

POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

A large, detailed mural of Angela Merkel's face serves as the background. A person in a blue shirt is seen from behind, using a long-handled brush to clean the mural. The brush is positioned near her eye.

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Introduction

Christina Holtz-Bacha, Edoardo Novelli and Kevin Rafter

The European Parliament elections in 2014 took place against the backdrop of a dramatic global economic crisis and considerable European financial instability that raised real questions about the very future of the European Union (EU) itself. The campaign in May 2014 undoubtedly received far more attention than any previous one to the European Parliament on account of these momentous economic challenges. Whether this heightened interest could be adjudged to be a positive for the reputation and standing of the European Parliament among the peoples of the Union is a moot point.

This chapter was jointly written by the three editors, Edoardo Novelli was responsible for the part on methodology and the summary.

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These contests take place in all 28 member states at the same time. This common timing therefore presents a unique opportunity for international comparisons of the political process across countries and thus to determine what are general trends and what are peculiarities of individual countries or regions. Surprisingly, this opportunity has not been taken up to any great extent to date in research in the communication studies discipline. Although the role television played in the campaign for the first direct European Parliament election in 1979 was the subject of a major comparative study (Blumler 1983; Blumler & McQuail 2016), few researchers developed this type of study in subsequent campaigns. Whereas political science has steadily presented studies of successive European elections, the communications discipline has rarely grasped the opportunity of this unique setting for studying the role of the media in a cross-country comparative context.

This volume focuses on the role played by political advertising in the 2014 elections, specifically posters and commercials/spots. The production of these two forms of political advertising is the responsibility of the political parties and election candidates. As such, these advertisements reflect their specific strategies and how they want to be seen by the electorate without being subject to any media intervention. Thus, posters and commercials allow parties and candidates to make direct appeals for support to voters. They have direct control of the design and message creation as well as the ultimate sign-off on what the voters finally see and watch. Therefore, the analysis of campaign advertising allows for insight into the marketing strategies of electoral contenders and, at the same time, sheds light on the political culture of the specific country. In its function as a mirror of political culture, this type of advertising gains relevance beyond its immediate goal of influencing the voter decision by also reaching those who do not yet have the right to vote and forming an image of the political world independent of the election campaign itself. If the advertising is regarded as an expression of political culture, then cross-country comparisons allow for assessing common features, and in this case a common European political culture, or differences that are rooted in, and reflect, national idiosyncrasies.

Spots and posters have traditionally been used in West European election campaigns and were, more recently, integrated quickly into the strategic repertoire of political actors in the new democracies of Central

and Eastern Europe. Posters and television spots always rank highest when voters are asked where they have seen or heard something about an ongoing election campaign. This prominent status among the different campaign channels does not necessarily stand for effectiveness but is rather an indicator of awareness and may, in some cases, even be a routine answer because both forms of advertising are obtrusive, can hardly be avoided and almost act as signals that the election day must be close.

Posters and spots mostly reach people inadvertently. Spots do not have an audience 'of their own'. Viewers hit upon spots when searching for a specific program or when switching channels. Posters occupy the public space during election campaigns and, as a result, cannot be avoided when people move on the street. This quality of reaching the inadvertent audience may be even more important in European election campaigns because the European Parliament is less familiar to citizens than national parliaments and European elections generate less interest than national contests.

METHODOLOGY

As with any other campaign material, spots and posters represent persuasive communication primarily designed to influence voters in their decision-making. Their combination of text and visuals places them in the realm of visual communication, which poses particular challenges for the analysis of their content, which, in the case of spots, is enhanced by audio as an additional element to be considered. Pictures are ambiguous, do not have a manifest meaning and their interpretation is highly dependent on their context (e.g., Müller 1997, 2003). These characteristics provide for particular difficulties in international comparisons because of the different contexts of their origin and their audience.

Due to their dominant role in election campaigns, television spots are a well-researched topic in the USA. Posters, on the other hand, have not received a great deal of attention in American research, most likely due to their minor importance in American electoral contests (see, however, Seidman 2008). In Europe, research on campaign advertising on television, on electoral posters and lately on the Internet is less developed and of a more recent nature. The lack of research on electoral spots may be due to the minor importance campaigners attribute to this kind of advertising, particularly as long as access to television and airtime is widely restricted. Liberalization of television markets in

Europe occurred only with the introduction of commercial broadcasting, although even this has not opened Insert ‘up space’ between ‘opened’ and ‘for’. So sentence reads...not opened up space for...for electoral advertising everywhere. Moreover, even where political advertising on television is permitted, the conditions for spot advertising in many European countries often remain unfavorable (Holtz-Bacha, in this volume). Finally, it is worth noting that the Internet has promoted the production of commercials/spots designed specifically for the Web, a feature that is likely to increase further in all future elections.

Nevertheless, an increase in advertising possibilities went hand in hand with an intensification of research, mostly on the content but less on effects. Across Europe, this research has remained disjointed and often has not allowed for comparison across countries due to the adoption of different methodological approaches. The European elections in 2009 were the first with a large-scale comparative study focused on advertising (Maier, Strömbäck, & Kaid 2011). Even though electoral posters have a long tradition in Europe and plaster the streets in many countries during election campaigns, studies focused on this form of communication are still scarce. While research on the content and effects of campaign posters has increased recently, comparative research across countries is still largely absent. The European elections have not, as yet, been the subject of any detailed study of posters across borders.

Given the meagre state of research on European elections, there are few models for content analyses of campaign material. Due to the political system with its focus on individual candidates and cultural peculiarities, the coding schemes developed for the analysis of political advertising in the USA cannot easily be applied to a European context. To address this weakness, we have developed a new codebook (see Appendix 2) to study spots and posters in the 2014 European Parliament election. This codebook was based in part on a study of the 2009 European election campaign (Mosca & Novelli 2010).

Even though the EU prides itself for a common culture and heritage, there are nevertheless great differences in political culture across different countries. In the case of European elections, even though they take place at the same time and electoral systems have been coordinated, some differences remain, in particular with regard to the role of individual candidates. This has also consequences for electoral campaigns and the strategic decisions taken about political advertising. In addition, electoral advertising is regulated differently (Holtz-Bacha, in this volume), which

affects the amount and, in some cases, also the content of this advertising. Moreover, some countries hold national elections on the same day as the European election which creates a different campaign environment. A common codebook has to take these national differences into account and will therefore always be based on compromises to allow for integrating different national cultures.

The analyses presented in this volume draw on posters and spots collected by research teams in the 28 EU member states (see Appendix 1) and coded according to the same categories with separate coding schemes for posters and spots. Categories referred to the verbal and visual content of the advertising. Both coding schemes were structured into three parts: the first – common to the two coding schemes – aims to identify and classify the material; the second refers to the iconographic/aesthetic/visual dimension and the third references the textual/visual/discursive dimension.

The first part included variables such as nation, year, duration of EU membership, region, political party name and party family. The second part contained variables such as the protagonists (leader, citizens, other social groups, etc.), the characteristics of the leader when present (dress style, expression, partners), the presence of references to the nation or to Europe (flag, geographical maps, etc.), the presence of symbols of political parties and European party families and the presence of other political-ideological symbols. The third part included variables such as references to the nation or to Europe, the vision of Europe (neutral, threat, opportunity), political or ideological anchors (words, phrases, concepts), reference to communitarian elements (population, people, citizens, compatriots, etc.), thematic issues (economics, environment, welfare, security, etc.), prevalence of the European versus national dimension, the overall tone of the message (positive, negative, neutral), the presence of negative elements and the target of the message (leader, party, people, nation, Europe).

In total, 1,445 documents were collected in the content analysis study – 1,023 posters and 422 videos. All these posters and videos were produced by political parties and candidates in the 28 member states ([Table 1.1](#)). The research material comprises advertising by all electoral contenders independent of whether they won seats in the European Parliament or not. The analyses presented in the chapters of this volume are based exclusively on the analysis of our data set.

Our collection of posters and videos does not, however, include all the electoral materials produced in 2014, so the database cannot be considered

Table 1.1 Posters and spots by member state

<i>Country</i>	<i>Posters</i>	<i>Spots</i>	<i>Total</i>
Austria	68	5	73
Belgium	40	6	46
Bulgaria	16	17	33
Croatia	19	6	25
Cyprus	56	12	68
Czech Republic	44	5	49
Denmark	61	13	74
Estonia	24	21	45
Finland	29	5	34
France	19	29	48
Germany	148	31	179
Greece	40	37	77
Hungary	13	11	24
Ireland	12	0	12
Italy	41	27	68
Latvia	18	14	32
Lithuania	21	24	46
Luxembourg	24	11	35
Malta	11	25	36
Netherlands	34	7	41
Poland	13	12	24
Portugal	28	32	60
Romania	86	11	97
Slovakia	41	3	44
Slovenia	20	1	21
Spain	19	32	51
Sweden	63	17	80
UK	15	8	23
<i>n</i> =	1,023	422	1,445

exhaustive. Nevertheless, the collection is comprehensive and permitted the contributors to this volume to assess the main characteristics of posters and videos produced by parties and candidates in 2014. The results that emerged from the content analysis allowed the respective chapter authors to examine similarities and differences across the 28 member states and also to engage in relevant comparative discussions.

European Parliament elections are usually described as secondary, or second-order, elections because the efforts of campaigners, media and voters are low-key compared to national contests. Nevertheless, these

contests still provide a unique opportunity for comparative research. The fact that the campaign takes place at the same time and for the same institution keeps two influential variables constant. The study of political advertising focuses on the campaign side. This type of research can reveal the electoral strategies of political parties and candidates and how they try to win the voters' support. Political advertising reaches voters unaffected by any journalistic selection and production criteria. It therefore reflects how the political actors see themselves and want to be seen by the public. So, in addition to providing insight into the campaigners' efforts for a specific election and thus at a specific point in time, the analysis of electoral advertising also provides an insight into the strategies employed by parties and candidates for self-portrayal and the staging of the political contest.

Political advertising is always bound to a specific (political) environment and this has to be considered when framing strategies to attract electoral support. The latter issue refers to the content of advertising as well as its design. For instance, and this fact is corroborated in our study, populations differ in their acceptance and tolerance of negative strategies, in particular if they are targeted against specific politicians. In the same way, some symbols, metaphors or historical references used in the advertising will not be understood in a similar way across different countries.

Significantly, our comparative design – with content analyses based on the same coding scheme for the 28 EU member states – provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which political advertising is indeed dependent on, and reflects, national political culture of respective countries. However, the chapters in this volume also show that there are overarching strategies used when addressing electorates, which can be regarded as being inherent in the advertising independent of national political culture. The evidence presented in this volume simultaneously allows for the description of national advertising cultures but also the identification of strategies – independent of culture – that are evident in electoral advertising elsewhere in Europe and internationally.

ABOUT THE BOOK

This volume is based on data on commercial/spot videos and poster advertising in the 2014 European Parliament elections. In terms of the structure of the volume, an overview of the context in which the campaign

took place across the EU, and the regulatory environment for political advertising in the different member states, is provided in [Chapters 2 and 3](#), respectively. Subsequent chapters make use of the results of the content analysis to focus on issues such as negativity, personalization and the place of visual appeals and candidates in political advertising strategies in the 2014 elections. The economic crisis is a common theme influencing and impacting upon many of the topics examined in the book.

[Chapter 4](#) focuses on the representation of the EU in posters and video commercials. Regional variations based on the economic crisis emerge from the content analysis, specifically the presence of negative attacks in member states in the south of the EU, most impacted by the crisis, when compared to other regions. The other findings in [Chapter 4](#) include that national and European symbols were more frequently evident in posters and videos in countries in the east of the EU, where less negative adverts were also produced.

[Chapter 5](#) takes up this issue of the economic crisis to examine the role played by austerity politics in political advertising in the 2014 campaign. The chapter focuses on member states – Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus – which required external bailout support during the crisis as well as a number of other countries, which experienced significant economic decline, Italy and Malta. The analysis addresses how the economic crisis impacted on political advertising strategies in 2014. The findings in this chapter show that in the 2014 campaign economic issues replaced ideological issues and national themes across the EU.

[Chapter 6](#) deals with the use of negativity in political advertising in the different member states. Among the conclusions is that negative advertising was generally less evident in member states in Eastern Europe. There was also higher negativity in posters in the founder countries while the Second and Third Enlargement countries displayed a greater tendency towards negativity in spots.

The growth in discontent – arising from the economic crisis and manifest in negativity – is examined in [Chapter 7](#), which discusses the emergence and performance of ‘radical right’ parties in several member states in 2014. Interestingly, with the exception of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), it would seem that in their political advertising strategies these parties moderated their once pronounced rhetoric and adopted a more ambivalent discourse about the EU.

The focus of [Chapter 8](#) is the idea that political advertising strategies might be influenced by length of EU membership, which is used as a proxy for addressing the idea of a ‘new’ and old’ distinction between the 28 member states. Among the findings to emerge from an examination of the data set on posters and video spots is that in terms of the level of negative campaigning there is some indication that membership length matters. In general, however, the chapter authors note that variations across parties within member states remain considerably larger than variations across member states.

[Chapter 9](#) is focused on identifying similarities and differences in political advertising in the 2014 elections in a group of 11 post-communist member states located in Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis shows how the salience of European issues was low, whereas nationalist, populist and political extremist appeals were used relatively frequently in posters and commercials.

[Chapter 10](#) is concerned with Croatia, the newest EU member state, where political advertising was found to be personalized and focused on national topics and national politicians. The analysis of content analysis findings from Croatia clearly shows that national circumstances and the context of the national political campaign are still important factors in examining European Parliament elections.

[Chapter 11](#) explores the role played by candidates in political advertising in 2014. While these contests are party-oriented, personalization has become a common strategy. In terms of the posters and commercials in 2014 across the member states – irrespective of their individual electoral and governmental systems – much of the advertising included candidates or national leaders. The analysis also shows that the innovation in relation to electing the European Commission President position did not have the intended effect of adding a truly European element to the ballot or giving voters any sense that they were deciding the individual who would assume that role.

[Chapter 12](#) focuses on visual appeals in posters and television spots in the 2014 election campaign. Taking up the point that posters and commercials are not exclusively based on written or spoken words, the results find a widespread use of visual appeals in both posters and commercials across the member states contesting the 2014 European Parliament election. As is stressed in the discussion, there seems to be an emergence of communication cultures or at least communication styles in European campaigns.

SUMMARY

As mentioned at the outset of this Introduction, for the first time since the first direct elections in 1979 the European Parliament elections in 2014 generated significant interest and debate across the EU. The motivating factor for this interest and debate was not, however, a positive, for the EU, and this reality is reflected in the findings in this volume. Several broad themes emerge from our content analysis of posters and spots – specifically that political advertising in 2014 was more European but it was also more negative with less ideological difference and much greater focus on economic matters. To what extent the imprint of the economic crisis on the 751-seat assembly is lasting beyond the crisis itself will only become evident when European voters cast their ballots again in 2019., in what may well be the first post-Brexit elections to the European Parliament.

In drawing together the findings¹ from our study, [Figs. 1.1](#) and [1.2](#) present a visual reproduction of the associations among the main variables used in the content analysis of posters and spots referenced throughout this volume. The findings shown in the two graphs are based on a multiple correspondence analysis.² These variables are associated with the formal construction of political advertising messages in the 2014 elections as well as the content in posters and spots and also the political and geographical features of parties and candidates. In order to facilitate the reading of the two graphs, only the most significant variables are shown.

For posters, the analysis (x -axis) shows opposition between anti-EU and pro-European sentiment. On the right side of the graph (1 and 2 quadrants), the prevalence of neutral or positive positions towards Europe is observed in posters produced by parties or candidates belonging to specific European political groups, namely the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and European People's Party parliamentary group (EPP). The findings reflect widespread use of values and ideological references, the use of the image of the political leader and a low propensity for negative advertising. We find that anti-European positions are distinguished by reference to the content of the messages and, above all, in the construction of the formal aspects of the poster. The third quadrant in [Fig. 1.1](#) shows an area characterized by the construction of messages as mainly textual, accompanied by the use of

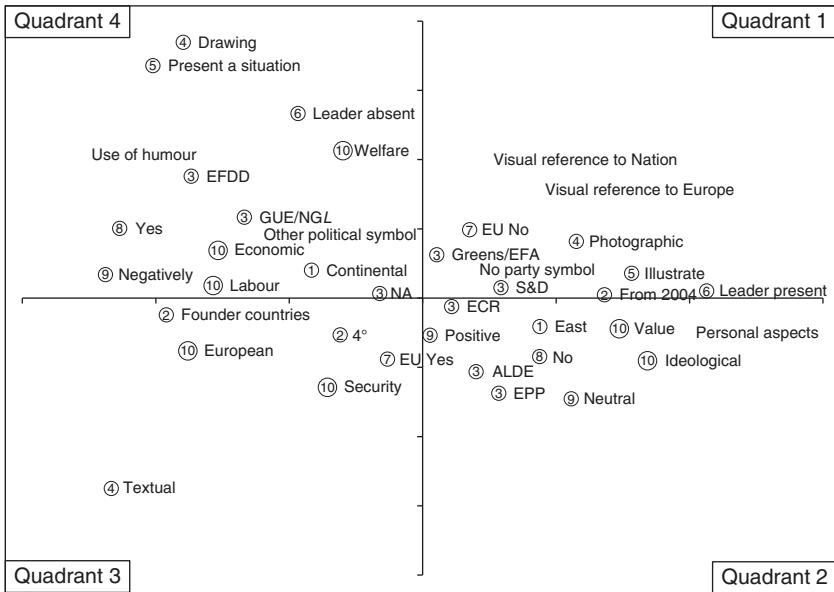


Fig. 1.1 Analysis of posters: main relationships among variables. ① European area; ② group of enlargement; ③ European party family; ④ poster typology; ⑤ function of the visual; ⑥ presence of the leader; ⑦ verbal reference to Europe; ⑧ negative campaign; ⑨ vision of Europe; ⑩ issues

negative and critical positions against supranational political issues (European items) and safety-related issues (security items). In the fourth quadrant, where we find parties and candidates belonging to the European political families, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NLG), the anti-EU message is characterized the use of graphics in posters and also by a low degree of personalization. These formal aspects also seem to be mainly associated with national contents, with particular reference to economic issues and welfare.

In terms of spots/commercials, the analysis presented in [Fig. 1.2](#) identifies an important differentiation on the first factor (x -axis). On the one hand, it highlights the evocation of rational elements (competence, rationality, reliability), but, on the other hand, there is also a tendency to arouse emotions and feelings (pride, compassion, empathy, enthusiasm).

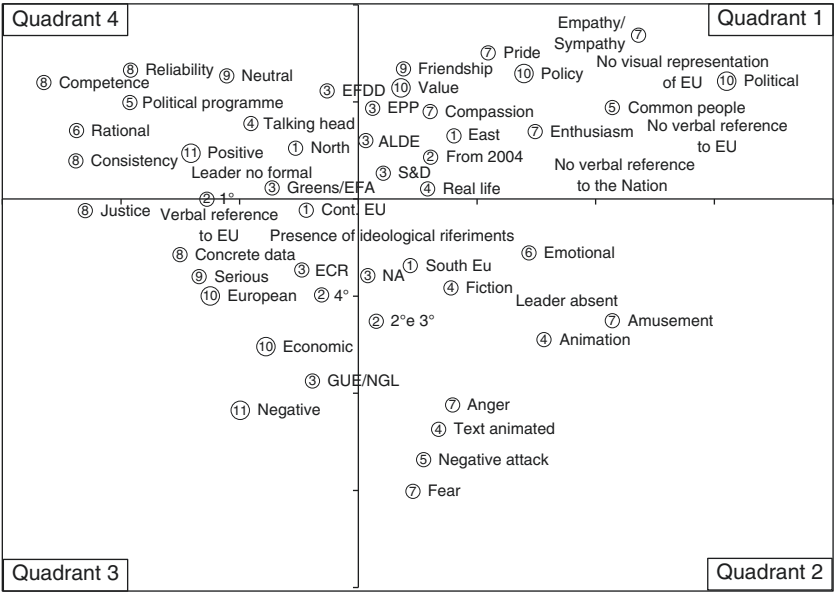


Fig. 1.2 Analysis of spots/commercials: main relationships among variables. ① European area; ② group of enlargement; ③ European party family; ④ spot typology; ⑤ spot genre; ⑥ tone of the message; ⑦ feeling evoked; ⑧ attribute evoked; ⑨ leader's expression; ⑩ issues; ⑪ vision of Europe

In the upper-right quadrant (quadrant 1), we find formal traits (leader friendly), communicative registers (emotional tone: enthusiasm, pride, compassion, empathy-sympathy) and genres (common people). These features are, in fact, very similar to those which feature strongly in commercial advertising (highly emotional tone, common people genre, real-life typology, the presence of a friendly image of the leader). In the upper-left quadrant (quadrant 4), the presence of pro-Europe positions and the prevalence of the rational dimension of political communication is reflected.

Along the second factor (*y*-axis), there is a clearer differentiation between pro-EU and anti-EU positions. The second and third quadrants (where we find the party groups ECR, non-attached (NA), GUE/NLG) show a concentration of anti-Euro issues, especially related to the economic crisis. In the lower-right quadrant (2), opposition to Europe is, however, identified

through emotional communication, the use of negative campaigning, appeals to feelings such as fear and anger, and connects with the typology of fiction and animation. In the lower-left quadrant (3), opposition to the European project includes logical and rational features.

We can conclude from our analysis that the impact of national and European austerity policies and the role of European and other international institutions in economic policy strongly influenced the themes and tones of the 2014 European electoral campaign in several member states. Criticism of the EU was undoubtedly motivated by different factors in different member states. Yet, in our analysis we frequently found that such criticism was simplified into common visuals and messages in campaign advertising. For example, Germany was presented negatively in many campaigns given its perceived responsibility for the implementation of austerity policies. The image of German Chancellor Angela Merkel was frequently used to personalize the economic crisis while her name was also used as a critical reference point in numerous poster texts. In addition, Brussels appeared in many campaign adverts as a short-hand reference to signal to voters the negative impact of the economic crisis and unhappiness with the EU itself (Rafter et al. 2016).

The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) included a proposal for supranational candidates – representing the different political groups of the European Parliament – who would seek election as President of the European Commission. Guidelines produced by the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament in 2013 sought to ‘Make European elections more European’ (EU 2013). Such aspirations for common campaigns in the various EU countries were, however, not realized. Personalization, a strong trait of European election campaigns, was not extended to the candidates for European Commission President, nor did it encourage transnational personal campaigns. Only in very rare cases did a party carry a foreign leader’s image on its own posters with positive intent. Indeed, when a leader from another European country featured on a poster, – and that leader was generally Angela Merkel – the connotation was mainly negative.

NOTES

1. Methodological support for the study was provided by Andrea Taddei, Università degli studi Roma Tre.
2. Multiple correspondence analysis is a procedure for assessing the relations between categorical or ordinal variables. One of the objectives of the analysis

is to reduce the information present in the data structure in a reduced number of macro-variables. The following variables were entered (variables that contribute to the construction of the factors): *posters*: Type (Textual/Photo/Chart), Purpose (to show a situation or action), Presence/Absence of the party symbol, Presence/Absence of references to partisan family, Presence/Absence of other political symbols, Presence/Absence of verbal references to the State, Presence/Absence of verbal references to the EU, the EU Representation (Positive/Negative/neutral/not represented), Presence/Absence of Humor, Presence/Absence of the leader, Presence/Absence of visual references to status, Presence/Absence of visual references to the EU. Thematic (Labor/Economic /European/Security/Welfare/Value/Ideological/Policies/Other issues). *Spots*: Type 1 (Animation/Cartoon/Fiction/Graphic text/Real Life/Talking Head), Type 2 (Rational/Emotional), rational aspects of the message (Competence/Concrete data/Consistency/Justice/Reliability/Other), Emotional aspects of message (Amusement/Anger/Compassion/Empathy/Enthusiasm/Fear/Pride), Presence/Absence of the leader, the leader's communication style (or Smiling Friendly/or Serious, Worried/Neutral), Presence/Absence of visual references to the State, Presence/lack of visual references to the EU, the EU Representation (Positive/Negative/neutral/not represented), Presence/Absence of verbal references to the State, Presence/Absence of verbal references to the EU, tone of the message (Feeling good/Common people /political program/Negative attack), the leading type (Formal/semi-formal or not).

The following explanatory variables were taken into consideration: geographical area (Continental Europe/East Europe/South Europe/North Europe), entry period in the EU (Founder country/First enlargement/Second and Third enlargement/Fourth enlargement/from 2004 until 2016), European Political Group (Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR)/ALDE/EFDD/European People's Party parliamentary group (PPE)/Greens/The Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA)/GUE/NGL/NA/S&D), Assigned seats (≤ 2 / > 2). In both cases (posters and spots), only the first two factors extracted from the analysis were used. This decision was based in part on the finding that the first two factors reproduce most of the inertia/variability present in the data structure – poster 82 percent, spots 70 percent).

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