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While the relationship between public opinion, mass media, and political elites in the United States is well documented, less is known about this topic in Europe. I argue that the way the media covers a European Union (EU) affair is more prevalent and relevant than often considered and demonstrate how it has consequences for European public opinion and policymaking. Expanding the traditional focus of political communication theories to the European context, I show that the media effects are pertinent in this geography as well.

In doing so, I conduct four empirical investigations. First, I ask if the press coverage affects how people perceive the importance of the Eastern enlargement of the EU which occurred in May 2004. I find that the media’s coverage of EU enlargement fluctuates across the course of the time frame of this research along with the public salience of the issue. Second, I ask what role the media play in shaping public perceptions and evaluations of EU enlargement. I find that the aspects of the issues that
are emphasized more frequently by the media attract more attention from the European public. My findings further suggest that with the increasing exposure to enlargement-related coverage in the press, more people form negative opinion about EU enlargement. Third, through an individual-level analysis, I test if the effects of print media content on the people are contingent on other factors such as the socioeconomic status, political sophistication, issue interest, media exposure, or expectations of various consequences of EU enlargement. Ultimately, I place the EU enlargement debate in political context to provide an in-depth examination of the relationship between the people, the media and official policies of Britain and France on EU enlargement.

The result of this dissertation is a clearer understanding of the role of the news media in shaping the public agenda on EU affairs. In addition, the findings broaden our understanding of the flow of information and the critical linkages between the media, political elites and the masses, the center of the democratic process.