

ELECTIONS AND THE MEDIA IN CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ELECTIONS AND THE MEDIA IN CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In modern democracies, television news is often named as the most important source for political information. This is especially so at election time, when political leaders gear their daily activities largely to the needs and deadlines of television news (Butler and Ranney, 1992; Swanson and Mancini, forthcoming). Television news is thus a primary battleground for politicians at election time as well as a main source of political information for most people (Dalton, 1988).

The role of television in politics and its potential influence on public opinion about political leaders and issues has also been the source of much debate in European democracies in recent years. This led parliaments in Germany, Britain and Spain over the course of the 1980s to pass legislation that provided for new private channels to compete with the public service broadcasting organizations. This paper compares main evening television news coverage of politics during recent election campaigns in four countries: Germany in 1990, the U.S. and Britain in 1992, and Spain in 1993. 1 Content analysis of television news coverage during the final weeks of the national election campaign in each country was conducted, using comparable codebooks and variables. National public opinion surveys were also conducted during and/or after the election campaigns in each country. 2

In this paper, we draw on the content data to address a number of questions concerning the information environment: How visible was the election in the main evening television news programs? To what extent did political coverage at election time emphasize the substantive issues as opposed to the horse race or the electoral game? What opportunities did politicians have to initiate the news? How visible were the incumbents, challengers, and other party spokespersons in the news? To what extent are evaluations in the news neutral? Before turning to address these questions, we discuss some of the possible systemic influences that may help to explain the cross-national and in-country similarities and differences in television news at election time.

Influences on the Construction of Election News

A number of systemic factors, legal, and institutional influences may have consequences for the construction of election news (cf. Semetko, 1994). With regard to the broadcasting system, for example, the degree of competition may be an important influence on the content and construction of election news. The degree of autonomy broadcasters have from political control or influence may also be important. The length of the election campaign also varies from country to country. Finally, the traditions or regulations governing the access of parties to television during campaigns is another factor that may influence the construction of election news.

Competition

A cross-national study comparing election news in the early 1980s found that there was more news about the parties and top candidates, and more substantive news as opposed to coverage of the horse race and hoopla, in Britain than in the U.S. and this was attributed in large part to the stronger

public service broadcasting system in Britain (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, Weaver, 1991). More commercial competition was associated with greater concern by broadcasters with audience interests and less concern with politicians' news agendas. Although Britain today has more private channels than ever before, it has had ITV and its nationally networked news program ITN in competition with BBC news since the 1950s, whereas in Germany and Spain the dominance of the public service channels has only recently diminished.

After a period of much uncertainty, the BBC was assured of its licence fee form of funding at least until the year 2000 in a recently published government White Paper. But competition has become more intense particularly among the new private commercial channels in Britain since the passage of the 1990 Broadcasting Act. ITN traditionally embraced a public service approach to election news but this has diminished since 1990.

In Germany and Spain, new private commercial television channels entered the market over the course of the late 1980s and somewhat diminished the predominance of public service broadcasting. In Germany, the first and second (public service) channels, ARD and ZDF, now face the most serious competition from RTLplus and SAT1, in addition to other less important private channels such as Pro7 and Tele5 (see Humphreys, 1994).

In Spain, until the early 1980s there were two national public service channels, TVE1 and TVE2, when the Autonomous Communities obtained the right to establish their own regional public service channels. Today only six of the seventeen Autonomous Communities have regional public channels (Catalonia, Galitaiia, Valencia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, and Madrid); the first three broadcast in their regional language while the Basque Country has two regional public channels, one in Spanish and the other in the Euskera language. Since 1988-89, three private channels were licensed by the national government -- Antena 3, Tele 5 and Canalplus. The first two are over the air and are financed by advertising while the last is encoded and available by subscription only.

In a cross-national context, the U.S. remains at the high end of the continuum in terms of the degree of competition in broadcasting. If maintaining audience interest is a higher priority in the more competitive systems, we might expect to find more human interest oriented news at election time such as an emphasis on the colorful events of the campaign and the personalities in the election as opposed to the more serious substantive issues.

Autonomy from Political Influence

The degree to which broadcasting organizations are or have been autonomous from political control or pressure may also influence the construction of election news. Public service broadcasting organizations are generally less autonomous than commercial organizations. In Britain, the BBC license fee is determined by Parliament and increases in it are approved by Parliament. The BBC's Board of Governors is appointed by the Prime Minister and although appointees are supposed to be politically neutral, Mrs. Thatcher's appointments broke with this tradition.

In Germany, individual states are authorized by law to supervise the public service broadcast channels and they do so via state-level councils sometimes called the Broadcasting or Television Council. The members of the council, as set forth by law, are to include "socially relevant groups" and

political parties represented in the Laender parliaments are members of these councils. The Council is to represent the public and is responsible for the oversight and accountability of public service broadcasting. Other "socially relevant groups" on the councils include church groups, unions, women's groups, farmers' and employers' associations. Members of the council are not supposed to represent any political point of view or be bound by any mandate, but when critical issues or complaints about programming arise, disagreement often breaks along party lines (Schoenbach, 1987, 1991).

Another way in which the political parties influence broadcasting in Germany is in the hiring and promotion of public service television journalists. In contrast to Britain and the U.S. where reporters describe themselves as politically neutral, German TV reporters often rely on "leftist" and "rightist" terminology to describe themselves and one another. Leading positions in the public service news organizations are taken up by "red" (SPD) or "black" (CDU) news professionals who may be card-carrying party members or known party sympathizers (see Chapters 5 and 9 in Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994). The traditionally Germanic 'Proporz' principle assures both major parties a degree of influence or representation in the two public service broadcasting organizations (cf. Humphreys, 1994). In theory, the appointment of one "red" is supposed to be balanced by the appointment of one "black", though in practice this is not always the case.

German broadcasting is thus less autonomous from political influence than U.S. or British broadcasting. Indeed, German public service broadcasters "too often...appear to be overconstrained by these political pressures to the point of timidity in the tackling of controversial themes" (Humphreys 1994:321). That said, the new private channels in Germany are not accountable to political parties. They do not practice party balance in the newsroom and rely solely on professional criteria in the promotion and hiring process.

In Spain, TVE1 and TVE2 as well as the national radio broadcasting (RNE) are supervised by a board or council of twelve members who are presumed experts elected by the National Parliament and they represent the main political parties in proportion to their weight in Parliament. At the time of the 1993 national election there were six PSOE (Socialist), four PP (Conservative), one CDS (centrist), and one (CIU) Communist. The board's role is to ensure that there is a balance in the news about the different political parties and their leaders, based on their representation in Parliament. A monthly tally is kept outside of election periods, and on an almost daily basis during official election campaign periods. Similar boards with similar functions exist for all the other public regional channels. There are no such boards or legal regulations for the private channels, though they are expected to provide 'balanced' coverage of the parties in the news. Audience share remains the highest for the public service channels in Spain, though viewership of the private channels is on the increase.

In a cross-national context, Spain and Germany are at the low end and the U.S. at the high end of a continuum concerning the broadcasting system's degree of autonomy from political control or influence, with Britain in between. Whether this has an effect on the amount of time devoted to incumbents and challengers as well as the evaluations of political actors in the news is an open question.

The Length of the Campaign

The duration of the general election campaign varies from country to country. In the U.S. there is no 'official' campaign period as in Britain or Spain, for example, but it may be seen to begin with the nomination of the Democratic and Republican candidates at the summer conventions or, at the latest, in early September when the candidates' travel agendas and news coverage go into full swing and this runs through Election Day on the first Tuesday in November. There are no regularly scheduled press conferences by the candidates during the campaign, but there is daily travel with meetings, speeches and rallies across the country.

The British campaign is much shorter (three-and-a-half to four weeks) and much more intense, with party press conferences scheduled each morning for the weeks preceding Election Day. The morning press conferences are usually followed by afternoon 'walkabouts', when leading politicians visit various constituencies, shops, hospitals or schools for example, followed by evening rallies or speeches by the party leaders or top party spokespersons. The parties usually launch their manifestos within a week after a general election is called.

The length of the "hot phase" of the German national election campaign is determined by agreement between the political parties and the broadcasting organizations, and is usually three to six weeks before Election Day (cf. Semetko and Schoenbach 1994). During this time the parties' television ads are broadcast. Because of the restrictions on broadcast advertising, however, the parties make extensive use of other channels to present themselves to the public. Print advertising is very important, as is direct mail to households of brochures and leaflets. The parties occasionally target areas to distribute weekly newspapers to households. Cities and towns are also heavily covered with posters and billboards often featuring the faces of the chancellor candidates and party messages. Parties also run information booths at marketplaces and shopping malls. During the final weeks before Election Day, rallies are also held regularly and the leading politicians speak at rallies of varying sizes, ranging from small market squares to large soccer stadiums.

The duration of the official campaign in Spain for national parliamentary elections has been decreasing (with the consent of the political parties) and in 1993 it was only fifteen days (May 21st to June 5th). Election Day was June 6th. No political campaigning was permitted on the day before the election (the 5th), however, to give citizens an opportunity to reflect on their voting decision. During this time the parties advertisements are broadcast on television and radio. But since the date of the election is known two or more months in advance, the parties are 'unofficially' campaigning well prior to the start of the 'official' campaign period. The 1993 election were called on April 12th. The pre-campaign period (April 12th - May 20th) is devoted to various legal procedures -- the presentation of the parties' lists of candidates in each of the 52 political units, the formation of the National and Provincial Electoral Boards, etc. The leaders of the parties are on the campaign trail each day of the 'official' campaign, and speak at large rallies across the country almost every evening.

Parties' Access to Television During Elections

Much of what the political parties and the top candidates do during the final weeks of the campaign is geared to television. It is important to note how the question of fairness in terms of political parties' access to television during election campaigns has been resolved in each country. This concerns the

availability of advertising time as well as the visibility of the parties or various political spokespersons in news and information programs.

In the U.S., candidates and political parties are free to purchase air time so money is the key determinant of access for advertising. The only stipulation, known as the equal time rule, is that if a station chooses to sell or give time to one candidate, it must make the same opportunity available to all the candidates for that office. If a station denies time to all candidates, however, none have a right to demand access to time (Graber, 1991 and 1993). There is no connection between the sale of advertising time and the coverage of the parties and candidates in network news. News values are the primary criterion for story selection, though there is a general expectation that election news will be balanced in terms of the amount of time devoted to the candidates and the correspondents who cover them provide an inside check on this (Semetko, 1994).

Paid political broadcasting is prohibited in Britain on the public service and private commercial channels. Instead, the broadcasting authorities make free air time available to the political parties based on a formula which involves an equal number of broadcasts for the government and opposition parties and often a smaller number for the largest third party as well as the nationalist parties represented in Parliament (cf. Semetko 1991a). In the past decade, this has meant five Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) each for the Conservative and Labour parties and between three and five for the center party now known as the Liberal Democrats. These broadcasts may be no more than 10 minutes in length and no less than five. Other parties not represented in Parliament and contesting at least 50 seats receive one free 5 minute PEB.

The most important aspect of the PEB allocation is that in past elections it has been used by public service and commercial broadcasters as a guideline for maintaining balance in election news (Semetko 1991b). For every five minutes of news coverage devoted to the Conservatives, there would be five minutes about Labour and three to five for the Liberals. "Stopwatching" refers to the efforts by the broadcasters (and parties) to ensure that there was balance in terms of time devoted to the parties in the news. Broadcasters keep a daily and weekly tally of the amount of time each party receives in the news, and the parties have elaborate monitoring crews who complain loudly if they believe they have been treated unfairly (cf. Blumler, 1969, Blumler and Semetko, 1987; Blumler, Gurevitch and Nossiter, 1986, 1989, and 1994). According to Gurevitch and Blumler (1982: 191), at election time in Britain: "News is governed by 'news values'; the need for 'balance' is introduced as an extra requirement that forces a 'compromise'; and the 'solution' is found in the adoption of a stopwatch approach to the allocation of timed coverage shares to the competing parties, based on 'objective' measures of their relative strengths in the country."

In Germany, there are regulations governing the availability of free time on public service broadcasting and the purchase of advertising time by the parties on the private commercial channels. On the public channels, an ad is not to exceed two minutes in length. Unlike Britain where talking heads are still commonplace in the parties' election broadcasts, party ads in Germany take the form of highly professional commercials, rather like the fast-paced ad of the "Coke is It!" type. Each party contesting the election is granted at least one free commercial on public broadcasting. Additional spots are allocated according to the parties' representation in the national parliament, and the number of extra spots is roughly proportional to the number of seats the party holds in Parliament though an effort is made to balance the number of spots

given to the two largest parties (the CDU and the SPD). Similar rules apply to the availability of free advertising time on public radio.

Since 1987, political parties in Germany have been permitted to purchase advertising time on private commercial television and radio. The parties were somewhat reluctant to pay for air time, despite the fact that they were charged at a reduced rate which represented only the actual cost to the station. In the 1990 national election campaign, only the CDU purchased time for airing commercials on RTLplus. There are also regulations governing the format and distribution of political ads on the private TV channels (Schoenbach, 1991). The amount of time available for purchase on the two most important private channels (RTLplus and SAT1) was limited in 1990, and the limit was determined by the proportion of seats the party held in parliament.

There is no connection, however, between the allocation of free broadcasting time in Germany and balanced coverage in the news at election time. An underlying assumption behind the aforementioned "red" and "black" balance in the newsroom, though, is that this type of balance among management and editorial staff would ensure political balance in the news. Studies from the early 1980s showed that German journalists viewed themselves as "missionaries" whereas British and U.S. journalists described themselves more as "watchdogs" (Koecher, 1986). In early 1990, a majority of German journalists still expressed satisfaction with the possibilities they had to convince and educate their audience (Schneider, Schoenbach and Stuerzebecher 1993). If German journalists continue to hold strong political convictions, then the 'institutionalized' balance described earlier in theory at least seems to guarantee pluralism of political voices.

German journalists, like their colleagues in other countries, nevertheless believe strongly in objective reporting defined as "avoiding subjective beliefs to enter into news decisions and fairly representing all sides in a conflict" (Donsbach and Klett 1993:75). Balance among competing political voices is expected to be attained over a series of programs on a channel, and not necessarily within a single news program (Semetko and Schoenbach 1994). News values remain the primary criterion for story selection at election time and broadcasters do not feel bound to keep a tally of the time devoted to politicians from various parties in the main evening news.

In Spain, as was noted above, public service broadcasters keep an almost daily tally of party representation in news and information programs during the election campaign. There is the expectation that television news on both the public and private channels will be fair and impartial in its presentation of the political parties, but there are popular assumptions about the political leanings of individual television journalists as well as the broadcasting organizations themselves. The national public service channels (TVE1 and TVE2), for example, are popularly assumed to be pro-Government (PSOE) in their presentation of news and information. Our content analysis of television news in the 1993 Spanish election will be the first to directly address this question.

Spanish law prohibits the purchase of advertising time by political parties on the public service and private commercial television channels or on radio. Instead, during official electoral campaigns, broadcasting organizations produce a plan to distribute free time to the parties each day, and these are broadcast immediately after the news programs. Time is allocated in proportion to each party's representation in Parliament; those parties outside of Parliament are granted a minimum (and equal) time based on the number of provinces in which they field candidates.

Methods

The visibility of the campaign and of the top candidates and spokespersons from the various political parties, the subjects of political coverage and the initiators of those subjects, as well as reporters' evaluations in news stories, were measured in the content analysis of main evening television news programs in each country.

The figures presented here are preliminary, and are based on content analysis of the following programs: May 15th to Election Day (June 6) 1993 on TVE1, the main public service channel in Spain; NBC Nightly News from Labor Day (Sept. 6) to Election Day (Nov. 2) 1992 in the U.S.; BBC's Nine O'Clock News and ITN's News at Ten from March 16 to Election Day (April 9) 1992 in Britain; and the main evening news program on each of Germany's main channels (ARD, ZDF, RTLplus and SAT.1) from Oct. 1 to Election Day (Dec. 2) 1990. The content comparisons here are based on all stories that mentioned domestic politics or politicians in each country. ³ There were no significant differences between the channels in Germany and therefore all are aggregated for purposes of presentation in the tables. The differences that emerged in Britain, however, made it worthwhile to distinguish between BBC and ITN in the tables.

Findings

The Campaign Trail, The Candidates and the Electoral Game

One of the variables in the content analysis was the main topic of the news story. Figure 1 shows that the campaign and the candidates were accorded least importance in Germany, most importance in the U.S., with Spain and Britain in between, when taking this news as a proportion of all political stories. Figure 1 also reveals a substantial difference between BBC and ITN, with the latter more campaign oriented. This category is void of substantive issue news concerning matters of policy. It refers to news about events on the campaign trail, such as rallies, speeches on the hustings, as well as news about the horse race or opinion polls, in addition to news about the personal qualities of the candidates. Table 1 shows how other types of political news fared in comparison with news about the campaign and the candidates.

In 1988, U.S. network news was preoccupied with the horse race as well as with having colorful visuals from the rallies and speeches and this led to much critical discussion after that election (Kalb 1991). In 1992, on NBC at least, in comparison with 1988 there was a substantial decrease in the amount of attention given to the polls and the horse race (Semetko 1993). Nevertheless, in comparison with other countries, the U.S. remains at the high end of the continuum in terms of presenting the election as personality based and event driven as opposed to a serious discussion of the various stands on substantive issues (see also Patterson, 1993).

In Britain, the commercial or private channel (ITN) appeared more like U.S. news than the BBC in the amount of emphasis placed on the "campaign and candidates," whereas in previous elections the news on both channels appeared more similar than different (Semetko 1991b). The increased commercial pressures on ITN help to explain the increasing divergence in election news between the public service and private channels (Nossiter et al. 1994, Semetko et al. 1994).

In Spain, campaign and candidate news was the focus of about one-quarter of the coverage on the main public service channel, TVE1. In such stories the party leaders were often seen speaking at elaborately staged rallies. Although Spanish electioneering has become more "personalized" in recent years, Spanish public service TV news at least remains less focused on personalities of the candidates and the electoral game than the news in the U.S. and Britain (cf. Gunther, Sani and Shabad, 1988; Rospir, 1994).

In Germany, the events on the campaign trail such as the party rallies and the speeches by the chancellor candidates were rarely reported on main evening news. Much of the fifteen percent noted in Figure 1 actually concerned the results of the Landtag elections held on October 14 in the East German Laender and Bavaria and Berlin. These election stories had more to do with the momentum provided to the parties' national election campaigns rather than the events of the Bundestag campaign and activities of the chancellor candidates.

There are a number of reasons why opinion polls and the colorful activities on the campaign trail were not as evident in German news, but the most important concerns the significance of the election as a news story. German news professionals did not want the main evening news to become a transmission belt for the parties' campaign propaganda (Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994). They believed there was ample opportunity for citizens to learn about the election from other sources such as political discussion programs, newspapers and magazines, and the parties' activities in the cities and towns. Any events which involved politicians on the campaign trail were therefore deemed not as important as other stories, unless something really 'new' had developed. Foreign news remained very important during the final weeks of the German election campaign, unlike Britain where, at ITN at least, resources were reallocated from foreign to domestic news so the party leaders' domestic campaigning activities could be covered in full. The German foreign news often involved the activities of German politicians, but they were depicted without any reference to the election campaign. Helmut Kohl, for example, was seen representing Germany as Chancellor at the CSCE conference in Paris. Visuals were also not as important a factor in the selection of a story for inclusion in the bulletin in comparison with the other countries. Many German news stories were told by the anchor alone with a backdrop graphic in a blue box. In the U.S. and Britain, by contrast, if colorful visuals were not available the story would often be dropped from the program. In Spain too, visuals from the party rallies and leaders' speeches on the hustings were an important and regular part of the news.

The German television news producer's response to the politicians' campaigning activities was thus unlike that of the producers in other countries. ITN and BBC, for example, in 1992 as in previous elections, sent camera crews and reporters along with the party leaders every day and to all the party rallies. Film from these events was broadcast almost every day of the campaign. In Germany in 1990, however, camera crews were rarely sent to party rallies and there was no regular film crew with the party leaders.

Party Platforms and Issues

Table 1 also indicates how much political news during the final weeks of the campaign in each country was devoted to stories about substantive issues such as the economy, social welfare, the environment, or foreign affairs, as well

as party platforms or records. There was more of this in Germany and Spain than in Britain or the U.S.

In Spain, nearly as much attention was paid to party platforms and records as to the campaign and the candidates. There was also considerable attention, more than in any other country, paid to political institutions. Political institutions were more important than any particular issue (even the economy) in the Spanish 1993 campaign on the main public service channel. This includes news on the King and the Royal Family, the Courts, and in some cases the Government.

In Germany, however, the party platforms were hardly visible in the main evening news. During the first observation day at ZDF in October 1990, the CDU launched its manifesto at a press conference. The merited only a 22 second anchor-in-studio story with no footage from the press conference. The story came very late in the bulletin. One editor's explanation was that the press conference contained "nothing new" and "therefore we thought about not including anything at all, but we decided to include something finally." Issue coverage focused on foreign affairs and a newly unified Germany's role in the world, and particularly on the problems and developments in the East with regard to unification. A follow-up comparative study of main evening television news coverage of the German 1994 national election campaign conducted by Schoenbach and Semetko will show how unique the 1990 election was with respect to campaign vs. substantive issue coverage.

In Britain, by contrast, when the parties launched their manifestos in 1992, both BBC and ITN contained lengthy pieces on party policy, including graphics as well as film from the party press conferences. U.S. TV news often covered key issues in the campaign as "issue stories" presenting the Bush, Clinton and Perot proposals in each area. There may have been more such stories in the U.S. 1992 campaign than in previous elections (Patterson, 1993: 146).

Media versus Party Initiated News

A variable in the content analysis was the initiation of the main subject of the news story. The degree to which candidates and parties initiated the main subjects of stories was assessed as either party or media initiated. Party initiated stories were defined as those in which the main subject stemmed from politicians' planned public statements or activities. This included, for example, speeches or statements made by candidates or party leaders at rallies and on the hustings, and candidates' activities on the campaign trail. This also included opening statements at press conferences. Media initiated news stories were those in which the main subject stemmed from reporters' activity, such as questions to politicians during press conferences or while on the hustings. They also included investigative reports, issue stories, analysis and poll stories, and stories taking elements from different time periods. In some cases, political news was initiated by others such as nonparty actors such as experts, voters, pollsters, world leaders, businesspeople, interest group elites, or even journalists themselves.

Figure 2 shows that reporters were most active initiating the news in the U.S. and Britain, and least active in Germany, with Spain in between. Table 2 shows the advantage, if any, held by the incumbent parties in initiating news. In each country, the incumbent (parties, party or candidate) initiated more news than the main opponent, though gap between the two was greater in Germany and Spain than in the U.S. or Britain.

Incumbents versus Challengers

Of all political actors, the party leaders (the candidates) received the most attention in the news in each country, an indication of the personalization of election news.

Figure 3 shows that the main actor in the main evening news stories was more often the incumbent or one of his party spokespersons than someone from the main opposing party in each country. Figure 3 presents the visibility of the incumbent party and its leader versus the opposition party and its leader.

Table 3 shows that the visibility advantage of the incumbent was greatest in Germany where it took the form of not only a significant *Regierungsbonus* but also a *Kanzlerbonus*. Chancellor Helmut Kohl was the main actor in six times as many stories as the SPD chancellor candidate, Oskar Lafontaine. There was also a visibility advantage for the spokespersons from the incumbent parties (excluding the chancellor candidates) over the opposition parties in Germany. In Spain, there was little evidence of a visibility bonus for the incumbent prime minister, Felipe Gonzalez, over his main challenger, Jose Aznar, but there was a clear visibility bonus for the incumbent party (PSOE) over the main opposition (PP). In Britain and the U.S., however, although the incumbent leader or candidate was somewhat more visible in the news than his challenger, there was almost no difference between the two main parties once lower level spokespersons were considered.

A possibly interesting cross-national difference in Table 3 concerns the proportion of stories having non-political actors as the main actor. 'Other' actors include interest group representatives as well as journalists themselves, and the latter accounted for the majority of the 64% of stories fronting 'others' as the main actor in the U.S. But this may be due to the fact that only NBC News is used here and it often relied on field correspondents as interviewees for analysis.

Evaluations of Political Actors in News Stories

Television news in Europe is more neutral than U.S. news in its depiction of politicians, with regard to the verbal evaluations or comments made by reporters in the news. Figure 4 shows that while 47% of U.S. evaluations were straight or neutral, this compares with more than two-thirds in Britain, 70% in Spain and 96% in Germany.

In Germany and Spain, therefore, but particularly in Germany, the visibility advantage for the incumbent parties was not also one of tone. There were almost no reinforcing or deflating evaluations in German TV news. In Spain, reporters on the main public service channel were nearly equally likely to offer reinforcing or deflating comments about politicians. News on ITN in Britain was more evaluative than on the BBC, while evaluations on the latter were more often reinforcing than deflating. Evaluations were most common in the U.S. where, on NBC at least, they were only slightly more likely to be deflating than reinforcing.

Further analysis of the Spanish data suggest that the majority of non-verbal comments about Gonzalez and the PSOE were reinforcing while the majority of such comments about Aznar and the PP were deflating. This lends

support to the popular assumption that TVE1 sympathizes with the PSOE, though it is important to remember that Spain ranked low in comparison with the other countries in terms of the willingness of reporters to make evaluative comments.

Discussion

This paper represents the first opportunity to bring together in a comparative fashion the content analysis data from the recent election studies of media coverage and effects in Germany, Britain, Spain and the U.S. 4 The above discussion of possible systemic influences on the content of election news led us to have two general expectations. One concerns the possible consequences of the degree of competition in the broadcasting system and the other concerns the possible consequences of broadcasting organizations' degree of political autonomy.

In a cross-national context, the U.S. was at the high end of the continuum in terms of the degree of competition in broadcasting. Britain is next in terms of the longstanding competition between BBC and ITN. Germany and Spain are at the low end with private channels only recently competing with public service channels. It has been argued elsewhere that maintaining audience interest is a higher priority in the more competitive systems (cf. Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch and Weaver, 1991). We therefore expected to find more human interest oriented news at election time such as an emphasis on the colorful events of the campaign and the personalities in the election as opposed to the more serious substantive issues. The comparative data presented here lend support to this.

The campaign and the candidates or party spokespersons were accorded most importance in the U.S. and least importance in Germany, with Britain closer to the U.S. and Spain and closer to Germany. With regard to stories about substantive issues such as the economy, social welfare, the environment, or foreign affairs, as well as party platforms or records, there was correspondingly more of this in Germany and Spain than in Britain or the U.S.

It is also worth noting that in Britain, there was also a substantial difference between BBC and ITN, with the latter more campaign oriented. ITN has been hit the hardest by the more competitive media marketplace.

In a cross-national context, Spain and Germany were at the low end and the U.S. at the high end of a continuum concerning the broadcasting system's degree of autonomy from political control or influence, with Britain falling closer to the U.S. At the outset we suggested that this may have potential consequences for the amount of time devoted to incumbents and challengers as well as the evaluations of political actors in the news. Our data suggest a pattern exists which corresponds to such a continuum in two ways.

First, we found that reporters were most active initiating the news in the U.S. and Britain, and least active in Germany, with Spain closer to Germany. In each country, the incumbent (parties, party or candidate) initiated more news than the main opponent, though gap between the two was greater in Germany and Spain than in the U.S. or Britain.

Secondly, we show that the main actor in the main evening news stories was more often the incumbent or one of his party spokespersons than someone from the main opposing party in each country. The visibility advantage of the incumbent was greatest in Germany where it took the form of not only a significant *Regierungsbonus* but also a *Kanzlerbonus*, while in Spain there was a clear visibility bonus only for the incumbent party (PSOE) over the main opposition (PP). In Britain and the U.S., however, although the incumbent

leader or candidate was somewhat more visible in the news than his challenger, there was almost no difference between the two main parties once lower level spokespersons were considered.

These findings point up possible consequences of the politicization of the broadcasting system. In Germany and Spain, where the political parties play an important role in the oversight of the public service broadcasting organizations and where reporters are more inclined to, so to speak, wear their partisan sympathies on their sleeves, there was greater evidence of a reluctance on the part of reporters to initiate the news. At the same time there was a greater openness to inputs from the incumbent parties and greater visibility gap between the incumbent and opposition parties with more visibility given to the incumbent parties. But this did not translate into evaluative comments by reporters.

We found that television news in Germany, Spain and Britain is more neutral than U.S. news in its depiction of politicians, with regard to verbal evaluations or comments made by reporters in the news during election campaigns.

In the U.S. and Britain, on the other hand, where reporters are not formally affiliated with political parties and political parties are not directly involved in the oversight of broadcasting, reporters initiated more news stories and less of a visibility gap between the incumbent and opposition candidates or parties. At the same time, however, these reporters were also more inclined to offer evaluative comments of a reinforcing, deflating or mixed kind.

Cross-national comparative survey research has a long tradition (see, for example, Almond and Verba, 1963, 1974; Barnes and Kaase 1978; Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Prezworski and Teune, 1979; Dogan and Pelassy 1984; Blumler, 1983; Kohn, 1989). Comparative research on the news media and its political impacts is more recent (see, for example, Donsbach, 1983; Koecher, 1986; Gurevitch, 1989; Patterson and Donsbach, 1993; Donsbach and Klett, 1993).

It is argued elsewhere that in each country, journalistic culture provides the framework for the reporting of politics and the campaign at election time (Semetko, 1994). The idea that the press or the news media take different forms in different countries is hardly new. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) argued that the press "always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures in which it operates." The influence of political, economic and cultural contexts on news media systems has been widely acknowledged but far less often the focus of systematic research (Blumler et al. 1992; Swanson, 1992; Blumler and Nossiter 1991; Mathes and Semetko 1991; Kaid et al. 1991; Gurevitch 1989; Paletz 1987; Smith 1979; Patterson and Donsbach, 1993). The data presented here are a starting point for identifying characteristics of journalistic culture. Max Kaase (1983) has argued that both cross-national scope and a relatively extensive time series are crucial to an understanding of political culture. The same may be said for journalistic culture. The study of news construction and content in this cross-national project is based on data from one election campaign in each country and the conclusions presented here are therefore necessarily tentative.

Notes

1. The data presented here are part of a larger cross-national comparative project involving the collection of media content data and interview data during recent elections in Germany (1990), Britain (1992), Spain (1993) and the U.S. (1992), which Semetko is currently writing under the title of Campaigning on Television: U.S. News and Elections in Comparative Perspective, to be published by

published by the University of Chicago press. The collection of TV news content and interview data, and its analysis, was supported by grants from the Joyce Foundation in the U.S., the Economic and Social Research Council in Britain, and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Michigan, and ASEP/CIRES in Spain. The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, supported Dr. Semetko's writing and analysis on the project with a research fellowship in Spring 1994.

Semetko conducted interviews and observation in television newsrooms during the final weeks of the national election campaigns in Germany, Britain and the U.S. and was granted access to all editorial meetings in each news organization. She was with the news team in Mainz at ZDF's "heute" for eight days, in late October and in mid-November 1990. Between mid to late March and early April 1992, she spent thirteen days with the News at Ten and Channel 4 News teams at ITN in London. She was also with the news team at NBC Nightly News in New York for the week of October 19 in late October 1992. Thanks are due to reporters, editors and producers in each organization for their generous assistance. Special thanks are due to Klaus Bresser and Klaus Peter Siegloch at ZDF in Mainz, and Glyn Mathias, David Mannion, Simon Bucks, Nigel Dacre, David Cowling, Michael Brunson, Richard Tait, Garron Baines, Nik Gowing and Jon Snow at ITN in London, and Don Browne, Bill Wheatley, Tom Brokaw, Lisa Meyers, Steve Friedman, Jeff Zucker, and the many others at NBC who agreed to be interviewed and to work under observation.

2 For Germany, see Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994; and for Britain, see Curtice and Semetko, 1994. Research on the effects of the news media in the Spanish 1993 general election and U.S. 1992 presidential campaign will be conducted in collaboration with national teams. In Spain this includes Professors Juan Diez Nicolas and Jose Ramon Montero (Madrid) and Richard Gunther (Ohio State). In the U.S. this includes Professors Russell Dalton (Univ. California-Irvine), Robert Huckfeldt (Indiana), Paul Allen Beck (Ohio State) and Marilyn Roberts (Florida). See Beck et al. 1993; Semetko and Roberts, 1993.

3 For further details on the coding of the variables in Britain see Nossiter et al. 1994 and Semetko et al. 1994; in Germany, see Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994. Two days in September and one in October are not included here for NBC. The content analysis of U.S. network TV news was supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation.

4 Other publications drawing on the some of the data from these studies go into greater detail regarding the single-country findings. See Curtice and Semetko 1994; Nossiter, Scammell and Semetko 1994; Semetko, Scammell and Nossiter 1994; Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994; Semetko and Roberts, 1993; Beck, Dalton and Huckfeldt 1993; Dalton and Semetko 1994;.

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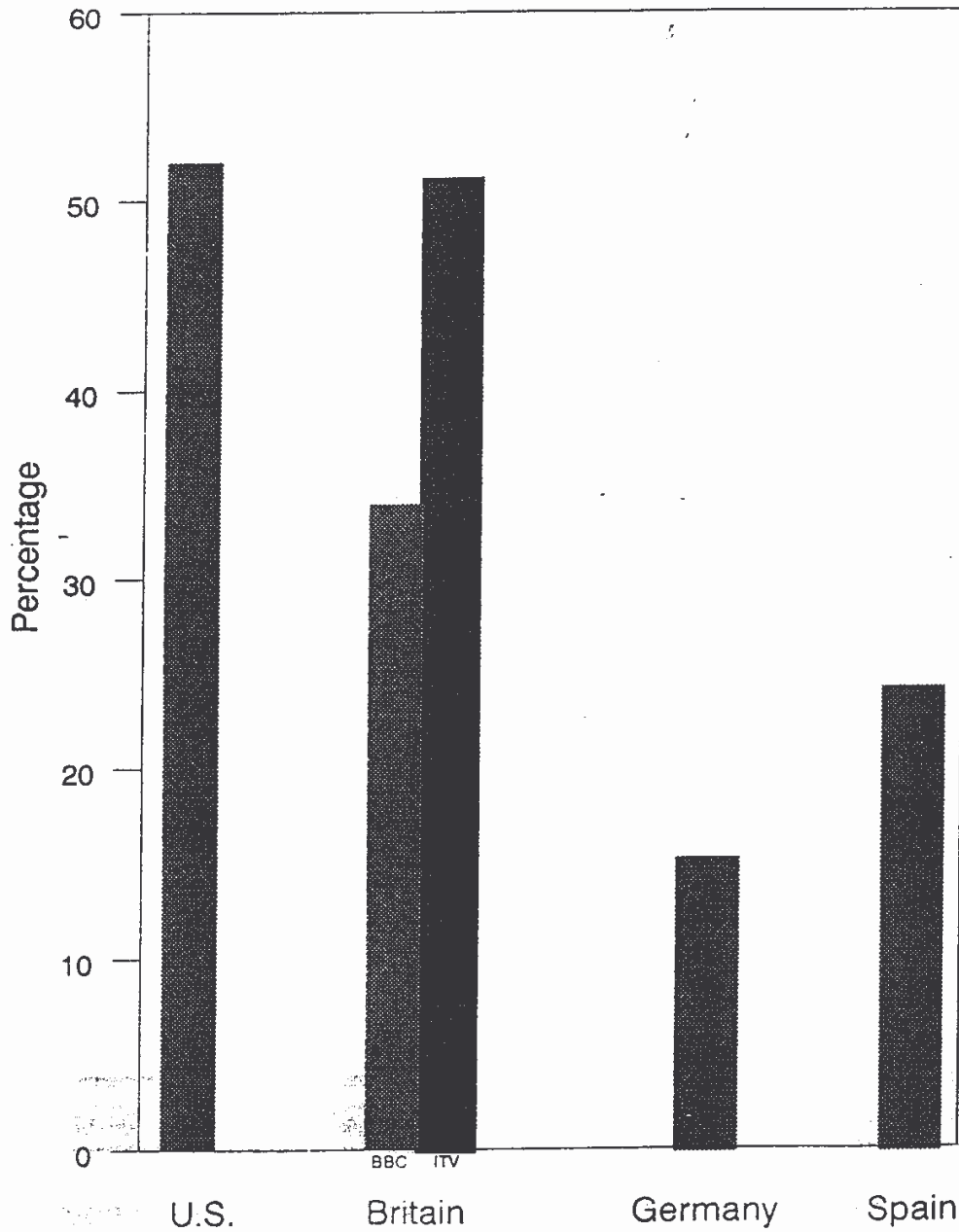
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FIGURE 1

PROPORTION OF STORIES HAVING THE CAMPAIGN/CANDIDATES AS THE MAIN TOPIC



Note: U.S. is NBC Nightly News only. Germany is all main evening news programs on ARD, ZDF, RTL plus, SAT 1. Spain is TVE 1 only

TABLE 1

Story Topics in Main Evening TV News During Recent
National Election Campaigns

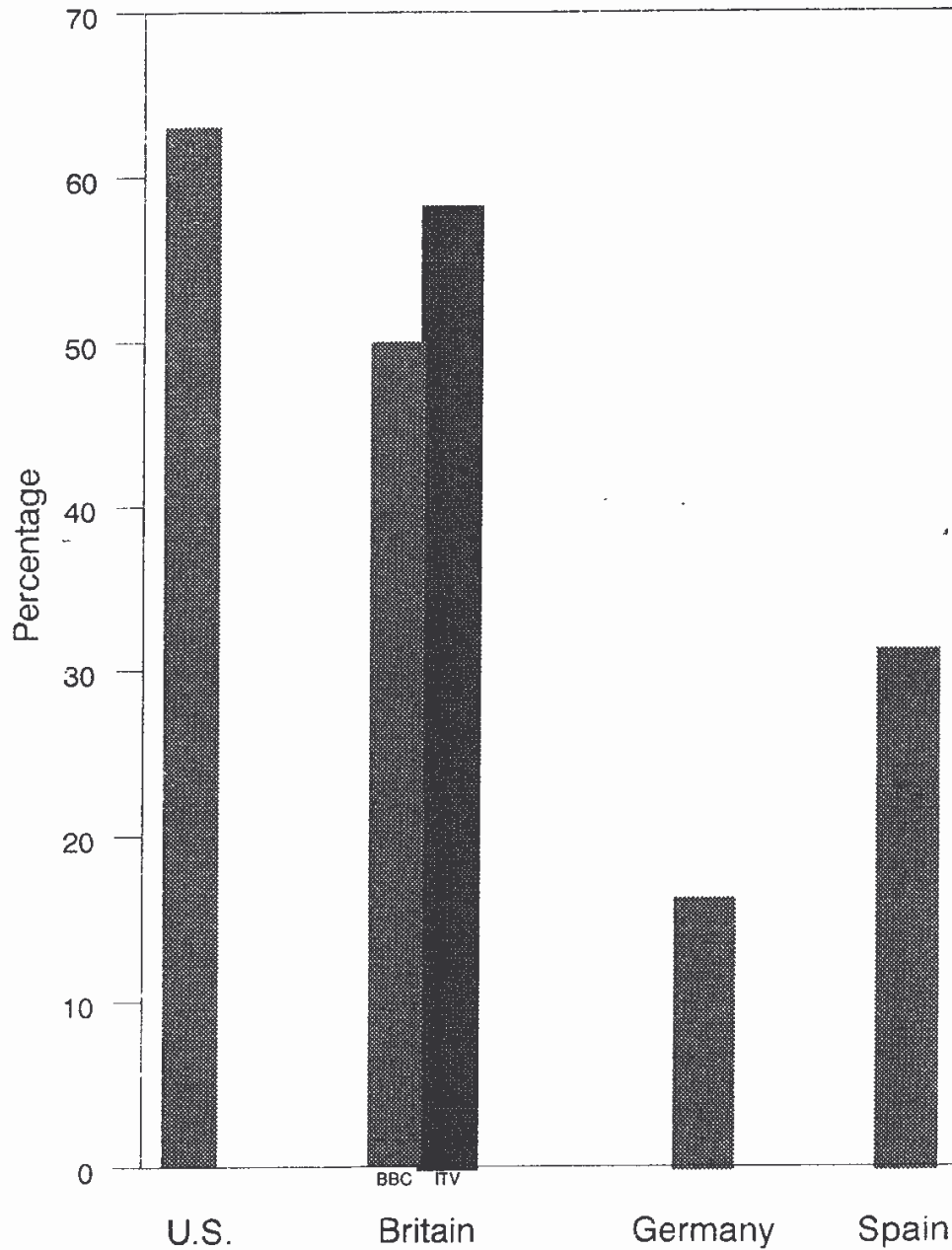
	U.S.	BRITAIN		GERMANY	SPAIN
	NBC	BBC	ITV	ARD, ZDF, RTLplus, SAT.1	TVE-1
Campaign/Candidates	52%	34%	51%	15%	24%
Party Programs/Records	8	10	7	*	14
Social Welfare/ Related Issues	11	15	10	2	14
Economy	14	19	15	3	10
Foreign Affairs	4	1	-	28	8
Environment	1	2	2	2	1
Other**	10	19	15	50	29
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	(219)	(191)	(136)	(1514)	(269)

* less than .5%.

** In U.S.: area profiles, legal issues. In Britain: devolution, Scotland and electoral reform. In Germany: East Germany developments and issues (21%), West German domestic non-campaign events such as the assassination attempt and recovery of Minister Schäuble (15%), unification (8%), immigration (1%), other (5%). In Spain: political institutions (22%), state or regional profiles (4%), other domestic themes (3%).

FIGURE 2

PROPORTION OF MEDIA-INITIATED STORIES



Note: U.S. is NBC Nightly News only. Germany is all main evening news programs on ARD, ZDF, RTL plus SAT 1. Spain is TVE 1 only.

TABLE 2

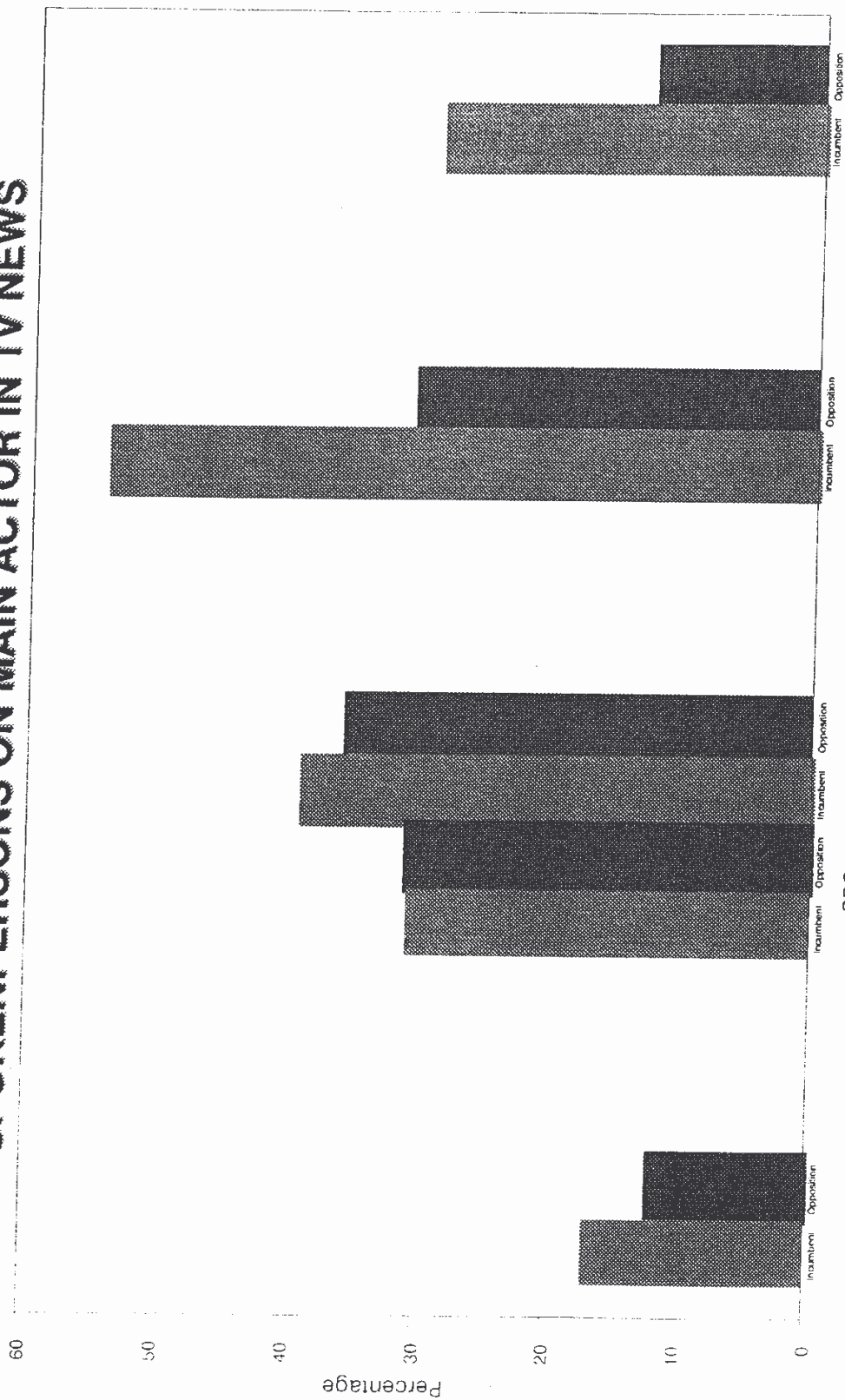
Initiators of Main Story Topic in Main Evening TV News in Recent Election Campaigns

	U.S.	BRITAIN		GERMANY	SPAIN
	NBC	BBC	ITV	ARD, ZDF, RTLplus, SAT.1	TVE-1
Parties					
Incumbent	12%	14%	7%	29%	21%
Main Opponent	10	7	7	17	14
Center	5	10	5	-	12
Other	1	8	4	2	11
Mixture of Parties	1	4	10	-	-
Media	63	50	58	16	31
Government	5	2	5	12 *	8
Non-Party	3	5	4	24	3
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	(219)	(184)	(135)	(1514)	(245)

* Includes the Bundestag (5%) and Bundersrat (2%).

FIGURE 3

**INCUMBENT PARTY SPOKENPERSONS VERSUS MAIN OPPOSITION
SPOKENPERSONS ON MAIN ACTOR IN TV NEWS**



U.S.

BBC ITV

Britain

Germany

Spain

Note: U.S. is NBC Nightly News only; Germany is all main evening news programs on ARD, ZDF, RTL, plus SAT 1; Spain is TVE 1 only.

TABLE 3

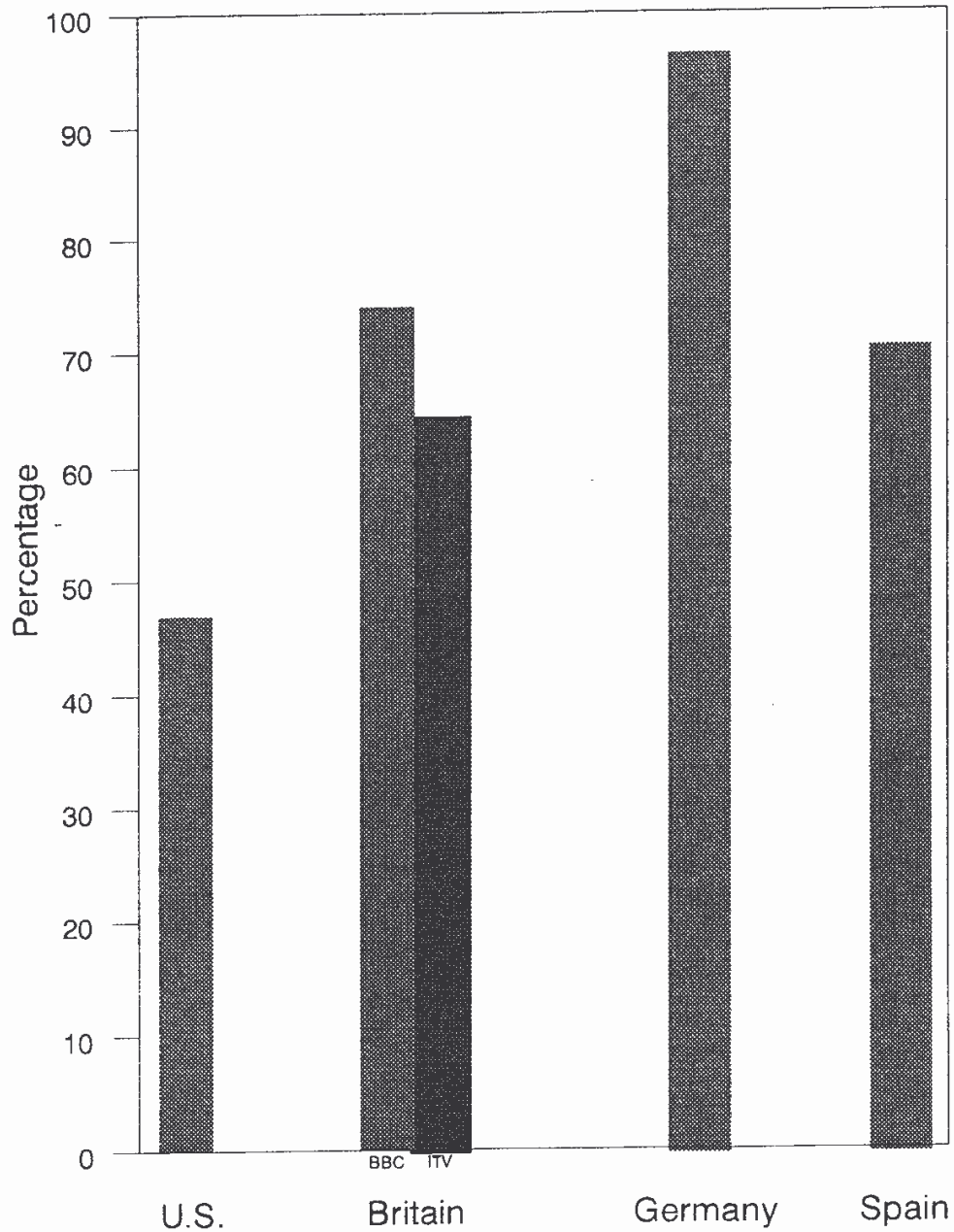
Main Actor in Main Evening TV News Coverage in Recent Election Campaigns

	U.S.	BRITAIN		GERMANY	SPAIN
	NBC	BBC	ITV	ARD, ZDF, RTLplus, SAT.1	TVE-1
Incumbent (1)	13%	7%	12%	12%	10%
Main Opponent (2)	8	6	9	2	11
Incumbent People (3)	4	26	27	42	19
Opposition People (4)	4	25	27	29	2
Other Political (5)	5	22	18	-	35
Government	2	2	3	8	9
Other (6)	64	12	4	7	14
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	(218)	(190)	(135)	(1514)	(269)

- (1) George Bush (US), John Major (UK), Helmut Kohl (Germany), Felipe González (Spain).
(2) Bill Clinton (US), Neil Kinnock (UK), Oskar Lafontaine (Germany), José M^a Aznar (Spain).
(3) In U.S.: Republican. Britain: Conservative. Germany: CDU/CSU and FDP. Spain: PSOE.
(4) In U.S.: Democrat. Britain: Labor. Germany: SPD, Green, PDS. Spain: PP.
(5) In U.S.: Perot and his campaign. Britain: Liberal and other small parties. German Liberals (FDP) have been classified as Right-wing because of their position in the CDU/CSU ruling coalition. Spain: IU, CDS, CIU, PNV, Other small parties.
(6) Interest groups, non-partisan actors.

FIGURE 4

PROPORTION OF STRAIGHT/NEUTRAL EVALUATIONS IN T.V. NEWS IN RECENT ELECTION



Note: U.S. is NBC Nightly News only. Germany is all main evening news programs on ARD, ZDF, RTL plus, SAT 1. Spain is TVE 1 only.

TABLE 4

Evaluation of Politicians on Main Evening TV News Coverage
in Recent Election Campaigns

(up to five comments per story)
(% of comments)

	U.S.	BRITAIN		GERMANY	SPAIN
	NBC	BBC	ITV	ARD, ZDF, RTLplus, SAT.1	TVE-1
Reinforcing	20%	16%	14%	1%	13%
Mixed	8	4	11	*	3
Deflating	24	6	12	2	14
Straight/Neutral	47	74	64	96	70
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	(539)	(224)	(172)	(2858)	(359)

* Less than .5%.