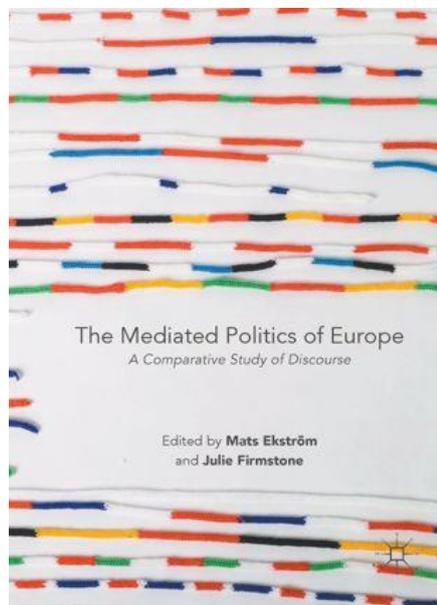




## The Mediated Politics of Europe: A Comparative Study of Discourse

Edited by Mats Ekström and Julie Firmstone

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Review by Maria Ivana Lorenzetti\*

The last few decades, and most significantly the last few years, saw substantial changes in the way of doing politics, with traditional political parties undergoing a radical makeover both as a result of global impactful economic changes and to cope with the increasing disaffection of citizens towards politics and democracy (Mair 2013). This climate of uncertainty proved to be a fertile ground for the global rise and spread of populist actors on both sides of the political spectrum claiming to champion the interests of the people as opposed to the elite, i.e. the ruling political class, portrayed as greedy and vexing citizens with taxes and bureaucracy. Such a fluctuating situation, with mainstream parties trying to regain people's consensus, populists emerging and increasingly resorting to different communicative strategies to depict their dichotomous world of 'us versus them' inevitably led to changes in the way roles and relationships between politicians, citizens and journalists are performed and negotiated in the media across countries.

Political discourse analysis is a blooming research field (Van Dijk 1997; Fairclough 2001; Charteris-Black 2014), and in particular after the resurgence of populism across the globe—with the election of Donald Trump as American President in 2016, and the growing consensus of parties, such as *Rassemblement National* (formerly *Front National*) in France, *UKIP* and *Brexit Party* in the United Kingdom, *Movimento 5 Stelle* and *Lega* in Italy, *FPÖ* in Austria, *Podemos* in Spain, *Syriza* and *Golden Dawn* in Greece to mention but a few - the literature on populism has been growing exponentially in the last few years, both in the area of political science (Taggart 2000; Mudde 2004; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) and within critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2015; Koller et al. 2019). Not much attention, however, has been devoted to the complex relationship

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between media, politicians and electorate, especially in the aftermath of this populist contagion. The *Mediated Politics of Europe* sets to fill this gap, presenting a comprehensive overview of the changing nature of mediated political communication and the challenges it is faced with in an increasingly fragile European landscape. Relying on a contextual cross-national approach, this edited volume is the result on the coordinated effort of a number of researchers from diverse academic backgrounds, ranging from political communication, media studies and linguistics, who have applied different discourse analytical approaches incorporating critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, semiotic, narrative and framing analyses to the qualitative study of the same political process. Concentrating on data related to the televised coverage of the 2014 European Union Elections in several European countries (France, Greece, Italy, Sweden and United Kingdom) in the three weeks before and the two days after the elections, this work attempts to compare the role of the media and the changing relationships between citizens, mainstream politicians and political institutions, such as the EU. The comparative micro-analyses in the book chapters present an outline of the way election narratives, politicians' performances, the role of citizens and the relationships between politicians, citizens and journalists are articulated in media discourse.

Language is the primary instrument of politics. Not only are most of the micro-levels behaviours that define political actions primarily linguistic acts (Searle 1969), but voters make their decisions based on the soundness of political arguments and how convincingly they are discursively presented on the podium (Moffitt 2016). Political ideas are articulated and negotiated in a variety of media settings, such as speeches, interviews or debates, where the performative quality of the individual is critical for success. Moreover, these performances designed for media audiences are typically framed, interpreted and discussed in media contexts, hence they crucially depend on the discursive practices of journalism.

Elections traditionally represent critical events which, as Coleman argues in Chapter 2, generate a collective focus of attention, and in which the public comes together giving substance to the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), or the 'we' of a nation in the symbolic act of casting the ballot. While EU elections are generally perceived as less important than national ones, the 2014 EU elections represent a turning point moment, where the Eurozone crisis, the increasingly mainstream nature of Euroscepticism, tensions and rivalries among member states and the lack of a common transnational cohesion were inextricably linked with other ongoing crises, including the 2008 economic crisis with its far-reaching consequences, challenges posed by massive immigration and the crisis of democracy in general.

The focus on television journalism, the editors argue, is due to its central role as authoritative voice, being the main source of information citizens rely on for political affairs. Secondly, television coverage has largely been overshadowed in previous studies on EU election campaigns predominantly based on newspaper journalism. The volume is organized in five sections. While Part II presents the context and sets the agenda for the following analyses, the next three sections explore specific angles of the political communication triangle, namely journalistic practices, citizens' voice and politicians from multiple perspectives.

Part II: Context. In Chapter 2 Stephen Coleman sees the European elections as a moment in which the conventional democratic narrative competed with an opposing one challenging the legitimacy of the system itself. How the elections were discursively constructed in the media nationally, and the prominence of the less orthodox view are indicative of a critical political phase differently interpreted in each country. Chapter 3 by Marianna Patrona and Joanna Thornborrow on the discursive construction of the crisis suggests that the way the crisis was interpreted either from a European or a domestic perspective largely depended on the extent to which each country had been affected by the economic crisis and on national problems, with the result that in many countries (UK, Greece, Italy) the EU was perceived as a remote entity far from the people.

Part III: Journalistic Practices. The three chapters of this section investigate how politics is communicated through different journalistic practices. In Chapter 4 Joanna Thornborrow and Louann Haarman explore the generic features of news reports across countries through multimodal analysis, arguing that practices vary considerably, from the skeptical and dismissive tone used by BBC reporters, to the more informative and documentary reporting style typical of Italy and France. Chapter 5 (by Mats Ekström and Andrew Tolson) investigating interviewing practices, points out that new styles are emerging in this domain, such as more aggressive 'accountability interviews' in the more spectacular forms of late-night shows mainly by celebrity interviewers. However, this aggressive form of interview is also crucially related to the ideological stance of the interviewee. Different views of Europe outlined in TV news programs emerge from Chapter 6 (by Andrew



Tolson and Joanna Thornborrow), one where the viewer is addressed as a concerned citizen (France), and both domestic and foreign populist parties are presented as serious threats, while an ironic and dismissive attitude towards populists prevails in the UK and Denmark.

Part IV: Citizens. This section of the book focuses on the way citizens are represented or given active voice in news programs. Specifically, Chapter 7 by Julie Firmstone and John Corner analyses how the public is talked about in news reports, when absent. Cross-national data point to a large usage of polls more as a point of departure for other narratives rather than to focus primarily on the public itself. A simplified view of the public framed as homogeneous and merely useful to talk about general trends also emerges. In their analysis of the extent to which voice is given to the public through their participation in news programs in Chapter 8, Mats Ekström and Andrew Tolson highlight the role of vox pop as the primary form of citizens' active voice in news reports followed by edited soundbites of interaction between citizens and politicians. Vox pop in the UK is also used to frame a narrative of distrust, to vent people's frustration and depict a problematic relationship between politicians and the electorate. The authors, who have worked on a cross-national dataset of news programs, claim that in some countries, like Italy, the active voice of citizens is totally absent, while there are actually some programs in which room is given to citizens' voices and their personal experiences, especially when coming from a disadvantaged background. Those programs (*Piazzapulita*, *Report*, *Presa Diretta*) were also airing in 2014, but they are not among the ones considered for this study. Moreover, data show that vox pop is associated with a tendency by journalists to trivialise citizens' voice, often depicting them as ignorant or unprepared on political matters. In Chapter 9 Marianna Patrona examines citizens' direct participation in televised debates with politicians, showing that in Greece they have a more active role in holding politicians to account and are treated as reliable sources of information and as discursively emancipated, while other countries do not offer great platforms for confrontation.

Part V: Politicians. The last section of the book is devoted to the way politicians, both mainstream and populists, perform in the media. Chapter 10 by Stephen Coleman and Julie Firmstone presents a cross-national multimodal analysis of the way politicians from established political parties perform during election campaigns, convincingly showing that even mainstream politicians sometimes resort to hybrid performances to balance their need to look authoritative with their desire to result authentic, appeal to the people and not seem too distant from the electorate. Discourses of mainstream political authority and distance are routinised and based on the joint work of politicians and journalists and are consistent across countries. Non-mainstream performances by which politicians try to look like ordinary people, on the other hand, tend to be less effective, are frequently undermined by journalists exposing their attempts at hybridity, suggesting that they might not be authentic, and are treated as deviations. In Chapter 11 Mats Ekström and Andrew Morton investigate the core features of populism in mediated communication and analyse whether news reports and debates provide a favourable platform for populists. Starting from Moffitt's (2016) definition of populism as a performative style, the chapter highlights that how this performance is enacted, and the way politicians balance their being populists and political leaders is not consistent across countries. Core features of right-wing populism include the articulation of a dualistic view of society, the idealization of an idyllic past with nationalistic overtones, and the scapegoating of dangerous others (Taggart 2000; Wodak 2015). These are common traits for the leaders examined, as their racism-denial claims through victimization strategies. By contrast, differences emerge in the use of coarse language and 'bad manners', and in the embodiment of anti-establishment style, with Nigel Farage of *UKIP* representing the perfect emblem of populist leader with an informal, aggressive language often portrayed in 'normal people settings', such as pubs. The same cannot be said for Åkesson of *SD* who acts as a serious politician, claiming legitimacy within the rules rather than outside. These divergent behaviours are matched by reporting styles on populism. Since populism involves a destabilization of standard norms of conduct and of campaigning, with politicians voicing controversial opinions, their extravagant performances are often treated as news value and foregrounded in some countries to reinforce the narrative of the EU crisis, while they are de-emphasised in others.

In today's hyper-mediated world, where social networks are becoming primary propaganda tools that allow leaders to bypass journalists and foster the viral diffusion of populist contents and the exacerbation of tones (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018), and the credibility of professional journalism is threatened by the spread of fake news, a close monitoring of the evolving relationship between politicians, citizens and journalists is pivotal. This volume, with its comparative multidisciplinary analyses, is a precious instrument for any scholar interested



in political discourse analysis or journalistic discourse and provides a clear overview of mediated political communication in Europe. The qualitative approach adopted is especially helpful in presenting an in-depth outline of the main phenomena at stake. Data from these studies suggest that journalists still play a central role in indicating the main actors and deciding what is news value. On the contrary, among the actors in the political communication triangle, the role of citizens is the one that should be strengthened. The people that populists sanctify, that all politicians try to court are frequently left behind in news programs, simplified, de-emphasised in their knowledge and treated as accessory cheerleaders to support politicians, while they should be given more active voice in the mediated political debate.

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