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SUMMARY

Media Logic

Former Minister of Justice Piet Hein Donner said in 2004 that Dutch media "write what people want to hear, what attracts attention, what sells, instead of what is really going on" [author's translation]. This is a striking description of media logic. Media Logic refers to 'the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people's attention' (Strömbäck, 2008). It is thus a consequence of form requirements, such as visually attractive talking heads in television broadcasts and short, powerful headlines on the front page of the newspaper. It is also determined by what media expect that people want to hear such as news about elite persons, contest news, and negative news. Media Logic is not the logic of individual journalists or newsrooms but the shared logic of the media as an institution.

"Will Rutte or yet Cohen win the elections?" This question graced the front page of *De Telegraaf* on Election Day in 2010. This question was followed by the subtitle "VVD leads with four seats in the latest polls". With its attention for party leaders and the electoral contest, this headline is a prime example of media logic. This headline gives a false impression of the elections. By only mentioning party leaders, the parliamentary elections are presented as presidential elections. The elections also seem like a duel between just two parties. Lastly, the attention for the polls draws the attention away from political issues.

This dissertation answers the question as to whether Dutch campaign coverage meets the normative requirements of electoral democracy. It also measures the extent to which media logic comes to expression in campaign news in the form of personalised news, contest news, and negative news. The central question is whether these content characteristics of media logic threaten electoral democracy by influencing voting behaviour.

Method

Measuring content characteristics of media logic requires a detailed content analysis that simultaneously measures the attention for individual

politicians, different types of contest news, and the evaluative tone of the news. In the months preceding the elections of 1998 to 2010, coders analysed the campaign coverage of the major television news broadcasts and the national newspapers at the sentence level. To measure changes in voting behaviour, I gratefully made use of panel data from four research companies (NIPO, Blauw Research, Ruigrok | NetPanel, and Intomart GfK). These data sets have been merged at the level of individual respondents based on respondents' news consumption. The combined dataset provides a rare opportunity to study the effect of content characteristics of media logic on voting behaviour.

Media and electoral democracy

The answer to the question as to what we can expect from the media depends on our conception of democracy. In this dissertation, I examine the impact of media logic from the perspective of the mandate function of electoral democracy. From this perspective, media are expected to give voters information to make a well-informed vote decision based on their interests and policy preferences. The requirements to the media also depend on a state's democratic institutions, such as its party system. In this dissertation, I studied whether the campaign coverage of Dutch media meets these requirements.

The Netherlands has a *multi-party system*. The power in the parliament is divided among a large number of parties. A multiparty system requires diversity in media coverage. In this dissertation, the diversity of national newspapers in the coverage of the 2006 election campaign was measured. All newspapers devote most attention to the coalition parties and the largest opposition party. Yet traditional newspapers still pay most attention to the parties with which they used to be closely aligned. Free dailies devote relatively much attention to new parties and small opposition parties. The analysis also showed that the diversity of newspaper coverage is higher than the diversity in parliament. Yet the diversity in the political issues that are covered is limited. The coverage in the newspapers is dominated by the same political issues.

The Netherlands is characterized by *coalition governments*. In a system in which parties have to form a coalition after the elections, a strategic vote is not irrational. Yet the mandate function of elections requires that citizens vote based on their interests and policy prefer-

ences. News about the political contest - including coverage of conflict and polls - can entice citizens to cast a strategic vote. This dissertation shows that Dutch media pay more attention to the political contest than to the political issues where this contest is about. This is a worrying development from the perspective of the mandate function of elections.

The Netherlands has a *parliamentary system*. This means that parties play a central role in Dutch politics. In the voting booth, citizens do not elect a president but a representative of a party. Yet in the media, the elections are frequently presented as presidential elections. This dissertation shows that media pay as much attention to individual politicians as to the parties that they represent. Towards the end of election campaigns the attention for party leaders mounts. This is a worrying development because it gives citizens a distorted picture of the choice that they have to make.

Media Logic over time

In the scientific literature and the public debate, people often claim that the influence of media logic is increasing. This dissertation investigates the influence of media logic by studying the presence of content characteristics reflecting media logic. This has been done over time, from the election campaign of 1998 to the election campaign of 2010. Three content features that correspond with important news values and form requirements are personalized news, contest news and negative news. Journalists use these content characteristics because people identify more easily with politicians than with abstract institutions like political parties, because the political contest offers an engaging storyline, and because people are attracted to the negative.

The analyses show that the amount of personalised news, contest news, and negative news has *decreased* between 2002 and 2010. In this period, the relative attention for individual politicians has decreased, the relative attention to the political contest has declined, and the tone of the news has become less negative. Only the attention for party leaders has increased. This conclusion is perhaps counter intuitive. One must realise, however, that the campaign of 2002 was an exceptional campaign. The campaign in which Pim Fortuyn made an upsurge was marked by a political struggle between anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn and the so-called 'purple' coalition parties. After this prime example of a cam-

paigned dominated by media logic the influence of media logic could only decrease. Other studies have shown that until 2002 the attention for personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage did increase.

The influence of media logic on voting behaviour

In the last decade, the voting behaviour of the Dutch electorate has changed in several respects. Voters shift more often between parties. Especially in the period between 1994 and 2010, this so-called volatility was high. Voters do not only switch between parties from election to election but also from poll to poll. At the level of individual voters, volatility is nothing more than a change in party preference. Large groups of voters shifting between parties during the short period of time of an election campaign may however pose a problem. Because of the strong rises and falls in the polls, the outcome of the elections may seem coincidental. This can decrease the confidence in the election outcome and therewith harm the new coalition.

This dissertation posed the question as to whether campaign volatility is influenced by the relative attention for contest coverage and the tone of that coverage. Voters' inclination to change voting preference or to become indecisive is influenced by contest coverage. The more news about the electoral contest, the more likely voters are to alter their voting preference, or to become indecisive. So, the more contest news, the more unstable voters are. This effect of contest news depends on the tone of that news. Voters react most strongly to positive coverage of parties' success. Coverage of a rise in the polls makes voters move. Voters also change in response to negative coverage of political conflict. Media attention for political issues has the opposite effect. It makes people consolidate their vote preference. That does not mean that voters do not consider political issues in their voting decision. A focus on specific issues in the news may indeed cause these issues to play a role in the vote decision. The many changes in voting preferences during the campaign are however primarily influenced by media coverage of the political contest.

The motivations underlying voting behaviour have also changed. Long-term factors such as tradition, religion, and partisan considerations have decreased in importance. Short-term factors such as strategic con-

siderations and the evaluation of a party leader have become increasingly important. Yet a party's policy stances play also an increasingly important role. This latter trend is a positive development from the perspective of the mandate function of democracy.

This study examines the relation between personalised coverage – news about party leaders – and personalised voting behaviour – a vote based on a preference for a party leader. The study of personalisation shows that the tone of the news about party leaders varied from one week to another. In 2006, Labour leader Cohen was applauded at the beginning of the campaign, while he was fiercely criticized at the end of the campaign. The opinions of voters about party leaders are also less stable than is often thought. This study shows that evaluations of party leaders have a positive effect on voting preferences. The more a voter likes a party leader, the more likely he or she is to vote for the leader's party. This effect remains intact when controlling for a voter's opinion on the party itself and the degree to which a voter agrees with the views of this party. The degree of personalised coverage also affects the voting decision. Attention to party leaders in the news makes party leader evaluation more important in the voting decision. When voters are exposed to relatively more news on party leaders, their opinions about party leaders weigh more heavily in their voting decision.

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In conclusion, concerns about media logic are only partly justified. News coverage determined by media logic has a negative effect on the functioning of electoral democracy. Yet campaign coverage is to a decreasing degree influenced by media logic. Media Logic has a negative effect on electoral democracy but its impact decreases.