



PADEMIA PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Research Notes on Parliamentary Democracy 5/2016

Democratic *Deaf-icit?* Looking at newspapers in Finland, Germany and the UK, it seems that citizens have very different chances to learn what their European representatives are up to

Olga Eisele

Series Editors: Katrin Auel and Resul Umit

This research note series is published by the
PADEMIA: Parliamentary Democracy in Europe.
It is funded by the European Commission.

Democratic Deaf-icit? Looking at newspapers in Finland, Germany and the UK, it seems that citizens have very different chances to learn what their European representatives are up to

Olga Eisele

What do citizens get to hear about the European Parliament (EP)? Since Brussels and Strasbourg are far away, most people follow the EP through the media. PADEMIA member Olga Eisele looks at newspapers to assess whether and how the European Union's only directly elected institution is portrayed in the media. She finds large differences in EP coverage between countries. In addition, especially in the United Kingdom, the national parliament completely steals the EP's show.

As early as in 1922, public opinion scholar Walter Lippmann argued that 'the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, imagined'. This highlights the important role of the media without which the majority of people would not know a great deal about politics at all. This is particularly true for remote political processes such as the ones at the EU level. With the financial crisis, interest in the EU has increased – but in the form of growing criticism. EU opponents have become louder and been extremely successful in European elections. In this climate, parliaments could potentially play an important role: They directly represent the citizens that have cast their vote for them to express their political preferences. Political decisions in democracies are justified and legitimised by the fact that these direct representatives have made the voice of the people heard in negotiations: Parliaments build a link between citizens and politics.

Although the EU's parliament today is a strong partner of governments in EU legislation, it has struggled to build such a link – a fact expressed in EP elections' notoriously

low voter turnout. Therefore, also national parliaments – for a long time a bit of a side dish on the academic menu – have come more and more into focus in the discussion of the EU's legitimacy. To understand how citizens get to see their parliaments, we looked into quality and tabloid newspapers to understand what pool of information and opinions citizens have available when they evaluate the EP and EU politics along with it. We also looked at how national parliaments are depicted in EU affairs to compare.



Newspapers lose interest in the EP in between election years

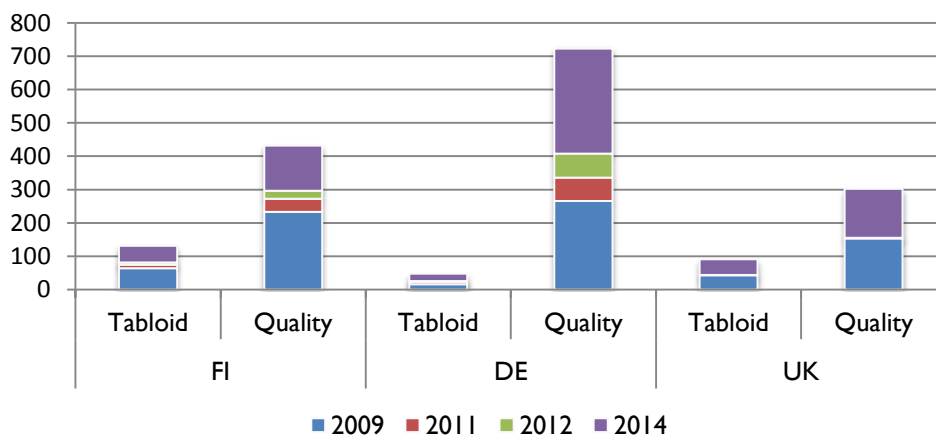


We selected three countries with very different national parliaments and very different approaches to EU politics - Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom. In contrast to Germany and Finland, British EU politics has always been characterised by a very sceptic approach and huge concerns about sovereignty. Furthermore, the crisis has fuelled Euroscepticism; it has increased it in

the United Kingdom, it has helped to establish and even bring into government a right-wing Eurosceptic party in Finland; and it has given rise to the first socially acceptable right-wing party in Germany – the country regarded as one of the most important motors of EU integration since the very beginning. These differences between countries are mirrored in the great differences we found in coverage.

First, concerning EP coverage in between elections (2009 and 2014) and routine periods (2011 and 2012), newspapers report much more about the EU’s parliament when elections are looming and discuss results afterwards (see Figure 1).

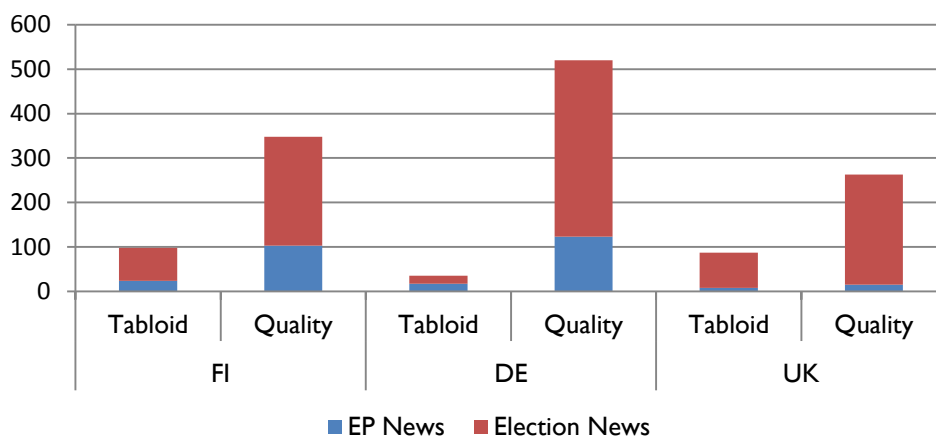
Figure 1. Amount of articles on the European Parliament



However, reporting about EP elections is dominated by other topics: The press talks much more about national candidates, national political parties, national issues and other topics that have to do with elections. In such reporting, the parliament itself is of course present in the backdrop since it is the institution that parties campaign for. But such articles do not convey information about what members of the EP actually do or how the EP

as an institution works. Indeed, they talk only about national aspects of EP elections, not the EP itself. And as we can see in figure 2, such election news is much more prominent in reporting during elections – especially in British news. This highlights the ‘second-order’ nature of the EP that is pushed in the background by the actual ‘relevant’ politics of the nation state.

Figure 2. Election news and EP news during elections





While the EP receives more negative than positive coverage everywhere, it is worse in the UK than in Finland or Germany

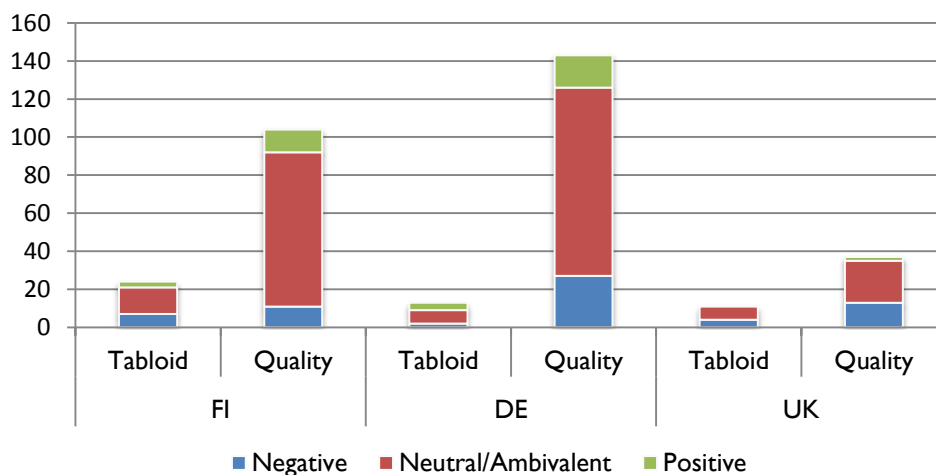


Second, we also checked how newspapers generally evaluate the EP: Most of the articles in which the EU's parliament is discussed have a neutral or ambivalent tone – this is a finding that holds for all three countries we looked at. While reporting – if evaluative – is more often negative than positive, the UK stands out here as the country with least positive

reporting. The German tabloid, in contrast to its overall mostly critical stance towards EU politics, seems to draw a surprisingly positive image of the EP.

In general, however, opinions about the EP are not very clear-cut which suggests that it is not a topic which is heatedly discussed in editorial sections of newspapers. Thus, while the EP may have the potential but is found unable to link citizens with the EU, this deficiency does not seem to worry newsmakers too much. In fact, public opinion and the news have been found to oppose or criticise 'the EU' as such rather than differentiating between individual institutions.

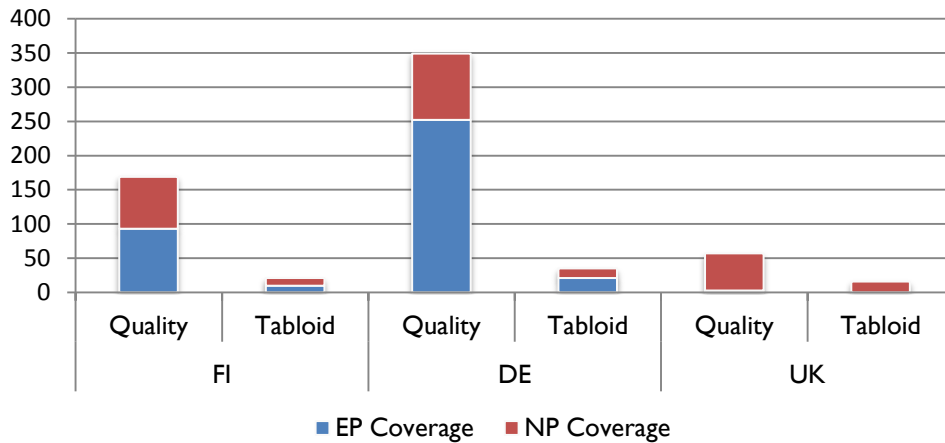
Figure 3. Evaluations of the European Parliament



And third, another great difference is found in the comparison of EP news coverage and news about national parliaments in EU affairs. Here, countries differ greatly: While the German Bundestag is actually covered less than the EP, Finnish news are quite balanced. The pattern in British news, in contrast, is overly explicit in taking sides: While the House of Commons is a regular topic in EU affairs, the EU's parliament is almost

completely ignored. And although the sovereign debt crisis of the EU is found to play a major role for coverage of national parliaments in the period we investigated (May and June in 2011 and 2012), it is still striking how little interest British newspapers show in the EU's parliament: It is the country with the strongest national focus in all EP reporting and the one with least interest in the EP as such.

Figure 4. Absolute numbers of articles about the EP and national parliaments in EU affairs in 2011 and 2012



To sum up, EP news increases during elections but makes national election politics more visible, not the EP as such. Reporting about the EP is quite neutral or ambivalent not suggesting it being a topic raising much controversy. And last but not least, national parliaments can steal the EP's show almost

completely – at least in the UK. Drawing these results together, the EP enjoys some attention regarding its work in Finland and Germany. But what difference does the European Parliament make in the UK? Apparently, the most adequate answer to this question is: None.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA.



Olga Eisele is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna. Her work focusses on the European Parliament in the news and effects of coverage on public support. Furthermore, she has worked in a research project investigating the communication of and about national parliaments in EU affairs. She holds degrees in Scandinavian and European Studies.