories, devoting more space to the Treaty. The study of news contents revealed that newspapers from 'referendum countries' also published a greater share of analytical pieces than those from 'non-referendum' countries. Equally, the share of analysis was greater in France than in Spain, where the campaign was more intense. As discussed earlier in the thesis, these variations are unlikely to be due to differences in media systems. Had this been the case, one would have expected to find similar patterns of coverage in the Italian press – often compared to France and Spain for belonging to the 'Mediterranean' or 'polarised pluralist' model (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Moreover, examining changes in the visibility and format of coverage indicates that these results were in fact due to the presence of a referendum rather than to other exogenous variables.

With respect to the focus of coverage on a 'European versus domestic' and a 'political versus economic' scale, however, the variations between 'referendum' and 'non-referendum' countries were not found to be as obvious. Coverage of the Constitution was indeed slightly more European in French and Spanish newspapers, than in the British and to a lesser extent the Italian press. This finding was corroborated by the qualitative content analysis. Interestingly, the focus of coverage was found to be more 'European' in left-leaning publications than in conservative or financial ones. Arguably, this may be explained by the tendency of the political left to be more supportive of European integration.

Domestic debates on the Constitutional Treaty were also found to be more political than economically-centred in all four member states. Coverage of the Constitution focused primarily on political rather than economic issues. However, emphasis on economics was most pronounced in French and British news coverage. Arguably, the British results may have been due to the country's historically utilitarian perception of European integration. Whilst these claims remain to be empirically tested, it is in fact plausible that media in Italy and Spain placed greater emphasis on political elements because of their historical perceptions of EU as both an economic community *and* a political project. Lastly, French newspapers' emphasis on economic considerations may be explained by the fact that coverage of the highly vocal 'No' campaign revolved around the alleged threats posed by the Constitution to the French social model. The main argument was that the so-called 'social Europe' would be threatened by globalisation and by a further shift towards the 'Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal' economic model.

In sum, the decision to schedule a referendum on the European Constitution had a significant effect on French and Spanish newspaper coverage of this topic. The most obvious effects concerned the sheer amount of media attention as well as the unusually high proportion of analysis and commentary devoted to a European issue. The presence of a referendum increased the saliency of the issue, and provided the national media with an incentive to cover, debate, and analyse it. Whilst the relationship between EU referendums and news coverage requires further investigation, it seems unlikely that the European Constitution would have generated so much popular interest had French citizens not been called upon to decide on its ratification.

7.1.3 *Towards converging public spheres?*

The empirical evidence presented in this dissertation also suggested that holding a referendum can encourage the emergence of a European public sphere. As discussed in the theoretical part of the thesis, the terms 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere are not used here in reference to a single 'supranational' or 'pan-European' debate. Instead, they refer to the Europeanisation of national public spheres, interrelated due to their coverage of the same topic, at the same time, and with similar frames of reference. The development of such a space was measured by examining how British and Italian newspapers 'reacted' to the French and Spanish referendum campaigns. Results from both the quantitative and qualitative content analyses have shown that the French campaign prompted a convergence of coverage in the four member states. Newspapers from these two countries published the vast majority of their articles on the Constitution during April and May 2005 in the weeks that preceded the French vote.

The same can be said for analytical or commentary-oriented news, which increased sharply during this time. Similarly, the rise in pessimistic evaluations of the Constitution observed during the final weeks of the French campaign also led to a rise in negative coverage in the other three countries. This trend may be less surprising in the case of the traditionally Eurosceptic British press, which seized the opportunity to paint a particularly critical picture of the situation. It was, however, more startling in the case of Italian and Spanish coverage, which had been positive in earlier timeframes. As suggested by the qualitative data, Italian and Spanish journalists recognised this change and acknowledged the importance of having a debate over the EU – rather than being pro-European out of 'allegiance' or 'tradition'.

It was also interesting to note that coverage of the Constitution across the four countries became increasingly polarised and EU - focused during the French referendum. The consequences of a French rejection on the rest of Europe featured highly in the media's discourse. Whilst British, Italian, and Spanish newspapers also discussed the more technical aspects of the French campaign, it was the possibility of a EU-wide crisis that dominated coverage during this time. Coverage of the Constitution

during the French referendum became more 'dramatised' and 'politicised' not just domestically, but in other member states, too.

Whilst there is evidence that a European public sphere emerged during the French referendum, it was equally interesting to note that the Spanish campaign did not have the same effects. As discussed, holding a referendum on the Constitution increased the salience and visibility of the issue and affected the way it was covered, domestically. Yet, the Spanish campaign was virtually invisible in the European press. Aside from a limited number of short pieces on Spain's successful ratification of the Treaty, coverage of the 20 February referendum failed to 'spill-over' into other countries. Interestingly, Spanish journalists noted this in their articles, commenting that Europe had shown little interest in the outcome of the Spanish vote. In both face-to-face interviews and in their writing, correspondents claimed that the problem with the Spanish referendum had been the limited intensity of the campaign. Whilst newspapers wrote 'a lot' about the issue, the limited polarisation on the topic and the fact that saying 'Yes' to the Constitution was presented as a 'matter of allegiance' towards the EU failed to make the issue particularly exciting both at home (low turnout) and abroad (little coverage). Scheduling a referendum may have provided an opportunity for more coverage on the Constitutional Treaty. However, Spanish politicians framed the issue in such a way that having a 'real' debate on the topic became particularly challenging. Again, these concerns dominated the rhetoric of Spanish newspapers in January and February 2005. Articles heavily criticised political elites for their one-sided propaganda. News coverage was especially critical of President Zapatero's efforts to convince the public that rejecting the Constitution would have been tantamount to rejecting the EU and that, after benefiting so much from EU membership, Spain 'owed' its support to Europe. In other words, the government's arguments were crude and simplistic. In the absence of a credible 'No' campaign the issue failed to engage voters on a large scale – resulting in historically-low levels of electoral participation. Having said this, the fact that holding a referendum increased coverage domestically, prompted more analysis, polarisation and debate may be viewed as positive from the standpoint openness and transparency. However, unlike the French case, the Spanish campaign did not seem to meet all of the pre-requisites for the emergence of a transnational or EU discourse.

Did the presence of a referendum prompt the emergence of a transnational communicative space or public sphere? In order to answer this question, one should return to the definition of the concept. Assessing whether a European public sphere emerged during the constitutional process boils down to what has been called 'the yardstick' of democratic theory (Meyer, 2007). This is particularly true with regard to horizontal Europeanisation. When it comes to measuring the extent of Europeanisation, where does one set the bar? At the start of this research – and drawing on the 'light' definition formulated by Eder and Kantner (2000) – I had conceptualised transnational coverage as a form of EU-focused debate occurring simultaneously across different member states. However, does this definition suffice? When talking about a European public sphere, should we also expect to see some form of discursive interaction (van de Steeg, 2002)? Taking it one step further, must 'reciprocal resonance structures' (Tobler, 2001) also be present?

As shown in Chapter 6, the French referendum campaign triggered animated debates in all the member states studied in this dissertation. British, Italian, and Spanish newspapers took an active part in the French campaign, presenting its outcome as a matter of common European interest. This observation is consistent with the findings of Vetters et al. (2009), who also found that (in the case of the German media) the French debate assumed a substitute function for the lack of a contentious domestic debate. Again this resonates with the words of Brussels correspondents, who claimed that they had used the French campaign to have the highly-politicised debate they had missed out on during their own referendum.

It is true that procedural issues, domestic actors, as well as the dynamics of the French campaign were not absent from press coverage. Yet, Italian, British and Spanish newspapers also talked about the effects that a rejection of the Treaty would have for both France and the future of Europe as a whole.

In sum, the most interesting finding is that the French vote changed the nature of the constitutional debate in other countries, particularly in Italy and Spain – which had previously supported the Treaty with near-unanimity. The results on the effects that the French vote had on the Europeanisation of public discourse are consistent with recent studies conducted within the framework of the Bremen

ConstEPS project (Maatsch, 2006; Liebert 2007). For instance, looking at the relationship between political conflict and public discourse during the Constitutional process, Liebert (2007) found that the 'constitutional moment' not only succeeded in sparking 'controversial and polarised' domestic debates', but – in the case of France – also prompted transnational communication on topics such as the referendum or the debate between 'social' versus 'market' Europe (p.23).

Similarly, a subsequent study found that the amount of cross-national debate was very limited until the start of the French referendum campaign (Maatsch, 2008). Moreover, whilst coverage of the French referendum was largely dominated by French domestic actors (little 'vertical' Europeanisation) – the Constitution was often presented in a European perspective (Maatsch, 2008). These findings are interesting and in line with the evidence presented in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

Returning to the 'yardstick' of democratic theory, whilst this research was designed based on 'lighter' definitions of 'transnational discourse' and the 'European public sphere' and focused on topics rather than frames, the empirical evidence presented in Chapters 4-6 seems to be consistent with the findings of previous studies (Eder and Kantner, 2000). In fact, the data suggest that the French referendum led to the same topic being discussed at the same time with similar frames of reference and to a cross-pollination of coverage. This issue, however, requires more systematic investigation. In fact, one fundamental difference with other studies is their focus on news frames rather than topics. Another potential issue worth mentioning here is the need for reciprocity in coverage (Tobler, 2001). In other words, would meeting this criterion require a receptiveness of, for instance, French debates in British, Italian and Spanish speakers or voices. Whilst further research on this subject would be desirable, the evidence presented in Chapter 6 suggests that indeed, the French debate was covered closely by the other three countries. However, it must be noted that this relationship seemed to be unidirectional, in that the French debate itself was insular and 'self-centred' (Maatsch, 2008). Whilst some form of discursive interaction was observed, one might wonder whether its 'one-way' character is enough to meet the criteria set out by the proponents of 'heavier' conceptualisations of the European public sphere (van de Steeg, 2002).

On the whole, however, the findings presented in this research suggest that (some degree) of both horizontal and vertical Europeanisation did take place during the French referendum campaign. This is particularly interesting and indicates that whilst French domestic issues and actors may have featured in the campaign, news coverage of the French referendum was indeed a first (rather than second) order affair.[84]

7.2 A Recipe for a European Public Sphere

As discussed in Chapter 1, this dissertation hoped to contribute to our understanding of EU communication by identifying the key drivers of the European public sphere. The empirical evidence presented in this thesis is consistent with the claim that referendums may affect newspaper coverage of European affairs both domestically and transnationally. Scheduling a referendum on the ECT prompted more articles and more analysis on this topic. As seen in Chapter 6, the French campaign also led to the emergence of a European public sphere, increasing the polarisation of news and leading to a convergence of coverage across different member states. This section explores why this was the case. In other words, it asks why scheduling a referendum might stimulate EU debates in the national media. Chapter 2 had hypothesised that referendums would increase the saliency of EU issues through two main 'channels'. First, by linking the EU and national levels, increasing the relevance of European issues for domestic audiences. Secondly, by creating opportunities for the polarisation of national political elites. The rationale behind this is that greater political investment and competition on EU issues sends out cues about their perceived importance (Kriesi, 2007). It follows that issues that are particularly salient are more likely to attract the media's attention. The evidence presented in the empirical part of this thesis seems to be consistent with this explanation. The importance of these two ingredients in stimulating EU coverage has emerged in both the interviews with Brussels correspondents and in the content analysis.

The presence of a (perceived) link to the nation state is one of the key drivers of EU news coverage. This is observation resonates with previous empirical findings (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005), and

[84] This last point is also consistent with the findings of Glencross and Trechsel, 2007.

has been supported by the evidence presented in this study. Coverage of European issues is dependent on topics being perceived as 'directly relevant' to readers. Journalists write with their audiences in mind, focusing predominantly on salient issues. Pressure to cover the most exciting stories comes not only from readers, but from news editors as well. As discussed, articles are unlikely to be published unless they meet this condition. The problem, however, is that EU topics are rarely perceived as salient or interesting. The technical, consensual and 'bureaucratic' aspects of the European integration process fail to excite and, consequently, rarely feature in the media's discourse. This, however, changes when citizens are 'brought into the picture'. For instance, scheduling a referendum on EU issues increases the need for information about these topics. On these occasions, journalists become 'interpreters' of the EU political process, 'translating' their relevance for domestic audiences. The fact that readers are asked to vote on European matters also raises the need for information and explanation. Similarly, having a direct say on the course of European integration may increase readers' appetite for this type of news.

The importance of a link to the nation-state in driving EU coverage highlights a seeming paradox. Despite their varying redistributive potential, the vast majority of EU policies have a direct impact on national publics. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that so few are perceived as such and succeed in attracting the media's attention. Arguably, this may be due to the fact that citizens currently have little say in the EU policy-making process. While the issue requires further investigation, directly consulting citizens through referendums may gradually alter this perception, bridging the gap between the European and national levels. The importance of a 'Euro-domestic' link in driving news coverage raises several questions. First and foremost, is this problematic? Does the need to apply a national 'lens' to EU debates make them 'second-order' affairs? The analysis of news contents suggests that this need not be the case, as coverage of the two referendum campaigns was predominantly EU-focused, and news about the Constitution actually became more European during the French campaign. The need to emphasise the national elements of EU news, stressing its importance at the nation-state level is not necessarily worrying. On the contrary, expecting to see purely EU-focused debates may be unrealistic, given that coverage takes place in the national media.

Relevance to the nation-states may indeed be a key pre-requisite for EU coverage. However, while citizen involvement may succeed in stimulating news stories about European issues, the presence of conflict among political actors seems to play a bigger role in the consolidation of a European public sphere. The empirical part of this study has highlighted the importance of elite polarisation at referendum time in stimulating both domestic and transnational debates about Europe. Elite polarisation or competition may serve as a key ingredient for a European public sphere for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it contributes to making Europe 'sexier' or 'more glamorous'. Second, the mobilisation of political elites increases the saliency of EU issues by transmitting cues about their importance (Kriesi, 2007). Third, the presence of tensions among key personalities mobilising around EU issues increases their news worthiness. Finally, in the context of EU referendums the possibility of a crisis resulting from a rejection increases the need for cross-border communication, increasing coverage and debate.

The results of the content analysis are consistent with the claim that the degree of polarisation or campaign intensity can affect the emergence of a European public sphere. The highly polarised French campaign prompted an increase in newspaper coverage not just domestically but in other member states, too. Moreover, newspaper coverage in the four countries also seemed to converge during this time, becoming more polarised, more negative and more EU focused. The divisiveness of the French referendum and the resulting uncertainty of the outcome initiated a debate about the future of the Union in several member states. The same cannot be said of the more consensual Spanish campaign, which was almost invisible outside the domestic public sphere. Differences in the way in which the French and Spanish campaigns were covered in other member states raise some interesting questions on the relationship between crisis and the European public sphere. Is crisis a pre-requisite of the consolidation of such a 'space'? If so, what does that say about Europe? Finally, do political or economic crises always increase the need for cross-border communication among EU member states? Part of these questions have been answered by a recent project undertaken by the Bremen ConstEPS project. The authors of this large-scale research projects have found that conflicts at both the

domestic and international levels have 'shaped the contours of [the] New Europe' (Liebert, 2007). In other words, public debates about the constitutional process have modified citizens' preferences and, ultimately, their voting behaviour.

As discussed at the start of the thesis, the idea that conflict and competition hold significant news value is not a new development (Schulz, 1997). What is innovative, however, is the realisation that it has the potential to shape the future of European integration by shaping the people's preferences. This suggests that, from the perspective of legitimacy and democracy, the EU might benefit from more politicisation. At the EU level, there is a need to increase the legitimacy of political contests by encouraging their transparency and visibility. At the national level, opportunities for greater political investment and mobilisation around European issue can raise their saliency and, consequently, the amount of media attention they attract.

The data presented in this study appears to be consistent with the idea that the creation of a 'political soap opera' may provide the media with incentives to cover Europe on a more regular basis (Hix, 2008). In-depth interviews with correspondents have in fact indicated that popular perceptions of the EU as a 'consensus-seeking', 'unexciting' apparatus make news reporting particularly challenging. Mass audiences appear to have little appetite for technical stories about the institutional aspects of European integration. Instead, they seem to be interested in the 'human side' of Brussels, particularly when it involves disputes or controversy.

7.3 EU Referendums: a Double-Edged Sword?

As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, the use of EU referendums has not failed to attract heavy criticism, particularly after the French and Dutch rejections of the European Constitutional Treaty in the first half of 2005. Throughout the two-year 'period of reflection', political scientists and commentators offered a range of competing explanations for these results. Among these was the condemnation of referendums as instruments of EU decision-making. Sceptics of direct democracy

argue that the referendum process is deeply flawed. There are in fact concerns that reducing complex matters to 'Yes/No' questions may divorce issues from their contexts. In addition, there are doubts as to whether citizens have access to sufficient information at voting time. A lack of information can be problematic because it increases the likelihood of votes being cast on the basis of other issues – such as, for instance, the popularity of domestic governments.[85] Furthermore, critics of direct democracy have pointed out that whilst referendums may be designed to settle issues, in practice they raise more questions than they resolve.[86] It has also been suggested that the public may not be ready to take part in EU referendums, and that there is little evidence to suggest that citizens are willing to talk about Europe. Forcing people to take part in EU debates may be counterproductive and actually result in debates that are 'off-topic'.[87] This accusation rests on the assumption that EU issues are generally low-salience and do not generate sufficient interest to trigger EU-centred discussions.

Let us briefly examine the validity of some of these criticisms. To begin, let us consider the claim that EU referendums are 'trouble-makers' because they raise more issues than they manage to resolve. The French and Dutch votes on the European Constitution did indeed raise a series of unforeseen and potentially troublesome questions related to the future of Europe. Arguably, however, this had the effect of placing EU issues higher up on political agendas, both at home and in Brussels. As suggested by the data presented in this thesis, the possibility of a EU-wide crisis during the French referendum ignited a rare cross-national dialogue increasing the visibility of the issue in several member states. What's more, it initiated a two-year 'period of reflection' which coincided with a revision of the Commission's communication strategy and the re-negotiation of the Treaty. The importance of information, dialogue and citizen participation are now at the top of political agendas. Ironically, therefore, the outcome of the two votes may have brought us closer to a more democratic and legitimate European Union.

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[85] See LeDuc (2002) on the relationship between government popularity and voting in EU referendums.

[86] For instance, this was the case of the French and Dutch referendums, where the negative outcome of the votes came as a pofound shock to the establishment and plunged Europe into a deep identity crisis.

[87] See the 'second order' literature on the subject.

Secondly, let us turn to the criticism that the debates which precede referendums are 'second' rather than 'first-order' affairs. The argument is that European issues are not salient enough to trigger debates that are genuinely EU focused. Yet, this claim does not seem to be supported by the evidence found in this study. In fact, news coverage of the Constitution became increasingly EU-focused, particularly during the French referendum. Arguably, this may have been due the controversial nature of the French campaign. However, the qualitative evidence presented in Chapter 4 of this study has also suggested that the value-added of EU referendums lies precisely in their ability to increase the saliency of EU issues. While one cannot expect national actors or themes to be absent from news coverage of referendum campaigns, their presence does not automatically translate into 'second-order' debates. This finding is consistent with other empirical studies, which have indicated that referendums on the ECT were 'first' rather than 'second-order' events (Glencross and Trechsel, 2007).

Third, observers often question whether citizens have access to sufficient information to make informed decisions in referendums. Access to information at voting time is crucial because it is responsible for shaping voters' attitudes and electoral behaviour (Zaller, 2002; Hobolt, 2005). Exposure to political information has in fact been shown to reduce attitude uncertainty (Hobolt, 2005). Yet, the study of the communicative aspects of European integration has indicated that the presence of information about EU affairs cannot be taken for granted. These doubts are aggravated by general concerns about the possible erosion of news standards and quality (Zaller, 2003). This research has not measured the availability of 'sufficient' news at referendum time. Yet, evidence from the French and Spanish cases discussed in this dissertation has suggested that that concerns about the lack of information in referendums may be misplaced. The findings of the content analysis have in fact confirmed that the volume of stories about the Constitution increased significantly at referendum time. This is consistent with other studies, which have shown that public interest and media coverage increased during the French campaign (Schuck and de Vreese, 2006). The study of news contents has also indicated that the presence of a referendum prompted an increase in the amount of *analysis* published about the Constitution. This trend can be explained by the increased issue salience and by the fact that journalists felt the need explain the Treaty to voters in greater detail. The relationship

between referendums and EU coverage is interesting. Whilst the topic requires further investigation, it seems plausible that scheduling referendums might actually affect both the amount and the quality of information about Europe.[88]

Despite these concerns, referendums have become increasingly popular in recent years. National governments have realised that they need citizens' consent to proceed with major decisions on the course of European integration. What's more, research has shown that referendums have the potential to combat popular apathy (de Vreese, 2007). Unlike European elections – famous for their low turnout and 'second-order' coverage of EU issues (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007), referendums may actually prompt first-order debates. The evidence presented in this thesis has suggested that holding a referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty has indeed affected the way it was covered by the press both domestically and abroad. The highly-salient French campaign also led to the emergence of what may be viewed as a 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere, with several media systems covering the issue at the same time and with similar frames of reference.

The recent two-year 'period of reflection' initiated by the so-called 'constitutional debacle' has led to the realisation that greater citizen participation in the EU political process would be beneficial in terms of the Union's democratic legitimacy. The European Commission has developed a new communication strategy aiming to reconnect with the public and stimulate an ongoing, 'direct' and 'open' dialogue with EU representatives and policy makers, strengthening existing communicative linkages between civil society and the public.[89] Yet, one could argue that 'pumping money' into top-down Brussels-based deliberative exercises to stimulate dialogue in 'artificial' settings is not a durable solution. To be sustained over time, debates about Europe should emerge spontaneously from the bottom up. For the time being, the national media remain the locus of EU debates. Consequently, one should look at ways to stimulate their coverage of European affairs. A vital pre-requisite in this

[88] As mentioned in Chapter 2, the focus of news on substantive issues rather than reporting the technical aspects of a campaign may be treated as a plausible indicator of the quality of news (Scammell, 2005: 209).

[89] See COM(2006) 211; COM(2006) 212; COM(2006) 35; COM(2007) 568 in Michailidou, 2008 for a more detailed review of EC-led initiatives.

respect is altering the media's perception of EU issues as 'low-salience', incentivising the development of an EU media 'soap opera'. This, it is argued, may be achieved through the politicisation of the EU policy agenda (Hix, 2008). As discussed throughout this study, referendums may also be part of the solution precisely because they provide opportunities for greater elite polarisation and mobilisation around EU issues. Because they are preceded by weeks of campaigning 'for' and 'against' a topic, referendums can lead to greater political investment at the national level. This, in turn, sends out messages about the importance EU issues, placing them higher on the media's agenda. Also, by directly consulting citizens, referendums bring EU issues 'home', strengthening the link between the European and domestic levels. This explanation appears to be consistent with this study's findings. Citizen participation through referendums may indeed affect the way we talk about Europe. By creating opportunities for elites to polarise on EU issues and providing a link between the EU and the domestic levels, holding a referendum may stimulate EU media coverage, affecting its volume, format and focus.

Having said this, advocating the widespread use of referendums on European integration goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, this study simply wishes to highlight that, despite their problems, their use may stimulate debate and communication about Europe in the national media. Arguably, a gradual increase in the visibility of the EU in domestic public spheres might increase citizens 'appetite' for EU news and debates and possibly help to address the existing 'communication deficit'.

7.4 The Study's Limitations

This project was designed to study how the European Constitutional Treaty was covered by the press in four of the largest EU member states. More specifically, its aim was to assess whether referendums stimulated the media's appetite for EU affairs. Finally, it looked at whether coverage of referendum campaigns had any 'spill-over' effects, shaping news about of the Constitutional debate in *other* countries. The results have suggested that the press reported more on the subject where referendums were scheduled and when they occurred. The debate surrounding the French referendum also 'spilled

over' to other member states, leading to the emergence of a 'transnational' or 'European' public sphere. This project may be seen as a useful starting point for studying the debates which precede EU referendum campaigns. Having said this, it suffers from a number of limitations. As a result, its findings should be seen as preliminary – or as a first step towards more sophisticated or conclusive analyses of the relationship between political contexts and EU political communication. The following are amongst the project's main shortcomings.

The first point concerns the country sample. This study was designed with a cross-national angle, essential for comparing patterns of coverage in different member-states. However, the fact that the analysis was limited to a total of four countries and only two referendums may question the generalisability of the findings. It should also be mentioned that the country sample may have been biased towards the 'Mediterranean' media system. With the exception of the British press, newspapers studied in this dissertation belonged to the 'polarised pluralist' model (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Yet, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 this did not seem to have had a significant effect on the study's outcome. Moreover, it must be said that earlier empirical studies have displayed North-European biases, leaving a gap for original data on Southern cases such as the Spanish and Italian media (de Vreese, 2003; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Whilst this study has contributed to filling this gap, it is clear that the analysis would have been more robust had it considered all of the countries that held referendums on the European Constitution. Also, it would have been interesting to introduce a further element of comparison by studying the media's coverage of earlier 'waves' of referendums, such as the ones on the Maastricht or Nice Treaties. Arguably, however, this could have given rise to a different set of problems, possibly limiting the country sample even further.

The second point has to do with the selection of timeframes. The study focused on five of the most salient timeframes of the EU Constitutional process, between 2003 and 2005. The decision to focus exclusively on key 'milestones' was taken in an effort to ensure that the timeframes were similarly salient. However, this also meant excluding less eventful or 'routine' periods which could have served as a yardstick for assessing changes in coverage over time. In hindsight, it would also have been

interesting to extend the scope of this study to include a number of weeks following the two referendums. This would have provided key information on the duration of these effects over time. Whilst the available data do provide some support for the claim that scheduling referendums can affect newspaper coverage of European affairs, the precise duration of these effects remains unclear.

The third issue surrounds the media sample. The obvious criticism here concerns the exclusion of television news. Whilst not ideal, this choice was dictated by a number of factors. These included the limited resources available for this research; the fact that most existing studies on EU coverage have focused on television programmes and, finally, the assumption that the press might be better suited to the in-depth study of contents. Moreover, choosing to include television and radio programmes as well as the 'new media' would have required focusing on a smaller number of newspapers. In other words, the selection of the media sample involved a compromise between a more diverse range of sources on the one hand, and a deeper, more focused analysis on the other (breadth versus depth dilemma).

Other limitations of this study revolve around methodological considerations. The first point concerns variable measurement. In retrospect, the study's findings could have been more robust had the visibility of the Constitution been measured by looking at relative (%) rather than total (n) amounts of articles published on the subject. This process would have required analysing all political stories. In a second stage, one would have examined how much of that coverage related to specifically to the Constitution. The rationale behind this is that individual newspapers might publish different amounts of articles on a daily basis, depending on factors such as journalistic traditions and news culture. Whilst arguably a 'compromise solution', I hope to have limited this shortcoming by showing that the newspapers studied in this dissertation were comparable both in terms of size and in terms of their average number of political and EU pieces.

With regards to the content analysis, it is now clear that it would have been logical to code the articles in greater detail, recording their publication date – rather than just the timeframe in which they were

published. This would have been particularly useful in the study of the two referendums, providing key information on the dynamics of the campaign whilst gauging how news coverage evolved over time. Last but not least, the study could have been improved by a more sophisticated research design and the development of control variables to rule out competing explanations for the observed results. This list of criticisms is far from exhaustive. Bearing these limitations in mind, it is important to consider some of the study's theoretical and practical implications.

7.5 Implications and Avenues for Future Research

Increasing the flow of communication about EU issues is vital to the legitimacy of EU governance. Recent years have led to the growing realisation by scholars and policy-makers that a higher visibility of European affairs in the media would enable a greater public scrutiny of its decision-making process, improving the transparency and legitimacy of the European Union (Trenz, 2007; Michailidou, 2008). Over the past decade, the Commission has taken several steps to encourage public dialogue, and has recently acknowledged the importance of reconnecting with European citizens, bringing Europe closer to the 'local' level. The importance of fostering popular engagement with the EU political process is now widely recognised both at the theoretical and at the policy levels.

Despite the numerous limitations discussed above, this study has shown that holding referendums on EU integration can stimulate news coverage of European affairs, both domestically and across member states. On a theoretical level, the analysis has contributed to our current understanding of the drivers of a European public sphere. Studying the news production process through a series of in-depth interviews with Brussels-based correspondents has confirmed the following: by acting as a bridge between the EU and domestic levels and creating opportunities for elite polarisation and competition, referendums increase the saliency of European affairs. This, in turn, provides the media with an incentive to cover Europe more extensively. This explanation is consistent with the empirical evidence gathered through the content analysis, which has indicated that member states which scheduled a referendum on the European Constitution published a greater volume of stories, as well as a greater share of analytical pieces than those that did not vote on this issue.

This study has also highlighted a number of issues that are worth mentioning here because they require further investigation. The first one concerns the influential 'second-order' model. Recent research has shown that news coverage of European elections can be a 'second-order affair, with domestic issues and actors dominating media debates (de Vreese, Lauf and Peter, 2007). This trend has raised concerns that EU coverage may be off-focus or 'hijacked' by more salient national issues. Yet, there is also evidence indicating that this did not apply to the recent 'wave' of ECT referendums, which were found to be 'first' rather than 'second-order' affairs (Glencross and Trechsel, 2007). The data presented in this thesis has suggested that coverage of the European Constitution during the French and Spanish campaigns was indeed EU-focused. This trend was particularly obvious during the French campaign, when the possibility of a rejection initiated a debate over the future of Europe across the four member states.

What also emerged from this dissertation is that expecting national issues and actors to be absent from EU coverage may be both unnecessary and premature. Explaining why policies formulated at the EU level matter domestically is an integral part of their role as correspondents. Most importantly, it has been shown that the mixing of EU and national issues may be a pre-requisite for coverage. If EU issues must have a link to the nation-state to make it into the national press, then it seems reasonable to expect domestic actors to feature in the news coverage of these events. Finally, this question seems to be closely related to one's theoretical stance on the European integration process. Proponents of a 'federalist' approach may expect to see the emergence of a EU-centred debate in a 'single' European communicative space. Interestingly, however, the people interviewed in this study seemed to favour the more pragmatic 'intergovernmentalist' or 'regulatory' approach. The fact that 'Europe' is made of nation-states makes it difficult to distinguish between the 'European' and 'national' levels and consequently, between 'European' and 'national' coverage. This issue is important and should be the subject of future research. It particular, it might be interesting to 'dig deeper' into the relationship between the focus of EU news and theoretical stances on integration.

Another lesson emerging from this study concerns the potential for the consolidation of a European public sphere at referendum time. As illustrated by the French case, may be particularly likely to occur at times of crisis. This finding resonates with previous empirical work (Eder and Kantner, 2000) which identified early signs of a EU public sphere during the 'foot and mouth' (BSE) crisis in the late 1990's. The fact that conflict and crisis are particularly newsworthy may not be a new discovery. However, the results presented in this research have provided additional support for the idea that converging debates can occur when tensions and political divisions are high. Whilst this issue requires further attention, it is interesting to note that there are times when 'European' debates can indeed take place.

Turning to the more 'practical' lessons of this study, the fact that referendums have the potential to increase EU dialogue and communication suggests that they may have a role to play in improving European legitimacy and democracy. Moreover, it indicates that at the policy level, Commission-led efforts to 'go local' and reconnect Europe to the national and regional levels may be a step in the right direction. The use of referendums might not be highly rated by commission officials (Michailidou, 2008) and several academics (Hix, 2008; Moravcsik, 2008). From the point of view of political elites referendums are, at best, impractical. Yet, if they are found to systematically increase the flow and quality of information about Europe, one might consider whether the use of direct democracy is in fact a necessary 'evil'. The outcomes of the French and Dutch votes are often treated as a 'shock to the establishment'. The entire Constitutional process is seen by some as a 'constitutional trap' (Diedrichs and Wessels, 2005). By effectively manoeuvring Europe into a 'period of reflection' and suspending its Constitution-making process, the French, Dutch and Irish[90] votes may have well cast doubts on the future of EU integration and on Europe's prospects for Constitutionalisation. On the 'positive' side, however, it may be argued that they have contributed to moving things in the 'right direction' by highlighting the importance of citizen involvement and consent for European democracy and legitimacy. Paradoxically, the negative outcome of the 2005 and 2008 votes has made voice of those

[90] Irish 2008 vote on the Lisbon Treaty.

calling for greater citizen involvement than ever. As a result, depriving citizens of a say on the future of Europe has become both difficult and unlikely (Meyer, 2007).

Another point emerging from this study relates to the importance of bottom-up communication. 'Sustainable' debates may be more likely to emerge gradually through the national media than through artificial Commission-sponsored deliberative exercises. In the future, it would be interesting to examine the relationship between the use of direct democracy and the 'new media', asking whether referendums might also increase citizen participation in EU debates through blogs and Web 2.0 platforms.[91]

This study has looked at referendums as a potential medium for increasing EU debates in the national press. In doing so, it has identified the potential for conflict and the presence of a 'Euro-domestic' link as the key drivers of the European public sphere. Clearly, however, the issue needs to be studied more systematically. The communicative aspects of referendums require further investigation. Future work should examine whether the coverage initiated by referendums is sustained over time. Whilst the existing data have provided some support for the claim that scheduling referendums can affect the media's coverage of European affairs, the duration of these effects remains unclear. This is an important consideration given the volatile nature of EU communication. What's more, it would be interesting to see whether referendums differ from other salient EU summits or events, or whether they simply trigger coverage at voting time.[92]

The findings in this thesis are consistent with the hypothesis that referendums can increase the volume and focus of newspaper coverage of European affairs. The thesis demonstrates that, in the case of intense campaigns these effects extend beyond the domestic public sphere. The French referendum affected news coverage of the issue not just domestically but in other member states too.

[91] The experience of the French referendum indicates that this may indeed be plausible. For anecdotal purposes, it is worth mentioning that French newspaper Libération's EU blog moderated by one of the journalists interviewed in this study was the fourth most widely-read blog in the Country in April and May 2005.

[92] The fact that the French and Dutch rejections of the ECT initiated a two-year period of reflection suggests that the effects of referendums on EU debates may indeed be longer-lasting than those of other EU treaties.

The rise in polarised news during this time indicates that elites, the media and the public cared enough about a European issue to take a clear stance on it. This supports the idea that the use of direct democracy may lead to greater engagement with the EU political process.

Whilst provisional due to the limited country sample, these findings highlight the importance of citizen participation for the legitimacy of the European Union. Consulting citizens on the future of European integration increases the need for information about the EU, as well as the relevance of 'European news' for domestic audiences. Moreover, it can contribute to making the EU more 'politicised', with national elites mobilising on European issues. This sends out cues about the importance of EU issues, raising their salience in the eyes of both the media and the public. Making Europe more political might lead to the development of a 'EU soap opera' (Hix, 2008) providing the media with an incentive to cover it on a more regular basis.

The use of referendums on European integration is controversial and will not offer a comprehensive solution to Europe's problems. However, their value-added might lie in the stimulation of communication and debate. More public debates and information on the EU policy-making process might help to combat popular apathy and feelings of 'disconnect' towards Europe. This, it is hoped, could lessen the existing democratic deficit, improving the Union's legitimacy. The results presented in this thesis open interesting avenues for future research and encourage us to further investigate the relationship between direct democracy, political contexts and the media's coverage of European affairs.

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Appendix 3A – The Coding Scheme

QuantitativeContent Analysis - Coding Scheme

COUNTRY

1	France	3	Italy
2	Spain	4	United Kingdom

NEWSPAPER

110	Monde	210	Mundo	310	CdS	410	FT
120	Figaro	220	Pais	320	Repubblica	420	Guardian
130	Liberation	230	5Dias	330	Stampa	430	Times
140	Humanite	240	Abc	340	Sole	440	Sun

TYPE OF ARTICLE

1	Reporting	3	Interview
2	Analysis	4	Letter

LENGTH

1 Short
2 Medium
3 Long

TIMEFRAME

1 Nov-Dec 03
2 Jun-Jul 04
3 Oct-Nov 04
4 Jan-Feb 05
5 Apr-May 05

WHAT IS THE ARTICLE ABOUT?

Code article's two main subjects

Focus 1

Focus 2

Appendix 3B – The Focus of Articles: List of Codes

Quantitative Content Analysis- List of Codes
Focus of Coverage

Q: What is the main focus of the article?

100 Agriculture
210 Constitution text, in-depth
220 Constitution text, debate on
230 Constitution text, support for
240 Constitution text, against
250 Constitution text, hope for
260 Constitution text, revision
270 Constitution text, coverage
280 Constitution text, impact
310 Economic benefits
320 Economic losses
330 Anti globalisation
410 Enlargement, positive
420 Enlargement, negative
430 Enlargement, debate
500 Environment
610 EU Leaders, Barroso
620 EU Leaders, Prodi
630 European citizenship
710 EU democracy
720 National Democracy
800 European institutions
900 EU values; identity; symbols
910 Nat values; identity; symbols
1010 Future of EU, positive
1020 Future of EU, negative
1100 Nationalism
1200 National sovereignty, loss of
1300 National interests
1410 National Politicians, Aznar
1420 National Politicians, Berlusconi
1430 National Politicians, Blair
1440 National Politicians, Brown
1450 National Politicians, Chirac
1460 National Politicians, Fabius
1470 National Politicians, Hollande
1480 National Politicians, Prodi
1490 National Politicians, Raffarin
1411 National Politicians, Zapatero
1412 National Politicians, Ahern
1413 National Politicians, Schroder
1414 National Politicians, Merkel
1415 National Politicians, Sarkozy
1416 National Politicians, Giscard
1417 National Politicians, Rajoy
1418 National Politicians, Fischer
1510 IGC Negotiations, agreement
1520 IGC Negotiations, failure
1530 IGC Negotiations, compromise lowest cd
1540 IGC Negotiations, uncertainty
1610 National Parties, internal divisions
1620 National Parties, clash among
1700 Ratification, method and date
1710 Ratification and campaign, third country
1800 Referendum, event
1810 Referendum campaign, yes/no battle
1820 Referendum, 'no' victory consequences
1830 Referendum, 'yes' victory consequences
1840 Referendum, information campaign, poor
1900 Religious values
2000 Security, terrorism
2100 Signature, Rome
2200 Socio-economic
2300 Voting procedures, weight
2400 Federalism, call for more
2500 Federalism, call for less
3100 Legal
3200 Human rights
3300 Public Opinion, state of
3400 Science
3600 Foreign policy
4000 Outside View
4100 Language
4210 Political participation, high
4220 Political participation, low
4300 Regions
4400 Protest vote

Appendix 3C - Operationalising the Depth, Tone and Focus of Coverage

As discussed above, the focus of coverage was used to construct a number of summative index scales for the following variables: the tone of coverage (negative versus positive news), focus on general aspects of the Treaty versus detailed provisions (general versus depth); focus on domestic versus European issues; and focus on economic versus political considerations. The scales ranged from -2 to +2. All codes at one end of the spectrum were assigned a + sign and added together. All codes at the other end were attributed a – sign and subtracted from the total number of positive ones. Focus codes that were unrelated were treated as neutral assigned a 0 rather than forced to 'fit' either category. The scales were computed using SPSS. Details of the process are described below.

Tone – Negative versus positive news

This variable refers to negative and positive evaluations of the EU or the Constitution. The scale was computed by adding all positive evaluations of the Constitution, and then subtracting all negative evaluations. The remaining focus codes were neutral. Values ranged from -2 (very negative); -2(slightly negative); o (neutral); +1 (slightly positive); +2 (very positive).

The 'negative versus positive' scale was computed in SPSS as follows:

Constitution text, support + Constitution text, hope for + Economic benefits + Enlargement Turkey, positive + Future of EU, positive + IGC negotiations, agreement + Federalism, call for more + Political participation, high – Constitution text, opposition – Economic losses – Anti globalisation and 'neo-liberal' order – Enlargement Turkey, negative – Future of EU, negative – National sovereignty, loss of – IGC negotiations, failure – IGC negotiations, lowest common denominator compromise – IGC negotiations, uncertainty – Referendum, poor information campaign – Federalism, call for less- UK no campaign

Depth of Coverage

This variable refers to the focus of coverage general versus specific aspects of the Constitutional Treaty. The scale was computed by adding all specific topics, and then subtracting all general ones.

Issues that did not fit into either category were treated as neutral. Values could range from -2 (very general); -2(slightly general); 0 (neutral); +1 (slightly deep); +2 (very deep).

The 'depth' scale was computed in SPSS as follows:

Constitution text, in depth + Constitution text, revision + Constitution text, impact on institutions + Referendum, 'No' victory, consequences + Referendum, 'Yes' victory, consequences - Constitution text, debate on - Constitution text, support for - Constitution text, against - Constitution text, hope for - Constitution text, media coverage - IGC negotiations, agreement - IGC negotiations, failure - IGC negotiations, lowest common denominator compromise - IGC negotiations, uncertainty - Signature, Rome - Ratification, method and date - Ratification, third Country - Referendum, event – Referendum campaign, 'Yes' vs 'No' battle - Referendum, information campaign, poor

Focus – Domestic versus European news

This variable refers to the focus of coverage on domestic or European issues. The scale was computed by adding all EU-related issues, and then subtracting all domestic-related codes. Issues that did not fit into either category were treated as neutral. Values could range from -2 (very domestic); -2(slightly domestic); 0 (neutral); +1 (slightly European); +2 (very European).

The 'domestic versus European' focus scale was computed in SPSS as follows:

Constitution text, in depth + Constitution text, debate on + Constitution text, support for + Constitution text, against + Constitution text, hope for + Constitution text, revision + Constitution text, media coverage + Constitution text, impact on institutions + Enlargement, Turkey, positive + Enlargement, Turkey, negative + Enlargement, general debate + EU leaders, Barroso + EU leaders, Prodi + European citizenship + Democratic standards, EU + European institutions + European values, identity, symbols + Future of EU, positive + Future of EU, negative + Signature, Rome + Voting procedures, weight + Federalism, call for more + Federalism, call for less – Democratic standards, national – National values, identity, symbols – Nationalism – National sovereignty, loss of – National interests – National politicians, Aznar - National politicians, Berlusconi - National politicians, Blair - National politicians, Brown - National politicians, Chirac - National politicians, Fabius - National politicians, Hollande - National politicians, Prodi - National politicians, Raffarin - National politicians, Zapatero - National politicians, Ahern - National politicians, Schroder - National politicians, Merkel - National politicians,

Sarkozy - National politicians, Giscard - National politicians, Rajoy - National politicians, Fischer – National parties, internal divisions – National parties, clash among – Social –Language

Focus – Economic versus Political issues

This variable refers to the focus of coverage on economic or political issues. The scale was computed by adding all political issues, and then subtracting all codes that were classified as economic. Issues that did not fit into either category were treated as neutral. Values could range from -2 (very economic); -2(slightly economic); 0 (neutral); +1 (slightly political); +2 (very political). This scale is skewed towards political issues. Yet, this is not expected to affect the outcome of the analysis, since the focus on economic or political issues is not expected to be dependent on the presence of a referendum. This variable is designed to serve as a measure of similarities in the focus coverage across different member states. Moreover, the relative 'bias' towards politics was not imposed or designed by the researcher. Instead, it is a by-product of the first or inductive step of the content analysis described above. The list of possible focus codes (Appendix B) was compiled on the basis of the most frequently recurring themes rather than artificially designed.

The 'economic versus political' focus scale was computed in SPSS as follows:

Constitution text, impact on institutions + Enlargement, Turkey, positive + Enlargement, Turkey, negative + Enlargement, general debate + Future of EU, positive + Future of EU, negative + Foreign policy + IGC negotiations, agreement + IGC negotiations, failure + IGC negotiations, lowest common denominator compromise + IGC negotiations, uncertainty + Signature, Rome + Voting procedures, weight + Federalism, call for more + Federalism, call for less + Nationalism + National sovereignty, loss of + National interests + National politicians, Aznar + National politicians, Berlusconi + National politicians, Blair + National politicians, Brown + National politicians, Chirac + National politicians, Fabius + National politicians, Hollande + National politicians, Prodi + National politicians, Raffarin + National politicians, Zapatero + National politicians, Ahern + National politicians, Schroder + National politicians, Merkel + National politicians, Sarkozy + National politicians, Giscard + National politicians, Rajoy + National politicians, Fischer + National parties, internal divisions + National parties, clash among + Referendum, event – Social – Economic benefits – Economic losses – Antiglobalisation, neoliberal order