

A FRAMING OF FUTURE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2014 IN A SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXT

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Abstract

Communication in marketing has always been a continuous conceptual hybrid of input from various domains: marketing, P.R., communication, sociology. With the constant transformation of web 2.0. phenomenon the demarcation lines between these domains and their influence has become more blurred and difficult to pinpoint. As a result, specific research methods and theories have become adaptable instruments, laying the path for grounded theory approaches or new research methods. Framing theory having as basis that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning has shifted towards organizations and further on to institutions. Framing is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. Framing theory suggests that how something is presented (the “frame”) influences the choices people make. In online communicative contexts, their own personal framings allow the communicative actors to make use of language and forethought so that specific embodiments of future evolutions may be depicted. In our case, we shall focus on the topic: European Parliament elections, which are to take place in 2014, and on the manner in which it has been framed in two online chat session with three MEPs. It is our intention to identify the framing techniques used, the framing links and the framing alignments.

Keywords

framing theory; framing techniques; social media; European Parliament; consumer citizens

JEL classification

M31; M37; M38

1. Introduction

The European Union institutional system represents an intricate mechanism of polity, policy and lobby, within which there are three major institutional pillars with a profound role in the communication and information policy, inside and outside the EU mechanism.

Starting with the Delors mandate, the *communicator* of the EU (Cini, 1996), namely the European Commission, entered scholarly scrutiny regarding the fragmentation of political authority (Meyer, 2002) and the lack of coherence within institutional and political communication. Furthermore, after the Wallström Plan D partial progress regarding the communication policy of the EU, the *communication deficit* of the European Commission became the conceptual currency for the entire debate

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regarding communication and the EU, especially in the context of the elections for the European Parliament, the second institutional pillar of the mechanism.

With the Lisbon Treaty entering into force in 2013, the issue of communication and proximity towards the citizen(s) changed its conceptual anchors amid the European discourse, as the institutional frameworks transformed as well. Therefore, the intricate mechanism made up of public administration, governance system and private/public lobbying shifted as well on new legal grounds. What also changed were the multiple voices of the EU, namely the people working inside the institutions, rather silent until the emergence of the social media channels, who became present and available for debate and dialogue.

Schaefer (*apud* Cohen, 2011) considers three indicators of social media: [...] Evolution, Revolution and Contribution. First, it is an evolution of how we communicate, replacing email in many cases. It's a revolution: For the first time in history we have access to free, instantaneous, global communication. Third, social media is distinguished by the ability of everybody to share and contribute as a publisher. Placing this trinomial for both the Commission and the Parliament we observed a constant presence on social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Storify and LinkedIn. Both have evolved, especially the EP, from a rather unconnected position towards the voters to a bridging-up with the media and the electorate, by contributing to the European debate with coherent and live interventions on the social media network, by means of chat applications.

The European Parliament, as an EU institution, has been named *the great non-communicator* (Anderson and McLeod, 2004) due to the poor turnout to the elections and the failure of MEPs to connect with the media and the citizens. In the case of the European Parliament, it seems that the online (r)evolution has provided a most convenient channel through which the MEPs can present their views to the citizen(s), be they elite or common, and also answer their questions.

1.1 Methodology

The term *frame* is borrowed from Goffman (Goffman, 1974) and it means *schemata of interpretation*. These *schematas* allow people to locate, perceive, identify and label repeated occurrences in their lives (Snow et al., 1986).

Framing plays a critical role in the construction of social reality (Hallahan, 1999), as it provides the lenses through which people see the reality they live in. Framing deals with salience and selection (Entman, 1993), where by salience we understand making a piece of information more meaningful or noticeable to certain audiences, in other words, from within the interaction between the text and the receivers the meaningfulness arises. And it is in this interaction that several techniques are used, within seven models (Hallahan, 1999) which focus on the object which is framed (*what* is framed): situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility and news.

Frame alignment is considered an important element for social movement (Snow et al., 1986). It was argued that when individual frames become linked in *congruency* and *complementariness*, than the alignment of frames occurs producing *frame resonance*, a key element for the transition of the group from one frame to another. According to Snow and Bedford, the alignment depends on four elements/tasks:

- frame bridging - unconnected frames are linked to congruent frames;
- frame amplification - the beliefs and values of the communicative actors become clear;
- frame extension - other frames are included;
- frame transformation - due to changing conditions, frames are altered.

1.2 Research objectives

Within administration theory there has been a lasting assumption that *sound communication* leads to *sound performance* (Pandey and Garnett, 2006). In the words of Chester Barnard, the first executive function is to develop and maintain a system of communication. In the case of the European Union, the first sign of the lack of a communication system appeared when the Delors commission had to resign because of allegations of influence. During that crisis, the conflict between the Parliament and the Commission became even more visible, an issue which was remedied with the Prodi Commission. But even during the first Barroso Commission, the European Parliament remained detached in the relationship with the voters, despite the 2009 election campaigns, which marked a beginning in the ever growing presence of the EP on the European and international stage. As the transition from a *non-communicator* to a *communicator* unfolds for the European Parliament, it is interesting to analyze the framing strategies it adopted and the channels it decided to use most often.

Therefore, our research objectives will focus on the following:

- RO1: in the context of social media networks, what are the framing models used by the EP regarding the European elections in 2014;
- RO2: has the EP been successful in establishing the foundations for a frame alignment.

2. Case study

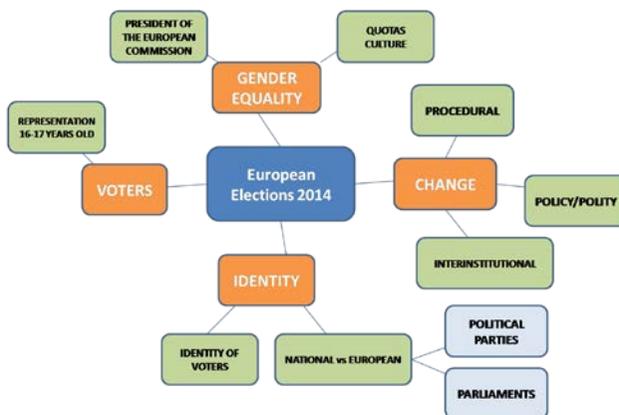
In order to accomplish our objectives we have chosen as a social network Facebook and the EP chat application, which became functional on the 24th of March 2011. The first chat available within the app was with Simon Busuttil, responsible for the Frontex mandate. For our study case we have chosen 2 e-conversations with three highly important figures from the European Parliament, namely: Andrew Duff, Joseph Daul and Hannes Swoboda. The first is

a British liberal who is responsible for steering the recommendations through Parliament and the spokesperson on the Committee on Constitutional Affairs - which is the committee charged with making the EU more democratic and accountable. The second is the president of the EPP's parliament group and the third is the president of the Social-Democrats group in the EP. The first e-conversation, which took place on 18th of June 2013, focused on the recommendations of the CCA committee on the following topics: candidates for the European Commission president being known well in advance, an EU-wide campaign and clear party lines. During this e-conversation there was a live stream of 142 interventions and 31 answers provided. The second e-conversation, which took place on 26th of March 2011, involved both J.Daul and H. Swoboda and presented a more general approach on several topics - EU budgets, solutions to end the crisis and European politics. During this e-conversation there was a live stream of 269 interventions and 34 answers (33 in English and 1 in French - we analyzed 33 answers).

For both of the e-conversations we analyzed the *what* of the frames, so that we could be able to pinpoint the construction of the social reality for each of the communicative actors, where by construction we understand: the attitudes and the representations. We did not focus on the element of culture, because on Facebook it is rather difficult to grasp the whole cultural background of the actors, especially for the senders of questions.

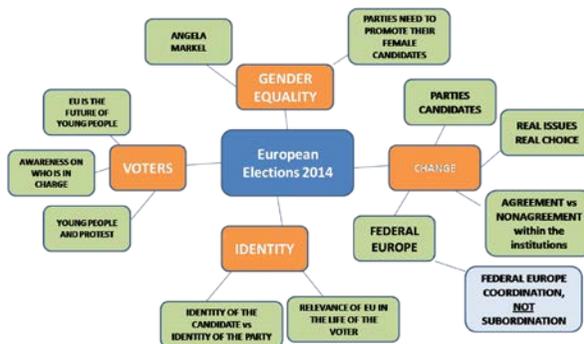
In the case of the first e-conversation, we identified two framing models: issue framing, where the issue was the European Elections in 2014 and the responsibility framing, namely the responsibility for the diminishing voters' turnout. In the case of

issue framing, social problems are explained in alternative terms by different parties and it is around these terms that public opinion and audiences are formed. (Grunic and Hunt, 1984). We have divided the issue framing from the questions and from the answers so that we may pinpoint certain points of congruency and/or of complementariness (see figure 1, figure 2).



Questions issue framing

Figure 1 Issue framing within the 31 questions



Answers issue framing

Figure 2 Issue framing within the 31 answers

As we can observe from the figures above, the congruency occurs at the first level of framing, meaning that there have been identified four issues framed within the conversation: gender equality, change, identity and voters. It is at the second level of framing that the foundations for frame alignment begins: *frame bridging* - the unconnected frames within the answers are now linked to the unconnected frames within the questions on the basis of the congruency. In the case of the voters issue (see figure 3), the future, the awareness and the protest of young people become complementary to the representation of the youth, within the context of the European elections.

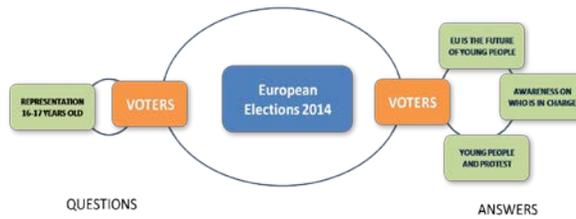


Figure 3 Congruency and complementariness for voters issue

In the case of the change issue (see figure 4), the procedural, inter-institutional and policy/polity become complementary to the federal Europe topic, the agreement vs. non-agreement within the EU institutions and to the awareness on the real choice of the voters.

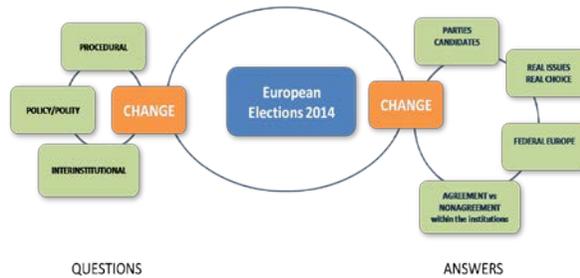


Figure 4 Congruency and complementariness for the change issue

As we can observe, the *frame extension* has begun at this point, as the connection real choice - policy/polity change - voters' awareness of who is in charge was established. In the case of the gender equality issue (see figure 5), the quotas issue becomes complementary to parties' internal affairs regarding female candidates and the much-debated persona of Angela Merkel to the hypothetical positioning as the future president of the European Commission. Inside this frame, the process of *frame amplification* has started as the complementarity Angela Merkel - president of the EC is complementary to the Federal Europe - policy/polity change in figure 4; in other words the liberal beliefs and values come forth, revealing the forethought of the one providing the answers - the liberals will support a liberal candidate, but when it comes to a female candidate, than Merkel is the (free or only) choice, even if she belongs to the EPP.

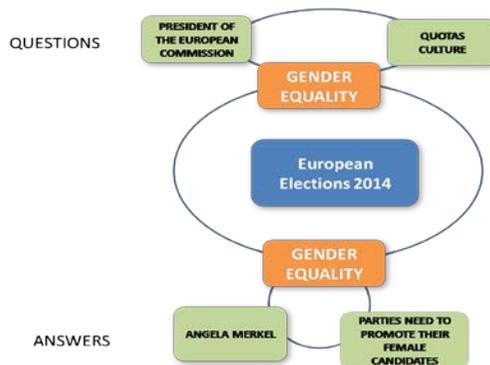


Figure 5 Congruency and complementariness for gender equality issue

The final congruency is the one regarding identity (see figure 6). At this stage the identity of the voters becomes complementary to the relevance of the EU in the life of the voters and the national vs. European identity of the party becomes complementary to the relation between the identity of the candidate and the identity of the party. Another *frame extension* occurs at this stage, namely the identity of voters - relevance of the EU is connected to the awareness of real issues/real choice - the future of young people is the EU.

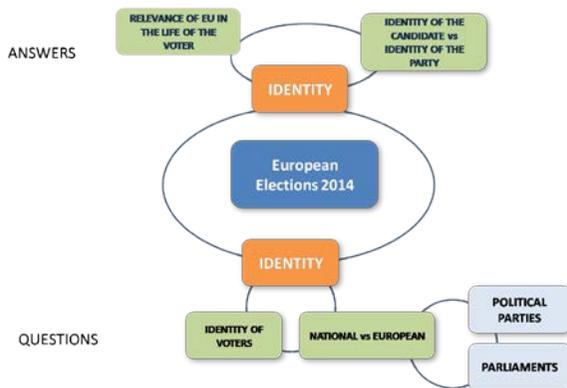


Figure 6 Congruency and complementariness for the identity issue

The responsibility framing was also analysed from a question/answer approach (see figure 7, figure 8). What we noticed was a much complex interweaving of frames, as indeed the issue itself requires more subtle and intertwined *frame extensions*.

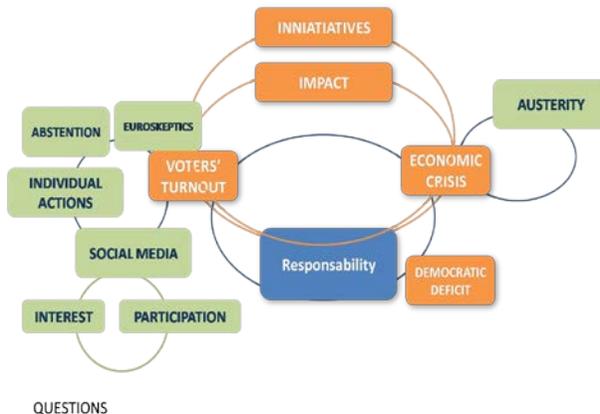
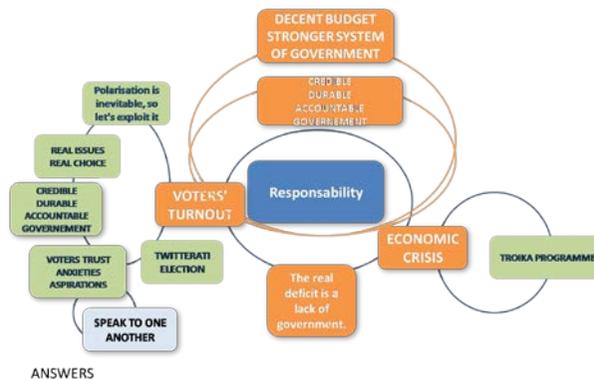


Figure 7 Responsibility framing out of 31 question



ANSWERS
Figure 8 Responsibility framing within 31 answers

As we may notice, there are two congruent connections which backbone the responsibility frame, namely the impact and the initiative. On account of these two circular linkages, a new *frame bridging* occurs, with a new *framing amplification* also: the bridging is represented by the reciprocal impact between economic crisis and voters' turnout, followed by the amplification - the real deficit is the lack of government - again the forethought of the one providing the answers comes forth, namely - it was never a matter of voters' disengagement towards the institutions, but it has always been a matter of governance and government, at EU level.

It is within this stage that the *framing transformation* occurs - the responsibility framing is endorsed through a binary approach: the impact/initiative translates towards the government level, thus becoming a matter of accountability and credibility on behalf of the EU and the voters' turnout shifts towards a matter of inter-communication and participation, as the future elections are going to be a twitterati election.

For the second e-conversation, we identified three framing models:

- issue framing, where the issues were: the economic crisis, European elections, youth unemployment, democracy (the Hungary situation, the Cyprus situation, the UK campaign against Romanians and Bulgarians), the EURO, the Single Seat;
- responsibility framing, on the topics: connecting with citizens, restoring the trust in EU institutions, voters' turnout, ;
- attribute framing, regarding the fear for Euros, euroskepticis, the situation of the net payer countries, trust in the decisional mechanism at a national level, what does it mean to be a European.

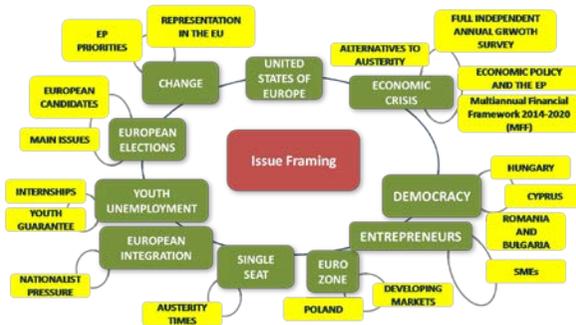
Attribute framing has been one of the domains in which consumer behavior researchers have been more active, using the term in at least four distinct ways. Our focus is on the use of *problem framing*, which refers to the deliberations used by decision makers to structure a preference judgment task (Hallahan, 1999); in our case the decision makers are the receivers of answers, as they decide whether their questions have been met with proper responses - in other words, if the future voters have found the right impetus to become even more interested in European issues and, consequently, to go to vote. Another use for attribute framing is the *agenda-setting* in the domain of media - in the case of social media the agenda-setters are the MEPs themselves, due to the evolution-revolution-contribution triad we mentioned earlier.

The issue framing was analysed from a question and answers' perspective (see figure 9, figure 10). In the case of the answers the two MEPs did not provide answers to all the questions, out of 33 questions 13 received binary answers and 20 received individual answers, either from one speaker or the other. Because the description for

the e-conversation provided a balanced vision of the two leaders, namely *both believe that Europe must provide the way out of the crisis. But they have a different approach to what it actually means* - a congruency as to the provider of the solution but a complementarity regarding the specific measures, we decided to present all the answers into one figure, within the principle of congruency, but mentioning the EPP and S&D input.

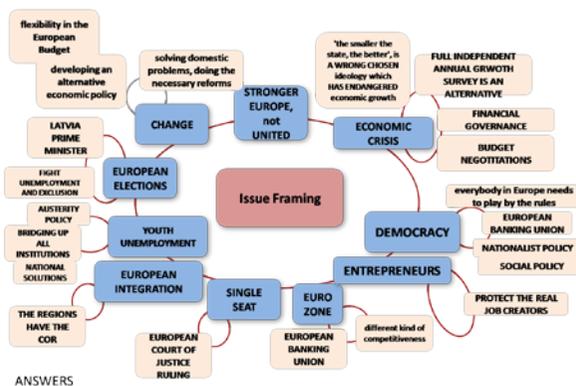
Comparing the issue framing we notice that the number of congruencies is bigger compared to the first e-conversation and more complex, covering a diverse thematic area. The complementarity at the third level of the frame allows for several patterns of forethought to come forth:

- negotiations on the budget, towards a new kind of financial governance;
- an alternative to the austerity policy intertwined with a different kind of competitiveness;
- European Banking Union;
- policy change, while respecting the EU rules.



QUESTIONS

Figure 9 Issue framing, out of 33 questions



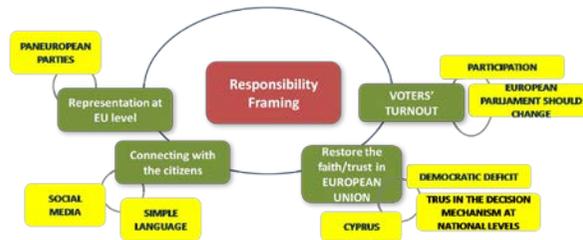
ANSWERS

Figure 10 Issue framing from 33 answers

Going forth with our study case, the responsibility framing for the questions and answers showed that a *frame bridging* has occurred between the issue and the responsibility framing through the following complementarities: alternatives to the current austerity policy, eliminate the blame game and the nationalist politicians with populist messages, an alternative economic policy.

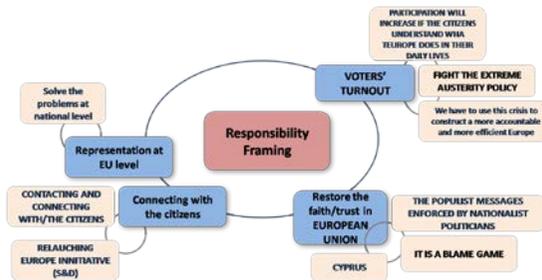
Compared to the previous e-conversation, there was only one issue framed, whereas, in this case, there are multiple issues with relevant sub-topics. Analyzing the European elections in this second conversation, the relevance of the EU in the daily life of the citizen is stressed and the importance of connecting with and contacting the citizen(s) for the European Parliament is dwelled upon. Bringing up the two e-conversations, there are three saliences in the discourses adopted by the three MEPs, despite their political affiliation:

- real issues/real choices - awareness of who is in charge - connect/contact the citizen - relevance of EU in the daily lives - eliminate nationalist politicians;
- the change processes within the EU institutions - the change within the EP - alternative to austerity policy and economic policy;
- youth unemployment - the EU is the future of youth.



QUESTIONS

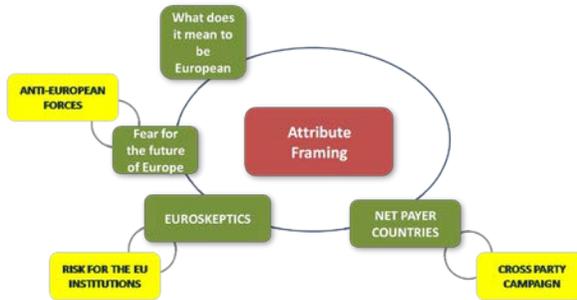
Figure 11 Responsibility framing within 33 questions



ANSWERS

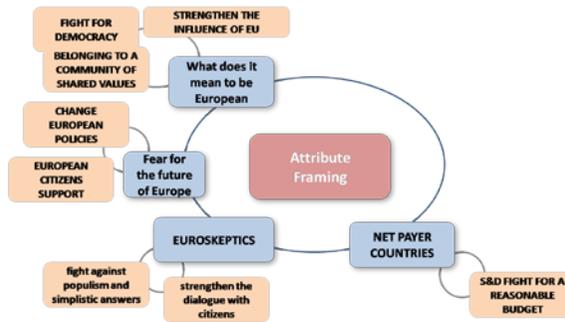
Figure 12 Responsibility framing within 33 answers

In this second e-conversation we identified an attribute framing (see figure 13, figure 14), which divides into four sub-issues: what does it mean to be European, fear for the future of Europe, euroskeptics and the net-payer countries. We believe that the *agenda setting* frame focuses the salience of the *change* paradigm, as the speakers do not tell to the participants what to think but what to think *about*, so that they react in the context of voters' turnout, i.e. change of austerity policy with the alternatives provided - change the ideology approach - agree/disagree with the change - vote for or against - but vote.



QUESTIONS

Figure 13 Attribute framing within 33 questions



ANSWERS

Figure 14 Attribute framing within 33 answers

The *problem framing* we depicted targets the condition of a European MEP and the euroskeptics, as both are built upon preference judgments - thus it is a question of deliberation to which the voter might agree or not, according to the perspective in which the problems are presented. Since they were identified within the attribute framing, and not among the issues, these insights could provide the voter with other criteria upon which she/he could motivate participation in the democratic mechanism.

3. Conclusions

Since the launch of the European Parliament chat application, there have been more than 15 e-conversations, with more than 2000 streams and over 1000 answers provided by MEPs on specific issues. Comparing to the 2009 elections, when the social media was used for the first time in most of the member-states, in 2014 the elections will be decided upon starting from social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook. As the social media provides a unique chance for the EP and the 750 MEPs to connect and contact the citizen, there should be more than 15 conversations taking place, as the questions of the voters deserve answers from the politicians. As Andrew Duff mentioned *the European Parliament is a first experiment of its kind and it would be a shame if it were the last.*

Regarding our research objectives, we were able to identify several framing models and framing processes and we believe that the foundations for a future frame alignment, in the context of future elections, have been set. However, the intricate

policy/polity mechanism at a EU level needs to become even more present in the offline context as well and needs to provide grounded solutions also.

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