

# The Effects of Strategic News on Political Cynicism, Issue Evaluations, and Policy Support: A Two-Wave Experiment

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*This study investigated the effects of strategic television news coverage of a routine political issue in a nonelectoral context on political cynicism, issue evaluation, and policy support. An experimentally manipulated television news story about the enlargement of the European Union was produced in a strategy version and an issue-framed version, which were embedded in an experimental bulletin of a national news program. Results showed that exposure to strategic news fuelled political cynicism and activated negative associations with the enlargement issue. Politically knowledgeable participants displayed higher levels of cynicism and were more negative in their evaluation. Strategic news did not suppress policy support. A 2-wave experimental design with a second posttest was employed to test the longevity of effects. The effects of exposure to strategic news on political cynicism muted between the immediate and delayed posttest. These findings suggest that effects may not persist unless participants are exposed to additional news framed in a similar way.*

News is the key source of information about politics and the economy for a majority of citizens in Western democracies. Previous studies of the impact of news on public perceptions of and engagement in politics have produced mixed results. These studies are characterized by a number of features, such as a strong focus on American politics during elections and often-assumed long-term effects on demo-

cratic processes and public evaluations of politics. This study was designed to investigate the effects of strategic news coverage of politics outside the United States in the context of a routine political news topic in a nonelection period. It also puts an assumption in the literature to an empirical test: whether the effects of strategy news on political cynicism are persistent or disappear over time.

Studies of political news in the United States suggest that the use of *strategic* news emphasizing the horse race, strategy, and tactics of politics has increased (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993). Strategic news is defined as news coverage of candidate motivations and personalities, focus on disagreement between parties, candidates or voters, and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson, 1992). In the same vein, *game* news has been defined as the game providing the plot of a news story about politics while focusing on polls and positioning the electorate as spectators and candidates as performers (Patterson, 1993). Moreover, studies suggest that politics is in a stage of permanent campaigning (e.g., Fallows, 1996; Nimmo, 2000) and the strategy frame is a pervasive and dominant frame for reporting not only political campaigns but also routine politics and policy debates (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000).

Outside the United States, little is known about the strategic reporting of politics. Studies of national election campaigns in, for example, Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands discuss the use of polls and the horse race frame in the election news coverage (e.g., Brettschneider, 1997; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999; van Praag & Brants, 2000). Some scholars refer to strategic coverage as the dominant journalistic mode since the 1970s (e.g., Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2001), but there is little specific evidence of strategic news reporting beyond the U.S. example.

Most evidence of the *effects* of strategic news coverage on political cynicism stems from experimental studies in the United States (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Crigler, Just, & Belt, 2002; Rhee, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr 2001; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). These studies provide important empirical evidence to the general claims made about the negative impact of (news) media on politics (Fallows, 1996; Hart, 1994; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993; Robinson, 1976). Specifically, extant research shows that news emphasizing the game aspects of politics and stressing politicians' motivations for their actions may evoke political cynicism and negative perceptions of political campaigns. To date, the majority of these studies focused on the effects of strategic news coverage on political cynicism in the context of election campaigns (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001).<sup>1</sup> Given the bias toward studying the effects of strategic news in the context of election campaigns, the first goal of this study is to investi-

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<sup>1</sup>Cappella and Jamieson (1997) also investigated the effects of strategy news during the 1993–1994 Health Care reform debate in the United States.

gate the effects of the strategic news frame in relation to a policy discussion of a routine political/economic topic, outside the context of an election campaign.

### STRATEGIC NEWS FRAMING

Although the discussion of the role of (news) media in political processes has received considerable scholarly attention both within the United States and in Europe, the evidence is not conclusive as to whether exposure to news contributes in a negative or positive direction toward, for example, political cynicism, trust, and electoral mobilization. Studies in the United States suggest that media disengage citizens, fuel cynicism, and erode social capital (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Putnam, 1995, 2000). This perspective is challenged by studies drawing on data from both the United States and Europe suggesting that attention to news media is associated with higher levels of trust, knowledge, and political mobilization (Norris, 2000). Others suggest that effects, either virtuous or vicious, are not omnipresent but contingent on, for example, the type of media use, political sophistication, and education of citizens (Moy & Pfau, 2001; Moy & Scheufele, 2000).

The claim that strategic news coverage fuels political cynicism is largely based on evidence from the American political context. Although news in other countries may also be framed in terms of strategy and focused on, for example, campaign conduct and polls (e.g., Norris et al., 1999), the “spiral of cynicism” hypothesis has not yet been put to a compelling test outside the United States. One study suggested that high exposure to strategic television news during an election campaign led to increases in political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations when controlling for both the level of cynicism and negativity at the outset of the campaign and a number of additional predictors of political cynicism (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002).

However, given that journalistic traditions and political systems differ (Patterson, 1998), we have no evidence as to whether the evidence of the effects of strategic news may in fact generalize across countries. Swanson and Mancini (1996) discussed aspects of strategic news reporting in various European countries under the heading of “Americanization” of politics, but do not specifically report on the effects of strategic news on audiences. Our current knowledge might be biased by single country data (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990).

### POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SUSCEPTIBILITY TO FRAMING

News frames are but *one* resource that citizens rely on when forming attitudes (e.g., Crigler et al., 2002; Gamson, 1992; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Most

previous studies of framing effects acknowledge the importance of individual audience characteristics such as political knowledge or sophistication, but only a few have formally modeled and assessed the impact of these differences and the findings are mixed. For example, Kinder and Sanders (1990) found that persons with lower levels of political information were more susceptible to framing effects and Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) found exposure to strategic news to be associated with lower levels of turnout intention for participants with lower levels of education, which they called *political sophistication*. However, Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) found persons with higher levels of political information to be more susceptible to framing effects and Rhee (1997) found political knowledge to significantly bolster readers' use of an experimentally induced frame in their interpretation of an election campaign.

Similarly, in *priming research* the evidence of the moderating effect of political knowledge is inconclusive. Krosnick and Kinder (1990) found politically knowledgeable persons to be *less* susceptible to priming effects. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found no systematic differences between "experts" and "novices" in the magnitude of priming and Krosnick and Brannon (1993) found that political expertise facilitates priming effects. The latter argument was elaborated by Miller and Krosnick (2000), who found the strongest priming effects for politically knowledgeable citizens who also trust media sources (Miller & Krosnick, 2000).

In one of their field experiments, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found "political sophistication" (measured as political knowledge) to be a significant positive predictor for political cynicism, but this was not a consistent finding across all their experiments. Finally, Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) found that political knowledge contributed to more elaborate responses to news, but did not find evidence that knowledge either enhances or depresses susceptibility to news frames. Given the inconclusive nature of previous research, this study investigated the potentially intervening role of political knowledge in the frame-setting process.

### CYNICAL TODAY, CYNICAL TOMORROW?

The effects of strategic news have been established in posttests held immediately after exposure to experimentally manipulated news. In studies investigating effects of other frames in the news on, for example, effects on the degree of tolerance extended toward political movements (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997) and the assignment of responsibility for social and political problems (Iyengar, 1991), effects were also documented as immediate short-term responses to the manipulated stimulus material. It remains an open question, how-

ever, whether the effects of news frames persist over time, whether they diminish, or whether they disappear entirely.

Most experimental designs in political communication research do not include a temporal component. The literature on framing effects implies that the impact of certain news frames may be persistent, but little prior research has investigated the longevity and robustness of these effects. One notable exception investigated the effects of an advocate news frame, that is, a frame advocating an interest group's perspective on a local farming issue (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). The presence of the frame was manipulated to vary in different news stories to which students were exposed. A retest three weeks after the initial exposure revealed significant, though muted, effects of the news frame. This finding was the first indication that framing effects might be persistent.

Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) experimental studies of the agenda-setting process are exceptions. In two experiments the authors included a delayed posttest one week after participants had been exposed to an experimentally manipulated television news program. In both studies they found support that the agenda-setting effect was maintained over the one-week period between the immediate and delayed posttest. A potential shortcoming of their design was the lack of knowledge about what information participants encountered during the period between the posttests. In the investigation of the persistency of agenda setting, they did not control for participants' media use and attention. It is very well possible that participants were exposed to additional news about, for example, unemployment or education, which could cue participants to consider these problems to be more or less salient in the second posttest. It is, therefore, difficult to confidently ascribe the effect entirely to the experimental manipulation.

Although some work has been conducted on the persistence of agenda-setting effects, this work is virtually absent in the framing literature. Most experimental framing studies investigating *change* have utilized pre- and posttests in the design, but these studies still focus on immediate responses to stimuli to compare how exposure affected initial pretest responses. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) conducted a series of experiments over five consecutive days during which participants were interviewed two to three days after exposure. However, this time lag was not the focus of the investigation and the design did not include repeated posttests. In short, previous studies investigating the effects of the *strategic* news frames have not been able to address the longevity of such effects.

## HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the considerations outlined earlier, an experiment exploring the effects of strategic news on political cynicism, issue evaluations, and policy support was designed. Previous research has centered on the effects of the strategy frame in

U.S. election campaigns or in relation to high salience issues such as health care (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). This study investigates the effects in the context of the routine political topic of enlargement of the European Union (EU). Based on the findings by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), it is hypothesized that exposure to strategic news about a routine political topic induces political cynicism compared to issue-focused news (i.e., news dealing with substantive dimensions and concrete policies related to a topic).

H1: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news.

Exposure to strategy-based news has also been found to impact affective reactions (Rhee, 1997). Previous studies have demonstrated this effect for print news. We extend this research and formulate two hypotheses that suggest exposure to strategic television news activates negative issue evaluations and depresses positive issue evaluations.

H2a: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy renders more negative thoughts about political issues relative to exposure to issue-based news.

H2b: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy renders less positive thoughts about political issues relative to exposure to issue-based news.

The effects of strategic news on support for European enlargement are also investigated. Previous research indicates that frames in the news may affect public support for various issues. Nelson and Oxley (1999), for example, found that the framing of a land development dispute led participants to consider different beliefs more important, which led to either endorsement or dismissal of the land development plan. Tewksbury et al. (2000) found that news frames affected attitudes toward restricting hog farms and McLeod and Detenber (1999) found that news frames affected support for social protests. Based on previous research on the effects of news frames, a third hypothesis was cautiously formulated.

H3: Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy suppresses policy support relative to exposure to issue-based coverage.

Finally, to investigate the duration of effects of strategic news, two research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do effects of exposure to news framed in terms of strategy on political cynicism persist over time?

RQ2: Do effects of exposure to news framed in terms of strategy on policy support persist over time?

## METHOD

### Design

To investigate the effects of strategic versus issue-based news coverage, a two-wave experiment with immediate and delayed posttests with repeated measures was conducted. Despite criticisms of impeded external validity, experimental research is superior in an attempt to investigate effects of a key independent variable (Brown & Melamed, 1990; Kinder & Palfrey, 1993). This study focuses on television because television is repeatedly identified as the most important source of political information (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Eurobarometer/European Commission, 2002). In addition, recent studies of the effects of strategic news coverage have focused on the press but predicted that television might be an even more powerful medium for effects of strategic news (e.g., Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001). To address potential shortcomings in previous experimental studies of television news (see the following), an entire version of a national evening news broadcast was produced in cooperation with the *BBC* equivalent, *NOS Journaal*, in the Netherlands. Inserted into this bulletin was a news story on the enlargement of the EU. Two versions of this story were produced for this posttest only, between-subjects experimental design.<sup>2</sup> One version of this story was framed in terms of strategy and the other was focused on substantive aspects of the issue.

The study was designed to investigate the longevity of the effects of exposure to strategic news. In a delayed posttest one week after the experiment, participants were re-interviewed drawing on repeated measures. To control for any confounding influence of information obtained about the EU between the immediate and the delayed posttest, the participants' news media exposure and attention to news during the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest was mapped. In addition, a content analysis of television news and print media (newspapers and magazines) during that week was conducted to explore whether exposure to additional news about the enlargement issue affected responses.

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<sup>2</sup>The design does not include a control group that would have to be treated to a "frameless" news story. To omit a control group in the design is in line with the procedures used in most experimental framing research (Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Iyengar, 1991; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001a). Because this study is designed to test the effects of strategic news, the other group (exposed to issue-driven news) may effectively be considered the functional equivalent of a control group (Brown & Melamed, 1990).

## Sample

A convenience sample was drawn from the database of the Audience Research Department of the public broadcaster. Participants were recruited to ensure variation in terms of gender, age, and level of education as these demographic indicators have proven to be important for explaining support for European integration (Eurobarometer/European Commission, 49, 1998; Gabel, 1998). A total of 83 participants (60% men, age 15–67;  $M = 43.8$ ,  $SD = 15.2$ , with varying levels of education) completed all steps in the study. This sample represents variation on key demographic indicators, which is preferable to a homogeneous sample given the nature of the issue.

## Procedure

The experimental design consisted of three distinct stages. First, participants were invited to come to the headquarters of the NOS Audience Research department to participate in a television study. The study took place on three weeknights in October 2001. Upon arrival, participants were randomly assigned to the two conditions.<sup>3</sup> The news programs were watched in different viewing rooms with a maximum of 12 participants per room. Coffee, tea, soft drinks, and cakes were available in all rooms and participants were encouraged to help themselves. The experimental leaders were randomly assigned to the different viewing rooms/conditions.

First, participants filled out a background questionnaire containing queries about demographics, measures of media use, an assessment of political knowledge, and feeling of political efficacy. Second, participants watched the experimental bulletin. They were informed that they would watch a proof taping of today's 8:00 News [*8 uur Journal*], taped in the late afternoon of that day.<sup>4</sup> A posttest was taken immediately after watching the news. Upon completion of the posttest, participants were reimbursed for their travel costs and they received a gift voucher valued at approximately 16 euro. A second posttest was conducted by telephone one week after the experiment took place. This design allows an investigation of how long the experimentally induced effects remain stable or diminish over time. Following this delayed posttest, participants were debriefed.

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<sup>3</sup>The key feature of experimentation is the elimination of intervening variables through random assignment to experimental conditions. In this study the randomization procedure was successful. Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences between the different conditions on demographic dimensions: gender ( $\chi^2 = .33$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .57$ ), age ( $\chi^2 = 50.53$ ,  $df = 45$ ,  $p = .26$ ), education ( $\chi^2 = 7.53$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p = .48$ ).

<sup>4</sup>The experimental bulletin was 6 minutes shorter than a regular 8:00 news bulletin. Participants were informed that the remaining time would be news about the aftermath of the September 11 events in the United States. They were informed that this news was changing so rapidly that it was not possible to include it in the proof recording.



## Stimulus Material

Previous research on the effects of frames in television news has a number of potential shortcomings in design and validity: first, insufficient control over the stimulus material (i.e., lack of ability to specifically manipulate the independent variable), which may jeopardize the experimental design (Reeves & Geiger, 1994; Slater, 1991); second, minimal explication of the validity of the frames for which effects are investigated (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997); and third, designs where the effects of messages are tested without an appropriate context, which increases the artificiality of the experimental situation (Slater, 1991).

This study addresses these potential shortcomings in the following manner: First, the strategy frame is theoretically grounded and observed in daily journalistic practices and its presence has been documented in content analyses of political news. Second, the news stories used are *produced* rather than *selected* as being representative of a particular frame. This procedure ensures full control over the stimulus material; that is, variation in the manipulation only and exclusion of other unintended variation in the material. Third, the experimentally manipulated news story is inserted into a bulletin of the national main evening news to provide an appropriate context for the manipulation.

To improve the external validity of the study, the stimulus material was produced in cooperation with the national public broadcaster, *NOS*. A bulletin with the characteristics of the regular 8:00 News (*8 uur Journaal*), including a nation-wide known anchorman, was produced. This bulletin, with the experimentally manipulated story as the second story, was made according to common journalistic practices and technical standards at *NOS Journaal* (Appendix A).

The focal point of the experimentally manipulated news story was a (simulated) publication of a report by the European Commission encouraging the fast entry of Poland into the EU. The story was introduced by the anchor. It then contained a brief summary of the report's conclusions. Following this, Dick Benschop, at that time Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, provided a quote that was scripted in advance. The news story then provided brief background information about the history of the EU developing from a 1950s Steel and Coal Community to a 1990s Economic and Monetary Union. A second quote was then delivered by the Secretary of State before a closing statement about public support for the enlargement in other EU countries.

With the exception of three sentences, the two stories were identical in each of the experimental conditions (the full text of both stories is included in Appendix B). The experimental manipulation consisted of one sentence in the opening section of the story. The journalist's text here referred to a "charm campaign" and a "strategic plan" (strategy version) rather than "concrete policies" (issue version). Second, the Secretary of State referred to a "battle" (strategy) as opposed to a "signal" (issue) in his quote. Finally, the closing sentence referred to mobilizing public support (strategy) versus focusing on policies (issue). Strategic news is defined in the literature as (a)

emphasis on performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (b) analysis of candidate actions as part of a consolidation of positions; (c) language of wars, games, and competitions; and (d) focus on polls (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). It was specifically chosen to vary the focus on motivations for political actions (to gain public support versus focusing on concrete policies) and the use of war language to create the strategy version of the news story, as suggested by Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001). Varying all elements of strategic news leaves too much uncertainty about which of the elements may cause variation in cynical responses.<sup>5</sup>

## Measures

*Political cynicism.* Four items were derived from Cappella and Jamieson (1997) to tap perceptions of politicians' motivations, their character, and confidence in the substance of policy debates:<sup>6</sup> (a) Politicians are too superficial when dealing with enlargement, (b) Politicians are too concerned with public opinion about enlargement, (c) The debate about enlargement is more about strategy than content, and (d) Politicians are clear and honest in their arguments about enlargement. The responses were recoded and averaged to form a scale of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 5 (Wave 1  $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = .79$ ,  $\alpha = .64$ ; Wave 2  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .73$ ,  $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Issue evaluation.* The second set of hypotheses predicted that strategy news activates and renders negative associations about a target, in this case the issue of enlargement, while depressing positive associations. To measure the volume of negative versus positive reactions to the issue of enlargement of the EU, an open-ended thought-listing item was used. The question wording follows: "*We are interested to hear how you think about the issue of the enlargement of the European Union. One of the news stories in the 'Journaal' was about the enlargement of the EU. Please list your thoughts and feelings about the EU enlargement.*"

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<sup>5</sup>Two items in the posttest questionnaire confirmed that participants in the strategy condition felt they had learned more about strategies than issues and participants in the issue condition reported they had learned more about issues than strategies.

<sup>6</sup>There is little agreement on how to conceptualize and tap political cynicism. Some scholars have linked discussion of cynicism to measures of political efficacy (Acock, Clark, & Stewart, 1985; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). At the core of cynicism is an absence of trust (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961). However, conventional measures of political trust, such as those used in the American National Election Studies, are often criticized (see, e.g., Lodge & Tursky, 1979; Muller & Jukam, 1977). Moreover, these measures of political trust should not be taken at face value as an approximation of political cynicism. Equating standard measures of political trust, alienation, and efficacy is not appropriate in the attempt to gauge specific dimensions of cynicism about politics. This study extends the work by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and therefore utilizes the items used in their study, although these items are worded slightly differently to apply to a policy debate rather than a specific election campaign.

This procedure has successfully been employed in previous experimental research on the effects of frames in the news (e.g., Price et al., 1997; Tewksbury et al., 2000; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999). Each respondent, on average, listed about three thoughts ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). The affective tone of each thought was assessed as “positive” toward enlargement, “negative,” or “neutral.” The thoughts were classified by two coders blind to the experimental condition. The intercoder agreement on the classification of thoughts ranged from  $r = .91$  to  $r = .95$ .

*Policy support.* To test the effect of the two frames on support for advanced European integration in the form of enlargement of the EU, five items were used. The items (measured on five-point Likert agree–disagree scales) included positively and negatively framed statements: (a) The enlargement of the EU has more advantages than disadvantages, (b) The enlargement of the EU should happen faster than it is currently happening, (c) I would be willing to sacrifice to help a less strong country in Europe, (d) The EU should be enlarged with former East-bloc countries such as Poland and Lithuania, and (e) The EU should be enlarged with South European countries such as Cyprus and Turkey. The responses to the statements were recoded and averaged to form a scale of “enlargement support” ranging from 1 to 5 (Wave 1  $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .80$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ; Wave 2  $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = .79$ ,  $\alpha = .76$ ).

*Other variables.* In addition to the effect of exposure to the strategy news frame, other variables were expected to affect the nature of participants’ cognitive and affective responses, in particular political knowledge and the degree of issue elaboration (Price et al., 1997; Rhee, 1997). Accordingly, these were included in the analysis. Political knowledge was measured by a scale of six factual questions, averaged to range from 0 to 1 ( $M = .67$ ,  $SD = .28$ ;  $\alpha = .63$ ). Issue elaboration was measured by verbosity; that is, the number of words participants listed for the open-ended measure ( $M = 32.3$ ,  $SD = 21.7$ ).

For the analysis of political cynicism, a measure of internal political efficacy was included. Political efficacy (i.e., citizens’ feeling of making a difference in the political process) is an important factor in understanding political cynicism. Previous studies demonstrate a negative relation between efficacy and cynicism suggesting that efficacious citizens were less likely to be cynical about politics (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2002). Political efficacy was measured by three standard items and averaged to form a scale from 1 to 5 ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $\alpha = .61$ ).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>The questions were as follows: “Sometimes politics is so complex that people like me do not understand what is going on,” “People like me have no influence what the government does,” and “I think I am better informed about politics than most others.”

For the analysis of support for the enlargement of the EU (H3), gender, age, education, and political knowledge were included in the analysis.

### Content Analysis

In the week between the experiment and the delayed posttest, a content analysis was carried out on the major news outlets in the Netherlands. The main evening television news programs, the main weekly current affairs magazines, and the front page of daily newspapers were monitored to identify news about the EU.<sup>8</sup> The news stories were coded for topic and indicators of strategic news framing (see earlier). The content analysis showed that two news programs in the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest contained news about the EU.<sup>9</sup> Three front pages of the daily newspapers contained news about the EU.<sup>10</sup> All stories, however, were unrelated to the topic of enlargement. The content analysis was carried out during the week between the experiment and the delayed posttest to inform the exposure measures used in the second posttest.

### Delayed Posttest

In the delayed posttest, the measures of political cynicism and EU enlargement support were repeated. The measures were part of a battery of attitude questions about current political news to avoid undesired panel test effects in the repeated measures. Prior to the delayed posttest, the content analysis (see earlier) revealed in which outlets and on which days news about European affairs had been included.

*Exposure to news about the EU* was tapped by specifically asking the participants if they had seen either of the two news programs that contained EU news in the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest. Exposure to the newspaper stories about EU was tapped from the pretest questionnaire of media use. Most participants reported reading only one daily newspaper. Participants reported how much *attention* they had paid to different topics in the news in the past week. One item, ranging from 1 (*no attention*) to 4 (*a lot of attention*), dealt with “attention to news about the EU” specifically ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). Finally, participants indi-

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<sup>8</sup>The news outlets were *NOS*, *RTL*, *SBS* (all TV); Weeklies: *Elsevier*, *Vrij Nederland*, *HP de Tijd*; Newspapers: *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Telegraaf*, *AD*, *Trouw*, *Metro*, *Spits*. For a news story to be included in the analysis, the EU had to be mentioned in at least two independent sentences.

<sup>9</sup>The stories were as follows: “European Parliament asks Commissioner for rectification” (*RTL*, October 4, 2001); “New fake-euro coins found” (*SBS*, October 5, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>The stories were as follows: “EU makes list of terrorists” (*Metro*, October 2, 2001); “Preparation for the euro in supermarket” (*Telegraaf*, October 5, 2001); “ESF funds to the Netherlands” (*NRC* October 6, 2001).

TABLE 1  
Political Cynicism by Experimental Condition, Immediate  
and Delayed Posttest

	<i>Immediate posttest</i>		<i>Delayed posttest</i>	
	<i>Issue<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Issue<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy<sup>b</sup></i>
Political cynicism	3.67 <sub>ax</sub> (.88)	4.11 <sub>bx</sub> (.60)	3.43 <sub>y</sub> (.67)	3.45 <sub>y</sub> (.78)

*Note.* Cell entries are mean scores of cynicism on a 5-point scale, standard deviations in parentheses. Different a,b subscripts indicate significant between-condition difference with  $p < .01$ . Different x,y subscripts indicate significant within-condition over-time difference with  $p < .05$ . Entries with no subscript do not differ significantly.

<sup>a</sup> $n = 42$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 41$ .

cated if they had engaged in *interpersonal discussions* about the EU in the past week ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = .80$ ).

## Data Analysis

To analyze the difference between the conditions, analyses of variance with covariates were used. The experimental condition was the fixed factor, and political knowledge, verbosity, and political efficacy were used as covariates to assess the influences of these variables simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> To analyze the difference within each condition over time (between the two posttests), paired sample  $t$  tests were used.

## RESULTS

### The Effect of Strategic News on Political Cynicism

The first hypothesis suggested that exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism compared to exposure to issue-based news. The first research question asked whether the effect of strategic news persists or diminishes over time.

Table 1 displays the means of political cynicism in the two conditions in the immediate and delayed posttest. The first hypothesis is supported as participants in the strategy condition ( $M = 4.11$ ) displayed a significantly higher level of political cynicism compared to participants in the issue condition ( $M = 3.67$ ) in the immediate posttest,  $F(1, 82) = 6.89$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ ,  $p = .01$ . In the delayed posttest, participants

<sup>11</sup>These variables were modeled as covariates as analyses indicated main effects, because no interaction effects were found between the variables and the experimental condition.

in the strategy condition ( $M = 3.45$ ) did not differ from participants in the issue condition ( $M = 3.43$ ) in their level of cynicism,  $F(1, 82) = 0.17$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ ,  $p = .90$ . The level of cynicism decreased for participants in the strategy condition (from  $M = 4.11$  in immediate posttest to  $M = 3.45$  in the delayed posttest).

Introducing political knowledge and political efficacy as covariates did not affect the impact of exposure to the strategy frame on political cynicism. The effect of exposure to strategy news was still significant in the immediate posttest after adjustment for the covariates,  $F(1, 82) = 12.92$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .14$ ,  $p = .001$ . Political knowledge significantly covaried with political cynicism,  $\beta = .89$ ,  $t(82) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ , whereas political efficacy was a significant negative covariate for political cynicism,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $t(82) = -1.67$ ,  $p = .08$ .<sup>12</sup> This finding suggests that the more politically knowledgeable participants and those feeling less efficacious were more likely to express higher levels of political cynicism.

Neither exposure to strategic news about the EU in the period between the immediate and the delayed posttest nor engagement in interpersonal discussions about the EU affected the posttest measure of political cynicism. This is because of the virtual absence of news about European affairs and the low number of participants reporting being exposed to and discussing this news.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, this means that the delayed posttest was conducted after a week in which the participants were not exposed to any additional information about the EU. The implications of this situation are addressed later.

### The Effect of Strategic News on Issue Evaluation

The second set of hypotheses predicted that exposure to news framed in terms of strategy activates and renders negative evaluations of the enlargement issue and depresses positive evaluations.

Table 2 shows the valence—positive, neutral, and negative—of the thoughts participants reported in each of the conditions. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, participants in the strategy condition ( $M = 1.54$ ) listed more negative thoughts than participants in the issue condition ( $M = .95$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 4.47$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ,  $p < .05$ . Conversely, participants in the strategy condition ( $M = .44$ ) listed fewer positive thoughts than participants in the issue condition ( $M = .79$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 3.20$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ,  $p = .07$ . The volume of neutral thoughts was not affected by the experimental condition so that participants in both conditions listed, on average, a comparable amount of neutral thoughts,  $F(1, 82) = .56$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ,  $p = .46$ . In sum, the news

<sup>12</sup>Verbosity,  $F(1, 82) = 3.16$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ,  $p < .10$ ; political knowledge,  $F(1, 82) = 9.33$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ .

<sup>13</sup>The week's news was dominated by the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 events. Ten percent of the participants reported having seen either of the two television news programs containing EU news. A total of 44% of the participants reported reading a newspaper that in that week contained EU news on the front page. However, none of these stories dealt with the enlargement of the EU.

TABLE 2  
Positive, Neutral, and Negative Issue Evaluations  
by Experimental Condition

	<i>Issue Frame Condition<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy Frame Condition<sup>b</sup></i>
Number of positive comments	.79 <sub>x</sub> (1.00)	.44 <sub>y</sub> (.74)
Number of neutral comments	1.10 (1.25)	.90 (1.07)
Number of negative comments	.95 <sub>a</sub> (1.27)	1.54 <sub>b</sub> (1.25)

*Note.* Cell entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences a,b  $p < .05$ , x,y  $p < .10$ .

<sup>a</sup> $n = 42$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 41$ .

frames significantly influenced the likelihood that participants reacted with valenced—both positive and negative—responses.

Introducing political knowledge and issue elaboration (i.e., verbosity) as covariates did not alter the results. Exposure to strategy news negatively affected listing positive thoughts,  $F(1, 82) = 4.13$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ,  $p = .08$ , and positively affected listing negative thoughts,  $F(1, 82) = 9.40$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ , after adjustment for the covariates. Verbosity was a positive predictor of the number of neutral thoughts,  $\beta = .74$ ,  $t(82) = 3.05$ ,  $p = .01$ .<sup>14</sup> Political knowledge,  $\beta = .94$ ,  $t(82) = 2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ , and verbosity,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t(82) = 4.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , were both significant positive covariates for the number of negative thoughts.<sup>15</sup> This finding suggests that the more politically knowledgeable participants, as well as those elaborating more on the issue, more often provided negative comments. None of the covariates was significant for predicting the number of positive thoughts.

### The Effect of Strategic News on Policy Support

Hypothesis 3 suggested that exposure to news framed in terms of strategy suppresses support for EU enlargement.

Table 3 shows that there was no significant difference in the level of support for future enlargement of the EU between participants in the two conditions. Political knowledge was a positive covariate in both posttests and this was statistically significant in the immediate posttest,  $\eta = .80$ ,  $t(82) = 2.33$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>16</sup> The findings suggest that more politically knowledgeable individuals are more supportive of the EU enlargement plans and that exposure to strategic news coverage does not affect policy support.

<sup>14</sup> $F(1, 82) = 9.03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ .

<sup>15</sup>Verbosity,  $F(1, 82) = 18.75$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ ,  $p < .001$ ; political knowledge,  $F(1, 82) = 4.46$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ .

<sup>16</sup> $F(1, 82) = 5.41$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ ,  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 3  
Support by Experimental Condition, Immediate and Delayed Posttest

	<i>Immediate Posttest</i>		<i>Delayed Posttest</i>	
	<i>Issue Condition<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy Condition<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Issue Condition<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy Condition<sup>b</sup></i>
EU enlargement support	3.10 (.80)	3.08 (.79)	3.10 (.80)	2.98 (.79)

*Note.* Cell entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. The means do not differ significantly from each other.

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 42. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 41

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to investigate the effects of strategic news coverage of politics outside the United States in the context of a routine political news topic in a nonelection period. It showed that strategic news evokes political cynicism, also outside campaign periods. The study put an assumption in the literature to an empirical test: the effect of strategy news on political cynicism was not persistent and disappeared over time. The data do not provide empirical support for claims inferred from previous studies about the long-term effects of strategic news coverage.

The study was designed to control for the effect of repeated exposure to news about the EU framed in terms of strategy. In the delayed posttest, the individual participants' news media exposure and attention were mapped during the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest. A content analysis of television news and print media (newspapers and magazines) during that week was conducted to explore whether exposure to additional news about the enlargement issue might alter responses. The formal models showed that exposure to news about the EU or discussion of the topics with family or friends did not affect the second-wave posttest measure. This is because the EU enlargement was almost entirely absent from the news during that week.

On the one hand, this absence is an asset for the design because it is possible to quite confidently rule out that participants were exposed to additional information in the news media about the enlargement issue during the week between the immediate and the delayed posttest. This control makes the experiment quite unique in a real-life setting. On the other hand, an experimental design with a temporal dimension in combination with individual-level news exposure and attention measures, in addition to a content analysis of these news outlets, would provide an interesting and compelling design. Such a design is a worthwhile path to pursue in the quest to disentangle the robustness and persistency of effects of strategic news on political cynicism.



This study is merely a first exploration of effects of strategic news in a temporal perspective, and therefore only tentative conclusions about the longevity and robustness of effects on cynicism are appropriate. We may, for example, find that repeated exposure to news framed in terms of strategy produces a cumulative effect. That the effects of news are likely to be conditioned upon repeated exposure is in line with arguments advanced by Zaller (1992, 2002), suggesting that media effects are likely to be of modest magnitude and most prominent in cases of extensive coverage with consistent directional bias. In fact, drawing on panel survey data and a content analysis of a referendum campaign, it was indeed demonstrated that frequent and repeated exposure to strategic news increased respondents' level of political cynicism (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002).

Participants' feelings of political efficacy and their political knowledge also affected the level of political cynicism. Politically efficacious individuals were less likely to express cynicism. This finding is an experimentally based corroboration of Pinkleton and Austin's (2002) survey-based evidence of the negative relation between cynicism and efficacy. In addition, the study suggested that political knowledge contributed to political cynicism. This finding is in line with Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) findings. However, whereas Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found political knowledge (or "political sophistication," as they call it) to be a stronger predictor of political cynicism than exposure to news containing the strategy frame in a multivariate analysis, this study suggests that exposure to the strategy frame drives political cynicism more than political knowledge. Both contribute to political cynicism, but knowledge is a less strong predictor compared to exposure to the strategic news frame.

This study also suggests that strategic news activates negative evaluations of a policy issue and depresses positive issue evaluations. Participants in the issue condition produced more positive thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the strategy condition. In addition, participants who were exposed to strategy-framed news listed significantly more negative thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the issue condition. The degree of issue elaboration and political knowledge were both positive covariates for expressing negative comments, suggesting that persons with higher levels of political knowledge and individuals offering a more elaborate evaluation of the issue were more likely to express negative evaluations.

This study found effects of the strategy frame in *television* news. This challenges Rhee (1997, p. 42), who only found effects of the strategy frame for print news and not broadcast news. He ascribed this finding to television's lack of ability to transfer "prepositional systems" because of the multimodal presentation of information including both visuals and text. This study does not support this conclusion and instead lends support to Graber's (1990, 2001) argument that the combination of text and visuals leads not to a more shallow issue interpretation but to deeper and more sophisticated information processing.

The third expectation of this study was that strategic news would have an impact on policy support, but this hypothesis was not supported. A similar approval level for future enlargement of the EU was found in the two conditions, both immediately after exposure to the news bulletin containing a story about the enlargement and in the delayed posttest. Thus, it is cautiously concluded that strategic news does not affect policy support. These findings are not in line with results from previous research (e.g., McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Tewksbury et al., 2000). However, these studies contrasted frames that emphasized either pros or cons of an issue or provided cues as to either supporting or opposing an issue. The strategic news frame is less explicit and does not offer direct suggestions as whether or not to support a policy.

The overall conclusion of the study is that news media may indeed contribute to political cynicism and negative associations with political and economic issues. However, these effects diminish over time, and it is possible to quite confidently rule out that this is the effect of exposure to new information because most participants were in an “information-vacuum” between the immediate and the delayed posttest. The study suggests that knowledgeable citizens were both more likely to express political cynicism and to evaluate the enlargement issue negatively, but they were at the same time more supportive of EU enlargement plans. Future research needs to further disentangle how political knowledge affects processing of strategic news. Such research may lead to recasting the largely negative across-the-board conclusions about the effects of strategic news on democratic processes in a new light.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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APPENDIX A  
Still Shots of the Manipulated Television News Story  
About the Enlargement of the European Union



NOS Journaal introduction



NOS Journaal anchor



Secretary of State D. Benschop



Map of Europe with ascension countries

## APPENDIX B

### Story EU story (issue and strategy version)

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*Anchor introduction (identical for both conditions)*

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Poland should enter the European Union within one and a half year. And not in 2004, which was originally planned. This is the conclusion of a report published today by the European Union. The report has been received with enthusiasm by the winners of the recent Polish elections: the Democratic Left-Alliance. The enlargement of the Union will be discussed in more detail by the end of October during the EU summit in Brussels.

*Text news report strategy*

*Text news report issue*

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But the European Commission wants Poland to enter a year earlier, on January 1 2003. *A political power play has begun in Brussels.* According to the report from the Commission, Poland is politically and economically ready for membership of the EU. And that is even though the agriculture has not been modernized and though the diary production does not yet comply with the strict hygiene norms of the EU. Surveys show that more citizens from the current EU countries are increasingly skeptical about the enlargement. *A political charm campaign is awaiting. So far the initiative of the Commission resembles a strategic plan rather than a concrete policy plan.*

Benschop (Secretary of State): "I consider it an interesting political step by the Commission. It is appealing and Poland has accomplished a lot, but the question is whether membership now is responsible. We will have to do our best to convince the EU citizens about the necessity of this step."

In 1951 the foundation for today's European Union was established. Six countries joined forces in coal and steel. Now there is a common market and in January that one currency. And the Union is getting bigger. A total of 13 countries will join. Six of them are the top of the list: Cyprus, and the former East-bloc countries the check republic, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovenia. The European Commission has concluded that Poland in the past years has demonstrated that it can join the Union earlier.

But the European Commission wants Poland to enter a year earlier, on January 1 2003. According to the report from the Commission, Poland is politically and economically ready for membership of the EU. And that is even though the agriculture has not been modernized and though the diary production does not yet comply with the strict hygiene norms of the EU. But the Commission and the Polish authorities are working on concrete policies for to be implemented to modernize the agricultural sector and invest in less developed cities and regions.

Benschop (Secretary of State): "I consider it an interesting political step by the Commission. It is appealing and Poland has accomplished a lot, but the question is whether membership now is responsible. We will have to do our best to convince the EU citizens about the necessity of this step."

In 1951 the foundation for today's European Union was established. Six countries joined forces in coal and steel. Now there is a common market and in January that one currency. And the Union is getting bigger. A total of 13 countries will join. Six of them are the top of the list: Cyprus, and the former East-bloc countries the check republic, Poland, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovenia. The European Commission has concluded that Poland in the past years has demonstrated that it can join the Union earlier.

*(continued)*

APPENDIX B  
(Continued)

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*Text news report strategy*

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*Text news report issue*

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Reporter: "Is this report not going to cause annoyance with the other candidate countries who want to enter?"

Benschop: "It seems that Poland has *won the first battle. A tough task is to in fact live up to these expectations.*"

The European Commission is facing a hard time with this proposal because in the European Parliament, the political parties are divided over the hasty enlargement. Some member countries are even against the enlargement. Ireland, for example, rejected the Treaty of Nice last year. And that Treaty was meant to create the possibility for enlargement.

*Benschop knows that public opinion is of crucial importance and has thus launch a 'charm campaign.' The question is whether Brussels and Benschop succeed in mobilizing public support.*

---

Reporter: "Is this report not going to cause annoyance with the other candidate countries who want to enter?"

Benschop: "It seems that Poland has shown that a country can get there by working hard and focused. They send a signal to the rest."

The European Commission is facing a hard time with this proposal because in the European Parliament, the political parties are divided over the hasty enlargement. Some member countries are even against the enlargement. Ireland, for example, rejected the Treaty of Nice last year. And that Treaty was meant to create the possibility for enlargement.

Benschop and his colleagues are joining effort to focus on the policies. If successful, the Polish flag will join the rest of the 15 nations in Brussels one and a half year from now.

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