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The rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands: A discursive opportunity approach

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Abstract. This article seeks to explain the dramatic rise of Pim Fortuyn's right-wing populist party during the campaign for the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in 2002. Fortuyn succeeded in attracting by far the most media attention of all political actors and his new party won 17 per cent of the votes. This article analyses how this new populist party managed to mobilise so much attention and support so suddenly and so rapidly. It uses the notion of 'discursive opportunities' and argues that the public reactions to Pim Fortuyn and his party played a decisive role in his ability to further diffuse his claims in the public sphere and achieve support among the Dutch electorate. The predictions of the effects of discursive opportunities are empirically investigated with longitudinal data from newspapers and opinion polls. To study the dynamics of competition over voter support and over space in the public debate during the election campaign, an ARIMA time-series model is used as well as a negative binomial regression with lagged variables to account for the time-series structure of the data. It is found that discursive opportunities have significantly affected the degree to which Fortuyn was successful both in the competition for voter support, and regarding his ability to express his claims in the media. Combining these two results, a dynamic feedback process is identified that can explain why a stable political situation suddenly spiralled out of equilibrium. Visibility and supportive reactions of others positively affected the opinion polls. Consonance significantly increased Fortuyn's claim-making; dissonance undermined it. Furthermore, electoral support and negative claims on the issue of immigration and integration in the media by others enhanced Fortuyn's ability to further diffuse his viewpoints and to become the main political opinion-maker during the turbulent election campaign of 2002.

Introduction¹

Until 2002, anti-immigration parties failed to make any significant impact on elections in the Netherlands. The stunning success of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the elections of May 2002 constitutes a remarkable deviation from the traditionally low scores of radical right parties in this country. In the parliamentary elections of 1998, the radical right Centre Democrats of Hans

Janmaat gained 0.6 per cent of the vote and lost the meagre three seats they had achieved in 1994. Only a few years later, the dramatic rise of Pim Fortuyn broke records in Dutch and European political history. The List Pim Fortuyn (hereafter, LPF) won 26 seats, achieving by far the most impressive result ever for a new party in Dutch national elections. Also, the parties of the incumbent government coalition suffered an unprecedented defeat (Van Holsteyn & Irwin 2003). Such a high percentage (30.7 per cent) of aggregated electoral gains and losses of parties was without precedent (Van Praag 2003). The elections were also very exceptional in an international perspective. They are the second most volatile elections of all 248 national elections in Western Europe between 1950 and the end of 2006 (Mair 2008). The breakthrough of the LPF was also remarkable with regard to the role of the media. Newcomer Pim Fortuyn was the most often mentioned politician in the media during the election campaign, receiving 24 per cent of all attention, which is the same amount as the politicians in the second, third, fourth and fifth positions taken together (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003).

The central question of this article is how to explain this striking outcome: what are the causes of the sudden and spectacular rise of Pim Fortuyn and his political party? The commonsense explanation that Fortuyn's success was a consequence of his indisputable charisma is doubtful as such reasoning is rather tautological (Van der Brug et al. 2005) and lacks convincing empirical evidence (Van der Brug & Mughan 2007). Weber (1947 [1921]) noted that charisma is an attribution to the 'heroes of a war'. If a leader is unsuccessful, or if the leadership fails to benefit the followers, charismatic authority disappears.²

Nevertheless, the observation that appealing media performances of successful party leaders of the populist right throughout Europe are often associated with charisma offers a good starting point. Scholars of 'contentious politics' have long pointed to the fact that for a satisfactory answer to questions about political change, the role of the media should be taken into account (e.g., Gitlin 1980). We believe that using theories and findings from the social movement field can improve our understanding of political breakthroughs as they draw attention to the fact that it is necessary not only to explain why anti-immigration parties are able to attract voters, but also why they are successful in making their voices heard in the public sphere in the first place. Therefore, our analysis of the rise of Fortuyn will refer to two elements. First, we look at his success in public opinion, indicated by the intention to vote for this party. Second, we analyse the public claims made by Fortuyn and his party, which indicate the extent to which he was able to publicly express his opinions and viewpoints in the media. Although there have been several studies that take news coverage into account – in Belgium (Walgrave & De Swert 2004),

Germany (Lubbers & Scheepers 2001) and the Netherlands (Boomgaarden & Vliegenhart 2007; Lubbers 2001) – these studies only explain fluctuations in electoral support for anti-immigration parties.

Much of the previous academic work on the rise of anti-immigration parties has focused on the structural conditions that have facilitated their emergence or ‘breakthrough’. It has focused on two main sets of factors: demand-side and supply-side (for a review of recent work, see Van der Brug & Fennema 2007). The former refers to the conditions that have created a social and cultural ‘reservoir’ to be exploited by far-right political parties, such as increased voter volatility and the demise of party loyalty caused by the process of depillarisation (Ignazi 2003). Demand-side explanations also include value changes and structural cleavages related to the modernisation process (e.g., Betz 1994; Eatwell 2000). Supply-side factors include political and institutional factors that social movement scholars have labelled ‘political opportunity structures’, such as the structure of the electoral system, the responses of established actors, and the dynamics of party alignment, demarcation and competition (e.g., Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995; Koopmans et al. 2005). These political opportunity structures provide the radical right with a political niche to be exploited.

We agree that these two sets of necessary conditions or facilitating factors are relevant to understand the breakthrough of anti-immigration parties like the LPF in the Netherlands. However, the question of how it was possible that public opinion and the media debate could change so dramatically within such a short time span cannot be fully answered by pointing at comparatively slow political and institutional changes or value shifts in the electorate (likewise Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003: 14). Of course, structural conditions are important to explain why certain changes are possible or likely. However, to understand these short-term changes, it is more useful to look at aspects of political opportunity that can, first of all, change within short periods of time and, second, are visible for people: the public debate in the media. Political contention increasingly consists of a battle over media attention and legitimacy in the public discourse, acted out on a public stage (Kriesi 2001), with the electorate behaving like an audience in a theatre (Manin 1997). This is not to say that the media determine political outcomes by themselves, but it has become more and more the ground for power struggles ‘where different actors and strategies are played out, with diverse skills, and with various outcomes, sometimes resulting in unexpected consequences’ (Castells 1997: 317).

The public sphere is where political parties or social movements can test the efficacy of different mobilisation strategies, and where opportunities and constraints become visible by way of the public actions and reactions of other actors. To capture this role of the public sphere, scholars have developed the

notion of '*discursive opportunities*' (Ferree et al. 2002; Ferree 2003; Koopmans & Olzak 2004; Koopmans et al. 2005). In the absence of fertile structural conditions and attendant grievances, political entrepreneurs will not be able to mobilise public support successfully. However, such grievances, we argue, are to an important extent amplified, and to some extent even generated, within the public discourse. Integrating theories on social movements and media influence, we analyse how public discourse provides opportunities for mobilisation. Our central argument is that, in combination with the electoral potential and the political space available, discursive opportunities help explain both the increase in public claim-making of Pim Fortuyn, and the electoral success of his LPF. Following this theoretical lead, we will show that the key to understanding the rise of Fortuyn lies in the dynamics of the public debate, and particularly in the ways in which other actors reacted to his claims.

Theoretical perspectives

Demand-side explanations: Socio-economic conditions and grievances

The process of depillarisation and de-alignment, reflected in higher voter volatility and declining party loyalty, has caused a shift from a structured model to what Andeweg and Irwin (2005) call an open model of electoral competition. Voting behaviour based on class and religion has been replaced by citizens who shop around for the most appealing party. Thus, the availability of a potential electorate creates a 'propitious context' for extreme right parties (Ignazi 2003: 206). However, although voter choice may be differently grounded than before, 'it has often tended to reproduce quite conventional and historically familiar outcomes' (Mair 2002: 125). Increased volatility makes the Dutch electorate rather unpredictable (Mair 2008), but this does not necessarily translate into considerable right-wing party success. Take for example the also exceptionally volatile 1994 elections. Floating voters might as well suddenly return to a mainstream party, as the strong gains of the Social Democrats in 2003 show.

Another familiar argument holds that worsening economic conditions increase dissatisfaction with an incumbent government. Yet in view of the socioeconomic situation in the Netherlands in 2001, the claim that the rise of Fortuyn was a result of the country's economic performance is not convincing. According to a survey by *The Economist*, the Dutch economy was remarkably healthy at the time and experienced impressive growth under the incumbent government.³ The unemployment rate was 6.6 per cent in 1990 (a moderate level compared to other countries of the European Union) and declined to

3.5 per cent in 2000 (a considerably lower rate than in most other EU member countries) (CPB 2001).

A more convincing demand-side explanation is that immigration and cultural diversity resulted in a new cleavage. Theories of 'ethnic competition' state that support for radical- right parties is generated by an increased sense of threat by immigrants (Scheepers et al. 2002). In this view, a high influx of immigrants may increase subjective perceptions of increased ethnic competition (even if perceptions are not justified) and people become receptive to ideologies and charismatic leaders who designate specific racial or ethnic minorities as responsible for social problems (Eatwell 2000: 415).

Detailed investigations at the individual level seem to offer some support for ethnic competition accounts. Voting decisions for the LPF were to an important extent based on the content of the political issues that the LPF advanced, most importantly its position on the issues of integration and immigration (Fennema & Van der Brug 2006). Fortuyn made it acceptable to speak publicly the previously unutterable and his views on the issues of immigration and integration tapped into the fears of ordinary Dutch people and matched their life experiences of minority-related crime and segregation in cities and schools. Fortuyn's rhetoric, which largely focused on the number of immigrants in the country and their supposed lack of respect for the Dutch way of life, struck a chord with some sections of the population.

However, Adriaansen et al. (2005: 234) show that the *potential* for the rise of a party like the LPF had already existed for at least eight years. Support for multiculturalism was already weak in 1994 and more than 60 per cent of the population held the opinion that minorities had to adapt to 'Dutch culture' (see also CBS 2006). Coenders et al. (2006) and Fennema and Van der Brug (2006) likewise point out that the Fortuynist potential had already been present many years before Fortuyn entered the political stage.

Objective immigration figures do not suggest a link between the rise of the LPF and increased ethnic competition either. Data provided by the Dutch Bureau of Statistics (CBS 2007) show that the monthly numbers of immigrants to the Netherlands were relatively stable during the 1990s and early 2000s. The numbers of asylum seekers even decreased from 52,580 in 1994 to 32,550 in 2001. The number of accepted applications decreased as well. The CBS (2006) data also show that the amount of dissatisfaction with the incumbent government was stable at 16–18 per cent until 2002, when the figure jumped to 30 per cent. Van der Brug (2003) shows, however, that the rise of Fortuyn from the second half of 2001 onwards incited dissatisfaction, rather than the other way round.

With the benefit of hindsight, the success of the LPF seems easy to understand in terms of an outburst of a long-existing but unnoticed stream of

discontent with the official political myth that Dutch multicultural policies were a success. Yet the breakthrough calls for an explanation that goes beyond the socio-structural model of voting behaviour since the social conditions and electoral preferences that supposedly caused the surge of an anti-immigration party did not vary much in time and hence cannot account for Pim Fortuyn's success. A primarily socio-economic or ethnic competition approach has problems explaining sudden breakthroughs and electoral dynamics (Eatwell 1998; see also Norris 2005). We conclude that social-structural and grievance theories offer at best a partial explanation for the rise of Pim Fortuyn.

Supply-side explanations: Political opportunities

The concept of political opportunity structure (e.g., McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1994; Kriesi et al. 1995) has gained widespread popularity in the literature on social movements. The basic idea is that the capacity to mobilise depends on opportunities and constraints offered by the political-institutional setting. Xenophobic and radical-right claim-making and success are affected by the institutional characteristics of a political system (e.g., its electoral system) and by dynamic aspects of the political process. As our case concerns developments over time within one polity, only the second set of factors seems relevant. The electoral system in the Netherlands (proportional representation with a low threshold) has always offered a fertile ground for the development of new parties, but the stable character of such explanatory factors does not make it useful to include them in our research design.

An important factor that varies over time is whether established parties that are in electoral competition with radical-right parties already occupy the electoral terrain of the radical right. The average position of established parties and the political space they leave to radical-right actors affect the openness of a political system to new anti-immigrant parties (Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995; Van der Brug et al. 2005; Arzheimer & Carter 2006). Koopmans et al. (2005) show on the basis of data for the 1990s that in the Netherlands there was a moderate potential for the emergence of a radical-right party because established left and right parties occupied positions relatively close to one another on multicultural issues, leaving a space on the right that could potentially be exploited by an anti-immigrant party. Several other authors have also pointed to the favourable opportunity structure because of the ideological position of the mainstream right party, the conservative-liberal VVD, which left a gap on the right end of the electoral spectrum from which the newcomer LPF could profit. The 'purple government', which brought together the social-democratic PvdA and the VVD in one consensus-based coalition increased convergence

in mainstream party positions (Pellikaan et al. 2003; Pennings & Keman 2003; Van Holsteyn & Irwin 2003; Van Holsteyn et al. 2003).

Critics of political opportunity structure theory have correctly pointed out that a factor such as 'political space' has no meaning if people do not become aware of it. Such awareness must arise on the basis of information that becomes publicly available, and the statements by and actions of elite actors that are visible to the public. Theories of 'discursive opportunities' integrate this criticism by explicating how structurally given political opportunities become publicly visible. This argument starts from the assumption that the public sphere is a bounded space for political communication characterised by a high level of competition (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988). Just as protests that receive no media coverage at all are, in the words of Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 116), 'nonevents', regime weaknesses and openings that do not become publicly visible may be considered 'non-opportunities', which for all practical purposes might as well not exist at all. Only a minority of all attempts at public claim-making receive the media attention that is necessary to reach wider audiences. We define '*discursive opportunities*' as the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message's chance of success in the public sphere (Koopmans 2004; Koopmans & Olzak 2004).

From communications and media research we know that the 'news values' of journalists shape the decisions that make a given story newsworthy (Galtung & Ruge 1965; Harcup & O'Neill 2001). The actions of gatekeepers produce the first and most basic type of discursive opportunity that we can distinguish: *visibility*. Visibility depends on the number of communicative channels by which a message is included and the prominence of such inclusion. Visibility is a necessary condition for a message to influence the public discourse, and, other things being equal, the amount of visibility that gatekeepers allocate to a message increases its potential to diffuse further in the public sphere (Koopmans 2004; Koopmans & Olzak 2004).

We envision the communication environment of any particular public actor as the source of two further types of discursive opportunity and constraint: the amount and character of public responses. Political newcomers are likely to remain stillborn if they do not succeed in provoking reactions from other actors in the public sphere. We refer to the degree to which an actor and his messages provoke such reactions as '*resonance*'. In the eyes of journalists and editors, messages that resonate, whether negatively or positively, become more relevant and the actors behind them more prominent, which increases the speaker's chances to gain more space for his or her opinions.

Following the dictum 'any publicity is good publicity' it may sometimes not matter whether reactions are supportive or critical, but often the extent to which the responses are negative or positive is likely to be relevant. We call

expressions of support ‘consonance’, and rejections of an actor’s claims ‘dissonance’ (see likewise Koopmans & Olzak 2004). Public statements of support for an actor’s claims will often not appear out of the blue, but in reaction to critical remarks by others on these claims.

According to Fennema and Van der Brug (2006), one of the main reasons that the earlier radical-right party of Hans Janmaat failed was that its message had been widely and consistently delegitimised and considered ‘politically incorrect’ by all other actors in the public debate. By contrast, they see Fortuyn’s success as resulting from the fact that he had the image of a ‘normal’ democratic politician. Thus, we expect that consonance was beneficial for Fortuyn’s ability to air his views publicly and dissonance was harmful.

We extend the above arguments by hypothesising that visibility and consonance will not only improve, and dissonance reduce, the opportunities for an actor to further increase the frequency of his publicly visible claims, but also help improve an actor’s support in opinion polls. We claim that right-wing populist actors who receive prominent media attention (visibility), draw many positive reactions from other political actors (consonance) and receive few criticisms (dissonance) will be more successful in mobilising voter support.

Research design: Data and variables

To obtain data on the discursive opportunity variables and the claim-making of Fortuyn, we used content analysis. Data were retrieved from articles in two national newspapers: the liberal *NRC Handelsblad* and the conservative *Telegraaf* (using the Lexis Nexis database). As these two papers are rather distinctive in terms of their so-called ‘popular’ or ‘quality’ character (i.e., the emphasis on entertainment versus political information), as well as the background of their readers (Bakker & Scholten 1999), we believe we have captured a representative picture of the Dutch public debate in the written press. We used political claim analysis, which finds its origin in social movement research (Koopmans & Statham 1999; Koopmans et al. 2005: 23–27).

A ‘claim’ is defined as ‘a unit of strategic action in the public sphere that consists of the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticism, or physical attacks, which actually or potentially affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors’ (Koopmans et al. 2005: 24). A typical claim consists of an actor (the subject) undertaking some sort of strategic political action to get another actor (the addressee) to do something regarding a third actor (the object). Claims must be the result of purposive action and political in nature. Examples of coded claims are ‘Balkenende [party leader of the Christian Democrats] rejects the

principles of multiculturalism and thinks a civics course should become compulsory', or 'Hans Wiegel [ex-leader of the VVD] blames Fortuyn for being a populist and states that Fortuyn's ideas are built on quicksand. He summons Dijkstal [the current VVD leader] to finally address Fortuyn.'

The temporal frame of our analysis runs from the third week of August 2001 – when Fortuyn announced his entry into politics – through the first week of May 2002 – just before the murder of Fortuyn on 6 May. For this period, three experienced coders (MA students in social sciences) and the second author scanned all issues of the two newspapers and identified and coded 1,056 claims, which are divided into three categories: 115 were statements made by Fortuyn and his party (irrespective of the substantive issue); 715 were reactions to him or his party (again irrespective of the substantive issue); and another 226 were negative claims by other actors on immigration and the multicultural society. A claim is not identical to an individual statement – for example, a press conference or interview is coded as one strategic action in the public discourse (although several different topics might be addressed and different persons might be criticised). The inter-coder reliability test conducted on a randomly selected subsample of issues of *NRC Handelsblad* showed satisfactory agreement on the identification of articles (90.1 per cent), as well as claims within articles (88.0 per cent). Agreement scores for variables used in the analysis ranged from 87.5 to 100.0 per cent.⁴ Variables were aggregated to weekly scores, implying that the unit of analysis is a combination of time and score. The time sequence is a critical element in determining causation and crucial to analyse changes.

Dependent variables

The variable *Public claim-making by Fortuyn* is the weekly count of the number of claims made by Fortuyn and his party. For the variable *Public opinion on Fortuyn*, we use data gathered by the polling agency *Interview/NSS*. Their *Political Barometer* measures levels of support for the various parties per week during the period under investigation. This gives a reliable and valid picture of the amount of support among the Dutch electorate for all political parties. The results of these polls are reported every Friday, which is why we have chosen Saturdays as the demarcation line between weeks (our units of observation). Support for Fortuyn is measured by the percentage of people that reported the intention to vote for Leefbaar Nederland (Liveable Netherlands, hereafter LN) or the LPF when asked for their party choice if parliamentary elections were to be held the next day.

At the end of August 2001, Fortuyn announced his intention to join a political party and enter the political arena, most likely with LN. We will

consider a voting intention for LN as support for Fortuyn from that moment on. In the second week of February 2002, Fortuyn was forced to step down as leader of LN after an interview in the *Volkskrant* in which he called Islam a 'backward' religion. Immediately after Fortuyn's ejection from LN, many commentators thought that his short political career was over. However, Fortuyn founded his own party (the LPF) two days later. We will still consider a voting intention for both the LN and LPF as support for Fortuyn during the three weeks after these events, in particular because Fortuyn remained the party leader of Leefbaar Rotterdam (the local branch of LN) for the municipal elections of 6 March. For many voters it may have been unclear during this period whether or not Fortuyn was still associated with LN. After the municipal elections, only the support for the LPF was included in the dependent variable.⁵

Independent variables

Discursive opportunities are measured by: the amount of visibility in the media; the amount of dissonance in the media; and the amount of consonance in the media. '*Visibility*' is defined as the extent to which the claims made by Fortuyn are visible in the newspapers. Our measure of visibility distinguishes claims that were reported prominently from those that were reported less prominently. We combine different elements of prominence into a composite indicator: Is the claim reported on the front page?; Is the claim the first claim mentioned in the article?; Is the claim referred to in the headline of the article?; Does the claim appear in both newspapers?; and How many times is the claim repeated in follow-up articles?⁶ The variable consists of the summed score on each of the items and has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.67, which is evidence of a fair scale and indicates acceptable reliability.⁷ To avoid overlap between the dependent and independent variables, the total amount of visibility in a week is divided by the number of claims made by Fortuyn. In other words, our visibility measure indicates the average visibility of the claims made by Fortuyn in a given week.

In order to distinguish the amount of resonance from the degree to which public reaction was supportive or critical, resonance is captured by two separate variables. *Dissonance* counts the number of negative reactions by other actors to Fortuyn. All instances of critical claim-making that are directed to or referring to Fortuyn and his political party are included. This can also be an indirect reaction, for instance, when someone urges the leader of the Social Democratic Party to take a stronger stance against the viewpoints of Fortuyn.

Consonance is measured by coding the extent to which Fortuyn and his party are supported. A claim that expresses an ambivalent or neutral position

was also counted as consonance as we assume that such reactions – although not unequivocally supportive – enhanced the legitimacy of his political message.

In terms of *Negative claims on immigration and integration*, one of Fortuyn's unique selling points was his viewpoint on the issue of the multicultural society. It may have been the case that other actors created further opportunities for Fortuyn by also making restrictive claims about immigration and integration. For that reason, the number of negative claims on immigration or integration during a week will be taken into account. To avoid confounding of independent and dependent variables, claims made by Fortuyn on this issue were excluded from this variable. This is in line with the combination of the agenda-setting theory and issue ownership theory that Walgrave and De Swert (2004) have elaborated. They found that when the media reported more on immigrants and asylum seekers, more voters expressed a preference for the party that 'owns' this issue – in this case, the right-wing populist Vlaams Blok in Belgium. Alternatively, restrictive claims on the issue of the multicultural society may also have undermined Fortuyn's uniqueness in this regard and thereby reduced his opportunities to make further claims.

As regards *The impact of 9/11*, we use a dummy variable to capture the effect of a potentially influential event that took place during the election campaign: the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11 (week 4 in our data). We explored both the temporary and the permanent effect of this event. The dummy variable applicable for an event with a temporal effect is set equal to 1 in that particular week. Modelling a permanent effect entails that the time period is divided into two parts: before (score 0) and after the event (score 1).

With *Unemployment and immigration*, data were retrieved from the Dutch Bureau of Statistics (CBS 2006, 2008).⁸ Because these are monthly figures, an interpolation procedure was carried out to create weekly rates.

Analysis and results

Determinants of public opinion support for Fortuyn

We start our analysis with support for Fortuyn in public opinion polls as the dependent variable. To estimate the effects of the media variables, immigration, unemployment and the attacks of September 11 on public opinion during the election campaign, we use Box-Jenkins transfer modelling (see McCleary & Hay 1980). The first step in order to derive an ARIMA model is to check whether variables in the model have stationary means and variances. An

Figure 1. Percentage of voters intending to vote for Pim Fortuyn per week (August 2001–May 2002).

Note: Week 1 starts 18 August 2001.

Source: Interview/NSS.

inspection of the opinion poll series shows that the variance and mean of the time series increase as the level of the series increases. This is also what a graph of the polls indicates (see Figure 1). The time series is made stationary by log-transformation and differencing. The explanatory variables are likewise inspected, and logged and differenced in case of non-stationarity.⁹ The most common unit-root test is the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test, which shows that none of the variables contains a unit root (which implies that all series are now stationary).

The second step is an inspection of the autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation functions of the dependent variable. These functions show a single spiking (and almost significant) ACF at lag 1 and decaying PACFs, which indicates a moving average component with lag 1. A univariate ARIMA model shows a significant coefficient for a moving average parameter at lag 1. The residuals are 'white noise', which means that there is no remaining autocorrelation in the residuals. Similar 'noise models' were developed for all independent variables in the analysis except for the dummy 9/11 intervention variable.¹⁰

Table 1 shows the results of the first model with the predicted impact of the 9/11 attacks, the unemployment rate and immigration. The interpretation of the results depends on the fact that the dependent variable is differenced (Enders 2004: 257). An independent variable has the effect of increasing the

Table 1. Determinants of public opinion support for Pim Fortuyn, 2001–2002

	Model 1 coefficient	t-value	Model 2 coefficient	t-value
Moving average (t–1)	–0.47***	–3.21	–0.59***	–3.94
9/11(t–1)	0.07	0.38	0.08	0.50
Unemployment (t–1)	1.55	0.74	0.71	0.35
Immigration (t–1)	–0.52	–0.45	–1.27	–1.25
Claims Fortuyn (t–1)			0.04	0.83
Visibility (t–1)			0.06***	3.03
Consonance (t–2)			0.07**	2.13
Dissonance (t–2)			–0.01	–0.31
Negative claims immigration (t–1)			–0.01	–1.42
RMS	0.040		0.029	
AIC	–10.98		–18.04	
N (weeks)	38		38	

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

change in the dependent variable by a certain amount of units: a significant positive predictor has an influence on Fortuyn's popularity *growth*. In this model it is assumed that 9/11 has a long-term (permanent) impact with a delay of one week and therefore the intervention is lagged one period. However, the table shows that the intervention does not have a significant effect. An alternative model (not shown in the table) in which it is assumed that 9/11 only had a temporary effect leads to the same conclusion. We also have to conclude that unemployment and immigration have not affected the opinion polls during the election campaign. For immigration, this is hardly surprising since, as we indicated earlier, the rise of Pim Fortuyn occurred during a period when immigration figures had already been on the decline for about two years. Unemployment did increase slightly during Fortuyn's rise, but on a very low level, from 3.5 per cent in August 2001 to 3.9 per cent in May 2002.

In the second model in Table 1, the other explanatory variables are added. Adding these variables increases the explanatory power of the model as indicated by the mean square root of the squared residuals summed over all time periods (RMS) – the standard goodness of fit measure in time-series analysis (Clarke et al. 1990). The RMS decreases from 0.040 to 0.025. The smaller the RMS, the smaller the error and the better the fit of the model. Also, a lower AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) points to a better fit of the model.¹¹

As expected, the public discourse has a significant influence on the polls. First of all, it is important to note that the amount of claim-making by Fortuyn

as such does not have any effect, which means that he was not able to boost electoral support just by airing his views in the public sphere. He depended on discursive opportunities provided by others: visibility and consonance have significant positive effects and lead to increases in public support for Fortuyn. The impact of the variables on the polls is lagged, and strongest at the first lag (for visibility) and the second lag (for consonance). Dissonance does not have a significant effect. This implies that efforts of other political actors to delegitimise Fortuyn by making negative claims about him or his party in the public sphere did not undermine public opinion support for Fortuyn. On the contrary, negative reactions may have been counterproductive because criticism might have encouraged other actors to stick up for Fortuyn (thereby increasing the amount of consonance) and journalists to present further messages by Fortuyn more prominently (increasing visibility).

These results are largely in line with those of Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2003: 117), although they only analysed the average balance of support and criticism (on a scale from -1 to +1), not the absolute number of supportive and critical statements.¹² As in our results, they find a positive net effect of support by political actors on the intention to vote for Fortuyn, which is mediated by respondents' assessment of Fortuyn's media performance.¹³

A change in the amount of negative claims on immigration or integration does not turn out to be significant.¹⁴ Other Dutch studies that take media coverage into account do not give an entirely consistent picture. Lubbers (2001) does not find an (additional) effect of the number of articles on asylum seekers on the amount of support for the Dutch extreme right during the 1990s. However, including the Fortuyn period, Boomgaarden and Vliegenhart (2007) show for 1990–2002 a positive influence of issue attention on anti-immigration party success (with a time lag of three months). The differences in outcomes might be due to the research design that focuses more on long-term effects.

Determinants of Fortuyn's claim-making success

As our second dependent variable we now turn to the investigation of the rate of claim-making by Fortuyn – that is, the successful attempts by Fortuyn to air his views. Figure 2 shows the amount of claims made by Fortuyn in our two media sources for each week. This variable is an event count, which has the characteristic that its values are discrete and non-negative. King (1989) explains why in that case an ordinary least squares regression (OLS) is inappropriate (King also presents a good discussion and application of event count data).

In addition, we are confronted with over dispersion in the dependent variable, which means that we are more likely to see both a large number of low counts and a number of very high counts, as is shown in Figure 3. Some

Figure 2. Weekly count of the number of claims by Pim Fortuyn (August 2001–May 2002). Note: Week 1 starts 18 August 2001.

Figure 3. Density distribution of the weekly number of claims made by Pim Fortuyn.

30 per cent of the weeks have a zero score, which means that in these weeks Fortuyn was not able to insert any new claims into the public discourse. In over-dispersed data there is positive contagion across events, and one count (observation) increases the likelihood of observing additional events in the same period.¹⁵ This positive contagion implies that we have more variability than for an independent Poisson process, and therefore we will use a negative

Table 2. Determinants of the rate of publicised claim-making by Pim Fortuyn, 2001–2002

	Model 1 coefficient	z-value	Model 2 coefficient	z-value
Claims Fortuyn (t–1)	0.07**	2.21	0.06	1.50
9/11(t–1)	1.33	1.19	0.69	0.59
Unemployment (t–1)	4.25**	2.20	1.27	0.60
Immigration (t–1)	0.00	–0.36	0.00	0.16
Visibility (t–1)			0.14	0.75
Consonance (t–1)			0.02*	1.76
Dissonance (t–1)			–0.03**	–2.19
Negative claims immigration (t–1)			0.07***	2.66
Opinion polls (t–1)			0.11*	1.65
Constant	–15.12*	–1.75	–6.55	–0.76
Log pseudo-likelihood	–72.18		–67.18	
Wald Chi ²	28.37***		57.96***	
N (weeks)	38		38	

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

binomial distribution for the dependent variable instead (Long & Freese 2006). To model the time-series character of these event counts, we include a lagged dependent variable event count as a regressor in the model.

Table 2 shows the results of a negative binomial regression model with the number of claims by Fortuyn as the dependent variable. In the first model, only 9/11 (with a long duration effect), unemployment, immigration and a first-order autoregression of the dependent variable are included. We find both an autoregressive effect and a strong relationship between a change in the unemployment rate and the amount of claims by Fortuyn in the subsequent week.

The second step is to investigate the effects of the discursive opportunity variables. This second model includes the amount of negative claims by other actors on immigration and integration as well as support for Fortuyn in opinion polls. The model fit statistics (Wald Chi² and log pseudo-likelihood) point to a better model. After adding these variables, both the autoregressive effect and the impact of unemployment are no longer significant.

It appears from our second model that there is no relationship between the degree of visibility of the claims of Fortuyn and the number of public claims by him one week later. Resonance, however, has a significant impact, as in the earlier analysis with opinion polls as the dependent variable. Negative reactions significantly decreased the rate of claims by Fortuyn that made it into the media. The reverse is also true: support for Fortuyn in the public debate

increased his ability to express his viewpoints through the print media in the subsequent week. The results also show a strong positive influence of the number of negative immigration claims. This means that other actors enhanced Fortuyn's opportunities for claim-making by also making restrictive claims about immigration and integration. Support for Fortuyn in public opinion polls also had a positive effect on his subsequent rate of claim-making. The general conclusion is that approval (as indicated by opinion poll support from the general public, supportive statements by other actors in the media and absence of critical reactions) enables a new political party to further make its standpoints heard in the public sphere.

Summary and concluding remarks

In this article, we set out to examine the spectacular rise in the Netherlands of the new populist right party headed by the charismatic Pim Fortuyn in 2002. Pim Fortuyn succeeded in attracting by far the most media attention of all politicians and out of the blue the LPF won 17 per cent of the votes. Dissatisfaction with multicultural policies offered a fertile ground for a populist anti-immigration party, but these longstanding grievances fail to explain the explosive political career of Fortuyn. The immigration figures were relatively stable during the 1990s and had been declining since 2000, and the country's economy was healthy. Research shows that long before the emergence of Fortuyn, there was an electoral *potential* for an anti-immigration party.

The political opportunity structure perspective adds to our understanding of the potential for a radical-right party. One of the most relevant facilitating factors for the emergence of the radical right is the political space made available to it by the policy positions of mainstream parties. However, empirical evidence suggests that such an electoral niche had already been present much longer. During the election campaign of 1998, the Dutch political elite was still able to stick to its commitment to multiculturalism by mobilising 'political correctness' to delegitimise the then active anti-immigration party. Like the grievance and ethnic threat arguments, the political opportunity perspective is useful to identify the existence of an electoral potential, but it cannot explain why this potential lay fallow for so long and was then so suddenly and spectacularly seized upon by Pim Fortuyn.

Similarly, it should be stressed that we do not see the availability of facilitating political conditions that are stable or only gradually change over longer periods of time, like an electoral system with proportional representation and a low threshold, as irrelevant. The same is true for socio-economic factors or

the long-term decline in party loyalty, which can identify electoral potentials. However, such slowly shifting variables fail to account for sudden breakthroughs and short-term electoral changes.

We have advanced the argument that electoral potentials and political opportunities have to be made visible in the public discourse in order to become behaviourally relevant. We use the notion of 'discursive opportunities' to capture the publicly visible opportunities and constraints for the claim-making behaviour of political parties. We have shown that indeed media attention for Pim Fortuyn and the public reactions to his party played a decisive role in explaining the remarkable degree to which he was able to mobilise support and express his claims in the public sphere. Applying this perspective to the explanation of both support for Fortuyn in opinion polls and his claim-making success in the media, we showed that visibility, consonance and dissonance were relevant for understanding the rise of Pim Fortuyn and his party.

Public visibility and consonance in the media significantly affected public opinion support for Fortuyn. Support by other actors in the public sphere was beneficial, but criticism was not harmful for his position in the weekly polls. Ventilating critical reactions in order to undermine the legitimacy of political opponents may have partly backfired. Negative reactions to Fortuyn could serve as an important indirect channel that, contrary to the intention of those who criticised Fortuyn, partly boosted popular support for him by creating more consonance and visibility for his claims.

With regard to Fortuyn's own claim-making success, we found, however, that critical claims referring to Fortuyn were effective to the extent that they decreased the rate at which he was able to air his positions publicly. Also in line with our expectations, consonance put Fortuyn in a more favourable position. Visibility did not have a direct impact on Fortuyn's claim-making, although it was relevant in an indirect sense by increasing his support in opinion polls. One of Fortuyn's unique selling points – his position on the issue of the multicultural society – was not undermined when other actors also made restrictive statements about immigration and integration. On the contrary, they created further opportunities for claim-making by Fortuyn. The opinion polls also had a positive effect: the more support for Fortuyn in the polls, the more space was given to him to express his views in the media.

Combining the results for the two dependent variables, we can identify a dynamic feedback process in which the reactions by the media and by other politicians to Fortuyn (visibility and consonance) raised his popularity among the electorate. In turn, Fortuyn's support in opinion polls, combined with direct support that he drew from other political actors and failed attempts by other politicians to steal his thunder by also making anti-immigrant claims, raised the

rate of claims by him that made it into the media. When other political actors again reacted to Fortuyn's increased public profile, and the media presented his claims more prominently, the spiral of discursive escalation was given a further swing and his star rose yet further in the opinion polls.

This feedback chain explains why political relations that had been relatively stable, and an election campaign that was expected by most observers to become very dull, suddenly spiralled out of equilibrium and gave rise to the greatest landslide in Dutch electoral history. Our results are thus in accord with the 'punctuated equilibrium' view on policy shifts, which Baumgartner and Jones (1993) borrowed from evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (e.g., Gould 1989). We believe that the relevance of these findings and the theoretical perspective of discursive opportunities that accounts for them extend beyond the case of Pim Fortuyn and can add to a more general understanding of the dynamics of sudden political transformations, shifts, breakthroughs and breakdowns. It could be fruitful to test empirically the short-term discursive mechanisms we identified for the breakthroughs of right-wing populist parties in other European countries. For example, Art (2007) states that the difference in success for the extreme right between Germany and Austria – two politically and socio-economically similar countries – is due to the different nature of the reactions from other political parties, the media and civil society. The incessant campaign (especially of the *Bild Zeitung*) against the German Republikaner Party led to the collapse of the party very shortly after its appearance, while Jörg Haider of the Austrian Freedom Party profited from 'free advertising' by Austria's largest newspaper. Rydgren (2005) argues that the emergence of the right-wing populist party New Democracy in Sweden can be partly explained by the evolution from only two public television channels in the 1980s to a variety of commercial channels in the 1990s, which increased the opportunities for visibility for the new political contender. Likewise, one of the reasons the Danish People's Party was electorally successful was that it was given a great deal of media coverage – for example, many items dealing with immigration issues included statements and comments of party representatives (Rydgren, 2004).

The success or failure of populist right parties throughout Europe is often associated with the (lack of a) charismatic personality of their leaders. We argued that such post-hoc attributions run the risk of circular reasoning and therefore cannot offer a satisfactory explanation for electoral breakthroughs (see also Van der Brug & Mughan 2007). Our results suggest that charisma is better seen as an emergent property that is part of what needs to be explained. In this view, charisma depends as much, or more, on the actions and reactions of other political and media actors than on the personality, skills, and tactics of populist political entrepreneurs.

Notes

1. Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript. The order of names is strictly alphabetical.
2. Weber illustrates this by noting that even Chinese monarchs could sometimes lose their status as a 'son of heaven' because of misfortune, such as defeat in war, floods or drought. For more recent examples of instability, see Collins (2004).
3. *The Economist*, 4 May 2002.
4. The codebook and more detailed information on the reliability of the coding of claims are available online at: www.jaspermuis.com.
5. We performed our analyses also including a dummy variable for the three weeks after the resignation of Fortuyn as leader of LN and until the municipal elections in order to check whether our decision on how to deal with this confusing period had affected our results. The results are, however, very similar and the dummy variable is not significant.
6. The rate of repetition was logged. It is measured independently of resonance because repetitions that occurred in the context of direct reactions to Fortuyn's statements were excluded.
7. We additionally considered the item 'Is there a photograph illustrating the claim?', which was, however, removed from the scale because it correlated very poorly with other items and thus seems to refer to a different dimension of prominence.
8. Instead of monthly immigration figures, we also considered the monthly influx of asylum seekers. However, asylum seeker numbers show a similar declining trend as the general immigration figures and using this variable instead of total immigration does not influence the results.
9. In order to achieve stationarity, the following independent variables were transformed: unemployment (differenced), consonance and dissonance (logged and differenced). Additional analysis shows that differencing and/or logging the independent variables that were not differenced and/or log-transformed does not alter our results.
10. See McCleary and Hay (1980: 243) for a good discussion of why the relationship can only be interpreted when the cause variable is a white noise process.
11. The Ljung-Box Q statistic, which tests the significance of autocorrelation at each lag (see, e.g., Enders 2004), indicates the absence of autocorrelation in the residuals for all models. Its significance value is less than or equal to 0.05 for twenty lags.
12. It should also be noted that they analyse the period starting at the end of February 2002 (a major part of Fortuyn's meteoric rise took place earlier).
13. In our study, positive and negative reactions only refer to political strategic statements. Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2003) find that shifts in vote preferences are also significantly affected by the nature of 'objective' news on real-life developments.
14. Even if we only add this variable to Model 1, media attention for the issue of immigration does not have a significant effect on Fortuyn's success in the opinion polls.
15. An illustration of over dispersion because of positive contagion is counting antelopes. Antelopes are herd animals, and when you see one, you will probably observe more. This violates the assumption that one event has no effect on the likelihood of observing additional events in the same period.

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