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Chapter 6

Summaries

6.1 English summary

Political “Frenemies”

Party Strategies, Electoral Competition & Coalition Cooperation

The overwhelming majority of governments formed after elections have been coalition governments, in which two or more parties cooperate. Parties, therefore, have to target their message to both the electorate and the possible future and/or current coalition partner(s). Oftentimes the preferences of voters and future and/or current coalition partner(s) do not align. This places political parties between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, parties aim to represent their voters and to implement the policy pledges. On the other hand, parties have to account for the policy preferences of their coalition partner(s) and end up compromising some of their policy pledges. The Dutch Social Democrats (PvdA) have been fiercely punished during the most recent Dutch elections: They lost 29 of the 38 seats the party used to have. Media and pundits attributed this loss to the fact that the PvdA gave in too much of their principles to appease their coalition partner the Liberal Conservatives (VVD). Simultaneously, the Cabinet Rutte II, consisting of both the PvdA and the VVD, was the first coalition government since 1998 to not terminate due to conflict. The PvdA might have traded-off the pledges they made towards their voters in favor of stability in the coalition. Parties in a coalition government need to weigh whether being friends with their coalition partner(s) is more beneficial than being enemies. The result of this trade-off, also referred to as the coalition dilemma, is decisive for their communication strategy. The current literature explaining changes in party

communication does not account for these trade-offs coalition government participation brings. In this thesis, I therefore pose and answer the question *how past coalition participation and future coalition considerations influence parties to change their communication*.

Political parties have multiple goals in mind when crafting their communication strategy. They want to gain votes (i.e. vote-seeking goals), as well as participate in a coalition government (i.e. office-seeking goals). Being in office yields cabinet portfolios. These are important to augment a party's influence on public policy (i.e. policy-seeking goals). Seldom are parties able to propose a strategy that accommodates all goals. Hence, parties have to trade-off vote-, office- and policy-seeking goals. In my dissertation, I argue that how parties trade-off vote, office and policy is determined by the so-called coalition dilemma (see Chapter 2). Moreover, I propose in Chapter 2 that to explain political parties' communication strategies, we have to refine our current theories and empirical strategies. First of all, I state that our current explanations should consider government participation as an important reason for parties to change their communication. Especially, because coalition participation changes how parties weigh their goals. Parties in a coalition government cannot only listen to the voters, but they also need to make sure not to alienate their coalition partner(s). Second, I argue that to understand party communication strategies, we should study inter-party responsiveness instead of assuming all parties making independent decisions. For example, in Germany, parties oftentimes send coalition signals, indicating to voters that if those parties gain a majority, they aim to coalesce. In order to send these coalition signals, parties have to cooperate and align strategies. Third, I pose that in order to understand how the coalition dilemma affects party communication, we should broaden the scope of party communication. While most studies have looked at parties' manifesto's, there is a multitude of documents in which parties propose policy alternatives. These other documents are important because the trade-off between the party's goals might have changed over the course of the electoral cycle and that will be reflected in these documents. In Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 I refine the existing theories, use novel data and innovative empirical strategies to answer how past coalition participation and future coalition considerations influence parties to change their communication.

In Chapter 3, I investigate how party communication in-between election periods changes. On an almost daily basis, opinion polls update political parties on their virtual performance – have they gained or lost seats in the polls? Do parties change their communication based on this information? And do coalition government and opposition parties respond similarly to this information? These are the central questions I answer in this chapter. I conduct automatic text analysis using >20,000 press releases issued by Dutch political parties between 1997 and 2014. Using quantitative methods, I demonstrate that both coalition government and opposition parties do not alter their communication based on gains or losses in the polls.

Opposition parties, however, do respond to gaining (losing) seats in the actual elections: losing seats leads them to change their platform. Coalition government parties seem to not care about vote goals when they craft their press releases. The results of Chapter 3 thus show that coalition government and opposition parties weigh their goals differently when they decide on their communication strategy.

Chapter 4 examines the conditions under which coalition government parties converge or diverge their election manifesto. In this chapter, I analyze 3,766 election manifestos of 11 Western European countries where coalition governments are the norm in the period 1960 till 2013. Based on the statistical analyses I conduct, I conclude that government parties stick together when inter-party cooperation works. This is reinforced by familiarity between two coalition parties and by the absence of inter-party conflict. Second, government parties stick together when they are popular. Conversely, coalition partners drift apart because of conflict or predicted electoral losses. These findings of Chapter 4 underpin the critique I voiced in Chapter 2, where I stated that we should study parties' inter-responsiveness.

In Chapter 5, I delve deeper into the possibility that parties cooperate to achieve their goals. I theorize that parties' use their tone of voice to send signals to other parties. By speaking positively about another party, the party flirts and sends the signal that they think alike and therefore would cooperate well together. Talking negatively signals the opposite. I argue in this chapter that parties use the debates to explore potential coalition partners. Empirically, I test my expectation using the Dutch parliamentary debates between 1998 and 2012. I conduct automatic text analysis to subtract parties' tone of voice. The results of the statistical analyses show that (1) parties oftentimes flirt with each other; and (2) parties mainly send these positive signals to parties that are realistically potential coalition partners. That is, parties that are ideologically close and have sufficient electoral support. These results indicate that parties are future-oriented when it comes to coalition partner(s) and adjust their strategies to increase their own chances of coalescing with them.

Hence, using a variety of quantitative methods, my dissertation shows that the coalition dilemma alters how political parties trade-off votes, office and policy goals. Which of the goals prevails is reflected in their communication strategies and therefore in the policies they propose and implement once in a coalition government.