Getting an issue on the table: A pragma-dialectical study of presentational choices in confrontational strategic maneuvering in Dutch parliamentary debate
Tonnard, Y.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
2. STRATEGIC MANEUVERS TO GET AN ISSUE ON THE TABLE

2.1 Introduction

Getting a party’s priority issue on the table is just one of the aims a topic-shifting or polarizing argumentative move can have in a parliamentary debate. A topic-shifting move could, for instance, also be used to avoid a difficult question or a face-threatening accusation; a polarizing move might also serve to simplify matters for the electorate – for example when ‘we’ are described as the good guys and ‘they’ as the bad guys. These different purposes make it possible to distinguish different kinds of topic-shifting and polarization. In this chapter I will describe the different kinds of topic-shifting and polarizing moves in an attempt to characterize the move I am interested in as a specific confrontational strategic maneuver and to explain how the conventions of Dutch parliamentary debates constrain the possibilities to conduct this maneuver. Section 2.2 explains the institutionalized setting, or communicative activity type in which the topic-shifting and polarizing moves are put forward. It describes the aim of the activity type of a parliamentary debate and the parliamentary conventions that apply to the confrontation stage. Section 2.3 distinguishes between different kinds of topic shifts and provides a pragma-dialectical characterization of the kind of topic shift that will be analyzed in chapter 4. This characterization is based on the result the politician is aiming for and the route of possible argumentative moves by which the result can be established. Section 2.4 deals with the discussion strategy of polarizing the standpoints of the discussion parties. Just like the section that precedes it, it describes different kinds of a strategic maneuver, in this case polarization, and provides a pragma-dialectical characterization of one
of these specific kinds. Section 2.5 explains how the parliamentary conventions of Dutch parliamentary debate sketched in section 2.2 constrain the possibilities to realize a topic shift or polarized discussion in this particular institutionalized context.

The examples used in this chapter all stem from the General Debate on the 2009 budget held in September 2008. The reason for choosing a General Debate is that this debate provides an excellent opportunity for politicians to address the electorate since it attracts a lot of media attention. In political circles, the General Debate is even considered the highlight of the year. As a consequence, its participants can be expected to use the debate primarily for electoral reasons, which means that they will try to address the issues that benefit their party. Almost all examples used in this chapter are contributions of the politicians Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom) and Marianne Thieme (Party for the Animals). Based on their contributions to this debate there is reason to call them one-issue politicians. Almost every contribution they made to the debate was in Wilders’s case about Muslims and in Thieme’s case about animal and environmental welfare. With respect to Wilders’s contributions, thirty-four out of the forty-one remarks he made addressed directly or indirectly the topic of Islam and integration. In Thieme’s case, twenty-nine out of her thirty-two contributions were about animal and environmental welfare.\(^{25}\)

2.2 The institutional context of Dutch parliamentary debate

2.2.1 The aims of a parliamentary debate

Dutch parliamentarians can be involved in several kinds of institutionalized parliamentary debates. All of these debates provide the Members of Parliament (MPs) the opportunity to fulfill the tasks ensuing from their function as representatives of the people. These tasks are supervising the Government and participating in the legislative process by introducing, passing or amending bills.\(^{26}\) In the standing

---

\(^{25}\) One year later, in the General Debate of 2009, Wilders’s party in fact addressed some other issues as well. Their main issue was still related to Islam though: the party proposed to cut back drastically on immigration (and foreign aid) in order to prevent an increase of the retirement age. Other issues were the royal family, the welfare of elderly people and the counterbudget.

\(^{26}\) The information in this section about the function and organization of Parliament stems from Fransen and van Schagen 1990 and www.parlement.com (an initiative of Het Parlementair Documentatie-centrum of the University of Leiden).
orders of the Dutch Parliament a distinction is made between debates that occur
in so-called committee meetings and debates occurring in plenary meetings. Commissions deliberate on a specific matter and are comprised of specialized MPs of
the different parties. These MPs have regular meetings with a Minister or Secretary to
prepare for discussions in a plenary meeting. A plenary meeting, on the other hand,
is meant to realize the performance of the two tasks of Parliament. In principle, it is a meeting of all MPs. In practice, however, a plenary meeting can already take
place if a majority of the Second Chamber – that is at least 76 Members – has
signed the attendance list (even if not all of them will participate in the debate). In
a meeting intended to make laws, parliamentarians question either a member of the
Government or another parliamentarian in order to amend a bill or to introduce a
law. In a meeting intended to supervise the Government, the MPs critically question
a Minister or Secretary in order to come to a judgment about the way laws and
other plans and actions are carried out. These debates may concern every possible
activity of the Government: from a politician’s slip of the tongue in an interview, to
the budget for the coming year. The excerpts analyzed in this study all stem from
plenary meetings intended to supervise the Government. In principle, all parlia-
mentary meetings are potentially interesting for my research, because a politician
might use a debate to initiate a discussion on a preferred issue irrespective of the
political function it has (preparing for plenary meetings, law making, or supervising
the government). However, the meetings that attract most media attention appear to
be plenary meetings meant to supervise the Government (such as the yearly General
Debate). These meetings therefore provide a much better opportunity for politicians
to address the electorate than committee meetings and legislative debates.

The possibilities to maneuver strategically within the context of a parliamentary
debate are determined by the conventions regulating this practice. Van Eemeren
describes parliamentary debates as a communicative practice belonging to the
domain of political communication. The aim of all practices in this domain is “to
preserve a democratic political culture by means of deliberation” (2010: 140). A

27 Committee meetings and plenary meetings have different aims and, according to the standing
orders of Parliament, these aims are achieved through different procedural rules (chapter VII
of the standing orders concerns committee meetings; chapter VIII is about plenary meetings).
However, the division between these meetings is not always that strict. Some rules of a plenary
meeting also apply to a committee meeting and a so-called “extended committee meeting” is
actually quite similar to a plenary meeting because it serves the aim of relieving the agenda of
the plenary meeting (Fransen and van Schagen 1990: 56, 96-7).
parliamentary meeting meant to supervise the Government has to be viewed as a specific type of communicative activity within this domain. It has its own specific goal that is to be achieved by making use of deliberation in a clearly defined institutionalized format laid down in parliamentary procedure. However, such a debate may still serve slightly different purposes and address different kinds of topics. Parlement.com mentions among other ones the following purposes and topics: talks (and votes) about reports, letters and memoranda of the Government, declarations of the Government, interpellation debates and emergency debates. These debates are related to each other, but need to be viewed as different communicative activity types. They are related in the sense that they share the same general goal (supervising the Government), which has to be achieved according to the same general rules (chapter VIII in the standing orders). They differ from each other because each of them has a specific goal that is in its own way instrumental in contributing to realizing the institutional point associated with the activity type in question (in this case supervising the Government) (van Eemeren 2010: 141). The specific goal of the debate can be achieved by taking into account particular unofficial informal practices associated with this debate. For example, the yearly General Debate on the budget is intended to supervise the Government by discussing the budgetary policy. The debate’s particular unofficial informal practices, such as the expectation that every parliamentarian and every member of the Government is present, might affect the course of events in the debate in different ways.

In a parliamentary debate, a politician putting forward his point of view always has a complex audience. There is the political opponent, who is the official antagonist (the immediate second party audience), and the listening, reading or watching audience (the third party audience) (van Eemeren 2010: 148). The third party audience consists of potential voters who listen to the debate from the public gallery, watch it via the internet, read about it in the newspapers or hear about it

28 Deliberation is one of the genres of communicative activity (next to, for example, adjudication, mediation and negotiation) through which the aim of an activity type can be achieved (van Eemeren 2010: 139).

29 For example, in case a Minister or Secretary is not present, emphasizing the requirement that he should have been there provides opportunities for the Opposition to attack the Government. In this study, however, I will not restrict myself to one of the related activity types. The excerpts that will be analyzed stem from all kinds of plenary meetings of which the primary aim is to supervise the Government. If particular unofficial informal practices of the specific communicative activity type affect the strategic maneuvering (as in the case just explained for the General Debate) this will be explained and taken into account in the analysis.
on the news. The third party audience may also include the media or another party in Parliament. In the latter case the discussion with the official antagonist serves, for example, to convince a (coalition) party to vote in favor of a particular motion. Depending on what the politician is aiming for in the debate, he will consider either the opponent or the third party his primary audience.

A politician who aims to initiate a discussion on an issue in a debate that will attract a lot of media attention can be expected to have the intention that his argumentation has primarily an effect on his electorate: the purpose of his argumentation then is to make potential voters judge his argumentative moves as acceptable and, as a secondary effect, vote for his party in the next elections. Since a great many of his potential voters will already agree with the politician, his argumentation will be mainly aimed at reinforcing the electorate’s opinion. However, he will probably also intend his argumentation to have an effect on other voters, which means that his argumentation can have the additional aim of taking away potential doubt or possible objections. If the potential electorate is the politician’s primary audience in a parliamentary debate, the discussion with the secondary audience (the political opponent) can be regarded as a means to reach the primary audience (van Eemeren 2010: 109). In this study, I shall analyze the discussion with the political opponent from this particular perspective because I consider an attempt to get a specific issue on the table as a means to win the support of potential voters. Hence, in the context of debates with the primary aim of supervising the Government the critical exchange with the political opponent will be analyzed as a means to address the potential electorate without frustrating the resolution of the difference of opinion with the political opponent.

---

30 As is also explained by Mohammed, politicians that use discussions in Parliament to address and appeal to potential voters attempt to employ argumentation to convince these voters that their own party is the one that deserves the voters’ support (2009: 69-70). In other words: the argumentative move to initiate a discussion on a specific issue might (together with other moves in the debate) provide an argument in the implicit discussion about who to vote for in the next elections (or as Mohammed formulates it: as an argument to support the standpoint that “unlike the other party, we can provide good leadership” (2009: 139)).

31 The choice to focus on how the discussion with the opponent is used to address the public is a choice of perspective made in view of a particular analytic point. (See for a different choice of perspective, for example, Mohammed’s dissertation on Prime Minister’s Question Time (2009)). In this study, my aim is to examine how the discussion with the opponent can be used to address potential voters and how doing so affects the discussion with the political opponent.
Some authors believe that the dialectical objective of resolving a difference of opinion with the political opponent cannot play a role in an institutionalized political discussion aimed at promoting the party’s interests. Edwards, for example, claims that sound arguing is always subordinate to the strategies and tactics that are involved in the struggle for power, because parliamentarians hardly ever have the intention of convincing their opponent (1993: 62). However, the lack of intention to convince the political opponent is not a sufficient reason to conclude that the dialectical objective is irrelevant to a politician. Although it is not his primary aim (and maybe even not his aim at all) to convince the political opponent of his standpoint, a politician can be expected to at least portray himself as a reasonable discussant willing to play the parliamentary game by the rules. As van Eemeren explains: “In order not to be perceived as non-cooperative, unresponsive, impolite or even rude by their primary audience, the participating parties cannot afford to ignore each other’s questions, statements and other contributions to the exchange” (2010: 154).

The following contribution to the General Debate illustrates how the dialectical objective may play a role in a parliamentary debate. In this example, left-wing politician Halsema accuses Wilders of practicing politics with the sole aim of engaging in party politics. Halsema bases her accusation on the observation that Wilders introduces the problem of disadvantaged neighborhoods without offering any feasible solution. She blames him for not seriously participating in the debate.

Halsema (Green Party): “The reason that you are here [in Parliament] is not at all because you sympathize with the people in these neighborhoods. It is because you hope that next Friday you will go up in the polls from 10 to 11 seats.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

Whether Halsema is correct or not, the accusation is certainly not in the interest of Wilders: even if he is only in Parliament to increase his own political power, he still needs his potential voters to believe that he is there to solve their problems. In his response to Halsema, Wilders therefore attempts to repair the damage the accusation might have caused to his relationship with his electorate.

32 Edwards refers to van Braam as an author who holds the same point of view (1993: 63).
33 Grootendorst explains: “Whatever their secret motives may be, in a democracy such as ours, politicians are bound by the rules of the democratic game. This means, at the very least, that they have to act as if they wish to solve their differences of opinion in a reasonable way” (1993: 53).
Wilders (Party for Freedom): “We are here first and foremost for the Dutch who live in these neighborhoods [...], to give them a voice and to stand up for them. Even if you go to the interruption microphone a thousand times with I do not know how many words, I will keep on doing it, until the last word I will ever speak in this house.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

This fragment of dialogue shows that being seen to be engaged in a problem-solving process with the political opponent is of importance to a politician. As a consequence, the politician can be expected to make an effort to keep up a rhetorical aim as well as a dialectical aim. The politician can be expected to try to get an issue on the table that serves his party best (his rhetorical aim), while at the same time remaining a reasonable discussant willing to solve problems that matter to society in the context of parliamentary debate (his dialectical aim).

2.2.2 The conventions of parliamentary debate

In order for a parliamentary debate to proceed as productively and efficiently as possible, the standing orders of Parliament (Reglement van Orde van de Tweede Kamer) contain specific rules that serve to further the aim of the debate. These rules concern the delivery of speeches and the making of interruptions (turn sequencing, speaking time, the amount of interruptions, etc.), the way of voting, and the maintaining of order. Next to these rules, specific practices that are not laid down in the standing orders have developed over time. The interpretation of whether these conventions (rules and practices) are respected is up to the Chair and is, to some extent, based on common practice. If the Chair thinks that the participant ignores the conventions, he is entitled to interrupt or even make this participant withdraw a certain word or phrase.

In terms of confrontational strategic maneuvering, what is of importance are the roles that participants are allowed to assume and the conventions concerning the kinds of standpoints that can be advanced. I will discuss four conventions of plenary meetings that affect the confrontation stage because they either affect the proposition that can be put forward or the positions that can be taken towards that proposition.
A first convention determines that participants have to stick to the agenda as set by the Chair. This convention is formulated as a rule in the standing orders of Parliament and originates from the Chair’s function to regulate the work of Parliament (Reglement van Orde 2008, article 58, section 1). It says that: “In case a speaker deviates from the topic at issue, the Chair requests him to get back to the topic at issue”. An example of such a request is the following intervention of Chairwoman Verbeet.

“Verdonk (one-woman party Verdonk): “Yesterday on public television, I was accused of having agreed in 2005 on a proposal for a general pardon, […] which was meant to save the cabinet.” […]
Chairwoman Verbeet: “Mrs. Verdonk, please let us talk about the subject that is on the agenda. […] We already have enough on our plate as it is.”
(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

The criteria for determining whether an issue deviates too much from the agenda are determined by the Chair. He or she can decide at any given moment in the discussion and without giving a detailed justification, that a shift of topic is undesirable.

A second convention affecting the confrontation stage formulated as a rule in the standing orders is that participants “cannot use offending expressions or urge anyone to act illegally” (Reglement van Orde 2008, article 58, section 2). This means that a politician is not allowed to offend his opponents, nor to urge them (or other audiences) to act illegally (for example by inciting his audience to discrimination or hatred). An example that illustrates the implications of this rule is the following intervention of Chairwoman Verbeet.

Wilders (Party for Freedom): “I did not call you a stupid goose; at most I had the thought.”
Hamer (Labor Party): “I take that as a compliment.”
Chairwoman Verbeet: “But I don’t and I really want us to try to maintain the quality of our exchanges.”
(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

This rule is part of the section that explains when the Chair should make participants take back their words.
In order to protect free speech in Parliament, parliamentarians possess great freedom to put forward a standpoint, including those standpoints that outside Parliament could be judged as illegal. This applies, for example, to standpoints that contain discriminating expressions. Parliamentary immunity, however, does not mean that the parliamentarian’s freedom of speech is absolute. As Nieuwenhuis explains, “In Parliament a regulated forming of opinion and decision making takes place” (my italics, YT), which means that the rules laid down in the standing orders should be of higher order than the right to freedom of speech (2010: 11). As a consequence, parliamentarians have to take into account that some specific utterances might not be tolerated because they are offensive. How this rule will be maintained, though, is not laid down in the law, but determined by the Chair. Nieuwenhuis emphasizes that the possible consequences of maintaining the rule that participants are not allowed to use offending expressions are vague. The rule obviously pertains to insults directed at the opponent, but insulting a community seems to be inadmissible only if it urges others to act illegally. However, when the politician is not urging for action but proposing an amendment to a law or policy, it is not transparent where the Chair will draw the line (Nieuwenhuis 2010: 12).

Bootsma and Hoetink have shown that the interpretation of the rule that politicians should not be offensive indeed depends highly on the Chair. Different Chairs, even within one and the same cabinet period, appear to have different judgments about parliamentary language use (2006: 183-185). During the period of 2006-2010 (the fourth Cabinet of Christian Democratic Prime Minister Balkenende) there has been a lot of discussion about whether or not Chairwoman Verbeet was too lenient in applying the rule. Critics say that she allowed too many insulting and even discriminating remarks. The Dutch journalist Elsbeth Etty, for example, wrote a column in which she questions why Verbeet did not intervene when Wilders called Islamic immigrants “colonists” and their coming to the Netherlands “an Islamic intifada”.36 Bootsma and Hoetink, however, explain that although some

35 In addition to this formal reason, some people say that a parliamentarian’s freedom of speech is also limited because he has a bigger social responsibility and has to set a good example to others. A related reason for a politician to mark his words is that he has to keep up the dignity of Parliament. (Nieuwenhuis 2010: 4, Grootendorst 1993: 41)

36 The column is from 24 September 2008 (NRC Handelsblad). In January 2009 Wilders was prosecuted for discrimination for making these kinds of remarks outside Parliament (where he does not enjoy parliamentary immunity).
people think that such unparliamentary language use is indicative of diminishing Parliamentary standards, no evidence can be found for such a claim (2006: 185).

(3) A third convention affecting the confrontation stage can be derived from the right of information: parliamentarians need to have enough information to judge the performance of the Government (parlement.com). Although this rule is not explicitly mentioned in the standing orders, the Chair is allowed to intervene when a member of Government evades the obligation to provide this information. Therefore, it can be said that, as a rule, the Government has to provide the information asked for by the Parliament, which means that its members have to respond to the questions that are asked.37 Often the Chair’s interventions concern the fact that no answer was given at all; sometimes he or she will also intervene when he or she considers the answer irrelevant.38 An example of the first kind of intervention is the following remark of Chairwoman Verbeet.

Prime Minister Balkenende: “I will now start with part 8.”
Rutte (Liberal Party): “I thought you would come back to the asylum policy, for I did not get an answer to my question yet.” […]
Chairwoman Verbeet: “Part of the asylum policy has been addressed in an earlier stage of the debate, but not your question. […] You are right.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

This rule does not apply to a discussion between MPs though. Nevertheless, in practice parliamentarians always seem inclined to provide answers, especially when the question is an invitation to take a stance on matters. In case of such questions, parliamentarians hardly ever say that they do not have to answer a question. The

37 Chairwoman Verbeet stresses the importance of this particular rule on her personal webpage. She says that she will support the MPs in their pursuit for clear and relevant answers (www.tweedekamer.nl). In a phone call I had with Verbeet on 16 February 2009 she explained that, although Parliament has a right to information, this right cannot be enforced. When a member of Government refuses to give answers the only means left for the Parliament is to vote this member of Government out of office and hope that his/her successor will be more responsive.

38 The rule only stipulates that the information should be given and that it should be relevant. The Chair is actually allowed to break off a contribution in which a parliamentarian wrongly claims that his question has not been answered. In this respect Chairman Weisglas once said: “The standing orders do not stipulate that every question can and needs to be answered satisfactorily” (Bootsma and Hoetink 2006: 183).
reason is that because of their representative role, they are expected to take a position in matters that concern society—an expectation shared by the MPs and the electorate. Hence, it can be seen as common practice for parliamentarians to be responsive to questions put forward by their fellow MPs. It should be noted, however, that in these discussions the role of the Chair is quite restricted. The Chair can only intervene when he or she does not understand a contribution, whether it is a question or an answer. The rationale for making such interventions is, as Chairwoman Verbeet explains, that misunderstandings should be avoided or quickly resolved in order for the debate to proceed as efficiently as possible.⁴⁹ Hence, it is only on the ground of lack of comprehensibility that the Chair is allowed to say something about the quality of an MP’s contribution.

(4) The fourth and final parliamentary convention affecting the confrontation stage requires that participants direct their contributions to others actively participating in the debate by formally addressing the Chair. This convention actually comprises two articles of the standing orders. The first part is laid down in article 55 (Reglement van Orde 2008), which says that participants are only allowed to speak after having been granted permission by the Chair to do so. The fact that the Chair will only give this permission to those actively participating in the debate can be found in a different article. This article stipulates that only MPs or Government members are allowed to make a contribution to the debate. The gallery is explicitly forbidden to give any sign of approval or disapproval (Reglement van Orde 2008, article 152), which means that the Chair can ask the audience to remain quiet. Hence, this fourth convention makes clear that the public watching the debate (whether it is the media or the electorate) is not a party in the discussion. The public is considered to already have a voice in the debate by means of the parliamentarians they have chosen as their representatives. Although a parliamentarian will not be given permission to address the public, he does, of course, have the opportunity to involve them in the debate by making claims on behalf of them. An example of such a claim is the following question of Bos, the leader of the Labor Party, by which he tries to elicit a reaction of his opponent Prime Minister Balkenende: “The main point is that the people who are following this debate want to know what you intend to do with this country” (Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79).

................................................................................

⁴⁹ This remark was made by Verbeet in a phone call I had with her on 16 February 2009.
2.3 Shifting the topic of debate as confrontational strategic maneuvering

2.3.1 Topic shifts in parliamentary debate

In chapter 1, I gave an example of which the first part can be identified as a topic shift. The leader of the Party for the Animals tries to shift the topic of debate from the national debt to environmental welfare by putting forward the following contribution:

[2.1] Thieme (Party for the Animals): “Everything is about money, money, and again, money. […] I would like to turn things around: what do the Netherlands represent in terms of sustainability, biodiversity, the distribution of food and welfare for the rest of the world?”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

This particular shift of topic is of interest to this study because the shift aims at initiating a discussion on the party’s priority issue. A more precise description of the shift is that it is a critical response to the initially introduced issue. It is meant to exclude the original issue from the discussion and immediately initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue. Thieme’s reaction should be called critical, because the remark that “everything is about money, money and again money” makes clear that she considers the national debt (or its cause, the economic recession) an issue that is less important than environmental welfare. The shift is established by excluding the initial issue from the discussion, because Thieme suggests that her critical remark is sufficient reason to end the discussion on the national debt and immediately start a new discussion on the issue of environmental welfare. Finally, the issue introduced by Thieme is different from the initial issue because the national debt is a different subject than environmental welfare. In chapter 4, I will analyze topic shifts that meet the characterization just described. In sum, these shifts have the following four characteristics: (1) the shift is made to discuss the party’s priority issue, (2) this issue is different from the initial issue proposed by the opponent, (3) the shift excludes the

40 Based on the felicity conditions for putting forward a standpoint, the listener has different grounds for not accepting a standpoint. One of them is that he believes that p is not important (Houtlosser 1995: 107).
2. STRATEGIC MANEUVERS TO GET AN ISSUE ON THE TABLE

initial issue from the discussion and starts a new discussion (4) by means of a move that can be interpreted as a critical reaction towards the opponent’s standpoint. Each of these characteristics will now be explained in more detail.

(1) Wanting to initiate a discussion on a party’s priority issue is just one of the reasons to shift the topic. The following example illustrates a shift that is solely carried out to put the opponent in an awkward position. The example is a response of the leader of the Liberal Democrats (D66), Pechtold, to a speech of Verdonk, who at that time had a one-woman faction in Parliament. In her speech, Verdonk addressed only the topic of the costs of the amnesty for 27,500 asylum seekers. Pechtold uses the issue of the asylum seekers to introduce the issue of traffic jams, which Verdonk once promised to solve, but did not address in her speech.

[2.2] Pechtold (Liberal Democrats): “Mrs. Verdonk forgets that these 27,500 [asylum seekers] will also be in traffic jams soon. How is she going to solve those traffic jams?”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

Next to topic shifts that serve a different aim than getting a priority issue on the table (such as example [2.2]), there are also ‘double-motivated’ shifts. These topic shifts aim to introduce the party’s priority topic next to having some other aim. In particular, the wish to evade a difficult question seems to induce politicians to introduce an issue by which they can engage in party-politics.41 Bull and Mayer show that politicians seek safety in raising such an issue when they are confronted with a difficult question. From their research into evasive answers of British politicians it transpired that “making political points is a frequent form of non-reply used by politicians” (1993: 651).42 An example in which both motives (making a political point and evading replying) play a role is the following response from Wilders to a question of Pechtold. In this example, Wilders tries to steer the topic of discussion

------------------------------------------------------------------------

41 Polcar describes an evasive answer as a form of non-straightforward communication which is “a viable communicative move, since an interlocutor can maintain the appearance of openness and cooperativity to an overall discourse goal, while not committing herself to unwanted positions, allowing unwelcome conclusions, or otherwise appearing to thwart the point of whatever discourse activity in which she is engaged” (2002: 215).

42 Bull and Mayer examined evasive answers of Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock in eight televised political interviews.
away from an accusation of inconsistency by introducing the issue of Muslim immigration.

[2.3] Pechtold (Liberal Democrats): “You want to shout [that the political establishment is no good] after having contributed to it yourself for over twenty years?”
Wilders (Party for Freedom): “Mr. Pechtold will have to listen to very concrete proposals of the PVV for twenty years or longer. Again, it is not D66, but the PVV which is standing up for the average man who is bothered by the multicultural society.”
(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

A ‘double-motivated’ topic shift such as example [2.3] is part of this study because the shift is also intended to initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue.

(2) I will use the term ‘topic shift’ to refer to a discussion that is about an issue that is different from the initial issue introduced by the political opponent. This interpretation corresponds with the use of the concept of ‘topic’ in the pragma-dialectical approach to strategic maneuvering. When making a selection from the topical potential, the word ‘topical’ refers to a range of options available at a certain point in the discourse. In the confrontation stage, for example, the topical potential comprises of the possible choices for issues for discussion and standpoints (van Eemeren 2010: 100). Comparable interpretations of the word ‘topic’ can be found with Greatbatch (1986) and Goodwin (2002). In Goodwin’s view, a topic (or issue) is “a more or less determined object of contention that is, under the circumstances, worth arguing about” (2002: 86). Greatbatch uses the word ‘topic’ when speaking of ‘topical focus’. In case of a topic shift, “speakers ignore the precise topical agenda established by a prior contribution and proceed to direct their talk along an alternative track” (1986: 445).

43 Greatbatch writes about agenda-shifting procedures as an aspect of topical organization in news interviews. The term agenda-shifting (or topic-shifting as I define it) is not to be confused with agenda-setting, a term which is also frequently used with respect to political discussions. Agenda-setting refers to the role of the media. As Jacobs and Shapiro explain, studies of agenda-setting address the phenomenon that the press affects what subject or issue politicians consider important (2000: 56).
What might be confusing is that the word “topic” could also refer to the subject of the discussion. In speech analysis, for example, the expression “topical shift” is used to refer to a shift of subject (Haft-van Rees 1989: 85-99). In this study, a shift of topic could mean that the discussion is about another subject, but this is not by definition the case. The difference between “subject” and “topic” as applied in this study can be explained by means of the Thieme example (example [2.1]). In this example, Thieme shifts the topic from the national debt caused by the economic recession to environmental welfare. Since environmental welfare is not directly related to the economic recession, it can be said that the discussion is about a different subject than the one proposed by her opponent. If the new topic merely addressed a different aspect of the same subject, the discussion would in some way or another still be about the economic recession. In that case the topic could have changed, for example, from considering possible solutions for the recession to determining what caused the recession. My definition of topic shifts thus includes not only big shifts in which a discussion on the recession changes, for example, into a discussion on Islamisation or animal welfare, but also minor shifts in which the subject of discussion remains (more or less) the same.

In some cases, a minor shift has to be explained as an elucidation or precization of the primary issue of the debate as formulated by the Chair. An example of a precization is the following reformulation of what the General Debate is about. The Chair always starts this debate by saying: “under discussion is the General Debate on next year’s budget”. When it is Wilders’s first turn to address the issue, he reformulates this description of the debate in such a way that he is able to introduce the issue of Islam:

[2.4] Wilders (Party for Freedom): “Today we are not only talking about the budget, we also talk about the state of the country. What does Holland look like? […] Also, there is no longer one Holland, there are two.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

44 Haft-van Rees (1989) points at several definitions of the term subject as they are used in speech analysis, one of them is the following definition by Levinson (1983): “a subject is a by the interactional context of referents determined class”. That means that what belongs to one class (or subject) in a specific conversation could belong to different classes in another conversation.
Wilders’s reformulation incorporates the state of the country as part of the primary topic. By means of this extension he is able to describe the state of the country as consisting of two Hollands, which provides (a bit later on in the speech) the opportunity to introduce a Holland that consists of “the elite with its ideals of a multicultural society” and one that consists of “the people paying the price”. Such a reformulation has to be interpreted as a precization because it is actually a more accurate description of what the General Debate is about. In case of the General Debate, such a precization is generally accepted (and even expected) because this particular debate is about more than just the parties’ opinions about the budget (van Schagen 1994: 26). Cases in which the reformulation of the primary topic has to be explained as a generally acceptable precization will not be part of this study because then the discussion is not really about a different issue than the one initially proposed.45

(3) In this study I focus on topic shifts carried out to immediately start a new discussion on the preferred issue. The intention of starting a new discussion is not inherent in topic shifting attempts though. In some cases the arguer may introduce the issue without having this intention. Such a shift addresses in most cases a new subject that has nothing to do with the agenda as set by the Chair.46 An example is the standpoint by which the two members of the Party for the Animals always conclude their speech, also the one in the General Debate. In the tradition of the

45 Example [2.1] of Thieme can also be explained as a precization of the primary issue of the debate. In relation to the overall topic of the debate as introduced by the Chair, this topic shift should be explained as meaning that the General Debate is about more than just money (that is: the budget). It is only as a reaction to the contribution of van Geel (see section 1.1) that Thieme’s utterance can be explained as shifting the topic by excluding the original topic (the national debt) of the debate.

46 In some cases the introduction of a topic that has nothing to do with the initial agenda is in fact seriously meant to discuss this new topic. An example is the following parliamentary contribution of the Party for Freedom. In this contribution Mr. Brinkman (PVV) made a serious attempt to introduce the issue of Islamisation in a debate on the Law on the disposal of the dead. He stated that a specific exception to the law was, in practice, most used by Muslims (an exception to the rule that bodies may not be buried within 36 hours after death). Brinkman used this fact to introduce the following standpoint: “The PVV has problems with giving Muslims a preferential treatment. This is the next proof of the Islamisation of the Netherlands and the weak attitude of the Dutch legislator to which the PVV will not bend.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, 4 September 2008)
Roman senator Cato, their last line always contains the same standpoint about animal welfare, whatever the subject of the debate. In the General Debate of 2008 this standpoint was phrased as follows:

[2.5] Thieme (Party for the Animals): “In the interest of the animals, the bio-industry should be stopped soon.”
(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

It is not very likely, though, that the Party for the Animals seriously believes that the issue of the bio-industry (factory farming) is going to be discussed in every parliamentary debate. This kind of move is, therefore, not an attempt to exclude the original topic of debate, but rather a way of drawing attention to the topic the party finds most important. By ending every discussion with the same standpoint, the politician lets everyone know, including the electorate, that this topic has the party’s highest priority.

(4) Topic shifts can be established by different combinations of argumentative moves. Every combination includes at least the move that introduces the new issue. The way in which these moves put forward by the politician react to the opponent’s initial standpoint, however, may differ. The politician can make clear that he agrees with the opponent’s standpoint, that he disagrees, that he questions whether the standpoint is true, or refrain from giving any reaction at all. In this study I confine myself to topic shifts established by means of a move that can be interpreted as a critical reaction (expressing doubt, or the opposite standpoint). Topic shifts in which the politician agrees with his opponent’s standpoint will not be part of this study, even though, as the next example shows, these shifts are interesting strategic moves. The example of an ‘agreeing’ shift is an excerpt in which Wilders responds to a standpoint of Christian Democrat van Geel on the importance of the constitutional state. By

.................................
47 I am referring to Cato’s famous line: “Furthermore, it is my opinion that Carthage must be destroyed.”
48 The Party for the Animals makes this kind of drastic topic shift more often. Another striking example is the following contribution to a debate about the trustworthiness of the Minister of the Environment, Jacqueline Cramer. Some parliamentarians wanted the Minister to resign, but Thieme was of a different opinion. She said: “We support the Minister in these times in which hate-spreading parliamentarians, as in the old days, would like to drive her around in their villages in a dung cart. This is again a reason why the dung-issue should be put on the agenda with priority.” (Proceedings Second Chamber 2007/2008, 106, 7727-7750)
agreeing with van Geel, the discussion on the initial issue ends. Wilders then uses the agreement to elicit agreement on a new discussion issue, the double nationality (especially Turkish or Moroccan next to Dutch) of people in public functions.

[2.6] Van Geel (Christian Democrats): “The core values of the democratic constitutional state are not negotiable for the Christian Democrats.”
Wilders (Party for Freedom): “I agree with Mr. van Geel that our constitutional state is something very important. [...] Do you think then that the PVV was right when it said in the past that not only secretaries of state but also policemen ought to have only the Dutch nationality?”
(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

In this example the issue that was initially introduced is excluded from the discussion by making it seem as if the parties agree on the matter.49 In this study, I will only analyze topic shifts intended to get a party’s priority issue on table in which the exclusion of the initial issue is established by means of response that can be taken as a critical reaction (as, for instance, in example [2.1]).

2.3.2 A pragma-dialectical characterization of topic shifts

Shifting the topic is a way of confrontational strategic maneuvering because it aims at defining the result of the confrontation stage in the way favored by the politician.50 The confrontation stage results in a specific type of difference of opinion. In case of a topic shift the favored type of difference is one about a different proposition than the original type of difference. From an analytic point of view two kinds of propositions can be distinguished that differ from proposition p. The first kind of proposition is an elucidation or precization of proposition p (as mentioned in example [2.4]). In such a case, the shift concerns only a minor reformulation of the initial proposition, which means that the participants continue the original discussion. Such a reformulation

49 Wilders assumes that the issue of the constitutional state needs no further discussion, because van Geel and he agree. However, his formulation of the issue (“the constitutional state is very important”) is different from van Geel’s formulation (“the core values of the democratic constitutional state are not negotiable”).
50 From now I use the word politician (or ‘P’) to refer to the politician trying to get his party’s priority issue on the table and political opponent (or ‘PO’) to refer to the party he is having a discussion with in Parliament.
can be characterized as proposition p’. The second kind of proposition that is analytically different from proposition p is a proposition r referring to a specific issue preferred by the speaker. A discussion about proposition r has to be analyzed as a new discussion with a new confrontation stage. The excerpts [2.1], [2.3], [2.5] and [2.6] are all examples of topic shifts intended to initiate a discussion about a proposition r. However, not all examples follow the exact route from p to r that I am interested in. In example [2.5] (the Cato-like remark of Thieme concerning the bio-industry) proposition r is not introduced by excluding the initial proposition p; in example [2.6] (about the core values of the constitutional state) the exclusion of the initial proposition p is not established by means of a critical response, but by means of a response that involves agreement.

The different results and routes of a topic shift can be made clearer with the help of a dialectical profile of the confrontation stage. Figure 2.1 is a representation of this profile.51 The result and the route of the topic shift I am interested in are shown in grey. It concerns a shift that aims for the exclusion of the original proposition p and the start of a new confrontation stage about a proposition r by means of a critical response towards p (see example [2.1] and [2.3]). The route towards this new confrontation stage always departs from the standpoint expressed by the protagonist (PO in the figure); the one who changes the topic is the antagonist (P in the figure), who has (at least) doubt regarding the tenability of the standpoint put forward by the protagonist.

51 This profile is based on the profile of the confrontation stage as used by Mohammed (2009: 31).
FIGURE 2.1  Preferred route of P from a discussion about p to the preferred result of a discussion about r

CF stage  1 PO
           +/p

2 P  rud/p  ?(+/p) or -/p  +/p [no discussion]

3 PO  +/p'  maintain +/p  retract +/p

new CF stage  1 P  +/r  +/r

CF stage = confrontation stage
P = the politician who tries to shift the topic
PO = the political opponent
+/p = advancing a positive standpoint concerning proposition p
rud/p = requesting a usage declarative concerning proposition p (elucidation or a precization)
?+/p = casting doubt on +/p
-/p = advancing a negative standpoint concerning proposition p
+/p’ = advancing a reformulation of +/p
maintain +/p = expressing the will to defend +/p
retract +/p = expressing that one refrains from defending +/p
r = starting a new discussion on a proposition r preferred by the politician

According to this dialectical profile, excluding proposition p from the discussion and initiating a discussion about proposition r could be perfectly reasonable. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst explain, all arguers are at any time entitled to put forward any standpoint and they may in no way prevent other discussants from doing the same (2004: 136). However, a topic shift could frustrate the discussion with the political opponent. When the new proposition is introduced by means of an unclear or ambiguous formulation, by personally attacking the opponent, or by wrongly ascribing a position to the opponent, the topic shift frustrates the confrontational aim of externalizing the difference of opinion that truly exists, and becomes a fallacious move.52

52 These fallacies refer to the different rules applying to the confrontation stage: the freedom rule, the standpoint rule and the language use rule (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).
Accusations of changing the topic imply very often that the confrontational aim of externalizing the difference of opinion is at stake. Politicians then suggest that the shift of topic is in fact a devious and veiled attempt to evade taking a stance on a specific matter. An example of such an accusation is the following response of Christian Democrat van Geel, which makes clear that he is not satisfied with the answer of Rutte, the leader of the Liberal Party. Van Geel has asked Rutte which people have to pay the bill for the reorganization of Government spending. In different phrases Rutte answers that, in contrast to the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party favors a smaller Government in order to help the weaker to participate in society again. Van Geel responds as follows:

Van Geel (Christian Democrats): “I observe that I have asked already three times who is paying the bill. I get a general answer that I have heard three times now. So let me indicate who according to the VVD has to pay the bill.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

Although van Geel could be right that Rutte’s answer is evasive and unclear, it should be noted that accusations such as van Geel’s could also be intended strategically. When a politician does not get the answer he prefers, he might feel tempted to say that the answer is unclear and therefore not an answer at all.

2.4 Polarizing the parties’ standpoints as confrontational strategic maneuvering

2.4.1 Polarization in parliamentary debate

The second part of the Thieme-example mentioned in the introductory chapter can be identified as an attempt to polarize the parties’ standpoints. After the leader of the Party for the Animals has tried to shift the topic of debate from the national debt to environmental welfare, she suggests that she and her opponent disagree on the issue of environmental welfare. In so doing she challenges her opponent to participate in a different discussion. Thieme said the following:
This particular polarizing move is of interest for this study because its aim is to initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue. A more precise description of this particular way of polarizing is that the move aims to change a situation of agreement (in this case presumed agreement) between the politician and the opponent on an issue favored by the politician into a situation of disagreement. Earlier in his speech, van Geel has emphasized the measures taken by the Christian Democrats to protect the environment. Thieme wants to make clear that although van Geel claims to be concerned with the environment, it is her party, not the Christian Democrats, who takes the problem seriously. In chapter 5, I will analyze polarizing attempts that meet the characterization just described. In sum, these attempts have the following three characteristics: (1) the polarizing move is made to initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue, (2) between the politician and the opponent by (3) changing a situation of (presumed) agreement into a situation of disagreement. Each of these characteristics will now be explained in more detail.

(1) This study focuses on polarization intended to initiate a discussion on a specific issue. However, polarizing actions in Parliament are not always meant to initiate a discussion. The following example from Thieme shows how she suggests that the leader of the Liberal Party Rutte disagrees with his party members in order to make him agree (and not disagree) with her on the issue of environmental welfare:

[2.8] Thieme (Party for the Animals): “When I hear Mr. Rutte speak of the environment, I think: he cannot really mean this, can he? I know him as someone who wants to be ‘green’. In the corridors, I have also heard him say that he wants to eat less meat. But now I hear him talk about the environment in this way and I think by myself: his parliamentary party makes him say this.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

By saying that Rutte disagrees in fact with his party’s standpoint, Thieme claims that Rutte is inconsistent. This claim seems to be meant not only as an argument to convince Rutte (and maybe his party) to take a more environment-friendly
standpoint, but also to show potential voters that he is in fact a rather unreliable politician: at one point he may portray himself as willing to be ‘green’, at another point he defends a completely different standpoint.

In some cases though, the polarizing move which appears to be an argument meant to convince the opponent has to be reconstructed as an attempt to establish disagreement. In such a case the polarizing move can be reconstructed as an argument supporting the politician’s standpoint, but without in any way adapting it to the opponent’s demands. Example [2.9] illustrates this way of polarizing. In the excerpt, Wilders claims that the Socialists and their electorate have a disagreement on how to handle violent young Moroccans. The reason for claiming this is that in the past the party has not been able to solve the problem of increasing crime by these Moroccans; a problem that bothers a large part of their electorate. Wilders then makes it seem as if this claim (that the socialists and their electorate disagree on how to handle violent young Moroccans) is an argument that has convinced the Socialists to now support his standpoint to introduce stronger punishments. In the excerpt he asks the leader of the Socialist Party whether this is indeed the case.

[2.9] Wilders (Party for Freedom): “The people in your neighborhoods are troubled by crime. Beautiful as a policeman on the beat might seem, a policeman and a community centre do not solve the problem. What are you really going to do for the socialist voter? Will you let them down as in the previous years? [...] [or] Are you, in contrast to previous years, now in favor of more severe punishments for the scum that makes those neighbourhoods unsafe? Is there a new wind blowing or do we continue on the old, wrong track?”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

The way in which the argument – that in the past the party has not been able to solve the problem of increasing crime by Moroccans – is put forward does not make it really convincing for the Socialists though. If their leader, Kant, were to agree with Wilders that they are now in favor of more severe punishments, she would acknowledge that the measures proposed by her own party turned out to be worthless and, as a consequence, that they let down their voters (they were on the wrong track, leaving their voters out in the cold). The Socialist Party, therefore, is left no other choice than to disagree with Wilders: all his questions require a non-approving answer. Hence, the move is not meant to solve the issue of the violent
Getting an Issue on the Table

young Moroccans, but to bring back the discussion on this matter. Since this kind of polarizing move is meant to initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue, it will be part of this study.

(2) I use the term polarization to refer to the act of creating two separate groups with opposite opinions or positions. What initially seems to be one group (or a collection of different groups), should, according to the person who polarizes, be divided into two groups. This is a neutral definition because no judgment is given on the rightness or desirability of the division. Dascal explains how polarization can be explained both negatively and positively in deliberative thinking: “sticking uncompromisingly to a dichotomy may lead to sharp disagreement and paradox, but it can also sharpen the issues at stake and help to find a solution” (2007: 299). In this study, I use the neutral definition of polarization, which means that I look at how the politician and his political opponent can be portrayed as different groups holding opposite opinions irrespective of the positive or negative consequences this separation may have for the development of the discussion. I will mention two possible options for portraying the political opponent as (part of) the group holding the opposite opinion.

The first option is to address the opponent in his capacity as a problem solver and to claim that the parties have different solutions. Example [2.10] shows how

53 The word “crime” used by Wilders refers to crime committed by young Moroccans. A bit earlier in the debate he talked about crime committed by “little Moroccan boys of two crates high”. A day later he said (in the same General Debate): “Community Centers? Cameras? The whole Government and the Prime Minister evade the cause of this misery. The cause of this misery is that Moroccan scum that has to be put out of the country.”

54 See Cambridge English Dictionary.

55 In every day language, polarizing is often used as a negative term. It then refers to generalizations that are aimed at creating undesirable tensions and driving people apart. Also, the political definition of polarization can be evaluated both positively and negatively. In politics, polarizing is viewed as an action of power, because it is aimed at dominating the political opponent. A positive explanation is that polarization is an inevitable aspect of politics, and could have a salutary effect on society. From that point of view it is a means to bring to light and, in the end, solve so-called “hidden conflicts”. The negative explanation would be that a politician whose only aim is to dominate the opponent probably has no interest in the concerns, views and insights of his opponent. Such an attitude is not constructive for resolving the conflict. These views on polarization can be found in a discussion in de Volkskrant of 28 February 2009 between Ellian (professor of social cohesion, citizenship and multiculturalism) and de Dreu (professor of psychology). See also Ellian 2009.

56 By “problem solver” I refer to the politician’s function to cooperate with other politicians in order to resolve the conflicts and problems that matter to society.
Thieme attempts to initiate disagreement in this way. In this part of the debate Balkenende thinks that he agrees with Thieme on the importance of paying attention to environmental welfare. Thieme, however, tries to make clear that she takes the problem much more seriously.

[2.10] Thieme (Party for the Animals): “The Prime Minister makes it seem as if he is sailing with a small boat on a rippling stream. We are, however, involved in a worldwide food crisis. [...] This is an emergency.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

By describing the situation as an emergency and Balkenende’s solution as suitable only for circumstances far less critical, Thieme tries to show that her approach to the problem is effective, while Balkenende’s is not.

A second way for a politician to establish disagreement between himself and his political opponent is to approach the opponent in his role as representative of the people and divide the electorate into two groups: a group represented by the opponent, and a group not represented by the opponent. The following remark from Wilders addressed to the “leftist” Labor Party illustrates this way of polarizing.

[2.11] Wilders (Party for Freedom): “We could have been swimming in money and instead of doing so we follow the leftist’s dream to get half the Islamic world to the Netherlands. [...] Henk and Ingrid are paying for Mohammed and Fatima.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)

This provocative remark is an attempt to make the Labor Party explicitly say that it disagrees with Wilders’s party. Wilders knows that he is putting forward a standpoint about Islam that is generalizing and, therefore, unacceptable to the other parties. He is able to do this by exploiting the representative role of the parliamentarian. By dividing the electorate in two opposing groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, Wilders implies that the group he wants to represent is not represented well by the Labor Party.57

57 Polarizing is often referred to as creating a ‘we against them’ situation. People are referring to this specific type of polarizing when, for example, the electorate is divided into a group consisting of ‘our own people’ and a group consisting of immigrants (a strategy used by extreme rightist
(3) The polarizing moves that will be analyzed in this study aim to change an *undesirable situation of agreement or presumed agreement* into a situation of disagreement (in this case: a pro/con-discussion). However, it is also possible that the initial situation is not a situation of (presumed) agreement but of doubt: in that case the political opponent has cast doubt on the politician's standpoint. In these situations polarizing might also be a helpful tool to heighten disagreement, because though initially the two parties hold different positions, these positions are not yet opposites. An example of polarization that starts from a situation in which the opponent has put forward a reaction of critical doubt is the following passage from a discussion between Wilders and Prime Minister Balkenende. In the excerpt Wilders divides (just as in example [2.11]) the electorate in two opposing groups (the prisoners and the elderly people) in order to establish a disagreement between himself and the Prime Minister. At the end he claims that the Prime Minister, in contrast to Wilders's party that stands up for the elderly, prefers to take care of the prisoners.

[2.12] Wilders (Party for Freedom): “Yet it remains a shame that in this country prisoners are treated better than our elderly.” […] Balkenende: […] “I think we have to be careful when comparing the one with the other, because it is not a black and white story. Of course it is interesting to hear what Mr. Wilders has to say about the rights of prisoners. They also have rights, but I am not sure whether the one can be compared with the other just like that.” Wilders: “I want everyone of the elderly to be showered every day. I want them to go outside everyday. I want them to be surrounded by enough nurses. I want them to be able to smoke in their own room. The rights that now hold for criminals, rapists, pedophiles and murderers do not hold for the elderly.” Balkenende (PM): “Chairwoman, we have exchanged our views. Of course we will make inquiries, but I am not going to make the comparison Mr. Wilders makes and I will for sure not attach any conclusions to it.”

An example of a ‘we against them’ situation is when a division is created between the people and the political establishment (a strategy used by populist politicians (D'Anjou 2005, Abts 2004)). In that case a politician separates the politician's roles as problem solver and representative of the people by claiming that in their tendency to resolve problems the established politicians forget which problems really matter to the people.
Wilders: “Unfortunately then, no other conclusion can be drawn than that the Prime Minister of The Netherlands chooses for the prisoners and not for the elderly people. That is a shame.”

(Proceedings Second Chamber 2009/2010, 2, 2-100)

The Prime Minister responds by saying that he will investigate whether Wilders is right in claiming that elderly people do not have the rights that prisoners have. This response has to be taken as a reaction of critical doubt: Balkenende does not accept right away that Wilders is right, but neither does he claim that Wilders is wrong.\(^{58}\) As can be noted, the example does not really fit in with the corpus used so far: it is not an example from the General Debate of 2008 like all other examples used in this chapter (but from the General Debate of 2009), and the polarizing move is not about the issue of Islamisation. The reason that it is different is that in the General Debate of 2008 no examples could be found in which either Wilders or Thieme encountered critical doubt when trying to initiate a discussion on their preferred issue.\(^{59}\) Since these cases of polarizing in which the politician is confronted with (presumed) doubt do not seem to be representative of the polarizing moves used in Parliament, they will not be further discussed in this study. The polarizing moves analyzed in this study are all made to initiate a discussion on the party’s priority issue between the politician and the opponent by changing a situation of (presumed) agreement into a situation in which parties hold opposite standpoints.

\(^{58}\) It is often extremely difficult to differentiate between a negative standpoint and an expression of doubt. As van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans explain: “out of politeness expressions of doubt are often thinly disguised negative standpoints” (2002: 8). In this example too it could be doubted whether Balkenende’s expression of doubt is in fact a negative standpoint since he has objections to the comparison between prisoners and elderly people. However, in this part of the debate no indications can be found that Balkenende disagrees with Wilders on the standpoint that elderly people should be treated better.

\(^{59}\) A possible explanation for why these polarizing moves are rarely found in parliamentary debates is offered by the circumstance that, due to their representative role, parliamentarians are expected to take a position on matters, especially when their political opponents invite them to do so (cf. section 2.2.2 (3)). Just casting doubt is therefore not a common reaction when an opponent puts forward a standpoint.
2.4.2 A pragma-dialectical characterization of polarization

Polarizing the positions of the discussion parties is – just like shifting the topic – a way of confrontational strategic maneuvering because it aims at defining the type of difference of opinion in a way favored by the politician. In the case of polarization the favored type of difference is a mixed difference of opinion: polarizing implies that there are two opposing poles, which means that the difference of opinion is more serious than a difference that involves just doubt about the tenability of a specific standpoint. From an analytic point of view there are two situations in which there is no mixed difference of opinion: when the parties agree on a standpoint (which means that there is no difference of opinion), and when the opponent only casts doubt on the standpoint (a non-mixed difference of opinion). The aim of a polarizing move is to make the opponent take the opposite position in order to prevent either of these two undesirable situations from occurring. The difference between a topic-shifting strategic maneuver and a polarizing strategic maneuver can now be explained. In topic shifts the aim is to change the proposition that is under discussion when the discussion is not about a proposition that concerns the preferred issue. When polarizing the parties’ positions the aim is to change the positions taken by the parties towards this proposition because then the proposition put forward concerns the preferred issue but there is initially no mixed difference of opinion. Based on this argumentative explanation of topic shifts and polarization, it can be deduced that every attempt to get a specific issue on the table can be characterized as either a topic shift or a polarization. A topic shift is concerned with the propositional content of the standpoint about the issue the politician wants to discuss, and polarization with the communicative function of this standpoint.

Polarizing moves start from a situation of (presumed) agreement or doubt: the opponent has put forward a reaction of agreement or critical doubt, or is expected to do so. These different options can again be made clearer with the help of a dialectical profile of the confrontation stage. In case both parties initially agree on a standpoint about proposition $r$, the polarizing party (the politician (P)) can start a new discussion on the same proposition $r$.\footnote{As van Eemeren and Grootendorst explain, rule 1 grants the right to put forward the same standpoint to the same discussant again (2004: 136-7).} This option is represented in figure 2.2 by starting at the top of the route; this route corresponds with example [2.7], [2.9],
The second option, in which the political opponent (PO) casts doubt on the standpoint, is represented by taking just the second half of figure 2.2. Example [2.12] corresponds with this option.

FIGURE 2.2  Preferred route of P from no difference of opinion or a non-mixed difference of opinion to the preferred result of a mixed difference of opinion about a proposition r

1 P

2 PO rud/r ?(+/r) +/r [no discussion]

CF stage 1 P

2 PO rud/r ?(+/r) +/r [no discussion]

3 P maintain +/r retract +/r

4 PO maintain ?(+/r) retract +/r

CF stage = confrontation stage
P = the politician who tries to polarize the parties’ standpoints
PO = the political opponent
+/r = advancing a positive standpoint concerning proposition r
rud/r = requesting a usage declarative concerning proposition r (elucidation or precization)
?(+/r) = casting doubt on +/r
maintain +/r = expressing the will to defend +/r
retract +/r = expressing that one refrains from defending +/r
-/r = advancing a negative standpoint concerning a proposition r
maintain ?(+/r) = expressing the will to defend ?(+/r)

It should be emphasized that in many cases parts of this route remain implicit. It is, for instance, possible that the first part of the route in which the parties agree is not expressed. In that case the politician only assumes that the opponent agrees (see, for instance, example [2.11]).

The fact that I am only concerned with polarization intended to establish a mixed difference of opinion between the politician and his political opponent, excludes example [2.8]. In this example the polarizing move is meant as an argument (and not as a (sub)-standpoint), which means that the move has to be analyzed as part of the argumentation stage.
Getting an issue on the table

retract \(+(\ldots)+\) = expressing that one refrains from defending \(+(\ldots)+\)

According to this dialectical profile, initiating a discussion on a standpoint on which the arguers agree or seem to agree could be a perfectly reasonable move. In such a case, polarizing the parties’ discussion positions is a way to externalize the difference of opinion that truly exists between the parties. However, polarizing moves can frustrate the discussion with the political opponent. When a mixed difference is accomplished by imposing a position on someone who does not hold this position, such a move is regarded a straw man fallacy (a violation of pragma-dialectical rule 3).\(^{63}\)

Accusations of polarization often state that a straw man fallacy has occurred. This also happened in the follow up of the discussion Wilders tried to initiate about the violent young Moroccans (example [2.9] in the previous section). In the excerpt, Wilders tried to establish disagreement with the leader of the Socialist Party by asking her whether her party now agreed with more severe punishments for “that scum”. Kant then accuses Wilders of a straw man fallacy.

\[
\text{Kant (Socialist Party): “Here, a difference is created that does not exist. Do you really believe that I think that we should not be tough on these firebrands?”} \\
\text{(Proceedings Second Chamber 2008/2009, 2, 2-79)}
\]

Although Kant could be right in saying that there is no difference of opinion, it should be noted that such accusations can also be used strategically. When trying to conceal a difference of opinion, for example about an important electoral issue as how to deal with violent young Moroccans, accusing someone of wrongly polarizing the discussion might be an advantageous discussion move.

\(^{63}\) Comparable to topic shifts, polarizing moves can frustrate the externalization of the difference of opinion by violating any of the three confrontational discussion rules (the freedom rule, the standpoint rule and the language use rule).
2. STRATEGIC MANEUVERS TO GET AN ISSUE ON THE TABLE

2.5 How parliamentary conventions constrain topic shifts and polarization

The parliamentary conventions described in section 2.2.2 affect the party’s possibilities to maneuver strategically in the confrontation stage. In this section I will explain what that means for the confrontational maneuvers of topic-shifting and polarization. The first two conventions affect the standpoint a politician may advance. They stipulate that participants in a parliamentary debate are not allowed to put forward just any standpoint: the standpoint has to relate to the topic as set by the Chair (convention 1) and should not be offending (convention 2). The third and fourth convention determine the division of the participants’ tasks, which means that participants are not allowed to take just any position. The rules determine that there is a fixed set of tasks, and that each of these tasks is assigned to a specific participant: the Parliament’s task is to ask critical questions about bills or the performance of the Government; the Government’s task is to account for that bill or their performance by answering those questions.64 For parliamentarians it is not a rule but rather common practice to answer questions when asked to do so, because they are expected to take a position on matters that concern society (convention 3). The voters are not assigned any role in these debates (convention 4).

The different tasks of the participants lead to different discussion positions. The Government always holds a positive standpoint concerning the main point of view that the performance of the Government was up to standard or that a bill proposed by the Government should be accepted. These points of view are always positively formulated in order for the burden of proof to fall on the Government, which makes the Government the protagonist of the positive standpoint. The task of the MPs is to question the tenability of this positive standpoint. Hence, they hold the neutral position of casting doubt (which makes Parliament the antagonist of the positive standpoint).65 However, at the end of the debate MPs also have to give their judgment. By voting they indicate whether they think the performance of the

64 There is one exception to this rule: when a parliamentarian introduces a bill, he is assigned the task to defend it as well (www.parlement.com).
65 Houtlosser explains that in the traditional debate literature (for example Freeley’s Argumentation and debate) these roles are called the “affirmative side” and the “negative side”. Confusing about the latter name is, as Houtlosser points out, that it wrongly suggests that the party questioning the positive standpoint always holds a negative position towards the point of view that is at issue (1995: 43).
Government was up to standard or whether a law should be introduced. This means that in the end they have to adopt a negative or a positive position towards the point of view at issue: they either agree with the Government or they take an opposite point of view.\textsuperscript{66} A consequence of this double task of questioning and judging is that the initial position held by the MPs often already contains a judgment, a negative or a positive position.\textsuperscript{67} Then their questions do not serve the aim of seeking information to come to a judgment, but of eliciting premises to support their own standpoint.\textsuperscript{68}

The conditions for putting forward a standpoint and the division of the discussion tasks are \textit{institutional preconditions} for confrontational strategic maneuvering.\textsuperscript{69} The conditions impose restrictions on a right laid down in one of the pragma-dialectical rules for conducting a critical discussion, namely the \textit{freedom rule}. This rule stipulates that in the confrontation stage no specific conditions apply to the content of the standpoint that is advanced, the person to whom it is advanced, or the person who advances it (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 190-191). Hence, according to the freedom rule, each party can put forward the proposition he prefers to discuss and each party can take any possible position towards that proposition. However, due to the parliamentary conventions this freedom is restricted; not every proposition is allowed and not every politician can take any position towards a standpoint. These restrictions have an effect on the options for choosing from the topical potential, adapting one’s move to audience demand and for exploiting the appropriate presentational devices. I will briefly indicate what seem to be the most important constraints these parliamentary conventions enforce on the possibilities to establish a topic shift and to polarize the parties’ standpoints.

\textsuperscript{66} In most cases this point of view does not concern the initial standpoint whether the performance of the Government was up to standard, but a sub-standpoint on why that is or is not the case.

\textsuperscript{67} This way of doing politics is often criticized as backroom politics: parliamentarians then have their judgment defined outside the appropriate and public channels before entering the debate.

\textsuperscript{68} MPs are supposed to address the Government via the Chair by means of critical and informative questions. Such contributions, however, can easily be used to put forward a standpoint. Quintilian already explained that ‘question and answer’ is just a means to come to a judgment. He says: “In a debate the things people say are no different than in ordinary arguments, only the way in which things are said is different, namely by means of questions and answers” (Quintilian 2001: 333). Many authors have pointed at the assertive function a question can have. See, for example van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987: 162-163), van Rees (2006; 84) and Walton (1989: xiv). Walton uses the term \textit{adversarial question} to refer to a question that entails opposition (as is the case with most critical questions put forward by MPs).

\textsuperscript{69} The rules can be viewed as primary conditions, and the unofficial informal practices as secondary conditions (van Eemeren 2010: 152).
In section 2.3.2, I have defined a topic shift as a critical response to the issue initially introduced by the opponent meant to exclude this issue from the discussion and to initiate a discussion on an issue preferred by the politician. The easiest way to establish such a topic shift would be to break off the initial discussion and to start a new discussion on the issue preferred by the speaker. In everyday discussions, this could be a perfectly reasonable way of proceeding – for example, if someone claims that “Obama is not the best president of America”, the listener could respond by saying “It is high time that you put out the garbage” (thereby implying that he finds the garbage a more important issue than the American presidency).70 In a parliamentary context, however, such an evading response might be problematic due to the restrictions applying to the topical potential. The practice that politicians take a position in matters (convention 3) restricts the potential of possible responses to a standpoint. Refraining from taking a position would, therefore, be a politically weak move that could easily be exploited by the opponent. The convention that politicians have to stick to the agenda (convention 1) restricts the possible propositions that can be put forward as the new issue. Only the issues that relate to the initial agenda will be allowed by the Chair. Also, the possibilities to adapt a move to the audience’s demands are restricted when aiming for a topic shift in Parliament. The convention (4) that politicians are not allowed to address the public means that a politician can only appeal to potential voters by means of contributions that are – via the Chair – addressed to the opponent. In a presidential election debate, for example, it would be possible to shift to a preferred issue by saying “We can keep on talking about economic facts and figures, but those of you who are listening at home are probably more interested in how we get you or your family back to work”. In Parliament, the Chair will most likely break off such a contribution.

In section 2.4.2, I have defined polarization as putting forward a standpoint in such a way that a situation of agreement on a preferred issue changes into a situation of a mixed difference of opinion. A way to establish such a disagreement would be for an arguer to describe his own standpoint or his opponent’s standpoint in a rather extreme way. Such extreme formulations, however, could be regarded as offensive and even discriminating. An offensive example would, for instance, be to say that 70 When responding in this way the arguer violated the rule of language stipulating that “you must not perform any speech acts that are not in an appropriate way connected with previous speech acts” (the Gricean maxim of relevance) (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 76-77). However, no rule for critical discussion is violated.
“Roma are not a protected animal species, but a criminal bunch of primitives who should be thrown out of the country”. Such a claim will most probably help to initiate disagreement on the position of Roma. Also, its content does not make the standpoint fallacious. In specific contexts (for example an internet forum), such a controversial, and in this case even discriminating standpoint might be pre-eminently debatable and can thus provide good reason for discussion.71 However, in a parliamentary context such standpoints are problematic due to the convention that a contribution should not be offensive (convention 2). This convention restricts the potential of standpoints that can be put forward and the way in which they can be presented.72 In case of polarizing, also the possibilities to adapt a move to the audience’s demands are restricted. These restrictions are the same as explained for a topic shift: the convention (4) that politicians are not allowed to address the public means that a politician can appeal to potential voters only by means of contributions that are – via the Chair – addressed to the opponent.

71 This example was found on an internet forum that discussed the topic of the position of Roma in Europe.
72 The Roma example is an offensive standpoint presented in an offensive way. Saying that Roma are a group of criminals is a standpoint that is generalizing and therefore offensive to the whole group; Describing the Roma as “primitives who are not a protected animal species” is an offensive formulation, because it describes these people as inferior to non-Roma and indirectly even as animals.