

Communicating political positions on European issues – a comparison of parties and newspapers in seven countries

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Abstract

This article starts from the observation that most voters know relatively little about positions and plans of political parties, especially when European Union politics is concerned. One reason for this could be that the main sources for political information, party communication and mass media coverage, provide voters only little concrete information about positions and plans of political parties. We ask how concretely, respectively vaguely, political parties and mass media communicate political positions prior to the 2014 European Parliament elections. We conducted a quantitative content analysis of all European Union–related press releases from 46 national political parties and of all European Union–related articles of 14 national quality newspapers from 7 European countries 12 weeks before the 2014 European Parliament elections. Our analysis shows that press releases as well as media coverage contain more concrete political positions on European Union issues than vague political statements. Other than expected, newspaper coverage provided the public with less concrete information than political actors did. Nevertheless, countries vary with regard to the extent to which party communication or newspaper coverage contain vague statements. We cannot find empirical support that the communication of concrete political positions depends on a party’s “extremity” of issue position or on the type of issue.

Keywords

Political ambiguity, position blurring, equivocation, strategic political communication, European Parliament elections

Introduction

From a normative democratic viewpoint, it would be desirable if citizens were informed before elections about the aims and plans of political parties so they could make rational election decisions (e.g., Habermas, 1981; Downs, 1957). Having political knowledge contributes to better political decisions and a higher quality of democratic representation. Providing politically relevant information “is regarded as one of the core functions of political parties as they should help citizens in evaluating the complex and remote world of politics” (Popa et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, most European voters have relatively little knowledge about the plans and positions of political parties – especially regarding EU politics and policies (Hurrelmann et al., 2015; Maier, 2009; Popa et al., 2020; Westle, 2013) – and they do not always build their voting decisions rationally (e.g., Downs, 1957; Kepplinger and Maurer, 2005). The reason for this could, on one hand, lie with the voters themselves: they might use political information only sparsely or selectively, process it incompletely, and forget the information received (e.g., Downs, 1957; Lodge et al., 1995; Kepplinger and Daschmann, 1997). On the other hand, it could be due to the sources of political information that citizens use: they could contain little information relevant to an election (i.e., the “quantity” of information) or little *concrete* information (i.e., the “quality” of information; e.g., Maurer, 2009; Maier, 2009).

Citizens have largely two main sources of political information. The first is *party communication* (such as political parties’ election manifestos, election posters and spots, press releases, etc.). However, numerous studies have shown that voters rarely use political sources of information because they require an active recipient (e.g., Maurer, 2009; Kepplinger and Maurer, 2005; Ohr and Schrott, 2001; Popa et al., 2020). The second is *mass media coverage*. Traditional mass media report daily on political events, and citizens often use this political information (see e.g., Maurer, 2009; Maier, 2009; Popa et al., 2020; Schulz, 2011). Furthermore, recipients may receive political information “accidentally” when consuming mass media without actively searching for it.

Research questions

In this paper, we focus on the concreteness, that is, the “quality” aspect of the information available on European Union (EU) politics and policies in both of the aforementioned sources of political information, namely party communication and mass media coverage, put forward by political actors. More specifically, we are interested in how concretely or vaguely political actors communicate their political positions on EU issues and how concretely or vaguely news media cover party positions on EU issues.¹

Consequently, our research questions are (following a study by Maurer, 2009): *First*, how concretely or vaguely did political parties themselves directly communicate political positions prior to the 2014 European Parliament elections (EPE) and how where they covered in the mass media? Was there a difference in the communication of concrete political positions between political parties and the media – or more bluntly, which informed citizens more concretely? *Second*, did differences exist between different types of parties regarding the communication of political positions? *And finally*, were there country-specific patterns in the communication of concrete political positions by political parties and the media and, if so, can we explain them?

In the following sections, we first provide an overview of the (theoretical as well as empirical) state of research on vague political communication by political parties and by mass media and derive hypotheses. In a second step, we describe the methodological design of our study, explaining the case selection of the 2014 EPE and the operationalization of “concrete” versus “vague” political positions. We then present the results of our quantitative content analysis of the concreteness of political communication and mass media coverage in seven European countries. Finally, we discuss our results and provide alternative explanations and avenues for future research.

State of research

Communication of vague statements by political actors – party communication

To answer our first research question, if there might be expected a difference in the communication of concrete political positions between political parties and the mass media, the following section provides an overview of possible reasons, why *political actors* might lean towards the use of a vague political statements. An overview of theoretical as well as empirical studies is presented that might give a first hint of how often and in which situations vague political statements are voiced by political actors.

In his pioneering work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Downs (1957) argued that political ambiguity (or vagueness), in the sense of not voicing concrete political positions, is a suitable strategy for gaining votes whenever voicing a concrete political position would offend many voters. This hypothesis sparked a controversial discussion in the field of political science, and many researchers published (theoretical) papers on whether political ambiguity might be a useful campaign strategy.

Prominently, the question has been discussed as part of the *theory of political ambiguity* (see e.g., Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976). Here, “ambiguity” is defined as preventing political actors from being identified with policy positions (Shepsle, 1972: 555), that is, the avoidance of taking clear stands on an issue (Page, 1976: 742). Most authors belonging to this theoretical tradition conclude that ambiguity is a suitable strategy for gaining votes (e.g., Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976; Alesina and Cukierman, 1990; Glazer, 1990; Chappell, 1994) – at least under certain circumstances. Such circumstances might be, for example, a given risk-affinity of voters (Shepsle, 1972), when there is no accordance of the political actor with the political position of the mean voter (Alesina and Cukierman, 1990) or if the political actor does not know the political position of the median voter (Glazer, 1990).

Further, many empirical studies have been conducted in the context of Bavelas et al.’s (1990) *theory of equivocation* (for an overview, see e.g., Bull, 2000, 2008). They define “equivocation” similar to Shepsle (1972) and Page’s (1976) definition of ambiguity, as “non-straightforward communication” of politicians that “appears ambiguous” or “obscure” (Bavelas et al., 1990: 28). Empirical research shows that equivocation is an often-used strategy by politicians (e.g., Bull and Mayer, 1993; Harris, 1991; Bull, 2000). In line with most

researchers on political ambiguity, Bavelas et al. (1990) have argued that non-straightforward, ambiguous communication is a useful strategy for political actors if; first, the issue at hand is controversial among electorate (i.e., a concrete statement would offend a substantial number of voters), second, the politician is under pressure to respond to a complex question quickly and briefly, or third, if the politician lacks adequate knowledge of an issue.

Several empirical studies have also addressed the concreteness of *electoral promises*, in particular (e.g., Dupont et al., 2016; Hakansson and Naurin, 2016; Naurin, 2014). A side benefit of communicating vague political statements or election promises is that the vaguer a policy is formulated, the broader the party's later freedom of action in its implementation (Naurin, 2014).

Further, a few (quasi-)experimental studies exist on the *effects of political ambiguity* on evaluations of political actors (e.g., Rosen and Einhorn, 1972; Patton and Smith, 1980; Rudd, 1989; Reinemann and Maurer, 2005; Nagel, 2012). These studies have shown that a vague communication style leads to more positive evaluations of a political communicator compared with concrete political statements, at least if recipients do not have an (immediate) opportunity to compare these vague statements with the concrete statements of another political actor.

In sum, the aforementioned studies and findings show that communicating vague political statements (under specific circumstances) seems to be a useful strategy for political actors (e.g., to increase positive evaluations or improve electoral performance) – therefore, they should be expected to use it frequently.²

Communication of vague statements by political actors – mass media coverage

What about the second source of political information, used even more often by the citizens, namely mass media coverage? Abundant research in communication science shows that mass media do not simply echo what political actors state or simply adopt political actors' attention for issues (see Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2016) but select specific issues,

paraphrases/ edits them (see also Schulz, 2011) or gives more voice to specific actors (e.g., Hagen 1993). However, as far as the concreteness in media coverage is concerned hardly any research exists to our knowledge. Does it seem plausible that the media cover vague political statements by political actors – and if yes, as frequently as political actors do when they communicate directly through their party communication channels?

In this regard, two publications by Maurer (2007, 2009) are important that impart an impression of the frequency vague political statements occur in mass media coverage (compared to political communication). Maurer (2007, 2009) conducted a quantitative content analysis of election manifestos and campaign speeches for the 2005 German parliament election, with a focus on the issues “labor” and “taxes”, and the corresponding media coverage. His analyses show that newspaper and TV news coverage avoid conveying vague statements. The more concretely statements in party manifestos were formulated, the more likely they were to be covered by the media.

This finding might be explained, among other reasons, by news value theory. According to this theory of journalistic news selection, journalists orient their news selection on certain characteristics of (external) events, the so-called news factors such as facticity, conflict, prominence and surprise (e.g., Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976; Ruhrmann et al., 2003). These news factors help journalists to recognize what is newsworthy and what is not. The original contribution of Galtung and Ruge (1965) also includes unambiguity as news factor arguing that simple and easily interpretable rather than complex events are preferred. Compliant with the news value theory, vague political statements should be less newsworthy than concrete positions, because vague statements do not or only to a lesser degree include news factors such as unambiguity, conflict, facticity, surprise, and so on (e.g., Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976; Ruhrmann et al., 2003).

However, simplification as a news factor could also play a role (see Östgaard, 1965). Due to limited time or space, the media draw on information they retrieve from political parties and tend to simplify it in their coverage (on time and space restrictions, see also White’s (1950) contribution on gatekeeping; Leidecker, 2015; Maurer, 2007). Consequently,

this could be a reason why mass media cover positions of political actors more vaguely. Also results from the personalization literature provide support for this point by showing that media coverage of politics often tends to focus on single persons and non-political aspects of politics instead of on hard political facts (e.g., Adam and Maier, 2010; Schulz, 2011).

The role of the medium: Comparing party communication and media coverage

Altogether, the studies and theoretical approaches discussed so far show that political actors themselves might benefit by communicating vague statements. However, drawing on existing research so far it is not clear how concrete mass media cover political actors and their positions and statements. Therefore, we formulate an open research question and ask:

Research question 1: Do party press releases or newspaper articles on (EU) issues contain fewer concrete political positions?

The role of actors: Differentiation by issue position and type of issue

A second research question that follows from this first hypothesis is if it seems reasonable to lump all parties together (or do we expect differences between party types)? Rovny (2012, 2013) has studied the *conditions* under which political parties communicate vague statements. His research indicates that political parties indeed differ in their strategic use of vague statements, and that at least two factors are relevant, namely, a party's position on a specific issue (dimension) and the type of issue (dimension). He argues that party competition is multidimensional and that parties prefer to compete and present more concrete positions regarding those issue dimensions where they have extreme positions, that is which matter for their ideological profile and their constituency. By contrast, parties aim to de-emphasize or silence on other issue dimensions (e.g., where they have no reputation, hold unpopular positions or which divide their constituencies), and to blur their position, if they cannot avoid addressing these issues.

Focusing more specifically on radical-right political parties, Rovny (2013: 19) shows that these parties take clear political positions "on the authoritarian fringe of the non-

economic dimension” but avoid concrete political positions on the economic dimension. A reason for their “position blurring” strategy is that radical right voters show an affinity for non-economic, socio-cultural issues such as immigration or law and order, while they hold significantly more dispersed economic positions compared with voters of political mainstream parties. Thus, it is reasonable for radical-right parties to avoid concrete political statements on economic issues to not deter voters. We start drawing on Rovny’s research that parties’ blurring positions are related to their overall issue (dimension) position and expect:

H1: Parties with “extreme” positions on European integration communicate more often concrete political positions compared to parties with more “centered” positions on European integration.

However, lumping together EU issues into one issue dimension might fall short. Moreover, Rovny’s (2013) idea of a multidimensional competition dimension can further be applied to EU (or European) issues. Indeed, research on the influence of cleavages on parties’ support for European integration provides two insights (see Steenbergen and Marks, 2004; Marks and Wilson, 2000; Kriesi, 2007): first, at least two policy dimensions of European integration, namely *economic integration* or *political integration*, have to be distinguished, and second, most party families face a *dilemma with regard to one component*. Broadly speaking, the left tends to be divided on the merits of economic integration but mostly supports political integration, while the right supports economic integration but is more skeptical of political integration.

Depending on the parties’ overall position towards European integration (*against* or *in favor*) in combination with their ideological profile (*left* or *right*), parties have a more pronounced position on a specific issue dimension as compared to the other. This makes an elaboration of our hypothesis 1 necessary, which includes a 2x2 differentiation (namely two positions towards European integration x two ideological profiles) – resulting in four differentiated hypotheses. Accordingly, we expect parties to communicate more concretely

about those specific EU issues where they have a clear stance and which coincides with their general position towards European integration, but to avoid position-taking otherwise.

To start with extreme positions *against European integration*, the *right* strongly and uniformly opposes political integration, while they are more divided over economic issues ranging from taxes to welfare services and the size of public sector (Iversflaten, 2005; Rovny, 2013). Thus, we expect:

H2a: Parties on the *right* with “extreme” positions *against European integration* communicate more concrete political positions when *non-economic (EU)* issues are considered compared to economic (EU) issues.

On the other hand, the radical *left* strongly opposes economic integration because it threatens national achievements regarding the welfare state and industrial relations, though it is also critical of political integration. More precisely, the shift of political competence to the EU is perceived as undemocratic. However, these non-economic EU issues play a secondary role for them due to their ideological profile. We thus expect them, if they address these issues at all in their communication, to be more likely to blur their positions as compared to their core economic EU issues.

H2b: Parties on the *left* with “extreme” positions *against European integration* communicate more concrete political positions when *economic (EU) issues* are considered compared to non-economic (EU) issues.

By contrast, to continue with extreme positions in *favour of European integration*, the *left* strongly supports political integration as an opportunity to enforce EU-wide regulations, while the *right* supports economic integration through the benefits of lower trade barriers and market liberalization. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H2c: Parties on the *right* with “extreme” positions in *favor of European integration* communicate more concrete political positions when *economic (EU) issues* are considered compared to non-economic (EU) issues.

H2d: Parties on the *left* with “extreme” positions in *favor of European integration* communicate more concrete political positions when *non-economic* (EU) issues are considered compared to economic (EU) issues.

The role of the media system, i.e., professionalization of journalism: Differentiation by countries

Finally, we not only expect differences between party types but also between countries. We build on Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) well-established conceptual framework which compares media systems of 18 Western democracies to analyze differences and similarities of the relations between politics and the (mass) media. Their framework (2004) consists of four dimensions with regards to media systems (e.g., professionalization of journalism or political parallelism) and of five dimensions regarding to political contexts (of media systems; e.g., type of democracy or degree of pluralism). Out of these dimensions, they developed three ideal models of media-politics relations, namely the so called “Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model” (including France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), the “North/Central Europe or Democratic Corporatist Model” (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland), and the “North Atlantic or Liberal Model” (United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland).

For our analysis, we rely on one dimension concerning media systems, namely the professionalization of journalism, to draw conclusions relating to possible country differences. Indicators of professional journalism are the degree of journalistic autonomy, the development of distinct professional rules and norms, like practical routines or ethical principles, and a public service orientation of journalists (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Brüggemann et al., 2014). Additional, along with professionalization goes an information-orientation of journalists and a substantial journalism education (where standards of news selection and processing (informative content) are trained; e.g., Kepplinger, 2011; Leidecker, 2015). As vague (political) statements are less informative and newsworthy than concrete political positions, we conclude:

H3a: In countries where professionalization of journalism is weak, media coverage contains less concrete political positions than in countries, where professionalization of journalism is strong.

The effect of professionalization on the difference between media

Further, implying hypothesis one, according to which party communication contains fewer concrete political positions than mass media, we expect the difference between media coverage and party communication regarding the communication of concrete political positions to be higher in media systems with strong journalism professionalization compared to systems with a rather weak professionalization of journalism. This is, because highly professionalized journalism should rely more on informative, concrete political positions than weakly professionalized journalism.

H3b: In countries where professionalization of journalism is strong, the difference between media coverage and party communication regarding the communication of concrete political positions is higher than in countries, where professionalization of journalism is weak.

Study design

To test our hypotheses, we chose the 2014 EPE as a case study because general knowledge about EU politics and policies is relatively low among citizens, making the EPE an interesting case. Many studies have further shown that the EU may not be regarded as one of the “core issues” of political parties (e.g., they spend less money and time on EPE campaigning compared to national elections [Giebler and Lichteblau, 2016] and the strategic communication mostly focuses on national or domestic rather than European issues [Marsh, 1998]).³ Therefore, one would expect a relatively high amount of vaguely formulated statements in parties’ communication on European issues.

Further, the focus on EPE enables us to conduct a cross-country comparison of party and mass media communication related to one common overall issue, that is, European integration. We relied on cross-country quantitative content analysis of EU-related press releases and newspaper articles in seven European countries, namely, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Greece. These countries vary regarding one of our explanatory variables, namely journalism professionalization (Brüggemann et al., 2014), which should explain cross-national differences in use of concrete political positions between different media systems as well as between party communication and the media.

We have chosen an analysis period of 12 weeks to collect a substantial number of articles respectively press releases with a reference to European issues for different reasons. We go for a 12 weeks analysis period, as the EPE are still “second-order” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; see also Marsh, 1998; Schmitt, 2005; Niedermayer, 2014) as compared to first-order national elections. Moreover, news media coverage on EPE is significantly lower compared to national election coverage (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2007; Leidecker-Sandmann and Wilke, 2016). Finally, more than 60 percent of European election candidates start their election campaign more than three months before the election (see Giebler and Lichteblau, 2016).

For *party communication*, we analyzed all EU-related press releases of political parties having a voter turnout over three percent in the last European or national election before the 2014 EPE and participating in the 2014 EPE. We choose press releases as a data source because press releases – in contrast to manifestos, election posters, or spots – are specifically geared towards the media. Press releases are a simple and cheap form for parties to spread their issues, they are published almost every day and in great number, while for the media they are a convenient source of information, usually containing one or two pages of “pure” text and content (see also Haselmeyer et al., 2017).

For mass *media coverage*, we selected (quality) newspapers, which are a distinctive political medium in Europe in contrast to television, which satisfies mainly entertainment needs. Moreover, print media tend to be more extensive and provide more in-depth

background information regarding political information than broadcast coverage, where the contributions are usually limited to a few minutes (e.g., Schulz, 2011). Finally, compared with broadcasting, the press is also considered a “storage medium”: messages do not “rush” past the recipient but are materially available. Consequently, even complex political facts can be comprehensibly communicated (Wilke, 1998). For our analysis, we rely on all EU-related newspaper articles in two national quality newspapers per country, (one left- and one right-leaning newspaper; see appendix 1).⁴

Coding logic

The following coding logic is used for both information source, party communication and mass media coverage.

A reference to the EU occurred if the press release or newspaper article contained at least two references to European policies, European institutions, European politicians, or the EPE. For this, we compiled an electronic search string that contained the relevant keywords. For the newspaper coding, all articles published in the political and commentary section were considered (for further details on data sources and search strings, see appendix 1).

Coding was done at the *actor level* for both the press releases and newspaper articles. More precisely, we identified first active actors formulating a political statement or performing an action (such as passing a law). Thus, active actors were not merely (passively) mentioned in a press release or newspaper article, but agitated either saying or doing something within the press release or newspaper article. We only considered national political actors explicitly affiliated to a national party. We chose national instead of European parties as European elections and campaigns take part mainly in the national arena (e.g., Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Regierungsforschung.de, 2014).

As mostly one single political actor or party publishes each press release, we gathered one main active actor per press release but up to three active actors per newspaper article in which usually several political actors are quoted or referred to. For each active political actor, we then collected first, the main issue the active actor talked about –

focusing on two broader issues, an *economic issue* (i.e., social and labor market issues) and a *non-economic*, EU-generic issue (i.e., territorial questions, constitutional questions, and the functioning of the EU) – and second, whether the active actor advocated a concrete political position or a vague political statement.

To ensure the reliability of manual coding, 26 coders participated in a comprehensive training program, followed by a (researcher–coder) reliability test based on at least 25 active actors that showed satisfactory reliability values (Holsti: 0.72–0.92; Krippendorff’s Alpha: 0.62–0.89; for details see Appendix 2).⁵

Operationalization of dependent and independent variables

Dependent variable “type of issue position”: Following Shepsle’s (1972) and Page’s (1976) works on “political ambiguity,” we define “vague political statements” as messages that do not contain any information on concrete political principles, concrete political positions, plans, or goals. Vague political statements shun clear stands; they “withhold information about policy positions” (Chappell, 1994: 281) or “avoid stances on some dimensions of multidimensional conflict” (Rovny, 2013: 5). Put simply, they are imprecise. By contrast, we define “concrete political positions” as presented when active political actors not only talk about an issue (in our case EU-related), but also present a policy position or plan regarding this issue, for example, in the form of support or rejection of a concrete measure (see also Reinemann and Maurer, 2005; Maurer, 2009; Nagel, 2012; Rovny, 2012).

We would like to give some examples from our collected press releases and newspaper articles. The following press release of the Green Party (UK, 21 May 2014) includes several statements which would classify as vague statements, as they do not contain any information about the concrete political plans of the speaking active actor: “Green MEPs would make a fresh push to tackle the growing pay gap between Europe’s CEOs and their workforce, following elections on 22nd May.” or: “More Green MEPs means more opportunities to bring about an economy that works for the common good.” But vague political statements can also be found in newspaper articles: “It’s a slogan that has to be in

place in any red campaign: "Tax justice" propagated the SPÖ before the European elections on May 25th." (Der Standard, 6. Mai 2014, p. 7).⁶ These stand-alone statements do not contain information on how exactly the implied policies/ the "fresh push" would look like and what is meant by an "economy that works for the common good" or "tax justice", respectively.

The same press release includes the following statements with a concrete political positions: "A new directive on a European minimum income and EU-wide pay ratios for every company are the flagship measures designed to restore a degree of fairness to the corporate salary scale." Or: "Limiting bonuses to a maximum of 100 percent of salary, or 200 percent if shareholders vote for it, will reduce unnecessary risk-taking and make bankers more accountable for their actions." This is also the case in the newspaper article where the Austrian SPÖ calls "In addition to the fight against tax fraud and competition, [...] for a reduction in the burden of labour at the expense of wealth –now for the entire EU."⁷

To give a last example: "UKIP is determined to make a new and better offer to working people" (UKIP, 17 March 2014) would have been coded as a vague statement because it is not clear how the "new and better offer" concretely looks like. However, this press releases, which has been coded to have a concrete political position, contains the following sentence: "To help the lowest paid we will set out ambitions plans to further raise the amount that can be earned before any tax is paid." (UKIP, 17 March 2014) Here, a political position on taxes is given (namely to reduce tax payments).

In a nutshell, we operationalized statements of active actors talking about an issue without voicing his or her own plans or position as vague statements. If an active actor talked about an issue and voiced his/her/the parties' political position or plans, we operationalized this as a concrete political position. This proceeding resulted in a dichotomous variable *type of issue position* – concrete versus vague – as our dependent variable.

Independent variables: Our analysis differentiates between parties holding *extreme and centered positions on European integration*. The "extremity" of this issue position is measured based on parties' issue position towards European integration ranging from one to

seven, available in the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; for details see Bakker et al., 2015). To capture *parties on the left* and *the right* we relied on parties' general left-right position as a proxy ranging from zero to ten, also available in the CHES. We further differentiate between the *type of issue* that is communicated by political actors or the media, namely economic versus non-economic issues. As economic issues we have covered topics related, for instance, to stimulus packages and safety umbrellas, free movement of goods, capital and services within the EU or banking union. For non-economic issues, we restricted our analysis on the topics related to territorial and constitutional questions as well as the functioning of the EU such as the division of power between political levels and EU membership (e.g. British referendum). Finally, *professionalization of journalism* is measured using the dimension index values by Brüggemann et al. (2014: 1061, Table 12).

Results

The following analysis is based 1368 cases consisting of 942 press releases issued by 46 national parties (and party coalitions) and 426 active actors mentioned in 230 newspaper articles by 14 national quality newspapers (see appendix 2). We relied on logistic regressions to test our hypotheses and calculated cluster-corrected standard errors to account that the political statements are not independent from each other but nested within parties.

Starting with a description of our data, both, press releases as well as media coverage contain more concrete political positions on EU issues than vague political statements. However, cross-national variations exist when comparing the amount of concrete respectively vague political statements in party communication and newspaper coverage (see figure 1). *Political parties* in Germany, the Netherlands and France communicate more concretely (in over 95 percent of their press releases) as compared to Greek parties, for example, where almost every third press release contains a vague political statement. Regarding *media coverage*, by contrast, concrete communication is more widespread in the Netherlands, Austria and the UK (all over 90 percent) as compared to Germany (60 percent) and Portugal (67 percent).

In addition, the results from the logistic regression analysis of positional statements in press releases and media coverage by country revealed that the relationship between party communication and mass media coverage was not uniform across countries (see Table 1). The coefficient in the overall model, including all countries together, is not significant indicating that party communication and newspaper coverage hardly differs in terms of concreteness of political statements.

However, when turning to the analysis by each country separately, the coverage of concrete political positions in press releases and quality newspapers differs significantly in three out of seven countries, namely, France, Germany and Portugal. National parties in these three countries communicated more often concrete political positions (in their press releases) as compared to their newspaper coverage. The odds for press releases to contain concrete political positions in Table 1 ranged from almost four times higher in Portugal to more than 12 in Germany, with France in between with 7 times higher odds. For the remaining countries, that is Austria, Greece, and the Netherlands, the relationship was reverse, but not as pronounced and thus not significant. In Great Britain, the proportion of vague political statements in party communication and mass media coverage seems quite balanced as the non-significant coefficient close to one suggests.

[Figure 1 and Table 1 about here]

In sum, the statements of political actors in party press releases more often contained concrete political positions on EU issues than the statements of political actors quoted in media coverage (85.9% versus 75.8%). In other words – at least in some countries (e.g., Germany or Portugal) – mass media, in our case national quality newspapers, inform the public less concretely compared to political parties. This finding is even more interesting as our analysis focuses on “quality” newspapers only, which are supposed to provide more “in-depth” political news coverage as compared to newspapers in general.

We turn to our party communication hypotheses, 1 and 2, according to which parties' vague statements should depend on the extremity of their issue position towards European integration and in interaction with the type of issue (non-economic versus economic). The model including all countries does not provide empirical evidence for the hypothesis 1 that parties on the extreme communicated more concretely, regardless of the type of issue (see Table 1). However, the analysis by countries provides country-specific support for our assumption that a party's EU position matters, but only in selected countries, namely Austria and Portugal. Nevertheless, contrary to our hypothesis, parties on the extremes are more likely to communicate vaguely (see Figure 2 and 3 for the visualization of the results). As can be seen on the left-hand side in Figure 3, for instance, the probability of a press release issued by a Portuguese pro-EU party (e.g., Partido Socialista with a value of about 6.4) to contain a concrete political position is lower compared to a press release of a moderately anti-EU party (e.g., Bloco de Esquerda with a value of 3.1), more precisely 0.87 versus 0.93. Moreover and in line with the discussion above, the inverted u-shaped curves hardly differed when Austrian press releases and newspaper coverage are compared. By contrast, Portuguese parties across the whole spectrum of EU positions communicate more concretely as compared to the newspaper coverage of their political statements.

[Figure 2 and 3 about here]

The overall model in Table 1 testing the effect of extreme EU positions together with the specific type of issue did not corroborate our hypotheses 2a-d. Parties on the left and right with extreme positions against European integration do also not communicate differently when specific issues are considered.

Finally, we tested hypothesis 3a, that media coverage contains fewer concrete political positions in countries with weaker professionalization of journalism, such as Greece or Austria, as compared to countries with stronger professionalization of journalism, such as Germany and the Netherlands. The probability of a media coverage to contain concrete

political positions did not change with the strength of professionalization of journalism, as the flat line in Figure 4 shows. However, journalistic professionalization is positively related to the concreteness of party communication. Parties tend to communicate more concretely in countries with higher journalistic professionalization. As a result thereof, the findings support our hypothesis 3b that the difference between the media coverage and party communication should be more pronounced in countries with strong professional journalism. This is, however, not as we would have expected due to differences regarding the concreteness in newspaper coverage but in party communication. As Figure 4 further shows, the effect is only significant for middle levels of journalistic professionalization such as the UK, France, and Portugal.

[Figure 4 about here]

Discussion

This paper started from the observation that voters know relatively little about the positions of parties, especially concerning EU politics. We then asked whether the sources of information that politically interested citizens use to inform themselves explain part of this puzzle, that is, whether mainly parties or the mass media contribute to the dissemination of vague political statements.

Starting with research question 1, our analysis shows that countries vary with regard to the extent to which political statements communicated by parties or mentioned in the media contain concrete political positions. In Germany, France and the Netherlands parties communicated very often concrete political positions compared to parties in Greece, for example. While the media in the Netherlands, Austria and UK cited more often concrete political positions of political actors compared to France, Germany, Portugal and Greece. Comparing party communication (via press releases) and media coverage, overall party communication and media coverage did not differ significantly in terms of concrete political positions. In three countries, namely Austria, Greece and the Netherlands, the newspaper

coverage provided the public with more concrete political information than political actors did via their press releases, at least based on the descriptive statistics, but the differences were not significant. Unexpectedly, overall, the newspaper coverage provided the public with less concrete political information than political actors did via their press releases.

This finding was surprising in several respects. On the one hand, the theory of political ambiguity, the theory of equivocation, and earlier empirical findings (e.g., Maurer, 2007, 2009) have suggested that political parties might benefit from communicating vague political statements, and therefore, do so more often. On the other hand, as the EU may not be regarded as one of the “core issues” of political parties, we would have expected a higher amount of vaguely formulated statements in their communication. Moreover, we have only analyzed the coverage of *quality* newspapers – one would expect that their coverage provides “in-depth” political information. An interesting question for future studies might be, if the amount of vague statements in political news coverage would be even lower, if not only quality media are considered but rather tabloid or regional newspapers. Maurer’s analyses (2007) would support this assumption: he shows that the tabloid newspaper BILD in Germany covers more vague statements than quality newspapers.

Two possible explanations for our findings might be the news factor simplification (Östgaard, 1965), according to which mass media tend to simplify complex information, and/or the personalization hypothesis, according to which media focus more on non-political aspects compared to hard political facts (e.g., Adam and Maier, 2010; Schulz, 2011).

Concomitantly, one limitation of this study is that our analysis cannot conclusively rule out alternative explanations of differences in ambiguity of political statements in party communication and media coverage. Examples for those are the purpose (e.g., press releases are geared towards the media, while news articles target readers) or the structure of the text (e.g., length and style). Also the “quality” of the medium might play a role (in our case, we solely analyzed quality newspapers). Future research could put more emphasis in and control for those factors, for instance by extending the data sources to include tabloid newspapers and social media channels. In addition, our study cannot verify, if the newspaper

coverage consists of less concrete political statements because the media focus on the vaguer statements of political actors (i.e., they select existing vague statements) or because they do turn concrete statements into vague ones (i.e., by leaving out precise details). To answer this question, an input-output-analysis would have been necessary respectively a detection of newspaper content that overlaps with content of press releases (see also Meyer et al., 2017). However, referring to the studies of Maurer (2007, 2009) we would lean towards the latter explanation. Maurer showed that media coverage avoided covering vague statements. The more concretely political statements in party manifestos were formulated, the more likely they were to be covered by the media.

When turning to differences in party types, we cannot find empirical support that parties with extreme positions towards European integration communicate differently compared to those with “centered” positions. The exceptions are Austria and Portugal, where, contrary to hypothesis 1, parties without extreme EU positions communicated more concretely than parties with extreme EU positions. Furthermore, the results do not corroborate our hypothesis 2 that the communication of concrete political positions further depends on the type of issue as well as a party’s ideological legacy.

Finally, contrary to hypothesis 3a, we see no significant difference in the newspaper coverage of concrete political positions in countries, where professionalization of journalism is strong compared to countries, where professionalization of journalism is weak. However, we found that the difference between party communication and media coverage in publishing vague political statements was not uniform across countries. Further research is needed to explain why we observe those differences among countries. Maybe the type of issue in combination with issue salience and/or the degree of controversial public discussion could serve as an explanatory factor (at the country level). As Bavelas et al. (1990) have argued, the use of vague political statements seems especially useful for political actors, if the issue at hand is controversially discussed among the electorate.

More research is also needed on the conditions under which the communication of concrete positions in party communication and media coverage differ. This paper began

looking at the degrees of journalistic professionalization in different countries. We found that in countries with middle levels of journalistic professionalization, political parties communicate more concretely (while the degree of journalistic professionalization does not seem to affect newspaper coverage). This finding might imply that one should not only distinguish between different degrees of professionalization in journalism but also in public relations. Maybe also the extent of intereffication (the interconnectedness of public relations and journalism; e.g. Bentele et al., 1997) respectively the degree of determination (e.g., Baerns, 1991) might play a role in explaining differences in the communication of parties and the media. Moreover, future research could go beyond dimensions and aspects of the media system and focus on the political system. Schuck et al. (2011), for example, show that a country's extent of party contestation on Europe affects the visibility of EU news in a curvilinear way that is higher EU media coverage when parties hardly or highly vary in EU positions. It is conceivable that a party's EU blurring strategies depends not only on its own EU position and the type of issue, as hypothesized here, but also on those of other parties in the political system.

Furthermore, it remains unanswered whether the findings could be applied to other non-economic (e.g., socio-cultural) and national (instead of European) issues, as our paper focused only on specific issues in the EPE context. This raises another question, namely, if the findings of our study may be generalized to other EPE (we only analyzed the party communication and newspaper coverage in the run-up to the 2014 EPE, that does not seem unique to us as regards to our research question) or to elections held at the national level.

Further, an analysis that compares the concreteness respectively vagueness of political statements in time of elections with non-election times seems interesting, for example: are political parties in times of elections communicating more vaguely (to appeal to a majority of voters) than in non-election times (where they have little to fear)? Due to lack of a sufficient number of cases, we were not able to do separate or comparing analyses between different periods of time or weeks prior to the EPE in this study.

Although – or precisely because – most of our thoroughly derived hypotheses cannot be confirmed, our study provides interesting findings in an empirically underexplored research field. We think two very interesting findings are the following ones:

First, “extreme” political parties or actors at the left and the right of the political spectrum do not communicate more concrete political positions compared to “centered” political parties. At least in some countries, the centrist parties/politicians are the ones who inform the public more concretely about their positions and plans regarding EU issues.

Second, it is the political parties that overall communicate slightly more concretely on EU issues than the media do. More bluntly, we can say that in some countries political parties via their press releases (prior to the 2014 EPE) informed citizens remarkably more concretely about political positions and plans than the mass media did. This seems critical to us in so far as firstly mass media coverage – as against to party communication – is the main source of political information for most of the citizens, and secondly as our analysis only took *quality* newspaper coverage into account. The so called information function (in the sense of establishing a public sphere) is regarded as a central task of the mass media. In addition, of this information function qualitative demands are made – this means, among others, that the information should be covered in an understandable manner (and not roughly simplified; e.g., Pürer, 2008). If we take this information function of the mass media seriously, our results at least cast doubt on whether the newspaper coverage on European issues (fully) meets the requirements. Nevertheless, our results further indicate that the coverage of vaguely formulated political statements depends on the country concerned.

¹ It is not the aim of our study to analyze any potential interference of party communication on media coverage (or vice versa). We simply collect party communication data and media coverage data separately in the same period and compare whether the content of these two data sources is different (in the sense of: more or less concretely/vaguely).

² Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that communicating vaguely is just one strategy, which parties can use to broaden their constituency. Other broad-appeal strategies are, for instance, taking clear positions but on different issues across ideological borders (e.g., welfare chauvinism), selecting two leaders with different ideological appeals, or combining extreme manifestos with centrist party leaders (see Somer-Topcu, 2015). Indeed, it could be that depending on the party type a party might choose a different strategy than vague communication. This goes, however, beyond the scope of this study and could be addressed by future research. We thank the anonymous reviewer for his suggestion.

³ Although recent works find traces of EU politicization during the latest EPE (e.g., Hobolt and De Vries, 2015).

⁴ The selection of newspapers follows the media study of the European Election Studies (EES) project, which has been collecting data and conducting quantitative content analysis since the 1999, in order to make the data comparable whenever possible. However, we cross-checked them with our country specialists who suggested to rely on the right-leaning “Diario de Noticias” instead of “Journal de Noticias” for Portugal and “Efimerida” instead of “Eleftherotypia” and for Greece.

⁵ We used researcher-coder rather than intercoder reliability tests, taking the average of 26 coders’ reliability tests, to ensure that the coders were coding the project’s research interest correct in substance. Their coding had to be consistent with the coding of the leading researcher and not only with the (possibly wrong) coding of other coders. This approach not only allowed us to give the “go-ahead” for coders that passed the reliability test, while further instructing single coders that had not yet passed the reliability test (so we did not have to wait until all 26 coders passed the reliability test to start with our analyses). Further, this proceeding allowed us to recruit coders afterwards to do additional coding and replace dropping outs.

⁶ “Es ist ein Slogan, der in keiner roten Kampagne fehlen darf: ‘Steuergerechtigkeit’ propagiert die SPÖ vor der Europawahl am 25. Mai.” (Der Standard, 6 May 2014, p. 7).

⁷ “Neben Kampf gegen Steuerbetrug und -wettbewerb fordert sie eine Entlastung von Arbeit auf Kosten der Vermögen - nun eben für die ganze EU.” (Der Standard, 6 May 2014, p. 7).

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Table 1. Logistic regression

	RQ1								H1				
	All	AT	FR	DE	GR	NL	PT	UK	All	AT	FR	DE	GR
Source (party = 1)	1.940 (0.88)	0.481 (0.36)	7.451** (4.83)	12.67*** (8.70)	0.660 (0.26)		3.908*** (1.17)	0.957 (0.67)	1.932** (0.45)	0.444 (0.23)	6.764+ (7.06)	10.76*** (7.05)	0.708 (0.18)
EU position									0.994 (0.45)	8.857*** (3.22)	0.847 (0.67)	0.221 (0.45)	0.942 (0.41)
EU position ²									1.000 (0.06)	0.770*** (0.03)	1.016 (0.09)	1.142 (0.26)	1.018 (0.05)
Type of issue (non-econ. =1)													
EU position X type of issue													
EU position X EU position ² X type of issue													
Left-right position													
Professiona- lization													
Professiona- lization X source													
Constant	3.136*** (0.86)	13.00*** (9.54)	4.250*** (1.18)	1.500 (0.68)	3.300*** (1.19)		2.047*** (0.31)	10.33*** (6.25)	3.220 (2.36)	0.498 (0.30)	6.159 (8.51)	94.63 (373.31)	2.850 (2.18)
N	1368	289	182	100	240		348	132	1368	289	182	100	240
Model Chi2	2.16	1.13	13.18***	14.70***	1.18		24.07***	0.00	10.11**	36.55***	49.67***	23.14***	2.33
McFadden's R2	0.016	0.005	0.108	0.200	0.004		0.064	0.000	0.016	0.026	0.109	0.224	0.008

Complete separation¹

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients and cluster-corrected standard errors by parties in parenthesis. *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

¹ Cannot be calculated because there are only concrete political statements in the newspaper coverage (see Figure 1).

Appendix 1. Data sources, search string and parties included in the analysis

Newspaper sample:

AT: Der Standard (L); Die Presse (R);
FR: Le Monde (L), Le Figaro (R),
DE: Süddeutsche Zeitung (L), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (R),
GR: Efimerida ton Syntakton (L), I Kathimerini (R);
NL: de Volkskrant (L), NRC Handelsblad (R);
PT: Público (L), Diário de Notícias (R);
UK: Guardian (L), Daily Telegraph (R)
L = left-leaning; R = right-leaning

Search string:

The search string contains the following key words / word components in the respective languages: “Europ*, europ*, EU, EP, EZB, EIB, ESM, EFSF, EFSM, EuGH, EAD, EWSA, EIF, EDSB, EWU, Troika, Frontex, FRONTEX, constitutional treaty”

Parties included into the analysis:

Austria: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ), Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ), Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS), Die Grünen, Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP);

France: Front National (FN), Front de Gauche and Parti Communiste (FG), Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), Parti Socialiste (PS), Europe Ecologie - Les Verts (Verts), Mouvement Démocrate (MoDem);

Germany: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Die Linke, Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU-CSU), Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Grünen), Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD);

Greece: Golden Dawn (XA), Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Independent Greeks (ANEL), Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS), Syriza, Oikologoi Prasinoi (OP), Democratic Left (DIMAR), Nea Dimokratia (ND), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK);

Netherlands: Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), Socialistische Partij (SP), ChristenUnie - Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (CU/SPG), Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD), Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA), Christen Democratisch Appèl (CDA), GroenLinks, Democraten 66 (D66);

Portugal: Coligação Democrática Unitária (CDU-PCP), Bloco de Esquerda (BE), Partido Socialista (PS), Aliança Portugal (AP) including Partido Popular and Partido Social Democrata.

UK: UK Independence Party (UKIP), British National Party (BNP), Conservatives (Cons), The Green Party (Greens), Labour (Lab), Liberal Democrats (LibDem).

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Appendix 2. Reliability scores

	<i>Press releases</i>		<i>News articles</i>	
	<i>Holsti's R</i>	<i>Kalpha</i>	<i>Holsti's R</i>	<i>Kalpha</i>
Main actor / active actor 1	0.92	0.89	0.76	0.75
Active actor 2			0.85	0.81
Active actor 3			0.72	0.62
Main issue (agg.)	0.87	0.82	0.84	0.81
Issue position	0.79	0.76	0.81	0.80
<i>Number of coders</i>		5	21	

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Appendix 3.

	<i>News story (active actors)</i>			<i>Press releases</i>			<i>Total</i>		
	<i>Eco</i>	<i>Non-eco</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Eco</i>	<i>Non-eco</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Eco</i>	<i>Non-eco</i>	<i>Total</i>
Austria	22	6	28	215	46	261	237	52	289
France	47	37	84	78	20	98	125	57	182
Germany	9	11	20	69	11	80	78	22	100
Greece	37	6	43	175	22	197	212	28	240
Netherlands	7	15	22	42	13	55	49	28	77
Portugal	172	23	195	150	3	153	322	26	348
UK	5	29	34	32	66	98	37	95	132
<i>Total</i>	<i>299</i>	<i>127</i>	<i>426</i>	<i>761</i>	<i>181</i>	<i>942</i>	<i>1'060</i>	<i>308</i>	<i>1'368</i>