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Issues and Personalities in German and Dutch Television News

Patterns and Effects

■ *Jan Kleinnijenhuis, Marcus Maurer, Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Dirk Oegema*

ABSTRACT

■ This article elucidates the role of issue news and personality news in Germany and the Netherlands. A party with a popular leader is assumed to benefit from increased media attention. A party may also benefit from issue news. News on an issue favours its 'issue owner' (e.g. the German Social Democrats in the case of news on social security). Good news on issue developments (e.g. rising employment) favours the parties who make up the Dutch coalition government, whereas bad news (e.g. rising unemployment) favours opposition parties. Content analysis of the 1994 and 1998 election campaigns in Germany and the Netherlands shows that issue news and personality portrayal vary heavily between countries and between subsequent elections within one country. A broad comparison of news patterns and election outcomes suggests that election outcomes do indeed correspond with the news. A closer examination of effects of news about issues and party leaders on party preference at the level of individual respondents confirms the results of the exploratory analysis. ■

Jan Kleinnijenhuis is Professor of Communications and Dirk Oegema is Senior Lecturer of Communications at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Department of Public Administration and Communication Science, De Boelelaan 1081c (DBL 859), 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

[emails: j.kleinnijenhuis@scw.vu.nl and d.oegema@scw.vu.nl]

Hans Mathias Kepplinger is Professor of Communications and Marcus Maurer is researcher in communications at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Institut für Publizistik, Colonel Kleinmann-Weg 2, 55099 Mainz, Germany. [emails: kepplinger@uni-mainz.de and marcus.maurer@uni-mainz.de]

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Introduction

An old and basically unsolved puzzle in democratic societies concerns the relative influence on popular support of charismatic personalities as compared to the influence of sensible issue considerations. Centuries before the dawn of the television age, Plato concluded that democracy was a poor form of government because it systematically paved the way for charismatic birdbrains to gain popular support for rash acts. The Age of Reason brought books and newspapers, which stood between the flamboyant speeches of charismatic politicians and the masses. Radio made those who uttered words audible, television made them visual. The entanglement of personality perceptions and issue considerations may be one reason why nowadays election outcomes can be predicted both from personality portrayal (e.g. Kepplinger et al., 1994) and from issue news (e.g. Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder, 1998). In this article empirical patterns in issue news and personality portrayal in Germany and the Netherlands in two consecutive election campaigns are analysed. The aim is to provide evidence that the two types of information have independent effects on voters.

The 1994 and 1998 elections in Germany and the Netherlands offer good opportunities to study the role of issue news and personality portrayal. The two countries are similar both with respect to types of political parties and with respect to voter considerations. In both countries, the same party families dominate the political scene: Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals, with a minor role for the Greens and an outside role for the Extreme Right. Religion and social strata are still considered to be the dominant cleavages in both countries (Schmidt, 1996; Keman, 1996). The influence of social cleavages on the vote is overarched by a subjective left–right orientation. Party preference is also influenced, to practically the same degree, by party size, the evaluation of government performance and by the perceived issue competencies of parties (Oppenhuis, 1995: 145–6).

Although the party systems and voter considerations in the two countries are similar, the 1994 and 1998 elections resulted in dissimilar outcomes. In the case of the 1994 elections in Germany, opinion polls in 1993 had predicted a crushing defeat for the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). As it turned out, the CDU/CSU, led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, recovered strongly and lost only 2 percent of the vote compared to 1990.

The major opposition party, the Social Democrats (SPD), gained only 3 percent. In the Netherlands, the 1994 elections resulted in the strongest political landslide ever. The coalition of Christian Democrats (CDA) and Social Democrats (PvdA) lost its parliamentary majority. Compared to 1989, the CDA lost 13 percent of the vote, the Social Democrats 8 percent. The Liberal Democrats (D66) won 7 percent of the vote, the Economic Orthodox Liberals (VVD) 5 percent. The result was the first coalition government since 1917 which did not include Christian Democrats.

In the 1998 elections in Germany, the CDU/CSU lost after 16 years of Helmut Kohl. Finally, the SPD won the elections. The Greens remained stable. For the first time a green–red coalition came into being. In the Netherlands, the D66 lost 8 percent as a coalition party, but the major opposition party, the CDA, lost a few seats also. The PvdA and the VVD won.

Theory of news on issues and personalities

Theories of issue voting have received a lot of attention in the literature. Effects of issue news are assumed in issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie, 1983) and in public choice theory (e.g. Mueller, 1989: 289–91). Spatial theories (Downs, 1957) and directional theory (Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989) also deal with the role of issues in election campaigns, but their relation with issue news is less straightforward.

The theory of issue ownership presumes that voters will vote for the party that gets most attention for its own issues in the media. A party is said to ‘own’ an issue when the general feeling is that the party has a long-standing reputation to be able to solve problems regarding the issue. Expert surveys in 24 democracies by Laver and Hunt (1992) reveal clear-cut evidence for issue ownership.

Respondents were asked to rate the salience of each policy dimension for each party. . . . If the reader runs an eye down these figures, it will immediately be clear that there are major differences between different parties in the same country of the perceived salience of the main policy dimensions. (Laver and Hunt, 1992: 46–7)

Right-wing parties were deemed competent to handle (lower) taxes, left-wing parties were deemed competent to handle (raise) social security. Often historical cleavages (e.g. class, religion) are at the heart of issue ownership. For example levelling of incomes reflects the interests of the lower classes and is owned by parties from the social-democratic party family. The public will not link each issue with a fixed party, however.

New issues are not owned by any party. A party may try to 'capture' new issues (e.g. asylum seekers) by stressing them during a campaign. Furthermore, consensual issues ('valence issues'), such as economic growth and employment, are not connected with any particular party. Governing parties are said to borrow consensual issues such as economic growth and employment when the economy grows and employment rises, whereas opposition parties borrow these issues when the economy has a setback and unemployment rises (Petrocik, 1996). An explanation why long-standing reputations of issue ownership can have differential effects in the short run is given by priming theory (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Media attention for an issue triggers long-standing reputations from memory that are advantageous for its issue owner. This theory holds true, among others, for the 1987 elections in Germany (Kepplinger and Brosius, 1990) and the 1994 elections in Germany and the Netherlands (Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder, 1998).

Public choice theory assumes that news on positive or negative issue developments (e.g. a rise or decline in employment, or a decrease in crime) will increase or decrease support for the parties in office. The question here is not who owns an issue, but whether coalition parties are lucky enough to be faced with actual issue developments that were desired by the voters. Those developments need not necessarily be reported correctly by the media. For example, in the 1998 election in Germany the actual decline in unemployment and the economic growth were seldom reported (Donsbach, 1999). On 18 April 1994, two weeks before the 1994 elections, public television news in the Netherlands (*NOS Journaal*) opened with the news that unemployment had risen every month by 18,000 persons, although statistical figures revealed a decrease of roughly 60,000 per month in the months preceding the elections (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998). In such cases, issue news in the media rather than actual developments may be the key to understanding voters (Hetherington, 1996). Here, we assume that news on positively evaluated developments with respect to issues reported in the media (e.g. a rise in employment, a decline in crime) will lead voters to believe that the parties in office do a good job. News on negatively evaluated developments would favour opposition parties.

Theories of personality voting trace back voting decisions to candidates' personalities and their presentation by the media, especially television. Studies over the last two decades have shown that most voters are not interested in detailed information about issues, and their knowledge is not very sophisticated (Kinder and Sears, 1985; Neumann, 1986). Nevertheless, their voting decisions must be based on certain

criteria. Some theorists assume they apply general heuristics. According to this approach, the choice between political candidates and parties follows decision rules which are known from everyday life. Voters rely on their social experience and judge the candidates by their human qualities, their personality in a general sense (Herstein, 1981; Lau, 1986; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988; Lodge et al., 1989). This requires no detailed information about issues or candidates' issue stands and no specific ability to process them. The relevance of general heuristics has probably increased through the development of television, which is now by far the most relevant source of information about problems facing the nation, issue stands of particular parties and candidates' personalities (Kepplinger and Maurer, 2000). In contrast to issue news, information about candidates' personalities is largely based on visual television presentations, especially on candidates' performance in interviews and similar situations (Kepplinger et al., 1994). Use and processing of this information therefore requires neither high political interest nor high previous knowledge: visual information is understood by all viewers intuitively. Thus, television bridges the gap between politics and the relatively low political interest and knowledge of the larger public and influences their voting behaviour. Even if they do not know and understand basic facts, they get an idea of the problems facing the nation and of major candidates' personalities (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Kepplinger et al., 1994).

Method

Content analysis of daily news

Germany. Between 1 August and 16 October evening news programmes of two public and one commercial broadcaster (respectively ARD's *Tagesschau*; ZDF's *Heute* and RTL's *RTL-Aktuell*) were analysed ($N = 1558$ assertions). For detailed information on methodology, see description of coding procedures for the Dutch data.

For 1998 between 2 March and 26 September (the day before the national elections), news broadcasts and magazines of the five most frequently viewed German television channels, namely ARD (*Tagesschau*, *Tagesthemen*), ZDF (*Heute*, *Heute-Journal*), RTL (*RTL-Aktuell*, *RTL-Nachtsjournal*), SAT1 (18:30) and PRO7 (*PRO7-Nachrichten*), were analysed. SAT1 and PRO7 are further commercial broadcasters. All television news items dealing with domestic politics ($N = 6829$) were coded (for a detailed description of the analysis, see Noelle-Neumann et al., 1999).

The Netherlands. Between 24 January and 3 May 1994, prime-time television newscasts of the public broadcaster NOS (*NOS Journaal*) and the commercial RTL4 (*RTL Nieuws*) were analysed ($N = 2255$ assertions). For the elections of 1998, the news from the same media from 16 September 1997 until the national elections on 6 May 1998 was analysed ($N = 9494$ assertions). For both studies, all television news items concerned were coded in their entirety. Network analysis of evaluative texts (the NET method) was used (van Cuilenburg et al., 1986; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1997) as implemented in the program CETA2 (de Ridder, 1994a, 1994b). Here the frequency of the appearance of party leaders in news sentences and the frequency and direction of news about issues are all that is relevant.

Survey of general population

The analysis of the effects of news on public opinion on the level of individual voters is restricted to the 1998 elections.

Germany. A few days before the election (from 31 August until 4 September), 450 German citizens aged 18 years and older living in the Rhein-Main area were interviewed by telephone. A sample of 863 telephone numbers of private households had been drawn from the telephone directory. Altogether, 15 interviewers – students of communications at the University of Mainz – took part in the study. In each household one of the members who had the right to vote was selected as interview partner using the last birthday method. The completion rate was 52 percent.

Respondents answered a series of questions regarding media selection, sociodemographic characteristics and political attitudes. Finally they were asked: 'If national elections were held next Sunday, which party would you vote for?' The response to this question is the dependent variable in the analysis. For each party, a variable was created with the value of 1 if a voter answered that his or her vote would be cast for a specific party and with a value of 0 if the voter intended to vote for another party. Voters who responded 'don't know' were excluded from the analysis.

The Netherlands. Thirteen waves of the Telepanel data, which were gathered by the Dutch Institute for Public Opinion Survey and Market Research (NIPO) from weeks 1–19 of the 1998 campaign, were used. The NIPO Telepanel includes a random sample of 1045 respondents, who

answered a series of questions regarding personal media selection and a set of questions about sociodemographic characteristics. In the first 12 waves respondents were asked: 'Which party would you vote for if elections were held today?' In week 19, immediately after the elections, respondents were asked which party they actually voted for. Responses from week 19 are used to compare Dutch results with German results. To test whether the resulting cross-national model holds when the time-span is shortened, a time series model will be tested for the Netherlands. Responses from the last 11 waves (weeks 5–19) will be used as the dependent variable in this time series model (the responses of the first two waves are only used to construct time lags). Not all respondents participated every week. The total sample used in the effect analysis amounted to 846 respondents who delivered 8529 responses during 11 waves. As for Germans, for each party, a variable was created with value 1 if a voter answered that his or her vote would be cast for a specific party, with value 0 if the voter intended to vote for another party. For the respondents who indicated that they did not know which party they would vote for, a vote probability for a party between 0 and 1 was estimated. It was calculated as the proportion of respondents who voted for the same party as the respondent in 1994, who would vote for that party in the week of the interview. The dependent variable is thus a vote probability, rather than a binary dummy variable.

News effect analysis

To assess the effects of the news on individual voters for each party a regression model is used, rather than a more complex 'ideodynamic' model which specifies flows of voters between parties (Kleinnijenhuis and Fan, 1999). The dependent variable is the intention to vote for a specific party shortly before the elections in 1998. A separate regression model will be tested for each of the major parties separately. Earlier research showed that news effects on party preferences in Germany and the Netherlands (in 1994) are also compatible with a multi-party model (Kleinnijenhuis and Fan, 1999).

Party identification in this study is used as a surrogate for all 'internal' variables, which influenced the voter besides the 'external' influence of the news. In the German case, this variable is measured with a direct question (see Kepplinger and Maurer, 1999). In the Dutch case, the question whether or not a respondent voted for the party in 1994 is used. In the time series analysis for the Netherlands last week's intention to vote for a specific party is used as an additional indicator.

Three independent variables are used to assess the effects of the news on the voter: issue attraction, evaluation of issue developments and personality attraction. Issue attraction of a party is calculated as the sum of its attraction per issue domain. Attraction per issue domain is measured as the product of (1) perceived issue competence of a given party in a given domain and (2) the amount of attention for that issue area in the medium a respondent is frequently using. In the German case, the frequency of watching four news broadcasts (ARD's *Tagesthemen*, ZDF's *Heute-Journal*, RTL's *RTL-Aktuell* and SAT1's 18:30) was included. In the Dutch case the features of the news programme a respondent watches most frequently were assigned (*NOS Journaal* and *RTL Nieuws*). Perceived issue competence in an issue area in the German data is measured with the question how competent a party's major candidate is in solving problems in that area (see Kepplinger and Maurer, 1999). In the Dutch case it is measured as the agreement with the issue positions of a party, provided the respondent associated the issue area as one of the major concerns of the party (see Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998). The product reflects the hypothesis that an internal issue attraction should be 'primed' by external news in order to obtain its impact (see Kepplinger and Maurer, 1999).

Evaluation of issue developments is calculated as the ratio of positive (e.g. rising employment) and negative (e.g. rising unemployment) news messages (items or assertions) about the actual development of issues. Voters are supposed to interpret positive developments of these issues as a success of the parties in office. In the case of consensual issues (employment, crime, environment), the decision whether a development is positive or negative poses no problem. Whether developments regarding non-consensual 'position issues' were positive was decided in the spirit of issue ownership theory on the basis of the precise wording in the news. Thus, 'a cut in social expenditures' was coded as a negative development (although taxes may be high as a consequence), whereas 'high taxes' were coded as a negative development also (although they may enable high social expenditure).

Personality attraction is calculated as the product of the 'internal' perceived personality of a party leader and the 'external' amount of news on a party leader. In the German case, the perceived personality of a candidate was calculated as an index of 12 personal qualities attributed to a candidate (e.g. 'trustworthy', 'honest', 'insecure'; see Kepplinger and Maurer, 1999). In the Dutch case, the respondents were asked to mention the best, the second best and the third best party leader (resulting in

codes for each party leader of respectively 1, 0.67, 0.33 and 0 if not mentioned).

Results

Issues in the news

The 1980s had been a decade of rightist issues. Reducing the finance deficit and cutting taxes were the main targets of the coalition governments headed by Christian Democrats. In the campaigns of 1994 rightist issues – the finance deficit, taxes, crime – still received much attention in both countries (see Table 1: Germany 30 percent, the Netherlands 31 percent). In the Netherlands, the Christian Democrats were the first to launch a draft of a party programme in 1993. Since the rightist rhetoric prevailed in the programme, journalists would ask leftist questions to CDA politicians especially. For example, they asked whether the CDA also proposed cuts in pensions for the elderly. When a party representative granted this, the deliberate evasion of a discussion of leftist issues in their party programme would elicit a wave of media attention for leftist issues. The German SPD was not as lucky as the Dutch PvdA. The SPD was unable to create news on leftist issues, and did not have much success in the last months of the 1994 campaign.

Compared to 1994, both leftist and rightist issues became less important in the Netherlands and Germany in 1998, especially in Germany where media attention shifted towards the economy and other consensual issues. In the Netherlands, leftist issues remained twice as important as in Germany (respectively 16 percent and 8 percent), presumably due to the sharp competition between the PvdA and the more extreme left-wing parties GroenLinks and the Socialist Party for leftist voters. In Germany, news reports on unemployment and other consensual issues dominated the election campaign. The reunification and economic liberalization had left many inhabitants of the former GDR unemployed. Rising unemployment was detrimental for the parties in office (CDU/CSU, FDP).

In both Germany and the Netherlands, Europe played a much more major role in the 1998 election campaign compared to 1994. In Germany, the future conversion of a strong German mark may have also been one of the reasons to cast doubt on the governing parties. In the Netherlands, the discussion centred around the question of whether Wim Duisenberg would become the president of the European Bank in Frankfurt. A few days before the elections, Prime Minister Wim Kok

Table 1 Attention given to issues in German and Dutch television newscasts^a

Issue	Issue owner ^b	Attention in television news			
		1994		1998	
		Germany (%)	Netherlands (%)	Germany (%)	Netherlands (%)
Left	SPD	12	PvdA	22	8
Right	CDU, FDP	30	VVD, CDA	31	19
Employment	X	15	X	14	14
Economy	X	6	X	3	17
Environment	B90/die Grünen	11	GroenLinks	5	12
Asylum seekers	Extreme right, CDU	4	VVD (captured)	15	6
Christian ethics	CDU	0	CDA	2	—
Europe	CDU	3	CDA	3	17
International, incl. German unity	CDU	12	X	4	5
State reforms	X	6	D66	1	3
Total		99	100	101	101
N ^c		585 assertions	908 assertions	5440 items	3865 assertions

^a Germany 1994: ARD, ZDF, RTL, 1 August – 16 October 1994; Germany 1998: ARD, ZDF, RTL, SAT1, PRO7, 2 March – 26 September 1998; Netherlands 1994: NOS, RTL4, 24 January – 3 May 1994; Netherlands 1998: NOS, RTL4, 16 September 1997 – 5 May 1998.

^b Classification of issue owners, which is partly based on the pioneering work of Laver and Hunt (1992), is discussed in Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder (1998). The meaning of 'X' is that there is no structural issue owner. These consensual issues favour government parties in case of 'positive' actual developments, but favour opposition parties in case of 'negative' developments (see Petrocik, 1996).

^c The percentages of media attention for issues include media attention for issue positions of parties, but also, among others, media attention for actual developments regarding these issues. The percentages differ slightly from those reported in Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder (1998), which also represented newspaper attention.

(PvdA) was able to announce that Duisenberg (PvdA) had been appointed, although for a limited number of years.

For obvious reasons the international position of one's own country is more an issue in Germany than in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, this issue area attracted 4 percent of Dutch media attention in 1994, which was partly due to Dutch participation in the UN Peace Corps in Bosnia. In Germany, reunification and the collapse of Communism raised new questions regarding Germany's policy towards the new democracies to its east. In 1994, Chancellor Kohl could take advantage because he was the issue owner of reunification. It was his determined although cautious policy that contributed to German reunification. Unfortunately for Kohl, attention for this issue dropped sharply in the 1998 campaign (from 12 percent to 5 percent). Table 1 suggests that media attention for the owned issues was closely related to electoral gains.

Tables 2a and 2b show the evaluation of issue developments and the attention for issue positions of the three major parties in the German and Dutch television news in 1994 and 1998. It is expected that governing parties will win when 'positive' developments are reported (e.g. more social security, less crime, a positive balance of payment, reduction of unemployment), whereas opposition parties will win when 'negative' developments are reported (e.g. cuts in social expenditures, crime, an increase of the finance deficit, unemployment). The presentation of the data concerning evaluation of issue developments and attention for party positions in the media is concentrated on three major parties in each country and on three major issues: leftist issues (e.g. social security), rightist issues (e.g. balance of payment, combat of crime, tax reduction) and a major consensual issue (employment).

With regard to leftist issues in 1994, the general impression in German media (+0.7) and Dutch media (+0.4) was that social security provisions were high, presumably even too high. The economic boom in the USA and most parts of Europe led to a revival of the belief that workers were granted too little. In Germany, the low standard of living in East Germany contributed to this feeling (Germany -0.4, the Netherlands -0.4). The news about developments of leftist issues in 1998 as reported by the media clearly was not favourable for the governing parties. They suggested the desirability of a more leftist policy.

With respect to rightist issues, in the Netherlands trends were a mirror image of trends with respect to leftist issues. In 1994, the media reported as many windfalls as setbacks with regard to rightist issues such as the finance deficit (0.0 on average). In 1998, the media reported even more windfalls than setbacks with regard to the balance of payment

Table 2a Evaluation of issue developments and attention for positions of three parties regarding three issue groups in German television news

Issue group	1994 ^a		1998 ^b	
	Evaluation of issue development {-1...+1}	Attention for issue position Table (%) ^c	Evaluation of issue development {-1...+1}	Attention for issue position Table (%) ^c
		Social Democrats SPD (opposition)		Social Democrats SPD (opposition)
		Christian Democrats CDU/CSU (governing)		Christian Democrats CDU/CSU (governing)
		Liberals FDP (governing)		Liberals FDP (governing)
Leftist issues	+0.7	5	-0.4	2
Rightist issues	-0.3	15	-0.4 balance of payment -0.2 combat against crime -0.3	7 11 4
Employment	+0.2	4		4
N	79 assertions	310 assertions	4420 items	5130 items

^a ARD, ZDF, RTL, 1 August – 16 October 1994.

^b ARD, ZDF, RTL, SAT1, PRO7, 2 March – 26 September 1998.

^c Table percentages based on all issue news about all parties (sum for these three parties and these three issues therefore do not add up to 100 percent but 53 percent in 1994 and 41 percent in 1998).

Table 2b Evaluation of issue developments and attention for positions of three parties regarding three issue groups in Dutch television news

	1994 ^a	1998 ^b				
Issue group	Evaluation of issue development {-1...+1}	Attention for issue position Table (%) ^c		Evaluation of issue development {-1...+1}	Attention for issue position Table (%) ^c	
		Social Democrats PvdA (governing)	Christian Democrats CDA (governing)	Liberal Democrats VVD (opposition)	Social Democrats PvdA (governing)	Christian Democrats CDA (opposition)
Leftist issues	+0.4	9	16	4	7	2
Rightist issues	0.0	6	10	4	7	2
					balance of payment	
					-0.4 combat against crime	
Employment	-0.5	2	2	0	1	1
N	214 assertions		402 assertions		190 assertions	1405 assertions

^a Netherlands 1994: NOS, RTL4, 24 January – 3 May 1994.

^b Netherlands 1998: NOS, RTL4, 16 September 1997 – 5 May 1998.

^c Table percentages based on all issue news about all parties (sum for these three parties and these three issues therefore do not add up to 100 percent but 53 percent in 1994 and 34 percent in 1998).

(+0.5). In this year attention shifted somewhat to another rightist issue, namely the combat of crime. The media gave the impression that the crime rate had increased (−0.4). Since D66 held the portfolio for Justice – including the combat of crime – the blame for the policy failures to combat crime fell to D66. In 1998, German media also reported serious crime (−0.2), and moreover more setbacks than windfalls with respect to the balance of payments (−0.4). Germany's expenditure was high indeed as compared to earned taxes. Of course this was not good news for the governing parties.

With regard to employment, media reports in Germany and the Netherlands are the opposite of each other. According to the Dutch media employment decreased dramatically prior to the elections of 1994 (−0.5), but employment increased in 1998 (+0.4). In August 1994, German television reported a decrease in employment. But the last weeks of the election were dominated by reports indicating an increase in unemployment (+0.2 on average). But during the whole campaign of 1998 there was a predominance of reports on unemployment levels (−0.3). Needless to say, employment figures are benchmarks to evaluate a government (Mueller, 1989), regardless of their truth (Hetherington, 1996). The effects of media portrayal of issue development on the popularity of parties can be strengthened by media attention for the issue positions of parties. Three examples are discussed here. The first example concerns the large attention in 1998 for the position of the CDU/CSU regarding employment (6 percent). This contributed further to the loss of the CDU/CSU given the fact that a decrease of employment (−0.3) is harmful for the biggest governing party in itself already. The second example concerns the large attention for the positions of governing parties concerning rightist issues in 1998 (in the Netherlands: 7 percent PvdA and 9 percent VVD, in Germany: 11 percent CDU/CSU). According to the media the balance of payments improved in the Netherlands (+0.4), but worsened in Germany (−0.4), thus giving rise to the expectation that the PvdA and VVD would win, whereas the CDU/CSU would lose. The last example concerns the tactical error of the German Social Democrats in 1994 to announce a plan to raise taxes to finance solidarity with East Germany, thereby stressing an issue position on a rightist issue (15 percent all in all). This was grist to the mill for the CDU/CSU since a rejection of higher taxes would strengthen its reputation as the issue owner of tax reduction, while not endangering its reputation as the 'owner' of reunification in East Germany. By raising the tax issue, which was owned by its adversaries, the SPD committed political suicide in 1994.

Personalities in the news

The importance of media portrayal of politicians for election outcomes is self-evident, but many different indicators can be used to measure its quality. We concentrate here on the percentage of media attention for the major candidates, the tendency of evaluative comments regarding the candidates, and their issue orientation. The tendency of evaluative comments is defined as the average evaluation (on a scale ranging from -1 to +1) of candidates in the news, either by the medium itself (which is rather exceptional in television news) or by sources that are allowed to give comments. Issue orientation is a measure of political content. It is defined as the percentage of news items/sentences in which the candidate is associated with an issue. To keep the discussion simple, the analysis is restricted to the major candidates of the three major parties in the 1998 elections.

The distribution of media attention for candidates is more skewed in Germany than in the Netherlands (see Table 3). The two frontrunners, Schröder and Kohl, attracted far more than half of the news on political personalities. For the first time in the 1998 elections the CDU and SPD heavily concentrated their campaigns on their major candidates. Candidates had become the symbols of their parties' policies. In the Netherlands, the most visible electoral leaders, Kok and Bolkestein, attracted only 36 percent of the media attention for the top 10.

The tendency of the news reflects the value judgements in the news. A striking fact in the German media of 1998 was the lukewarm tendency towards Chancellor Helmut Kohl (+0.05 only). His political adversaries and even his deputy Wolfgang Schäuble were evaluated more positively. After 16 years the German media were tired of Kohl. Furthermore, the party leader of the Bündnis 90/die Grünen, Joschka Fischer, was more popular in the media (+0.25) than Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder (+0.18). Media appreciation of electoral leaders in the Netherlands is less negative than of party strategists. This reflects the parties' ploy to present their electoral leaders as nice, trustworthy, apolitical persons, while in the meantime the party strategists, who tend to become invisible in the last month of the campaign, do the dirty work. The opposition parties CDA and GroenLinks cannot play this game, however, since media attention for the party as a whole is too small to be split between personalities. As with Germany's Joschka Fischer (+0.25), the leader of the Dutch Green Party – Paul Rosenmöller – was one of the media's favourites (+0.00).

Statements of party leaders on the party's issue orientations were more newsworthy in general than issue statements of backbenchers. PvdA

Table 3 Attention, tendency (direction) and issue orientation of major politicians in German and Dutch television news 1998^a

Germany		Netherlands						
	Politicians	Attention for top 10 (%)	Tendency {-1...+1}	Issue orientation (%)	Politicians	Attention for top 10 ^b (%)	Tendency {-1...+1}	Issue orientation (%)
Greens	Fischer	5	+0.25	62	Rosenmöller	4	0.00	78
	Tritin	3	-0.17	64				
Social Democrats	Schröder	25	+0.18	37	Kok	21	-0.08	61
	Lafontaine	7	+0.21	46	Melkert	4	-0.55	72
Christian Democrats					De Hoop			
	Kohl	33	+0.05	45	Scheffer	6	-0.07	40
	Schäuble	8	+0.26	42				
	Waigel	7	+0.10	72				
Liberal (conservatives)	Stoiber	4	+0.10	56				
	Gerhardt	4	+0.18	44	Bolkestein	15	-0.21	42
	Westerwelle	3	-0.01	53	Jorritsma	8	-0.57	35
					Zalm	5	-0.26	47
N		5605 items	5605 items	5605 items		2656 assertions	496 assertions	680 assertions

^a Germany: ARD, ZDF, RTL, SAT1, PRO7, 2 March – 26 September 1998.

Netherlands: NOS, RTL4, 16 September 1997 – 5 May 1998.

^b Based on top 10. The three candidates of D66 are omitted.

leader Wim Kok, for example, used his role as 'statesman' rather than as party politician to stress his noble intentions regarding employment, health care, education and social security (61 percent of issue statements as compared to 39 percent on conflicts, political horse race, etc.). In Germany, his Social-Democratic comrade Gerhard Schröder shunned issue statements (37 percent only). This holds true especially for the last few weeks of the campaign. Many spectators believed that Schröder tried to avoid issue stands as much as possible because of a conflict in his party between the right wing, represented by himself, who stood for modernization and the traditional left wing, represented by Oskar Lafontaine. Hiding this conflict about issue positions was a necessary requirement for winning the elections. In the Netherlands, the leaders of the parties in the middle and to the right (the CDA and the VVD) had difficulties getting their issue positions expressed in the media. The CDA was simply unsuccessful in staging media events. In 1998 the media were reluctant to function once more as the loudspeakers for VVD leader Bolkestein's views on asylum seekers.

Effect analysis

The impact of issue news and personality news on voting intentions is calculated using simple regression models. The analysis is restricted to the effects of news in the campaigns of 1998. In the first step we present comparable regression models for both countries using voting intentions shortly before the elections as dependent variable and news during the whole campaign as independent variable. In the second step for the Dutch case the 11 (almost) weekly panel waves are the basis for the effect analysis. The voting intention in a given week is now the dependent variable and news in the week before is the independent variable. The purpose of this analysis is to find out whether the results hold true when tested with a more rigid time series analysis with a time-span of one week only.

In the case of Germany, party identification is the strongest predictor of voting intentions shortly before the elections (see Table 4). For both the SPD and CDU/CSU there were no direct effects of evaluation of issue developments in the news. Issue attraction (calculated as the product of perceived competence of a candidate to solve problems concerning several issues and the amount of news on these issues) only explains intentions to vote for the CDU/CSU. Because the SPD's major candidate Schröder avoided issue stands in the media, it is no surprise that issue attraction does not explain voting intentions for the Social

Table 4 Effects of issue and personality attraction on voting intentions at the level of individual respondents (OLS regression: standardized beta coefficients)

	Netherlands									
	Germany					Dependent variable: voting intention 1998 ^a				
	Social Democrats (SPD)	Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU)	Social Democrats (PvdA)	Christian Democrats (CDA)	Liberals (VVD)	Dependent variable: Current week's voting intention ^c (11 surveys on weekly basis)				
Internal predisposition										
Party identification	.55	.55	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vote 1994	—	—	.41	.42	.25	.03	.04	.01	.01	.01
Previous week's voting intention	—	—	—	—	—	.90	.91	.91	.91	.91
Personality attraction	.22	.21	.20	.39	.45	.02	.03	.03	.03	.03
Issue attraction	—	.15	.16	.12	.15	.02	.01	.01	.01	.01
Evaluation of issue developments										
Explained variance R^2	.45	.57	.31	.55	.45	.86	.91	.87		
N	450	450	846	846	846	8529	8529	8529	8529	8529
	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	respondents	responses

^a Date of survey: 31 August – 4 September 1998. Independent variable: all campaign news (ARD, ZDF, RTL SAT1) from 2 March to 4 September 1998.

^b Date of survey: week 19 of 1998. Independent variable: all campaign news (NOS, RTL4) from week 4 until week 19.

^c Date of survey: weeks 4–19 of 1998. Independent variable: previous week's news (NOS, RTL4).

Democrats. Personality attraction (calculated as the product of the perceived personal qualities of a party leader and the amount of news on a party leader) clearly explains voting intentions for both major parties.

In the case of the Netherlands, voting intentions shortly before the elections are for all three parties also explained by issue attraction. Also, for these Dutch parties no effects could be found for the evaluation of issue developments in the news. Just like in Germany, there are strong effects of personality attraction. This holds true for all three Dutch parties. Although issue developments tend to correspond closely with election outcomes (see public choice research, e.g. Mueller, 1989), they do not have independent effects on party preference.

The weekly analysis, which is only available for the Netherlands, shows that the effects of issue attraction and personality attraction remain significant, when the time span is shortened to a week only. Thus, the theoretical model passes a rigid weekly test. The weekly analysis shows relatively small effects of personality attraction and issue attraction (standardised regression coefficients between .01 and .03 as compared to .12 to .45 for the complete election campaign), but relatively large effects of one's internal predisposition, as measured by last week's voting intention, which is a logical artefact of shortening the time-span between measurements (predictably changes become small when this time-span is shortened). The striking result to note is that, even although changes within one week are small, changes in voting intentions within one week are consistently and significantly dependent on personality attraction and issue attraction. The differences between the weekly effects, which vary between .01 and .03, and the coefficients for the complete election campaign, which vary between .12 and .45, demonstrate that small weekly effects of the news may add up to substantial changes in voting intentions over a longer period of time. The relatively high explained variances for the weekly models (0.86, 0.91, 0.87) merely reflect the trivial fact that one's current voting intention can be predicted to a large extent from last week's voting intention.

Discussion

This article offers an analysis of effects of issue news and personality news on the election outcomes in Germany and the Netherlands in 1994 and, especially, 1998. Despite using somewhat different coding procedures and survey questions, results for both countries are quite similar. Many election outcomes are consistent both with trends in issue news and with features of personality news.

In the 1998 German election, the media coverage was dominated by rightist issues (financial deficit, crime) and consensual issues (employment, economy). Television news evaluated the development of these issues on the whole negatively, turning even the rightist issues against the conservative parties in power. Television viewers frequently watching news broadcasts presumably got the impression that the CDU/CSU after 16 years of government would no longer be able to solve problems concerning the most important issues. Leftist issues were only of slight importance in television news.

As compared to German news, leftist issues and the environment were much more important in Dutch television news. According to issue ownership theory this should be advantageous for the Social Democrats (PvdA) and the Green Party (GroenLinks). Whereas German television news presented issue developments predominately to the detriment of coalition parties, Dutch television news reported also favourable issue development, such as a decline of unemployment and a shrinking finance deficit.

Germany's SPD – especially their major candidate Schröder – avoided talking about issues. In contrast to chancellor Kohl, Schröder was presented positively in German television news. Television viewers presumably got the impression that Schröder was a sympathetic man even if they could not be sure what exactly he would do should his party win the election.

As compared to SPD politicians, the issue orientation of their Dutch comrades of the PvdA was high in 1998, although somewhat lower than in 1994. The same holds for the Dutch Greens, but for the other party families issue orientations in both countries are more or less the same. Dutch politicians received more criticism on television news than their German colleagues, but it is rankings rather than ratings that matter in politics. As in Germany, the electoral leaders of the Green Party and of the Social Democrats received a relatively favourable coverage in 1998.

On the level of individual respondents most expected effects of the news on party preferences can be confirmed. Long-standing party preferences are still the best predictors of voting intentions in 1998. This holds true for both countries but is especially the case in Germany. In addition, issue attraction and personality attraction are of great importance in both countries. A party with a popular candidate who is frequently in the news increases its chance of being voted for. A party that is seen as being competent for solving problems concerning issues, which are often presented in the news, increases its chance of being voted for. Even shifts in the time-span of one week can be attributed partly to

issue attraction and personality attraction. In the German and Dutch elections 1998 this did not hold true for the SPD and CDA. Both parties did – more or less intentionally – not often present their issue stands in television news. Comparing issues and personalities, the effects of personalities are dominant in Germany as well as in the Netherlands. Because long-standing party preferences are in decline in almost all western democracies (Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995) it can be assumed that the importance of personality attraction as well as issue attraction will grow in forthcoming elections. The empirical results show that both a personality strategy to display attractive politicians (SPD) to the detriment of issue politics as well as an issue strategy to display ‘own’ issues (PvdA) can be successful to win at elections.

A question for further research concerns the precise origins of personality attraction and issue attraction. To what extent is the perception of a politician’s personality shaped by personality news? How much change will be induced in perceived issue competence by news on policy successes and failures? How sensible is their saliency to the frequency of issue and personality news? Moreover, the translation of issue developments (e.g. a decline in unemployment) into a party’s issue attraction and personality attraction deserves more research.

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