

VU Research Portal

Media Logic and Electoral Democracy

Takens, J.H.

2013

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Takens, J. H. (2013). *Media Logic and Electoral Democracy*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Box Press.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

7 THE EFFECTS OF CONTEST COVERAGE ON CAMPAIGN VOLATILITY²¹

Electoral volatility has been on the rise in Western countries (Dalton et al., 2002; Drummond, 2006; Mair, 2008). Voters do not only shift between parties over a period of years, i.e. from one election to another, but also within the short period of time of an election campaign, i.e. from one election poll to another (Dassonneville, 2012; Granberg and Holmberg, 1991; Van der Meer et al., in press). Volatility has increased as a consequence of the detachment of voters from political parties and the decreasing importance of long-term vote explanations, like religion and social class (Dalton et al., 2002). The decreasing importance of long-term vote explanations spurs the importance of short-term influences, like news effects. This study answers the question as to whether short-term media influences explain campaign volatility.

Most voters do not have first-hand experience with politics. They receive political information predominantly from the media. In forming political attitudes, they use newly acquired and readily accessible information from the mass media (Zaller, 1992). Media coverage of issues as well as the political contest has been shown to affect voting behaviour. Issue coverage stimulates issue voting (De Vries et al., 2011). Yet, also coverage of the electoral contest influences the vote, like horse race news, including coverage of polls (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b; Mutz, 1997) and coverage of conflict and cooperation between political actors (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b). So, it is known that both issue coverage and contest coverage influence voting preferences. Yet, it is still unknown whether voters predominantly become volatile, i.e. shift between parties, in response to issue coverage or in response to contest coverage.

Previous studies have shown that also the tone of political news coverage influences voting behaviour (Balmas and Sheafer, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Yet, because these studies commonly measure the effect of the average tone of the news, they do not tell whether voters predominantly are pulled towards posi-

²¹ Manuscript under review. Authors: Janet Takens, Anita M.J. van Hoof, Jan Kleinnijenhuis and Wouter van Atteveldt.

tively covered parties or pushed away from negatively covered parties. Kleinnijenhuis and Fan (1999) showed that both positive and negative news coverage affect the vote but they did not directly compare their effects. The literature has shown that the importance of negative evaluations in the voting decision differs from the importance of positive evaluations (Aarts and Blais, 2011; Holbrook et al., 2001; Klein, 1991, 1996; Lau, 1982, 1985; Wattenberg, 1991). Yet, these studies showed mixed results and they did not take the role of media influences into account.

It has not been tested whether voters predominantly become volatile in response to coverage of issues or in response to coverage of the electoral contest. Neither do we know whether voters become volatile based on positive coverage or based on negative coverage. Because of the widespread concern about the role of the media in the political process, it is paramount to examine which elements of political coverage actually explain voters' rising volatility. In this study, we examine the effect of both the *type* of political information voters are exposed to, i.e. issue coverage or contest coverage, and the *tone* of contest coverage on campaign volatility. It does so in the context of four Dutch national election campaigns based on individual level panel data and a detailed content analysis of newspaper and television coverage. Individual level news effect models have rarely been tested structurally over a longer period of time. They enable a robust test of our research question: *Do issue coverage, contest coverage, and the tone of contest coverage affect campaign volatility?*

This study is conducted in the context of Dutch national elections. The Netherlands is an interesting case to study since it has recently witnessed a sharp increase in inter-electoral volatility (Dalton et al., 2002; Mair, 2008; Van der Kolk et al., 2007). It has witnessed an increase of electoral volatility of 5.1 percent in the 1950s to 19.1 percent in the 1990s. With 30.7 percent of the seats moving from one party to another, the 2002 Dutch election was even the most volatile election in Western Europe in the post war period (Mair, 2008). To our knowledge, no longitudinal data are available on campaign volatility in the Netherlands. Yet, indecisiveness, which arguably is related to campaign volatility, has sharply increased (Voerman, 2004). In 2006, more than half of the voters

decided on their vote in the last weeks before the election (Van der Kolk et al., 2007).

7.1 Contest coverage and issue coverage

Contest coverage refers to news that covers politics primarily as a contest between political actors. It can be distinguished from issue coverage. Contest coverage and issue coverage can be further refined in four types of news coverage based on the information they provide to the voter.

Contest coverage can be divided in horse race coverage and coverage of conflict and cooperation. *Horse race coverage* informs voters whether a political actor is doing well or not in the polls, in an election debate, or in the eyes of the media (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Jamieson, 1993; Patterson, 1993). Voters are inclined to vote for successful parties (McAllister and Studlar, 1991). Since most voters depend on the media for political information, horse race coverage has been found to mediate this bandwagon effect (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b). *Coverage of conflict and cooperation* tells voters whether a political actor is involved in a conflict or whether he or she is cooperating, and whether he or she is being supported or criticised (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 2009; Vliegenthart et al., 2011). These evaluations of political actors in the media influence voters' evaluations of political actors, which in turn influence vote choice (Balmas and Sheaffer, 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Both a party's standing in the polls and information on cooperation might additionally give voters information about the feasibility of future coalitions, which have been found to affect vote choice (Bargsted and Kedar, 2009).

Issue coverage can be divided in coverage of issue developments and coverage of issue statements. *Coverage of issue developments* provides information on societal developments, like the state of the economy, which contains cues as to how effective the coalition parties have been in addressing societal problems. The importance of information on societal developments is emphasised in the literature on *retrospective voting*, which argues that voters primarily base their voting decision on evaluations of past societal developments, most notably the economy (e.g. Hetherington, 1996; Söderlund, 2008). *Coverage of issue statements* tells voters how politicians plan to address societal problems.

According to the *prospective voting* thesis, voters base their voting decision on their agreement with parties' statements on future policies and the expected, economic, results (Lockerbie, 1992; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001).

7.1.1 THE EFFECT OF CONTEST COVERAGE AND ISSUE COVERAGE ON VOLATILITY

We expect contest coverage to make voters more volatile and issue news to make voters less volatile, based on the dynamic nature of contest coverage, the awareness of ideological differences it might raise, and the changeability of the vote determinants it appeals to. First, contest coverage is expected to make voters volatile because with its reports on polls, debates, and conflicts it itself is more dynamic than the coverage of long-term societal developments and political parties' ideological stances. Nowadays, election polls are omnipresent, which has created endless opportunities for the media to report about political actors' success or failure (Patterson, 2005). Televised election debates, which are rather new in European countries, have created even more possibilities to cover the electoral horse race (Reinemann and Wilke, 2007). Opportunities to cover conflict also constantly arise due to politicians who magnify their differences and criticize other politicians because it heightens their media presence (Kepplinger, 2000). A volatile determinant of voting behaviour, like contest coverage, has more potential to cause change in voting behaviour than a relatively stable one, like issue coverage. Therefore, contest coverage is expected to make voters more volatile.

Second, contest coverage might make voters volatile by increasing the perceived urgency of making a voting decision. Coverage about conflicts makes the ideological differences between parties clearer, which raises awareness among voters that they actually have something to choose. This argument is in line with (Adriaansen et al., 2012), who found that contest coverage, labelled as strategic coverage, increases voter turnout. In addition, coverage of the contest in the form of polls has been shown to increase the urgency of making a voting decision. Coverage of polls raises interest 'in the race and why it is developing that way', which in turn makes voters more interested in political issues (Meyer and Potter, 1998: 36). By creating a sense of urgency to make a voting

decision, contest coverage is expected to make voters contemplate on their vote and consequently to make them more volatile.

Third, contest coverage is expected to make voters volatile because contest coverage appeals to vote determinants that are more susceptible to change than the vote determinants to which issue coverage appeals. For change in voting preference to occur, logically, either political attitudes have to change or their perceived importance has to change. Voters can for example change their mind because they have come to evaluate a party leader more positively or because these evaluations outweigh other vote determinants. Estimations of a party's success or failure, to which horse race coverage appeals, and party evaluations, to which coverage of conflict and cooperation appeals, are arguably less stable than retrospective or prospective issue considerations to which issue coverage appeals. For example, voters will modify their agreement with a party's liberal ideas less easily than their liking of the liberal party's leader or the perceived changes of the liberal party to make it into the coalition. With its appeal to party and leader evaluations and a party's perceived electoral success, contest coverage is expected to make voters more volatile.

To the knowledge of the authors, the comparative effect of contest coverage and issue coverage on campaign volatility has not been empirically tested. Yet, the above-mentioned arguments are supported by an empirical study on the effect of different types of news on the vote. Contest coverage, i.e. coverage of criticism and support and especially news about success and failure, had a stronger effect on voting behaviour than issue news in the 2002 Dutch national elections (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b).

H 1a: Exposure to contest coverage, i.e. horse race coverage and coverage of conflict and cooperation, increases campaign volatility.

H 1b: Exposure to issue coverage, i.e. coverage of issue developments and coverage of issue statements, decreases campaign volatility.

7.1.2 TONE

Not only the type of news coverage has been shown to affect political attitudes, also the tone of this coverage affects voting behaviour (Balmas and Sheafer, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis and Fan, 1999; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). The common sense assumption that positive coverage has a positive effect on candidate and party preferences largely holds true. Voters are more likely to vote for successful parties (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b) and for parties which receive support (Fan, 1988; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b). The effect of the tone of the news on voting behaviour is commonly examined by using a combined measure of positive and negative coverage. So, a positive effect of a *relatively* positive tone on party preference can mean that voters align with parties receiving positive coverage, that they align from parties receiving negative coverage, or that both are true. To answer the question as to whether voters become volatile in response to negative coverage or in response to positive coverage both have to be studied separately and simultaneously.

A vast body of literature has demonstrated 'a tendency for negative information to have more weight than equally extreme or equally likely positive information in various impression-formation or cognitive processing tasks' (Lau, 1982: 355). This negativity bias has also been studied in the context of political decision making. People tend to select negative rather than positive political information (Meffert et al., 2006). Yet, Meffert et al. (2006) also show that exposure to negative information about a preferred candidate leads to more positive rather than more negative evaluations, arguably due to counter arguing. Additionally, some studies found negative evaluations to have a stronger effect on voting behaviour than positive evaluations (Kernell, 1977; Klein, 1991, 1996; Lau, 1982, 1985). Yet, more recent studies show that positive evaluations have a stronger effect (Aarts and Blais, 2011; Holbrook et al., 2001; Wattenberg, 1991).

Notwithstanding the contradictory results, the literature on the negativity, or positivity, bias shows that it is important to study the effects of positive and negative coverage separately. This study analyses the effect of the actor centred tone of election campaign coverage (Lengauer et al., 2012), which corresponds with the tone of contest coverage, on campaign volatility. Because of the mixed results regarding a

negativity bias in voting behaviour we formulate the following research questions about the effect of positive and negative coverage on campaign volatility.

RQ 2a: Do exposure to positive horse race coverage, i.e. success, and negative horse race coverage, i.e. failure, affect campaign volatility, and if so, which of the two has a stronger effect?

RQ 2b: Do exposure to coverage of cooperation and conflict affect campaign volatility, and if so, which of the two has a stronger effect?

7.2 Method

Longitudinal media data and public opinion data were gathered to measure the effect of news type, i.e. issue coverage versus contest coverage, and the tone of the latter on campaign volatility. Media data were gathered by means of a daily content analysis of newspaper and television coverage. Panel surveys provided the public opinion data.

7.2.1 PUBLIC OPINION DATA: PANEL SURVEY

During the election campaigns of 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010 public opinion data were collected by means of panel surveys conducted by external research institutes. The panel surveys contained nine waves in 1998, seven waves in 2002, six waves in 2006, and ten waves in 2010. The period in between surveys was either one or two weeks. The number of respondents who participated in at least two waves amounted to 1,139 in 1998, 759 in 2002, 1,693 in 2006, and 1,356 in 2010. For details, see *Appendix A*.

7.2.2 OPERATIONALISATION OF THE PUBLIC OPINION VARIABLES

Campaign volatility. In each of the waves of the panel surveys the respondents were asked about their intended voting behaviour by asking 'For which party would you vote if the elections were held today?' In the last wave, shortly after the elections, the respondents were asked: 'For

which party did you vote in the elections?' The answer categories included the names of the participating parties, indecisiveness (I do not know), and abstention (I will not vote). Campaign volatility is a dichotomous difference variable. If voters intended to vote for another party than they intended to vote for in the previous wave or if they moved in or out of the undecided category, they are considered volatile (coded as 1). If they stayed with the same party they are not volatile (coded as 0). Instances in which a respondent remained indecisive or intended to abstain were coded as missing values.

Media consumption. To be able to measure the effect of the content of political news to which people were actually exposed, we included questions about news media consumption. In 1998 and 2002, respondents were asked once, at the beginning of the campaign, which newspapers and news broadcasts they regularly consumed. In 2006 and 2010 respondents were asked in every wave which newspapers and broadcasts they had consumed in the preceding one (2010) or two weeks (2006). Each of the media under study was included as an answer category.

7.2.3 NEWS DATA SELECTION

This study is based on a daily content analysis of political news coverage of four Dutch subscription-based national newspapers, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*, and *Trouw*, and the most widely watched news broadcasts, *NOS journaal* and *RTL nieuws*, in the ten weeks preceding the 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010 Dutch national elections. The content analyses were conducted during and shortly after each of the election campaigns. All articles and items in which either a political actor or a political issue was mentioned were included in the study. For the newspaper articles, the coding was limited to the headline and the lead of the articles. Additionally, the introduction by the news anchor and the text of political commentators of the television news items were coded.²²

²² In 1998, the political articles were selected manually from the paper versions of the newspapers, in 2002 and 2006 they were extracted from LexisNexis, and in 2010 they were directly obtained from the Dutch newspaper publishers. From

7.2.4 MEDIA DATA: SEMANTIC NETWORK ANALYSIS

The content of political coverage was coded manually with a Semantic Network Analysis method. Coders were asked to code the occurrence of objects like political actors and issues, the relationship between these objects, and the direction of the relationship between these objects (Van Atteveldt, 2008). Coding results in a network of interconnected objects that can be aggregated in various ways. These aggregated data provide information on the relative attention for different types of coverage and the tone of this coverage.

The coding starts with the identification of propositions, which consist of a subject, an object, and the direction of the relationship between the subject and the object. The subject refers to the actor or issue who says, does, or causes something, while the object is the actor or issue at what is said or done is directed. The direction quantifies the relation between the subject and the object, ranging from -1 (maximal disassociation) to $+1$ (maximal association) (Van Atteveldt, 2008). For example, if *'Wilders criticizes Rutte for approving emergency fund'*, the subject Wilders is disassociated from the object Rutte, and the subject Rutte is associated with the object emergency fund. This headline results in the following two propositions: *Wilders / -1 / Rutte* and *Rutte / +1 / emergency fund*. The coding unit is an individual sentence, while the whole article or news item forms the context unit which may be used to interpret the content of a sentence.

To test the inter coder reliability for the measures presented in this study we calculated Krippendorff's α for scale variables based on the 2010 data. Six of the coders who participated in the coding of the 2010 data independently coded the same set of 120 articles. The newspaper articles formed the units of analysis. Krippendorff's α amounted to .86, .56, .78, and .68 for the relative attention for respectively horse race coverage, coverage of conflict and cooperation, coverage of issue developments, and coverage of issue statements. Krippendorff's α amounted to .81 and .66 for the actor-centred tone of respectively horse race coverage and coverage of conflict and cooperation. These are satisfactory to

1998 to 2006 the political news items of the news broadcasts were selected manually by watching the broadcasts and in 2010 the coders coded the transcripts of the television broadcasts.

good scores. Only the reliability score for the relative attention for conflict and cooperation is rather low.²³ For a more thorough discussion on the reliability of the NET-method see (Van Atteveldt, 2008). For a detailed description of the reliability of the 2002 and 2003, and the 2006 data see respectively Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) and Takens et al. (2010).

OPERATIONALISATION OF NEWS VARIABLES

The four information types that are distinguished in this study are operationalised as relations between actors and issues on the subject and object position in the coded propositions. *Table 7.1* provides a schematic overview of the operationalisation of the news variables. The news types and the tone of the news are coded at the level of propositions. Yet, at the aggregate level, in this case the coverage in the mix of media which a respondent consumed in the period before filling out the questionnaire, the network of these propositions measures the *share* of attention for the different types of coverage.

²³ It should be taken into account that coders are only considered to code similarly if they 1) identify the same number of propositions containing a certain type of coverage *and* 2) extract the same total number of propositions, or, in case of the tone of contest coverage, if they also identify the same tone. Moreover, the measurement of the variables at the level of all coverage in the mix of media which a respondent consumed, as reported in the results section, is more robust than the measurement at the level of articles, as used for the reliability analysis.

Table 7.1.1 Operationalisation of news variables

News aspect	Schema	Example
Newstype	<p>Horse race reality / ... / actor</p> <p>Conflict/cooperation actor / ... / actor</p> <p>Issue propositions reality / ... / issue</p> <p>Issue statements actor / ... / issue</p>	<p>"Wilders wins debate" : reality / + / Wilders</p> <p>"Wilders attacks Cohen" : Wilders / - / Cohen</p> <p>"Inflation increases" : reality / + / inflation</p> <p>"Wilders wants to abolish Euro" : Wilders / - / Euro</p>
Tone	<p>Success reality / + / actor</p> <p>Failure reality / - / actor</p> <p>Cooperation actor / + / actor</p> <p>Conflict actor / - / actor</p>	<p>"Wilders wins debate" : reality / + / Wilders</p> <p>"PvdA drops in the polls" : reality / - / PvdA</p> <p>"Rutte backs Wilders" : Rutte / + / Wilders</p> <p>"Wilders attacks Cohen" : Wilders / - / Cohen</p>

Horse race coverage is measured by counting the number of propositions that contain a description of the state of a political actor on the object position without a reference to an actor or issue on the subject position (indicated with the object *reality*). E.g. *PvdA is taking the lead* is coded as *reality / + 1 / PvdA*.

Coverage of conflict and cooperation is measured by counting the number of propositions that contain an expression of criticism or support between any actor on the subject position and a political actor on the object position. E.g. *PvdA condemns VVD* is coded as *PvdA / -1 / VVD*.

Coverage of issue developments is measured by counting the number of propositions that contain an issue on the object position without a reference to an issue or actor on the subject position (indicated with the object *reality*). E.g. *Inflation increases further* is coded as *Reality / +1 / inflation*.

Coverage of issue statements is measured by counting the number of propositions that contain a (political) actor on the subject position expressing an opinion about an issue on the object position. E.g. *Fortuyn wants immigration stop* is coded as *Fortuyn / -1 / immigration*.

The *tone* of contest coverage, i.e. horse race coverage and coverage of conflict and cooperation, is measured by counting the number of propositions which contain respectively a description of a political actor's success (positive horse race news), a political actor's failure (negative horse race news), cooperation between actors, or conflict between actors. By doing so we measure the actor-centred tone of the news (Lengauer et al., 2012).

The relative attention for the four news types and the four tone related subtypes is operationalised as the number of propositions containing a specific news type divided by the total number of propositions. This measure results in the percentage of coverage dedicated to a certain news type. These scores were subsequently mean-centred.

We measured the coverage in the period from the start of the campaign until the day in which the respondent filled out the questionnaire. The content of the news to which respondents were actually exposed was measured by calculating the mean value of the media variables in the mix of media that a respondent consumed. If, for example, a respondent read both *De Telegraaf* and watched *RTL nieuws*, we calculated the mean relative attention for a specific news type in these two

media outlets in the period preceding the day on which the respondent filled out the questionnaire.

The effect of old news decays with the memory of old news (Chong and Druckman, 2007). For that reason the decaying effect of the news was taken into account by using an exponential measure of the different news variables (e.g. Fan, 1988). The memory for old news as measured by recall occurs at an exponential rate with roughly a half-life of a week (Lodge et al., 1995). Therefore, we applied a half-life time of a week. This means that yesterday's news is weighted by 0.91, the news of a week ago is weighted by 0.5, the news of two weeks ago by 0.25, and the news of six weeks ago by 0.016.²⁴

7.2.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The data was analysed by means of logistic multilevel analyses since the dependent variable, campaign volatility, is a dichotomous variable and the data has a three level multilevel structure.²⁵ 27,012 observations are nested within respondents ($N = 4,947$), which are cross-nested in waves

²⁴ The model was also tested while applying a half-life time of the decaying effect of the news of respectively one and two days. The change in AIC values, measuring model fit, showed that both models fit less well than the model with a half-life time of a week. None of the effects ran in the other direction. Yet, some of the media variables failed to reach significance in the models with a half-life time of one or two days. The one day model did show a significant positive effect of news about failure.

²⁵ Full model: $\hat{P}_{ijk} = a_i + a_k + b_1 \text{time}_{ij} + b_2 \text{lag}_{ij} + b_3 \text{age}_{ij} + b_4 \text{edu}_{ij} + b_5 \text{sex}_{ij} + b_{6i} \text{idev}_{ij} + b_{7i} \text{istat}_{ij} + b_{8i} \text{suc}_{ij} + b_{9i} \text{fail}_{ij} + b_{10i} \text{coop}_{ij} + b_{11i} \text{con}_{ij}$. Thereby \hat{P}_{ijk} refers to campaign volatility, i.e. the probability of a change in intended voting behaviour of a certain respondent (i) in a certain wave (j) and election year (k). Furthermore, $b_1 \text{time}_{ij}$ refers to the number of days until the election, $b_2 \text{lag}_{ij}$ to the number of days in between waves, $b_3 \text{age}_{ij}$, $b_4 \text{edu}_{ij}$, and $b_5 \text{sex}_{ij}$ refer respectively to a respondent's age, educational level, and sex. Finally, $b_{6i} \text{idev}_{ij}$, $b_{7i} \text{istat}_{ij}$, $b_{8i} \text{suc}_{ij}$, $b_{9i} \text{fail}_{ij}$, $b_{10i} \text{coop}_{ij}$, and $b_{11i} \text{con}_{ij}$ refer to respectively the relative attention for issue developments, issue statements, success, failure, cooperation, and conflict in the mix of media which a certain respondent (i) has consumed in a certain wave (j).

($N = 32$), and election years ($N = 4$). Because of the multilevel structure of the data, we conducted multilevel analyses, which were conducted in R by means of the LME4 package (Bates and Sarkar, 2007). Random *intercepts* at the level of respondents were used because respondents can be generally more or less likely to change. Random *intercepts* per election year account for possible difference between the panels, which were administered by different research companies. Random *effects* at the level of respondents were included because people might respond differently to the news. We controlled for age, educational level, and sex, because these variables have been found to affect volatility and indecisiveness (e.g. Söderlund, 2008). Additionally, we controlled for the number of days until the election to control for a possible time effect and for the length of the time interval in between waves because voters have more time to change if this interval is longer.

7.3 Results

Table 7.2 shows how often voters actually shift during an election campaign. The first column shows the percentage of weekly or biweekly *observations* in which voters were volatile. The second column shows the percentage of *voters* who changed their intended vote at least once over the course of the campaign. The percentages differ because changing voters do not necessarily change every week or every two weeks.

Table 7.2 *Campaign volatility by election year*

	Campaign volatility	Respondents who changed at least once
1998	6,2 %	30,1 %
2002	23,0 %	56,1 %
2006	21,6 %	39,3 %
2010	13,6 %	40,7 %

Table 7.2 shows that change in voting preference was not an abnormality during the last decade. Unfortunately, these numbers cannot be directly compared because the number of waves and the periods in between waves varies between elections (see Appendix A). Yet, Figure 7.1 does

suggest that voters were more volatile in 2002 (23.0 %) and 2006 (21.6 %) than in 1998 (6.4 %) and 2010 (13.6 %). Both in 2002 and 2006 new successful anti-immigration parties entered the political stage, i.e. Pim Fortuyn's *LPF* and Geert Wilders' *PVV*. So, voters had more potentially successful parties to choose from. The number of voters that change their mind at least once amounts to 30.8 percent in 1998 to 56.1 percent in 2002.

Figure 7.1 shows the relative attention for issue coverage, i.e. issue developments and issue statements, and the positive and negative varieties of contest coverage, i.e. success, failure, cooperation, and conflict, in the mix of media that voters consumed. The relative attention for the different types of coverage does not add up to 100 percent since political news also contains other, excluded, types of coverage. The graphs shows that the media make room for politicians to discuss their issue positions. Yet, they also interpret the electoral contest by paying plentiful attention to cooperation, and especially, conflict. A comparison between election years shows that the turbulent 2002 campaign, in which the successful anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated, was dominated by contest coverage. During the 2010 election, media paid relatively little attention to the contest and relatively much to issue statements.

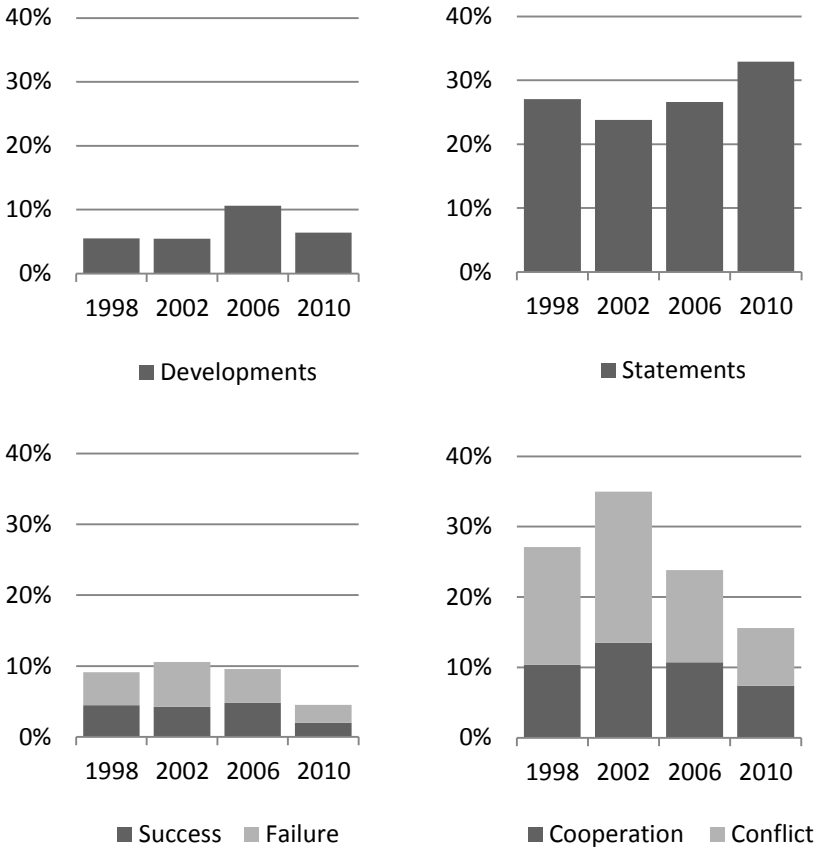


Figure 7.1 Relative attention for types of coverage by election year

7.3.1 NEWS EFFECTS

Table 7.3 shows the effects of the relative attention for the four types of coverage and the positive and negative varieties of contest coverage on campaign volatility. *Model 1* shows the effects of the socio-demographic control variables, age, education, and sex. *Model 2* shows the analysis that includes the relative attention for the four types of coverage. *Model 3* shows the full model, which includes the effects of issue coverage and

positive and negative contest coverage.²⁶ The first column of each model shows the log odds, the second column shows the standard errors, and the third column shows odds ratios.

Model 1 shows that campaign volatility is dependent on age, education, and sex. Younger voters, lower educated voters, and women (coded as 1) are more volatile. *Model 2* shows that contest coverage, i.e. horse race news and news about conflict and cooperation, increases campaign volatility. So, voters change their mind about their vote intention when they are offered more news about the political contest, like who is winning and who is in conflict with whom. This confirms hypothesis 1a. Issue coverage, in the form of both coverage of issue developments and issue statements, decreases campaign volatility. So, voters consolidate their voting preference when they receive more information about issues, which confirms *hypothesis 1b*.

Model 3 shows that coverage of political parties' success increases campaign volatility. So, coverage of political actors taking the lead makes people volatile. Coverage of political parties' failure does not affect campaign volatility. So, voters become volatile due to coverage of the winners, they do not do so based on coverage of the underdog. To answer *research question 1b*, this outcome shows that positive horse race coverage has a stronger effect on campaign volatility than negative horse race coverage. In fact, negative horse race coverage does not affect campaign volatility at all. *Model 3* also shows that coverage of cooperation between parties does not make voters volatile, while coverage about conflict does. To answer *research question 2b*, only negative coverage, coverage about conflict, affects campaign volatility.

²⁶ The highest Variance Inflation Factor, measuring collinearity, amounted to 1.98 for the relative attention for news about conflict and cooperation in *model 2*. In *model 3*, the highest Variance Inflation Factor amounted to 2.79 for the relative attention for news about cooperation. These results show that no multicollinearity problems arose.

Table 7.3 *The influence of the relative attention to news types on short-term volatility*

	model 1			model 2			model 3					
	log odds	SE	odds ratio	log odds	SE	odds ratio	log odds	SE	odds ratio			
Constant	-1.86	(0.33)	***	0.16	-2.21	(0.4)	***	0.11	-2.19	(0.41)	***	0.11
Age	-0.20	(0.03)	***	0.82	-0.21	(0.03)	***	0.81	-0.21	(0.03)	***	0.81
Education	-0.09	(0.02)	***	0.91	-0.09	(0.02)	***	0.91	-0.09	(0.02)	***	0.91
Sexe	0.34	(0.06)	***	1.00	0.33	(0.06)	***	1.00	0.33	(0.06)	***	1.40
Horse race				0.09	(0.03)	**	1.10					
Success								0.14	(0.04)	***	1.15	
Failure								-0.04	(0.04)		0.96	
Conflict/cooperation				0.18	(0.06)	**	1.20					
Cooperation								-0.02	(0.05)		0.98	
Conflict								0.18	(0.05)	***	1.19	
Issue developments				-0.16	(0.04)	***	0.85	-0.16	(0.04)	***	0.85	
Issue statements				-0.23	(0.04)	***	0.79	-0.26	(0.04)	***	0.77	
Variance respondent		2.00			2.02				1.97			
Variance year		0.41			0.47				0.58			
AIC		18,959			18,788				18,761			

Note: N observations = 27,012, N respondents 4,947, N years = 4.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, . $p < .1$

Time, not presented in the table, does not have a significant effect on campaign volatility when all other variables are taken into account too. The length of time in between waves does have a significant effect on volatility. By including these effects, we control for the fact that voters seem more volatile if the period in between waves is longer.

In conclusion, voters become volatile when there is relatively less news about issue developments and politicians' issue statements and more news about the politicians who are about to win the political contest and news about the conflicts which arise. So, during election campaigns the sizeable group of volatile Dutch voters started shifting based on what they read and heard about the electoral contest rather than based on what they learned from the news about political issues.

7.4 Conclusion and discussion

This study raised the question as to whether short-term media effects explain campaign volatility. The effect of issue coverage on campaign

volatility was compared to the effect of contest coverage. Based on the dynamic nature of contest coverage, the awareness of ideological differences contest coverage might raise, and the changeability of the political attitudes to which it appeals, we expected contest coverage to cause campaign volatility. The study indeed showed that voters become volatile in response to contest coverage rather than issue coverage. Voters start shifting based on information about the electoral horse race and political conflict. During the campaign, voters do not become volatile in response to news about societal problems or politicians' stated solutions to these problems. On the contrary, issue coverage makes voters consolidate their voting preference. So, these findings confirm our expectation that contest coverage causes campaign volatility.

The tone of political news also influences campaign volatility. We found that the effect of positive and negative coverage differs by news type. Positive *horse race coverage*, i.e. success, makes voters more volatile, while negative horse race coverage, conflict, does not affect campaign volatility. The opposite holds true for *coverage about conflict and cooperation*. Coverage of conflict, which is inherently negative, makes voters more volatile, while inherently positive coverage of cooperation does not affect campaign volatility. This finding leads to the recommendation to distinguish between positive and negative coverage when studying effects of the tone of the news.

This finding also raises the question as to why voters become volatile based on positive coverage about success on the one hand and negative coverage about conflict on the other hand. Any explanation has to move beyond intrinsic characteristics of negative or positive information, like their salience, since their effects differ by news type. The coverage of conflicts between political parties arguably shows voters that there are real differences between parties and that they have something to choose, which induces voters to reconsider their vote. The finding that positive coverage of politicians' success also makes voters more volatile suggests that voters follow the pack, supporting the bandwagon thesis (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; McAllister and Studlar, 1991). It also shows that voters are pulled towards winning parties rather than pushed away from failing parties. This outcome is in line with a study of Aarts and Blais (2011), who showed that positive evaluations of politicians have a stronger effect on party choice than negative evalua-

tions. It is not surprising that voters are pulled towards successful parties rather than pushed away from failing parties since voters are asked to make a positive choice for a party rather than a negative choice against a party. This especially applies to elections in multiparty systems since there aligning from one party does not almost inevitably implies aligning with the other party (Aarts and Blais, 2011).

The finding that voters primarily shift in response to contest coverage raises the question as to which political attitudes are influenced by contest coverage in such a way that voters alter their vote intention. Does contest coverage predominantly affect evaluations of political parties and their leaders or does it influence strategic considerations like expectations regarding coalitions? Contest coverage might even influences campaign volatility by increasing interest in political issues, like news about polls has been shown to do (Bleske and Zhao, 1998; Meyer and Potter, 1998). Further research should explore these possibilities.

At the individual level, volatility comes down to voters changing their party preference. Some authors see campaign volatility as a consequence of randomly drifting voters, while others see it as a consequence of educated, well informed voters shifting after careful contemplation (Van der Kolk et al., 2007). In the Netherlands, most voters shift between likeminded parties (Van der Kolk et al., 2007; Van der Meer et al., in press), which seems to indicate that voters are carefully shifting rather than drifting. Yet, the finding that voters shift based on information about parties' electoral success and conflicts between parties could still form a reason for concern. Elections are a means to represent people's needs, interests, and policy preferences. Large shifts in the electoral landscape based on voters simply following the winner and focusing on the opinions of politicians who create the biggest row then seems worrisome.

In a well-functioning democracy, we would expect voters to shift from time to time, based on the performance of political parties or changing policy preferences. Yet, if the volatility rises above a certain level this might pose a threat to the stability of the democratic system. Consensus building and coalition formation form essential elements in a multiparty parliamentary system, such as the Netherlands. Because of high volatility, parties constantly have to anticipate different election outcomes by reaching out to different coalition partners, which often

implies searching for unlike compromises. In the Netherlands, the high levels of volatility seems to have weakened the internal cohesion of governments (Pennings and Keman, 2008). High levels of volatility might eventually also harm the legitimacy of the parliamentary system. With large numbers of voters shifting during the campaign the outcome of the election can seem coincidental rather than a robust reflection of people's needs, interests, and policy preferences.

This study showed that the sizeable group of volatile Dutch voters became volatile in response to coverage of politicians' success and political conflict rather than in response to issue coverage. Therewith this study showed that it is necessary to look beyond the effects of issue coverage to explain campaign volatility. The finding that both positive coverage of success and negative coverage of conflict increases campaign volatility shows that it is paramount to distinguish between different types of news coverage and the tone of that coverage to deepen or understand of campaign volatility.

