



Who sets the agenda?

An analysis of agenda setting and press coverage in the 1999 Greek European elections

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1117

Received June 2000

Revised March 2001

Keywords *Marketing, Greece, Politics, Content analysis, Political parties, Media*

Abstract *News media have been shown to have a significant influence in the selection and perception of issues in political campaigns. This has become known as "agenda-setting". The evolution of the agenda-setting literature is traced and the links with political campaigning and political marketing are identified. Although the term is widely used in Australasia, Europe and North America, there is no previous empirical research on agenda-setting in Greece. The article outlines a content analysis of press coverage over the period of the campaign for the European elections in Greece in 1999. The results are contrasted with an analysis of party manifestos and press releases and with public opinion prior to the campaign. Differences between the three agenda groups are identified.*

Introduction

In this article we present an overview of the literature on agenda-setting and report on a study made in the context of the 1999 European elections in Greece. There has been little if any empirical research on agenda-setting in Greece to date. As Greece has a rather different modern political history and cultural traditions from the USA and the UK, which provide the bulk of the studies in the field to date, the study provides a useful comparative perspective on the field.

A content analysis of six newspapers over the full campaign period was carried out. A similar analysis of the manifestos of six parties was done using the same categories. In addition, the press releases of the two major parties, PASOK and New Democracy, were also analysed and categorised. These results were compared with the public perceptions of the issue priorities identified in a public opinion survey immediately prior to the election campaign. We were thus able to compare the agendas of the press, the different parties and the public. Whilst European elections do not necessarily indicate how people would vote in a general election, they are considered by political parties in all member states to be a barometer of public opinion and are a valid context for a content analysis study of a political campaign and press coverage. The differences reported between the apparent agendas of the press, the political parties and the public are consistent with the results reported by

Harris *et al.* (1999) in respect of the 1997 UK General Election. The implications of this for political marketing and political campaign management are discussed.

Agenda-setting

Lippmann (1922) argued that the mass media are the link between world events and the pictures of these events in our minds. Without using the modern term, he is clearly referring to what we have come to call public agenda-setting. In a similar vein, Cohen (1963) observed that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about”.

News media appear to determine to a considerable degree the significant issues during a political campaign (McCombs and Shaw, 1977). Media coverage structures voters’ perceptions of political issues and thus affects the ground on which campaigns are conducted. This process is commonly described as “agenda-setting”. The term was first used formally in a study of the 1968 US presidential elections conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972). They concluded that the media appeared to have had a significant influence on voters’ judgements of which the major issues of the campaign were and that there was a strong relationship between the emphasis given by the media to different campaign issues and the salience which voters applied to them.

Early research defined agenda-setting in terms of the influence of the media agenda on the public one. However, the process by which issues emerge seems to be both iterative and interactive and is by no means always initiated by the media. MacKuen and Coombs (1981) were the first to find evidence (although more suggestive than conclusive) that the press was “the primary causal agent” (p. 23) while there was some minor feedback from the public to the press. Their conclusion that the influence of newspapers was more persistent than that of television is supported by work of Benton and Frazier (1976), Clarke and Fredin (1978), Asp (1983) and Allen and Izcaray (1988). A systematic definition of agenda-setting as a process, in which the media, public and political agendas interact with one another and with their mutual external environment, was proposed by Manheim and Albritton (1984) and elaborated by Manheim (1987). Each agenda has its own internal dynamics and each one is linked to the others by informational, behavioural and institutional links and could be represented in diagrammatic form (Figure 1) (Rogers and Dearing, 1988).

Agenda-setting and campaign strategy

Becker (1977), after studying the 1972 US Presidential campaign, concluded that each party strategist tried to shift the attention of the campaign to the issues which were most favourable to his candidate. Campbell *et al.* (1966) argued that parties should try to increase the salience of advantageous “valence” issues (those propositions or beliefs which are positively or negatively valued by all voters) (see also Bowers, 1977; Brosius and Kepplinger, 1992).

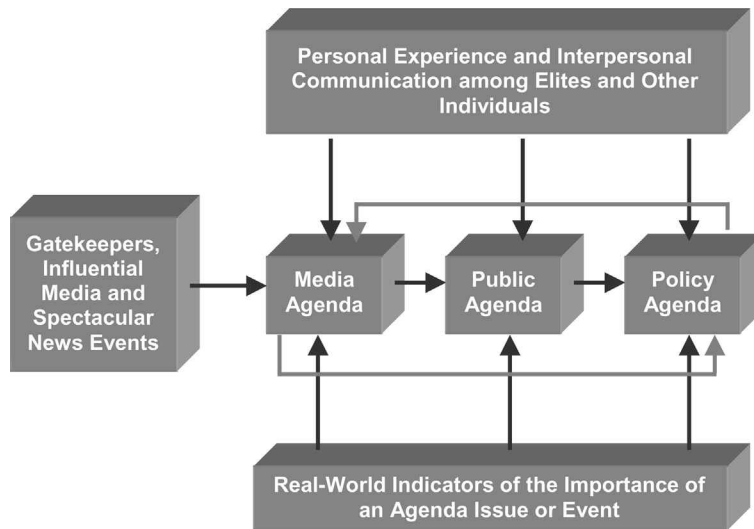


Figure 1.
Three main components
of the agenda-setting
process

Source: Taken from Rogers and Dearing (1988, p.557)

O’Keefe (1975) suggests that candidates should at least “pay lip service” (p. 146) to the issues which concern the electorate but, in turn, they should also attempt to direct voter attention to the issues they consider as important. This should be seen in conjunction to the concept of issue ownership by parties (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). Voters have prior beliefs about a party’s or candidate’s ability to deal with areas such as the economy, defence or welfare. The only communication tools over which the candidates can exert complete control, as far as the conveyed message is concerned, are political advertising, press conferences, speeches and policy statements. O’Keefe and Atwood (1981) define the purposes of political advertising as twofold: to boost the morale of campaign workers; and to make available candidate and party information that have not been filtered through the news media. Roberts and McCombs (1994), after studying the televised political advertisements that were broadcast during the 1990 Texas gubernatorial campaign, concluded that political advertising had a significant agenda-setting influence in both the press and television news agendas. Ansolabehere *et al.* (1991) concluded that paid political advertisements were more important in less newsworthy campaigns.

Norpoth and Buchanan (1992) argue that candidates should never follow a strategy of “trespassing” on the issue territory of another party. They suggest that such a strategy runs the risk of raising issues and images that the public has favourably associated with the opposing party. Evidence for this in practice is provided by Petrocik (1996) who reports that, during the 1980 Presidential election, the agendas of the *New York Times* and the two candidates were very different. Carter and Reagan tailored their activities and

their reports to match issues they each owned rather than adapt them to the press agenda.

Kleinnijenhuis and De Ridder (1998) tested two issue-voting theories:

- (1) the issue ownership theory which argues that a party will be preferred by the voters whenever the issues it owns dominate the media agenda; and
- (2) the issue position theory which argues that the voters' choice will be the result of a comparison between their own issue position and the current positions of the parties.

Both theories offered explanations of the electoral outcomes in Germany and The Netherlands in 1994.

On the basis of the literature, one might expect to find that party agendas do not necessarily correlate with the apparent press agenda. Clearly, parties and candidates seek to influence the media agenda in their favour. However, the literature does not offer clear guidance about how they might adapt their strategy as the campaign unfolds, particularly for those falling behind.

Agenda-setting and political marketing

There are only limited references in the political marketing literature to agenda-setting and the press. O'Shaughnessy (1990) and Newman (1994, 1999) make no specific reference to the agenda-setting role of the press in spite of the latter considering newspapers as "one of the key power brokers in the political process" (Newman, 1994, p. 30). He argues that its role during election campaigns has been enhanced by the emergence of investigative journalism. In her assessment of the 1987 UK General Election campaign, Scammell (1995) mentions agenda-setting in the particular context of political parties trying to influence the media agenda. Maarek (1995) describes agenda-setting as the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda, which was the original concept, and refers to just three studies on the subject, the latest being 1981. Kavanagh (1995) noted the interaction and influence between press and television and the way in which stories which appear in one medium may influence the agenda of the other during an election campaign. The apparent failure of press conferences to influence the political agenda in the 1992 UK General Election was discussed by Kavanagh and Gosschalk (1995). Harris *et al.* (1999) studied press coverage leading up to the 1997 UK General Election, which was dominated by a number of key issues, notably "sleaze". They concluded that these issues were not necessarily initiated by news media, but that, once established, they acquired a momentum over which the political parties, particularly the Conservatives, had little influence.

Greece and the Greek electorate

Greece is a parliamentary democracy with a population of about 10.5 million. The president is elected for a five-year term and there is a unicameral parliament with some 300 members, elected every four years. Greece became a

member of the European Economic Community in 1981. Elections to the European Parliament took place in 1981, 1984, 1989 and 1994, as in all member states. There are seven parties – PASOK, the ruling party (socialist), New Democracy (ND) (conservative), KKE (communist), Democratic Social Movement (left-wing), Coalition (left-wing), the Liberals, and Political Spring (a breakaway from New Democracy; conservative). At the beginning of the 1990s PASOK and New Democracy accounted for 80 per cent of the votes cast in general elections. This proportion has fallen, but Greek politics are still very much a duopoly.

These two parties have dominated the political scene of the country since the fall of the military regime and the restoration of democracy in Greece in 1974. PASOK has been in power since 1993, latterly led by the “modernisers” in the party. As in other European countries, the basic dividing line in the Greek party system after the second World War was the differentiation between Left and Right in politics. This is still the basis of political allegiance for most Greeks, though it is weakening with increasing evidence of growth in the centre and on the right of the spectrum (Vernadakis, 1999).

The study

The study consists of a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) of newspaper articles which appeared in six Greek newspapers during the period 3 May until 12 June 1999. This period covers the election campaign, which started on Monday, 10 May, the “official” agreed starting date of the campaign period for all parties. Press coverage of the week before that was included, as the parties had already begun their campaigns before the “official” date. The actual election day was Sunday, 13 June.

The newspapers chosen for analysis were two morning papers *Kathimerini* and *To Vima* and four afternoon newspapers, *Ta Nea*, *Eleftherotipia*, *Eleftheros Typos* and *Ethnos*. These papers had been selected for the analysis on their respective size of circulation and spread of readers. The two morning newspapers make up 80 per cent of the copies of morning newspaper sales and the four afternoon ones make up 70 per cent of the copies of afternoon newspapers sold during the same period. In aggregate, according to the Athenian Daily Newspapers Owners’ Union (EIEEA), the six accounted for more than 72 per cent of all newspapers sold in Greece in May and June 1999. This meant that the news content of the press in Greece in the period was covered in some depth and allowed the agenda-setting role of the press in Greece to be assessed. The issue categories used to classify the content are the ones used by the Public Opinion Poll Institute (V-PRC) in its studies of political opinion in Greece (Mendrinou, 1999). The one alteration that was made was to merge the categories of “Criminality” and “Illegal immigrants”, as these issues had become closely associated in the context of this election.

The press content analysed was taken from the main “body” of each newspaper – those pages directly concerned with political and social content. International pages, fashion pages, socialite pages, supplements, magazines

and financial pages were excluded from the analysis, unless reference to articles in these pages had been made in the front-page coverage of the newspaper. In that case, these specific articles were included. Sports pages were completely excluded. Newspapers issues were collected daily, apart from the Sunday editions. Coverage was measured in terms of square centimetres as well as the number of articles.

The campaign agenda of each party was traced through content analysis of party manifestos for the 1999 elections and changes in the party agenda of the two major parties (ND and PASOK) was monitored through the press releases issued by them during the election campaign. Walters *et al.* (1996) argue that press releases are an important element of a party's integrated political strategy, amplifying campaign themes and images and generating media coverage. In analysing these we used the number of issues rather than measuring space. New Democracy, as the main opposition party, had formed shadow ministries, which also issued press releases through the party's press office. PASOK's press office issued primarily party press releases. In order to make the two bodies of press releases comparable, the body of the government announcements issued by the Prime Minister or Ministers during the given period, were incorporated in the body of PASOK's press releases. The public agenda was identified from the results of a survey conducted by the V-PRC Institute in April 1999.

Whether the article appeared on the front page or inside pages was recorded. A distinction was also made between editorial comment, comments from prominent journalists and explicit news coverage. It was expected that each newspaper would put the stories which it considered as important on the front page and these stories were most likely to be the subject of editorial or prominent journalists' commentary (Shaw, 1977; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Watt *et al.*, 1993). The significant role of editorials in influencing people in all ideological groups has also been studied (MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Entman, 1989). The amount of space given to an issue in an editorial is an indicator of the importance the editor places on the topic and thus of the importance the reader should attach to it.

The method in context

The period studied (3 May to 12 June 1999 – 40 days) is similar to those in other election agenda-setting research. Siune and Borre (1975) studied a period of three weeks, Asp (1983) a month-long period, Semetko *et al.* (1991) a period of 24 days, and Harris *et al.* (1999) a period of 45 days.

Content analysis is the dominant approach in agenda-setting research. Semetko *et al.* (1991) present the most comprehensive study of the influence of the media in campaign agendas both in the UK and the USA and state that although content analysis does not shed any light into the behind-the-scenes forces and relations which result in producing a daily newspaper, it "can document what the media have covered" (p. 183). According to Phillips (1992) content analysis measures actual media behaviour. Dearing and Rogers (1996),

in an overview of the methodology used in agenda-setting research, mention only content analysis as the method to determine the media agenda. They emphasise that content analysis in typical agenda-setting research is concerned with the aggregate number of news stories and not their exact content.

The majority of studies including measurement of the press agenda have used the total number of news stories about an issue (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Tidmarch *et al.*, 1984; Semetko *et al.*, 1991; McCombs *et al.*, 1997). Fewer studies (Stone and McCombs, 1981; Salwen, 1988) have used the total amount of space devoted to an issue (usually in column inches), while others have used just the number of front-page stories (Wanta and Wu, 1992; Zhu, 1992). There is still a debate on which is a better measure of the press agenda. MacKuen and Coombs (1981) argue that the simple total of articles which are devoted to an issue reflects the editor's judgement of its salience (see also Mazur, 1989). Phillips (1992) and Watt *et al.* (1993) favour measurement in column inches because it gives an idea of the level of authority and impact the article conveys on the reader and also shows how much space the newspaper is prepared to devote to the issue when all related competitive coverage is taken into account. Stone and McCombs (1981) compared the total number of stories and the total number of column inches devoted to the issues of the agendas. This yielded a correlation of +0.90 across all issues. They concluded that a simple count of stories might be sufficient for the measurement of the media agenda. We measured both space in square centimetres (equivalent to column inches) and the number of articles.

We follow Phillips (1992) in including both headline and photographs as well as text in the measurement of press coverage, as this reflects the impact of an article on the reader. The same method was applied in the measurement of parties' manifestos. The press releases consisted of text only without photographs. Though photographs have been the subject of separate content analysis and found to have agenda-setting influence (Wanta, 1986) they were not separately analysed by us. Cartoons were not included in our study though they have also been the subject of research during election campaigns (Seymour-Ure, 1986).

The different agendas

The public agenda was taken from the results of a nationwide public opinion poll conducted by V-PRC Institute in April 1999 (Mendrinou, 1999), just before the start of the campaign. Table I shows the percentage of the sample reporting an issue as their principal concern.

The press coverage of all six newspapers on every issue was analysed for each category of issue. The totals are shown in Table II. The European election coverage is shown separately by way of comparison, though it is not one of the ten identified issue categories. Other issues cover the full range of other stories of public interest (e.g. personalities, accidents etc.).

From the results of all press coverage categories, it appears that the press as a whole has its own agenda, promoted through the level of coverage of issues.

Table I.
The initial public
agenda

Issues	Percentage
International issues and foreign policy	28.56
Economy	27.81
Unemployment	25.14
Crisis of institutions and values	5.10
Criminality and illegal immigrants	4.02
Education	3.00
Health and social welfare	2.43
Other social issues (e.g. drugs)	1.78
Environment and life quality	1.64
Other issues	0.51

Source: Mendrinou (1999, p. 55)

Issues	Front page cm ²	Editorial cm ²	Comment cm ²	News cover cm ²
International issues and foreign policy	50,299.15 (1)	16,446.75 (1)	156,332.1 (1)	913,546.9 (1)
Other issues	11,811.15 (2)	1,934.7 (3)	8,942.05 (2)	232,687.9 (2)
Health and social welfare	10,515.15 (3)	2,206.35 (2)	6,765.6 (3)	125,464.25 (4)
Criminality and illegal immigrants	10,178.8 (4)	1,603.9 (5)	6,674.4 (4)	144,515.5 (3)
Economy	7,736.25 (5)	1,443.85 (6)	2,047.8 (6)	70,533.45 (5)
Education	3,032.55 (6)	865.85 (8)	1,081.5 (10)	68,904 (6)
Environment and life quality	2,366.5 (7)	1,023.25 (7)	1,087.95 (9)	67,018.7 (7)
Unemployment	2,305 (8)	541.8 (9)	1,789.6 (7)	24,006.05 (10)
Other social issues (e.g. drugs)	2,278.2 (9)	376.75 (10)	1,152.7 (8)	34,830.1 (9)
Crisis of institutions and values	2,019.4 (10)	1,648.55 (4)	3,940.5 (5)	56,939.8 (8)
European elections	17,148.3	6,653.25	61,037.3	439,933.35

Table II.
The aggregate press
agenda

Note: Column rankings in brackets

One might also argue that, regardless of political affiliations and ideological preferences, newspapers tend to have similar journalistic norms and criteria of newsworthiness. We are satisfied that the aggregate newspaper agenda is representative of the six newspapers' coverage of issues and can be used in the research.

The content-analysis of the party manifestos produced the space coverage shown in Table III. The parties' aggregate agenda was not calculated as the objective was to draw conclusions for each specific party, and especially for the two major ones, and not for the parties as a whole.

The press releases for the two major parties during the election campaign were analysed using the same ten categories and are shown in Table IV. However, given the different nature of press releases, just the number of clear references to each category was recorded. It is interesting to note that two-thirds of the ruling party (PASOK) press releases made no explicit reference to any of the identified categories.

The agendas of the mainstream parties were correlated in order to determine whether they, despite their ideological differences, assigned similar importance to issues (Table V). For this analysis, Spearman's Rho rank order

Issues	PASOK cm ²	ND cm ²	KKE cm ²	DSM cm ²	Coalition cm ²	Pol Spring cm ²	Liberal cm ²
Economy	7,527 (1)	1,734 (1)	2,549 (1)	361 (2)	110 (4)	230 (2)	180
International issues and foreign policy	4,761 (2)	198 (4)	2,207 (2)	725 (1)	1,953 (1)	2,450 (1)	144 (2)
Health and social welfare	3,933 (3)	114 (6)	160 (3)	128.5 (3)	170 (2)	80 (7)	135 (3)
Other issues	2,964 (4)	1,120 (3)	0 (8=)	0 (10)	0 (9=)	0 (8=)	0 (5=)
Other social issues	1,331 (5)	150 (5)	155 (4)	66 (4)	112 (3)	130 (4)	0 (5=)
Environment and life quality	1,083 (6)	110 (7)	0 (8=)	30 (7)	20 (7)	0 (8=)	0 (5=)
Unemployment	622 (7)	76 (8)	77 (7)	6 (9)	70 (5)	90 (6)	0 (5=)
Crisis of institutions and values	533 (8)	34 (10)	96 (5)	38 (6)	55 (6)	170 (3)	180 (1)
Education	328 (9)	51 (9)	20 (6)	54 (5)	10 (8)	0 (8=)	0 (5=)
Criminality and illegal immigrants	239 (10)	1,731 (2)	0 (8=)	25 (8)	0 (9=)	110 (5)	75 (4)

Note: Column ranks in brackets

Table III.
The party agendas at
the beginning of the
campaign

Issues	New democracy Number of press release references on subject (<i>N</i> = 153)		PASOK Number of press release references on subject (<i>N</i> = 91)	
International issues and foreign policy	24	(1)	10	(1)
Other issues	18	(2)	6	(3)
Economy	13	(3)	3	(4)
Crisis of institutions and values	12	(4)	1	(6=)
Criminality and illegal immigrants	10	(5)	2	(5)
Unemployment	10	(6)	0	(8=)
Health and social welfare	7	(7)	8	(2)
Environment and life quality	4	(8)	0	(8=)
Education	3	(9)	0	(8=)
Other social issues	3	(10)	1	(6=)
European elections	49		60	
Total	153		91	

Table IV. Note: Column ranks in brackets

	PASOK	ND	KKE	DSM	Coalition	Political Spring	The Liberals
PASOK		0.491	0.693*	0.588*	0.663*	0.362	-0.020
ND			0.166	0.164	0.012	0.301	-0.145
KKE				0.865**	0.88**	0.739*	0.297
DSM					0.796**	0.607*	0.328
Coalition						0.597*	0.318
Political Spring							0.498
The Liberals							

Table V.
Correlations between
party agendas

correlation coefficient was chosen. The 5 per cent and 1 per cent significance levels for samples of ten pairs are 0.564, and 0.746 respectively (Siegel, 1956). These are indicated in the tables by a single asterisk and a double asterisk respectively.

Five correlations are significant at the 5 per cent level (*) and four are at the 1 per cent level (8). Twelve correlations are not significant at the 5 per cent level. These results suggest that there are two blocks of agendas in the Greek political scene. In the one block, there is "New Democracy" (the conservative party), whose agenda did not correlate significantly with the agenda of any other party, and in the other block we find PASOK (the socialist party), KKE

(the communist party), DSM and Coalition (left-wing parties) and “Political Spring” (right-wing party). The first four parties of the second block have high correlations among their agendas, which indicates a strong relationship. This may well be due to the fact that all four target more or less the same part of the electorate (centre-left and left-wing voters). The surprising result is that “Political Spring”, in spite of being a right-wing party (splinter from “New Democracy”), has an agenda which correlated highly with the agenda of the three left-wing parties (KKE, DSM and Coalition). This by no means suggests that the parties, whose agendas showed a high level of correlation, propose the same policies. It means that these parties have identified the same issues and rank them similarly.

Another interesting result is the moderately high correlation between the New Democracy and PASOK agendas in spite of not reaching the 5 per cent level of statistical significance ($\rho = 0.491$). Taking into consideration that PASOK’s agenda showed the highest correlation among “left-wing” parties’ agendas with the one of New Democracy, this indicates that the two major parties may have a quite similar view of which are the important issues for contemporary Greek society. An alternative explanation is that they are responding to one another as the campaign unfolds.

Though the election was for the European Parliament, clearly “internal” issues (such as “Health and social welfare”, “Crisis of institutions and values” and “Criminality and illegal immigrants”) form a significant part of the agendas of all the parties. The focus of the campaign on issues of “internal” (national) interest was particularly obvious in the case of the two major parties. One explanation is that the 1999 European election was a “preliminary test” for the General Election in 2000. It is not unusual for European Elections to be fought on domestic political lines in member states. The centrality of domestic or internal issues in the Greek European Election campaign suggests that agenda-setting is relatively unaffected by the type of election.

The aggregate press and the parties’ agendas were also correlated in order to determine the strength of the relationship between them (Table VI).

The vast majority of correlations were not significant at the 5 per cent level. The results for the Liberals are interesting as they had only four issues in their

	Front page	Editorial	Commentary	News reporting
PASOK	0.467	0.394	0.430	0.358
ND	0.612*	0.261	0.467	0.612*
KKE	0.080	0.202	0.227	0.031
DSM	0.2	0.248	0.115	0.212
Coalition	0.067	0.176	0.213	-0.049
Political Spring	-0.018	0.215	0.362	0.080
The Liberals	0.164	0.710*	0.608*	0.328

Table VI.

agenda. New Democracy is the only other party with an apparent relationship with the press agenda, and then in the “Front page” and “News reporting” rather than the “Editorial” and “Comment” categories. These results do not mean that “New Democracy” received favourable coverage for its views; they simply mean that the party ranked the issues similarly to the newspapers in aggregate.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from these results is that although the parties and the press have distinct agendas, the press and political parties do not have a common view of the relative importance of the issues in Greek society.

Similarly, rank order correlations were calculated between the aggregate press agenda and the public agenda (Table VII).

These results indicate that there is no strong relationship between the public agenda and the aggregate press agenda. The correlations are very low for all four categories of news coverage. This is particularly interesting given that the measurement of public opinion preceded the period of our measurement of the aggregate press agenda. By contrast, the correlations between the party agendas and public opinion show some significant relationships in a number of cases and, generally, apparently a higher level of association, though the low figures for the two leading parties are striking (Table VIII). Indeed, the overall results suggest that the public and party agendas are distinctly different.

From a political marketing point of view, it seems that most Greek parties (especially the two major ones), in spite of doing their market research (focus groups, opinion polls, etc.) choose to attach different relative importance to

Table VII.

	Public agenda
Front page	0.055
Editorial	0.164
Commentary	0.212
News reporting	0.055

Table VIII.

	Public agenda
PASOK	0.164
New Democracy	0.079
KKE	0.620*
DSM	0.479
Coalition	0.450
Political Spring	0.779**
The Liberals	0.403

issues than electors do. This conclusion is supported by a recent study from the University of Piraeus (Roubanis, 2000) using the Delphi Method with political correspondents who work in the media. The correspondents reportedly believe that the parties do not respond to contemporary needs satisfactorily, as they have neither identified the major issues of the country nor formed policies which will successfully solve them.

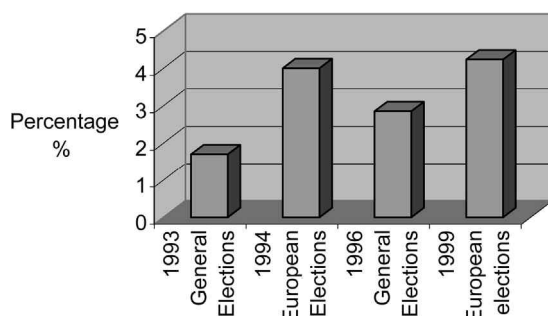
The 1999 Elections for the European Parliament showed interesting changes in the allegiance of the electorate (Table IX) with smaller parties gaining at the expense of the two leading ones. Whilst this might be attributed partly to the lower significance that voters in the EU attribute to European as opposed to national elections, disaffection with parties and the electoral system appears to be increasing. The proportion of blank and spoilt ballot papers (Figure 2) and the level of abstention is rising for both national and European elections, though it is still higher for the latter (Figure 3). The share of ND and PASOK in the actual election fell to a new low of just under 69 per cent.

The apparent lack of a strong relationship among the public agenda and the two major parties' agendas shown in this study may provide some explanation for this decline in popularity of the two major parties and evidence of a more general disenchantment with elections (Figure 4). Small parties' agendas showed much higher correlations with the public agenda, which may account for their growing public support.

Political identification	1996 (general elections) (%)	1999 (European elections) (%)
With PASOK	41.6	34.3
With New Democracy	37.5	32.0
With small parties	10.8	14.6
With no party at all	14.9	21.8

Source: Nikolakopoulos (1999)

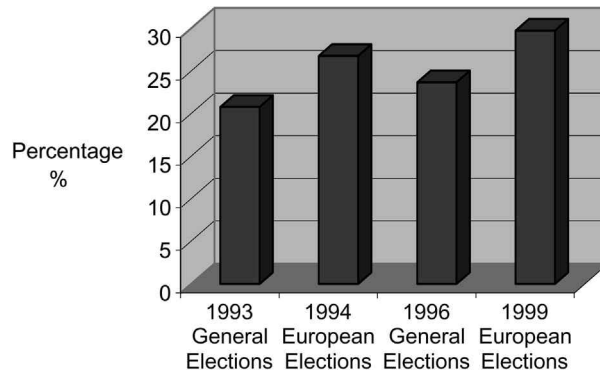
Table IX.
Trends in the political identification of the electorate (1996-1999)



Source: Stagkos (1999, p.A5)

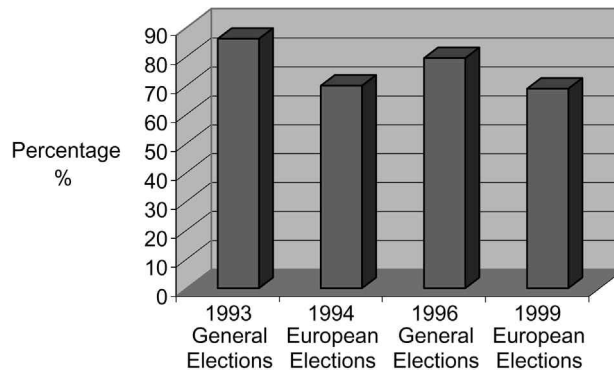
Figure 2.
The evolution of "blank" and "spoilt" ballot papers (1993-1999)

Figure 3.
Evolution of voters'
abstention



Source: Roubanis and Karimali (1999, p.23)

Figure 4.
Evolution of the two
major parties' aggregate
percentage vote



Source: Roubanis and Karimali (1999, p.23)

Discussion

The findings of previous studies on the relationships among the press, parties' and public agendas are somewhat confused. In respect of the relationship between the press agenda and the parties' agendas, our findings are similar to those of Tichenor (1982), who also found great disparities among them during the 1976 Presidential Election. On the contrary, Dalton *et al.* (1998), after studying the 1992 Presidential Election in the USA, found significant agreement between the press and candidates' agendas. Our results are consistent with the campaign strategy literature which implies that parties should focus on the issues they "own" and not be drawn on opponents' territory.

Analysing the data on the relationship between the press agenda and the public agenda is concerned, the findings of this study are again in discord with those of Dalton *et al.* (1998) who found that the match between the press and public agendas was "striking" (p. 474).

The findings support the issue ownership theory (Kleinnijenhuis and De Ridder, 1998). This theory states that a party will be preferred by the voters when the issues it owns dominate the media agenda. “New Democracy’s” agenda showed a stronger relationship with the press agenda than the other parties’ agendas did, which may have facilitated its electoral victory, though we offer this conclusion with caution given that we did not study broadcast media coverage. The results do not seem to support Kleinnijenhuis and De Ridder’s issue position theory which states that the voters will prefer the party whose issue positions reflect their own. “New Democracy” won the elections (albeit with a reduced vote) in spite of its agenda having the lowest correlation with the priorities of the public agenda.

The Greek press seems to play a role similar to the one played by the US Press (according to Semetko *et al.*, 1991) as far as the formation of the campaign agenda is concerned. The press had great discretion in emphasising or downplaying issues, although this ability seemed to become limited during the campaign. This role has been termed by Semetko *et al.* (1991) as “agenda shaping”. Missika and Bregman (1987) suggest that the formation of the campaign agenda is achieved through interaction between the media and the politicians. Voters are obliged to accept the outcome of this interaction although they can react to it; what they cannot do is to act proactively in order to influence it. As the agenda does not reflect the public worries, the electorate is disenchanted and votes for smaller parties, abstains or casts blank or spoilt ballots. This is a good description of the observable trends in the Greek 1999 European Elections. Similar phenomena may be observed elsewhere in Europe, though manifestations of it vary according to the particular form of electoral system.

Studies of this kind have limitations. First, whilst the issues are identified, the actual positions of the different parties and the press are not. We have noted that broadcast media were not studied. Also for the purposes of this analysis we treated press coverage as a whole, aggregating across the six newspapers, as we were interested in the overall press agenda rather than identifying differing perspectives between them. However, the results do appear to tie in with results from other analyses of the elections under consideration.

Conclusions

The result that the press agenda in terms of the relative priority assigned to issues, whether in editorial, other comment or core news coverage, differs from both the party agendas and the public one is a striking one. However, we do not believe necessarily that the press deliberately sets out to construct an agenda to influence elections, though papers may have strong party allegiances. There does appear in a number of national press settings to be some consensus about what makes newsworthy stories at any particular time during an election. These stories and themes are sometimes initiated by the parties themselves, sometimes by what are considered “gaffes”, and sometimes by external events. What does appear clear is that parties, even if they manage to initiate coverage

of a specific issue, do not subsequently manage to adapt the overall press agenda to their specific priorities. The difference between the public and the press agendas is not entirely consistent with studies in other national settings, but it may be evidence to suggest that the public does not necessarily respond to the press agenda and, that if they do converge, the movement may be from either side.

We tentatively link the divergence between the parties' and the public agendas to making the electorate feel isolated and ignored by its political leaders and thus become dissatisfied with the political system and the parties (first the agendas diverge, then comes the disenchantment); this is a matter of concern in many democracies. There are however, other, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations. First, the need to keep party activists content plays a significant role in the construction of political manifestos and other messages. Second, the need to construct distinct market positions may lead to different emphases on issues and, at least in the short term, a party's positioning strategy has to be reasonably consistent with voters' perceptions. Finally, the campaign strategy literature emphasis on issue ownership and parties sticking to their own issue territory may actually inhibit agenda adaptation. It offers little guidance to parties or candidates who fall behind in campaigns. We now have good models of the agenda-setting process. What appears to be needed at this point are theories on which to base campaign strategies which are capable of adapting and responding as events unfold.

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