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2 DUTCH CAMPAIGN COVERAGE (1998-2010)²

This chapter gives a brief description of the Dutch election campaigns under study based on the media coverage of these campaigns. How did Dutch media present the electoral contest? This chapter aims to give background information on the election campaigns under study. The descriptions will also show how media shape the election campaigns.

Before discussing the campaigns, I will briefly introduce the main Dutch political parties. *Table 2.1* presents the parties that were represented in parliament between 1994 and 2010. 1994 is added as a point of reference. The parties in the first three rows, *CDA*, *PvdA*, and *VVD*, have dominated Dutch politics for a long time. These three parties represented the main socio-religious lines along which Dutch society used to be divided. The Christian democratic *CDA* is a merger of three confessional parties: the protestant *CHU* and *ARP* and the catholic *KVP*. The *PvdA* is a social democratic party that used to represent socialist citizens. The liberal *VVD* represented the bourgeois middle class citizens. Any cabinet in the post war period contained two of these three parties – or their predecessors – in different constellations.

Five other parties have been represented in parliament for the full period under study: the socialist party *SP*, the liberal progressive *D66*, the Green *GroenLinks*, and the Christian parties *ChristenUnie* and *SGP*. *D66* has regularly participated in coalition governments. The *ChristenUnie* has participated in government once. Several other parties have been represented in parliament for a short period. These are mainly one-issue parties. In 1994, two parties for the elderly won seats in parliament. Since 2006, an animal rights party is represented in parliament. Anti-immigration parties also have been successful. 1994 was the last year in which the extreme right *Centrum Democraten* (CD) was elected. Recently, other anti-immigration parties have been more successful. In 2002, the *LPF* gained 26 seats out of nowhere. The *PVV* gained no less than 24 seats during the 2010 elections.

² Parts of this chapter have been published as: Kleinnijenhuis, Jan and Janet Takens (2011) 'Het Politieke Nieuwsaanbod van Dagbladen en Televisie: Objectief en Pluriform?', Andeweg, R.B., Thomassen, J.J.A. (Eds.), *Democratie Doorgelicht. Het Functioneren van De Nederlandse Democratie*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

Table 2.1 *Political party descriptions*

Party name	Description	Pillar	Number of seats					
			1994	1998	2002	2003	2006	2010
CDA	Christian democratic	Protestant/catholic	34	29	43	44	41	21
PvdA	Social democratic	Socialist	37	45	23	42	33	30
VVD	Liberal	Liberal	31	38	24	28	22	31
LPF	Anti-immigration				26	8		
PVV	Anti-immigration						9	24
SP	Socialist		2	5	9	9	25	15
D66	Liberal progressive		24	14	7	6	3	10
GroenLinks	Green		5	11	10	8	7	10
AOV	Elderly		6					
ChristenUnie ¹	Christian	Protestant	5	5	4	3	6	5
CD	Anti-immigration		3					
SGP	Christian orthodox	Protestant	2	3	2	2	2	2
PvdD	Animal rights						2	2
LN	Populist right-wing				2			
Unie55+	Elderly		1					

¹ ChristenUnie is the result of a merger between two Christian parties, RPF and GPV, in 2001. The seats of these two parties have been summed.

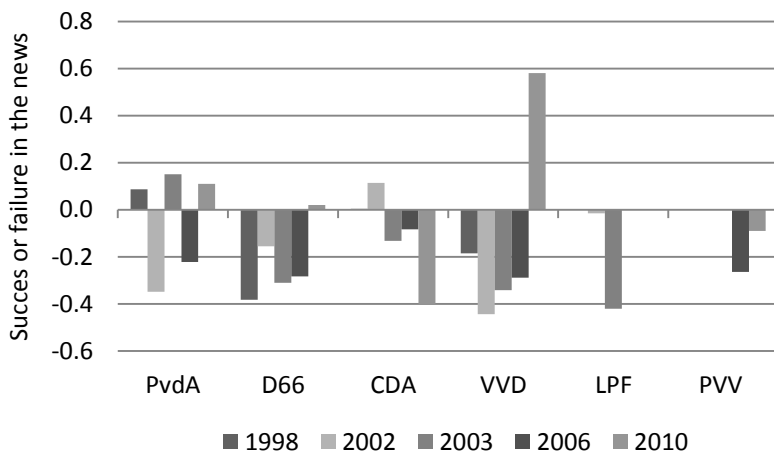
2.1 Storytelling during election campaigns

Section 2.2 will describe the election campaign in detail. The present section will give a concise overview of media's storylines.

To retain people's attention from day to day, politics is presented as a continuing story of winners and losers. Campaign events must fit into a storyline that should guarantee that people return tomorrow, just as in a soap opera. The question as to who is winning and who is losing is important within such a storyline. To show who is winning and who is losing, media can refer to polls, policy outcomes, or the answer to the question as to who is making the public laugh in the debates. Thereby it is decisive which reference point is chosen: did a party lose relative to the polls of a few weeks ago, relative to the last elections, or as compared to a competing party? Usually not all three hold true simultaneously. Media often choose the reference point that magnifies the dramatic effect of the storyline. The public just remembers the positive or negative com-

parison with the reference point. Kahneman and Tversky (2000) showed in numerous experiments that most people simply rely on positive or negative comparisons, without considering what the reference criterion was.

In the months preceding the 1998 – 2010 elections, the political news coverage of national newspapers and television news bulletins was coded by means of a Semantic Network Analysis (Van Atteveltdt, 2008).³ For a full account of Semantic Network Analysis and the operationalisation of different content characteristics, see *section 6.2.2*. *Figure 2.1* shows how positive or how negative the media portrayed political parties over time by covering their success or failure.



Note: A party's success or failure is measured on a scale from -1 to 1. Media can ascribe success or failure based on the polls, the appraisal of a party leader in a televised election debate, or a party's standing in the eyes of a journalist.

Figure 2.1 *Success and failure attributed to parties by the media*

³ Newspapers: *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*, in 2006 *NRC Next*, until 2010 *Algemeen Dagblad*, and from 2006 *Spits* and *Metro*. Television news broadcasts: *NOS journaal*, *RTL nieuws*, and in 2002 *Het Nieuws* of SBS6.

Figure 2.1 shows that media more often attribute failure to a party than success. The parties to whom media did attribute success, were also the parties that won the elections. This most clearly applies to the liberal VVD in 2010 but it also applies to for example the social democratic PvdA in 1998 and the Christian democratic CDA in 2002. Of course, *Figure 2.1* does not answer the question as to whether greater public support makes that the media attribute success to a party, or whether media's attribution of success leads to greater public support. From news effect studies we know that in the short-term the latter holds true for individual voters (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b). Yet that does not mean that in the long-term the media will attribute success to strong parties. In a period of weeks or months, voters are guided by the media's attribution of success or failure.

It does not only matter whether political parties are attributed success or failure but also whether 'their' issues receive media attention. It is beneficial for parties if media pay much attention to issues that they 'own'. A party owns an issue when it has a stronger reputation for addressing that issue than other parties (Petrocik, 1996). If the media for example focus on immigration and integration, this favours anti-immigration parties but also anti-racist parties. When social security issues do not make it into the news, this will be disadvantageous for a social democratic party. Voters assume that only issues where others also talk about are issues that truly matter. If a party is the only one speaking about an issue, the party will seem to be nagging.

Figure 2.2 shows the media attention for five issue categories. On the socio-economical dimension, we distinguish right-wing issues, i.e. taxes and a budget deficit, which right-wing parties own and left-wing issues, i.e. issues around social security, which left-wing parties traditionally own. We also measured the attention for issues on the cultural dimension: immigration, crime, and new left issues. New left includes topics such as civil rights, feminism, and gay rights, which are owned by new left parties. Other issue categories were not depicted out of reasons of clarity.

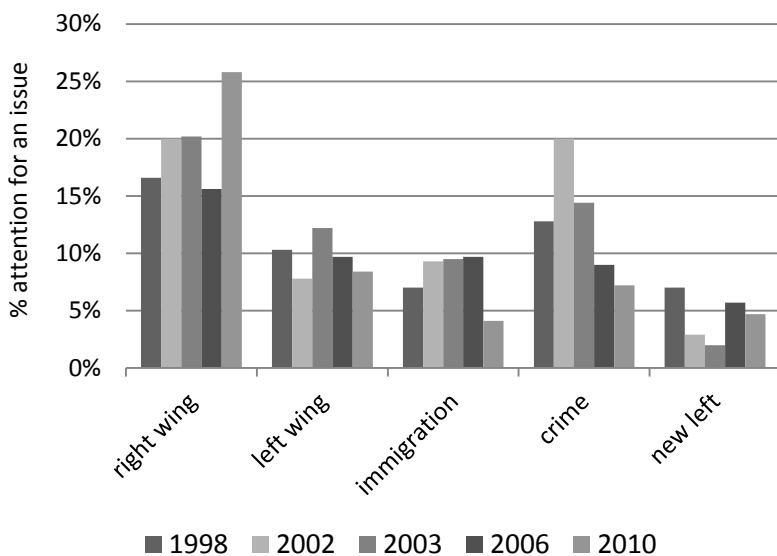


Figure 2.2 *Media attention for issues*

Figure 2.2 shows that right-wing issues, like taxes and the budget deficit, consistently receive more attention than left-wing issues, like social security. Immigration was an important topic in the 2002, 2003, and 2006 election campaigns. In 2002, crime received more attention than left-wing issues and just as much attention as right-wing issues. This attention for right-wing issues is beneficial for right-wing parties who traditionally 'own' these issues. The attention for immigration issues helps anti-immigration parties like the *LPF* in 2002 and the *PVV* in 2006.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will briefly discuss the storylines that media followed in their coverage of the 1998 – 2010 election campaigns.

2.2 Campaign coverage

2.2.1 *THE 1998 CAMPAIGN: PURPLE SUCCESS*

In the four years before the elections on 6 May 1998, the Netherlands was governed by the first 'purple' cabinet. It was called purple because it was the first cabinet in which 'blue' liberals – *VVD* and *D66* – and 'red' social democrats – *PvdA* – cooperated. It was also the first cabinet since 1918 without the Christian democrats (*CDA*) or one of its predecessors. The *CDA* had lost more than one third of its seats in the 1994 elections. At the start of the 1998 campaign, the purple parties were still firmly in place.

In the media coverage of the 1998 campaign, the *PvdA* was depicted as the frontrunner among the incumbent parties (see *Figure 2.1*). From the start of the campaign, media portrayed the election as a battle between *PvdA*-leader Wim Kok and *VVD*-leader Frits Bolkestein. Frits Bolkestein had chosen to represent his party from a position in parliament. Prime Minister Kok could therefore present himself in contrast as a true political leader representing 'the people'. Meanwhile, *PvdA*'s chair in parliament, Jacques Wallage, continuously attacked Frits Bolkestein. Bolkestein, who had been successful with his anti-immigration stances during the 1994 election, did not manage to put this issue on the agenda again. Months before the election, polls showed that Frits Bolkestein's *VVD* would not defeat Wim Kok's *PvdA*. Media soon lost interest in the election campaign and wrote the campaign off as an uninspiring campaign. The third of the three dominant parties, *CDA*, was almost entirely ignored by the incumbent parties and the media (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998).

The *PvdA* won the elections from the *VVD*, as predicted in the media. Both parties gained in comparison with 1994. The third coalition party, *D66*, dropped from 24 to 14 seats. Because of the success of the *PvdA* and the *VVD*, *D66* was no longer needed to form a majority cabinet. Yet the three parties decided to finish their job together. After the 1998 election, a second purple cabinet was formed. The *CDA* lost again.

2.2.2 THE 2002 CAMPAIGN: PURPLE RUINS

Despite some struggles, *PvdA*, *VVD*, and *D66* stayed in power for almost the full four years. In the autumn of 2001, the second purple cabinet successfully communicated that due to their policies the Netherlands was doing better than ever. Yet, the end of the internet hype on the financial markets and especially 9/11 created uncertainty, which reflected on the coalition parties. After 9/11 media for example wrote more on domestic problems with Muslims (Ruigrok and Van Atteveldt, 2007). 29 days before the 2002 elections, the cabinet came to a premature end because of a very critical report on the role of the Dutch army in Srebrenica. The elections were held on May 15, 2002.

The 2002 campaign was the campaign of Pim Fortuyn and the 'Purple ruins'. This was the title of the book in which Pim Fortuyn fiercely criticised the purple parties. He disagreed with the coalition's policy in general and their immigration stances in particular. The incumbent parties tried to ignore Pim Fortuyn's critique. Yet, on February 9, Fortuyn seemed to overstep himself by proposing to scratch the principle of equality from the Constitution. Pim Fortuyn was evicted from his own party, *Leefbaar Nederland*. In response, Pim Fortuyn started his own party, the List Pim Fortuyn (*LPF*). The incumbent parties decided to respond and finally attacked him. Pim Fortuyn got what he wanted, a battle between him and the purple parties. Pim Fortuyn made an unprecedented upsurge in the polls. Yet nine days before the election, on May 6th, he was assassinated by an animal rights activist. After his death, the remaining parties agreed to halt all campaign activities.

During the 2002 campaign, the three incumbent parties *PvdA*, *VVD*, and *D66*, were all depicted as parties in decline. By contrast, *CDA* is finally attributed success again. The *CDA* profited from the negative coverage of the *VVD* and the *PvdA*, which affected the evaluations of their leaders and party support (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Judging by the news Pim Fortuyn had to deal with many setbacks. Yet these setbacks did form the reference point for future success. Out of nowhere, it appeared that he would be able to become the largest party of the country. Besides, the media helped Fortuyn by covering 'his' issues. In comparison with the 1998 campaign, the attention for immigration increased. Due to Pim Fortuyn, the discussion on immigration had moreover be-

come strongly intertwined with the discussion on crime (from 20 percent in 2002 to 7 percent in 2010).

The speculations that the *LPF* could become the largest party did not materialize. The *CDA* won the elections and the *LPF* became second. The *LPF* got 24 seats, which is unprecedented for a new party. The *CDA* and the *LPF* formed a coalition with the *VVD*, which was led by Jan Peter Balkenende.

2.2.3 THE 2003 CAMPAIGN: TURMOIL WITHIN THE LPF

The coalition of *CDA*, *VVD*, and *LPF* was short-lived. After no more than 89 days, Jan-Peter Balkenende's first cabinet ended due to turmoil within the *LPF*. New elections were held on January 22, 2003.

During the 2003 campaign, the *PvdA* was depicted as the winner again. The social democrats created media attention by waiting until late 2002 with choosing a new party leader. The new party leader, Wouter Bos, was still relatively unknown when he was declared the winner of the first televised election debate on January 3rd. The *PvdA* also succeeded in regaining attention for left-wing issues. As of then, the elections were portrayed by the media as a race between Wouter Bos' *PvdA* and the *CDA* of the unsuccessful Prime Minister Balkenende. The *VVD*, which hoped to profit from the internal struggle within the *LPF*, was depicted as a losing party. The *VVD* attacked the financial policy of its coalition partner the *CDA* but the *CDA* chooses not to respond to these attacks. The *VVD* was consequently unsuccessful in generating media attention.

The *PvdA* gained most votes in comparison with the 2002 elections but the *CDA* remained the biggest party. Jan Peter Balkenende was going to head a second cabinet. After lengthy negotiations the *CDA*, the *VVD*, and *D66* formed a coalition.

2.2.4 THE 2006 CAMPAIGN: PVDA'S VIRTUAL DOWNFALL

In June 2006, the second cabinet Balkenende ended prematurely. *D66* lost confidence in the coalition when *VVD* minister of immigration Rita Verdonk wanted to expel *VVD* MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali for lying about her

name during her asylum procedure. Therefore, new elections were held on November 22, 2006.

In the 2006 campaign, the *PvdA* was portrayed as a losing party. After winning the municipal elections in March 2006, the party was heading towards sixty virtual seats in the polls. Thereafter, the unrealistic number of sixty seats became the reference point to measure *PvdA*'s success. A fall in the polls was inevitable. Fierce criticism from the *CDA* added to this decline. *CDA*'s chair in parliament, Maxime Verhagen, condemned *PvdA*'s pension plans. The *CDA* launched a campaign in which it introduced Wouter Bos' alleged flip-flopping as the explanation for the fall in the polls. The election campaign was at first portrayed as a 'titanic struggle' between Wouter Bos and Jan Peter Balkenende. Yet one month before the elections, a well-known polling station announced that the battle is over and that the *PvdA* would lose. Limited attention for the left-right dimension added to the virtual downfall of the social democratic *PvdA*. The attention for the left-right dimension lowered to only a quarter of the attention. Up until the election, the defeat of Wouter Bos was the leading story. The socialist *SP*, which attracted *PvdA*'s voters at the left side, was portrayed as the big winner.

The *CDA* also won the 2006 election. Although the party lost in comparison with 2003, it still was the biggest party. Despite of two prematurely falling coalitions, Jan Peter Balkenende was given the opportunity to head yet another cabinet. This time, the *CDA* formed a coalition with the *PvdA* and a small Christian party, *ChristenUnie*.

2.2.5 THE 2010 CAMPAIGN: THE 'OWNER' OF THE ECONOMY

In February 2010, Balkenende's last cabinet came to an early end. The cabinet fell over disagreement on a military mission in Uruzgan, Afghanistan.

In the months before the elections on 9 June 2010, the *CDA* was portrayed as the big loser. Polls increasingly seem to reflect the reiterated conclusion that *CDA* Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende did not manage to keep any of his four cabinets together. A week before the election, the public broadcaster NOS opened with the news that even within his party no one believed Balkenende would win the elections. The NOS brought this news despite of the fact that not any *CDA* politicians wanted

to confirm this claim on camera. The *VVD* was portrayed early on as the winner. The *VVD* benefited from the Greek crisis and its austerity plans. On average, the *PvdA* was successful but that figure masks that the new *PvdA* leader Job Cohen was cheered in March but covered critically by the time of the elections.

In the campaign of 2010, the left-right dimension became more important again, with right-wing issues getting more attention than in any of the other campaigns. The *VVD* and the anti-immigration party *PVV* successfully steered the media towards right-wing issues by denouncing *PvdA*'s allegedly unnecessary expenditures. Except for 2002, attention for the left-wing social security issue had never been lower.

The *VVD* narrowly won the election. The *PvdA* became second. After lengthy negotiations, the *VVD* formed a coalition with the *CDA*. The two-party cabinet is the first Dutch minority cabinet. Geert Wilders' anti-immigration party, *PVV*, which won 24 seats, backed the cabinet that was led by Mark Rutte.

* * *

Media cover election campaigns in line with their own storyline. Because media have to retain the attention of news consumers from day-to-day, media focus on short-term events like parties' standing in the polls. The analysis showed that media thereby often choose a benchmark that makes the most dramatic story. Winners can suddenly become the underdog if the media change their point of reference and vice versa.