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Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior

Adriaansen, M.L.

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**versatile
citizens**

**media reporting,
political cynicism
and
voter behavior**

maud adriaansen

VERSATILE CITIZENS

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The Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR)
Kloveniersburgwal 48
1012 CX Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Contact: maudadriaansen@gmail.com

VERSATILE CITIZENS
MEDIA REPORTING, POLITICAL CYNICISM AND VOTER BEHAVIOR

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
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ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties
ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
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Promotor: Prof. dr. C.H. de Vreese

Co-promotor: Dr. Ph. van Praag

Overige leden : Prof. dr. K.L.K. Brants
Prof. dr. W. van der Brug
Prof. dr. J. Kleinnijenhuis
Prof. dr. P.C. Neijens
Prof. dr. S. Walgrave

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

Voor Lya Adriaansen

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Introduction

Setting the Scene

In recent decades, there have been considerable changes in Western Europe in how people relate to political parties and the media. Parties were traditionally able to count on most of their constituents' loyalty and there had never been much need for media to worry about the sale of their products. In many countries, the frozen party systems Rokkan & Lipset (1967) once described began to thaw in the 1960s, but it was not until the past twenty years that the implications of the political changes and the process generating them became clearly visible all over Europe. Similarly, for most of the twentieth century, the media market was a closed and not very competitive *supply market*. In the 1990s it relatively quickly transformed into a competitive *demand market* with capricious consumers (Van Praag & Adriaansen, 2011, forthcoming). A comparable pattern is visible for both political parties and media; citizens have been called both *floating voters* and *zapping viewers* (Simons, 1998).

These changes affected the way political parties and media work, how they interact and their relationship with citizens. Over time, citizens, media and politics changed and accordingly the balance of powers between these actors shifted. This has affected the way the media report the news. In many countries, strategic news content has gained prominence at the expense of substantive content, although substantive content has by no means disappeared (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008b). When political actors (politicians and political parties) and their actions are presented with a strategic frame, this may affect the way citizens think about these political actors and politics in general. Strategic news coverage has been linked to changed political attitudes and behavior: previous research has suggested that information which frames politics as a strategic game can invoke political cynicism and decrease turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001).

The effects of news content are also the focus of this dissertation. We study the effects of news content on political cynicism, and the effects of political cynicism on voter behavior. Although it is not the main focus of this dissertation, we also pay attention to the effects of news content on voter behavior. In contrast to extant research, we both scrutinize the potential *unfavorable* effects of strategic news content as well as the potential *favorable* effects of substantive news content. With regard to voter behavior, we study turnout as well as voter uncertainty (hesitating voters and late deciders) and voter volatility (changing voters). In the following, we first pay attention to media effects in general and then to the ones we are

interested in specifically. We shortly describe the main concepts in this dissertation in the text, but we also included a summary of the main concepts in Appendix A.

Media Effects on Political Attitudes and Behavior

The Scope of Media Effects

What do we know about how the media affect political attitudes and behavior in general? There is scholarly disagreement about this question and the dominant opinion has developed over time as well (McQuail, 2005). Until the 1930s, media were credited to have a large impact on citizens' attitudes and behavior. This idea was induced by the fear for the effects of propaganda, but not based on systematic empirical research. After important studies were published in the 1940s and 1950s (the implications of these studies are described by Klapper, 1960) the scholarly consensus was one of minimal effects of media use; at best media could reinforce existing opinions, instead of shape opinions. This was to a large extent due to the imprecise operationalization and measurement of the independent and dependent variables (McQuail, 2005). Since the 1980s the minimal effects idea was therefore largely abandoned. In the past decades scholars have focused on the *differential* effects of media use; media effects are not equal for each medium, for each person and at each moment. We pay attention to this later on in this Introduction.

Recently, Bennett & Iyengar (2008) suggested that a new era of minimal effects has started. Because of the fragmentation of the media market, the effects of media coverage are harder to identify. Moreover, for citizens it is possible to stick to media that are consistent with their own partisan attachment (US news network Fox is often used as an example). Although this situation might apply to majoritarian two-party systems like the US, it does not apply to consensus democracies with multiparty systems. On the one hand, this is because of practical reasons: as compared to the US, the size of the media market is smaller and there are more parties in these countries, and it would therefore be less profitable to focus on the electorates of specific parties. Nevertheless, it is possible to target voters that identify with a specific ideological school which is broader than one political party. On the other hand, these countries still have strong public broadcasting systems and a non-partisan press. Public service television pays more attention to news and for this reason encourages higher news consumption. Consequently, the knowledge gap between the higher and lower interested is smaller in these systems (Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara, 2009; Iyengar, et al., 2010).

Favorable and Unfavorable Media Effects

In this study we focus on framing effects. Next to agenda setting and priming, framing is probably the most often studied media effect in political communication. Agenda setting concerns media effects on citizens' priorities and priming concerns the effect of changing priorities on the way citizens evaluate political events (Iyengar & McGrady, 2005). Framing concerns the way information is expressed, in which context information is placed and which aspects are emphasized. Agenda setting and priming studies focus on the importance of issues whereas framing studies focus on the interpretation of issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Druckman, 2001; Iyengar & McGrady, 2005). A framing effect occurs when emphasis on specific considerations causes an individual to focus on these considerations when forming his or her opinion (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). These effects can either be caused by an issue-specific frame which pertains to a specific topic or event, or by a generic frame which is more general in nature and can pertain to all news topics (De Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; De Vreese, 2003). In this study we focus on the effects of two generic frames on political attitudes and behavior: strategic and substantive coverage.

Since Robinson (1976) used the term "media malaise" for the perceived detrimental effects of media use on political attitudes and behavior, many scholars scrutinized these unfavorable effects of media use. Attention has been directed at the medium itself as well as at its content (Newton, 1999). The *medium* that is most often related to unfavorable attitudes is television (Putnam, 2000; Robinson, 1976). Most authors who study *news content* focus on the unfavorable effects of specific coverage, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative or uncivil coverage (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996) and strategic coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Our focus is on the effects of the latter on cynicism: the idea that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political trust, a process that has been called the "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Strategic news coverage includes coverage of gains and losses, power struggles between political actors, their performance, and public perception of their performance (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

In response to the media malaise theory, other scholars described a "virtuous circle" in which news media use increases political trust, interest and knowledge and it leads to mobilization (Norris, 2000b). Authors found beneficial effects of media use. Some found favorable effects of media use in general (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998) or of attention to political news in the media (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Others found favorable effects of specific media forms, such as newspapers (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Simon, 2006), radio

(Livingstone & Markham, 2008) and even television (O'Keefe, 1980; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998) or more specifically public broadcast television (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a), broadsheet newspapers (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a; Newton, 1999) and local news (Oberholzer-Gee & Waldfogel, 2009). Nevertheless, little attention has been directed to the favorable effects of media content. We argue that if strategic news content can induce cynicism, other sorts of news content may reduce it. For this reason we focus not only on the possible unfavorable effects of exposure to strategic news, but also on the possible favorable effects of exposure to substantive news. Political substantive news coverage provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

The Conditionality of Media Effects: Young Citizens

In the past years scholars have focused on the conditionality of media effects (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). First, some citizens are more easily affected than others. For example, knowledge moderates the extent to which citizens are affected by media use, although scholars disagree about the direction of this moderation (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Party identification moderates media effects as well: media effects vary among the adherents of different political parties (Gollust, Lantz, & Ubel, 2009; Young, 2004) and the less citizens identify with political parties, the larger the media effects are (Converse, 1976). Second, some media have more impact than others. Television is credited more effect than newspapers as well as a different effect (Chan, 1997; Druckman, 2005; Robinson, 1976). More specifically commercial broadcasters have an unfavorable impact, while public broadcasters have a favorable impact (Aarts & Semetko, 2003). Third, media effects are larger in some cases than in others. For example, the effects of news content are larger when the specific news content prevails in the media (De Vreese, 2005). In addition, media have more impact in specific political systems than in others. The Netherlands is a consensus democracy, in which media effects differ from majoritarian democracies such as the US (e.g. De Vreese, 2004; 2005). In summary, scientists agree that media have effects on citizens, but these effects are large at times and subtle at others, and are not identical for everybody and in each situation.

In this dissertation we focus on age as a moderator of media effects, since young citizens are more easily affected by media content than older ones (McLeod & Shah, 2009). Extant research has shown that young citizens' political expressions deviate from the average in two ways. First, since younger citizens have not developed stable attitudes and behavioral

patterns yet, their attitudes and behavior are less stable than older citizens' expressions, although political attitudes and behavior are far from stable in any stage of life (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Jennings & Niemi, 1978). For this reason, younger citizens are interesting for scholars who want to study attitudes and behavior, because changes may be best visible in this group. Second, young citizens' expressions can differ with respect to content: young citizens can for example be more trustful or less inclined to turn out to vote.

Younger generations' political attitudes and behavior have been explained in pessimistic as well as in optimistic terms, ranging from the idea that the younger generations are "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2000) to the idea that they are "reshaping politics" (Dalton, 2008; Inglehart, 1990). Verhoeven (2009) classifies the differential views on changing political expressions into three perspectives. The first perspective builds on social capital theories (Putnam, 1995, 2000). A decline in social capital, which started with the maturation of the Generation X (born 1961-1980) has led to lower levels of trust, engagement and participation (Wattenberg, 2007). The second perspective is based on theories of modernization (Dalton, 2006, 2008; Inglehart, 1977, 1990), which argue that because of processes of cognitive mobilization, citizens develop post-materialist values. These authors argue that citizens nowadays are more attentive and involved in democratic decision making and point to a shift from traditional forms of participation to elite challenging forms of political action. For example, the younger generation might not always vote, but they do engage more often than earlier generations in non-electoral activities like buying or not buying products for political reasons (boycotting) or signing internet petitions.

While the first perspective evaluates the changing political attitudes and behavior of younger generations in a pessimistic manner, the second perspective gives a more optimistic evaluation. A third school combines the first two perspectives and is based on theories of individualization (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). Citizens make their choices individually, but not separated from their social environment. Though citizens think they act independently, they are influenced by other people, politics, societal organizations and the media. Most citizens are busy and they have to choose in which activities they want to participate. The range of possible political and societal activities to participate in used to be predetermined by the societal group someone belonged to. Citizens can now choose from a much wider range, their "participation repertoire" has widened and for them it feels natural to switch between traditional and non-traditional forms (Verhoeven, 2009). While traditional political participation may be less self-evident for younger citizens and they participate more in non-

traditional activities, they do not choose between either traditional or non-traditional actions, but combine them (O'Neill, 2007; Verhoeven, 2009).

Scholars disagree which perspective applies best to contemporary societies and probably none of them fully does, or maybe each of them does for specific parts of the population. The optimistic modernist perspective may hold true for some citizens, it certainly does not for others and scholars suggested distinguishing between different young citizens (O'Neill, 2007; Verhoeven, 2009). In order to get a more detailed picture of the differences among the young population, we use political knowledge as an additional moderating variable. In several studies, political knowledge was found to be an important moderator of media effects, although the evidence is mixed: some find stronger effects for the lower knowledgeable (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), while others find stronger effects for the higher knowledgeable (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Nelson, et al., 1997). We aim to get a better understanding which effects apply to the lower knowledgeable and which apply to the higher knowledgeable.

The case of the Netherlands

The Media: from Citizen-Centric to Consumer-Centric

Before elaborating on the main research questions of this dissertation, we first turn to the changes on the side of the media and citizens, for European democracies in general and more specifically for the Netherlands. The European party systems emerged at the end of the nineteenth century on the basis of various cleavages and the media systems developed in line with these cleavages. In the Netherlands, the research venue of this dissertation, the important ones were the class cleavage and the religious cleavage; other countries had regional cleavages as well. The mass parties which developed around these cleavages were the breeding grounds for the modern parliamentary democracy. The parties were able to recruit and keep the firm support of specific segments of society and thus dominate the political arena up until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, many of the mass media were linked to specific political parties and the corresponding segments of society (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Van der Eijk & Van Praag, 2006).

For a long time, most Dutch media were entrenched in the Catholic, Protestant, Social Democratic and Liberal Conservative *pillar*. In practice, this meant they were not free to chart their own independent political course. Ever since the 1960s, the social dividing lines have

weakened, but not completely disappeared (Bovens, Pellikaan, & Trappenburg, 1998; Van der Eijk & Van Praag, 2006). Many party-related media have disappeared or dissociated themselves from the party they were once linked to. Despite this rapid *depillarization*, up to the early 1980s, the Dutch media had no cause for concern as regards the sale of their products; readers and viewers had little choice and accepted whatever the media presented to them without much complaint.

Although it was not yet fully visible, by the 1980s many people had already largely abandoned their unconditional loyalty to the media and the parties. Two developments created the preconditions for a fundamental change in the media market. Starting at the end of the 1980s, there was a rise in the number of television broadcasting channels, especially the commercial and regional ones. This was followed by the rise of the internet and other technological advances in the mid-1990s. In a relatively short period of time, the Dutch media market was transformed from a *supply market* into a *demand market* (Van Cuilenburg, Neijens, & Scholten, 1999). Now in 2010, with ten nationwide television broadcasting organizations, seven commercial and three public ones, three free daily papers and a rapid internet connection in more than 70 percent of the homes, the Netherlands has a competitive and fragmented media market (Adriaansen & Van Praag, 2010; Broeders & Verhoeven, 2005; WRR, 2005). Other countries were faced with similar developments, though not always at the same pace.

This fragmentation of the media market and increase of competition affected the way the media work. In an effort to keep their viewers and readers, reporters are now more assertive when it comes to politics. On a competitive demand market, the demands of the audience have become increasingly compelling and this has influenced how journalists deal with political information and report on political parties, Parliament, politicians and the civil administration. This development is often described as the growing dominance of *media logic*, as opposed to the *political logic* of the past.¹ Ideal typically, fully developed media logic would be characterized by six aspects related to the functioning of the media and the factors they take into consideration (earlier presented in Adriaansen & Van Praag, 2010). These aspects are briefly summarized in Figure 0.1, and in the following we use them to

¹ The term *media logic* was used for the first time in 1979 by Altheide & Snow (1979). In their approach, the focus is mainly on the technical demands and format of the media, “how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication. ... Media logic becomes a way of seeing and interpreting social affairs.” Mazzoleni (1987) used it in a study on the role of the media in election campaigns. In the Netherlands, Brants and Van Praag (1995) introduced the term in a book on the campaign of 1994. The Council for Social Developments (RMO, 2003) published a report in 2003 called *Medialogica*, in which the term was defined in greater detail than in most of the academic literature.

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describe the changes in the Netherlands and other democracies. We describe the ideal typical situation, but the real situation in the Netherlands is often moderate in nature.

Figure 0.1: Demand Market and Media Logic

	political logic	====>	media logic
market type	supply market	====>	demand market
commercialisation, market share more important:			
1. <i>media identify with:</i>	general interest	====>	own interest of medium
2. <i>address public as:</i>	citizen	====>	consumer
changing power relations media and politics:			
3. <i>kind of media reporting:</i>	substantive factual	====>	strategic personalistic attention for vox populi
4. <i>role journalists versus politics:</i>	following respectful	====>	dominant entertaining
5. <i>agenda determined by:</i>	politics	====>	media
6. <i>democracy model:</i>	party democracy	====>	audience democracy

First, in the current demand market the media allow themselves to be guided more than in the past by their own interests, often defined in terms of market shares, ratings, circulation and advertisement sales (Brants, 2007). At commercial broadcasting organizations, the amount of money coming in from commercials determines whether they survive, and newspapers are dependent on a combination of income from subscriptions, newsstand sales and advertisements. At public broadcasting organizations, it is only partly about income from commercials, and mainly about attracting market shares in various target groups, as well as involving enough members with the organization. Although the reasons are not the same, all media are aware of the demands of their audiences. This means market considerations play an increasingly significant role in how journalists report the news, especially political items (RMO, 2003). The interests of the public at large and the discussions about news items are often of secondary importance (Van Beek, Rouw, & Schillemans, 2006).

Second, while the dominant model used to be a *citizen-centric* one, now the *market-oriented* model is guiding journalistic principles more (Hallin, 2000) and could therefore be called more *consumer-centric*. Under political logic, preferences of readers and viewers were only rarely taken into account. The media did do their reporting for a specific rank and file, but their focus was mainly on what they thought was good for the audience, and not what the audience wanted. Journalists automatically assumed they should report on matters that can be of importance to citizens, about which citizens ought to be well informed, so they can think about the developments of society and properly play their role as citizens and as voters (Brants & Van Praag, 2005). Under media logic, in a fragmented, competitive and volatile market, media are not only interested in their public as citizens, but also as consumers. Media have to take into account what the public is interested in, a public which often consists of impatient and easily distracted consumers. Editorial boards are guided by what they think will capture the attention of their target group, reporters identify with the needs and wishes of their audience or what they think the needs and wishes of their audience are (RMO, 2003; Van Beek, et al., 2006).

In addition, the internet and other technological advances changed the way people deal with information. News consumers can now follow the latest developments anywhere in the world at any moment. Also, there are many possibilities for interactivity: news consumers have become producers after the introduction of blogs and response options on news websites. This acceleration of the news cycle puts pressure on the media to not only present the facts we already know, but to keep finding an original perspective, always adding a little something to the developments that are already “old” because they have been known for hours. Media are therefore systematically on the lookout for a perspective that can catch the audience’s interest (Brants, 2008; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Van Beek, et al., 2006).

The effects of the consumer-centric approach to editorial policy are clear when it comes to the third aspect, the nature of the news coverage. Journalists used to choose from the daily supply of news, without playing an active role in gathering it and news coverage was mainly substantive and factual (Patterson, 1993; Semetko, et al., 1991; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008b). Nowadays, reporters actively hunt for news, look for a scoop, select an attractive framework for a news item, and deliberate and negotiate regularly with politicians and PR staffs. They need to present political news in an attractive way and this has consequences for news coverage. News is more often presented within a strategic frame: a substantial part of the coverage is about how the political game is played, about political conflicts and campaigns, about what strategies political actors use to achieve their aims, about who is a

successful player and who isn't, and media devote ample attention to opinion polls (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008b). Although this development is definitely visible in the Netherlands, a considerable part of the news is still substantive (Van Praag & Brants, 2005). Political news coverage has also said to become more personalized, more focused on individual politicians (including their personal lives) and less on political parties as a whole (Brants, 1998; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), although evidence on personalization is contradictory (e.g. Kaase, 1994; Langer, 2007; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2008 did not find a heightened level of personalization). Additionally, political news coverage is often characterized by a focus on the point of view of the man in the street, the *vox populi*.

The fourth aspect of media logic is the altered attitude of reporters to politics. Newsmen are increasingly responsible for the entertaining nature of the news, and news formats are mixed with entertainment formats (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Brants, 1998; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). In practice, this means the newsman himself now plays a dominant role, certainly on television, and the politician often plays a secondary role. What politicians say is often reduced to a short sound bite (Hallin, 1992; Jones, 1995; Patterson, 1996; Van der Geer, 2000). The media decide which politician gets a stage. In general, only extremely popular or influential politicians are given an opportunity to present their demands to the program-makers (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Politicians therefore complain that journalists are too powerful and can make or break them (Van Aelst, Brants, et al., 2008).

This has led to the fifth aspect: the media are less willing to allow politicians to determine the political and media agenda. This division of labor was traditionally something the media took for granted, but they now want to play an active and important political role themselves (Semetko, et al., 1991). Not because they have their own political aims, but because they want to score with disclosures and scoops that are copied by other media and then reach the political agenda. In line with this argument, politicians also complain that journalists determine the political agenda (Van Aelst, Brants, et al., 2008). However, research has revealed that this ambition to play an active political role has only partially been achieved in the Netherlands. The influence of politicians on media coverage is still considerably greater than the influence the media exert on politicians (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003). The same patterns are found in some other European countries (for the UK see Brandenburg, 2002; for France see Kuhn, 2005; for the Belgium see Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers, 2008).

The sixth and final aspect of political news coverage dominated by media logic is that it is part and parcel of a transformation of the system of representative democracy in Western Europe. The social developments described before both altered the media market and the

relation between citizens and politics. The traditional mass party that emerged around the societal cleavages in nineteenth-century society continued to dominate political life throughout a large part of the twentieth century. In the *party democracy* of this period, political parties ruled the public debate, set the agenda, and had a great deal of authority. Manin (1997) has argued this party democracy is in decline and the old democratic systems are now in a transitional stage to an *audience democracy* where parties develop into an instrument in the hands of a political leader.

In the Netherlands and other continental Western European countries, there is a definite dominance of media logic, but it is a moderate variant that can be classified as a northwest European media model as outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2004). An important component of this model is the strong position of an independent public broadcasting organization. In a short comparative survey, Iyengar and McGrady (2007) show that in countries with a strong public broadcasting organization, political news coverage is still at a considerably higher quantitative level than in more commercial media systems that (virtually) only have private broadcasting organizations, such as the United States. Although the focus of political news has changed and the attention devoted to the political game and the accompanying strategic news has increased in the Netherlands, the newspapers, the *NOS-Journaal*, *RTL-Nieuws* and the current affairs programs still provide the audience with a great deal of relevant political information (Brants & Van Praag, 1995; De Vreese, 2008; Esser, et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis & Scholten, 2007).

Due to the changes summarized as the development from political logic to media logic, politicians and their actions are presented to citizens in a different way than before. Media that are more than before guided by their own interests are inclined to regard their audiences as consumers and to try to meet their consumers' demand in terms of content and format – or at least perceived demand. This has consequences for the way the news is covered and the most remarkable consequence may be that news coverage is more strategic in nature now, partly at the expense of substantive news.

As argued, when political actors and their actions are presented in a more strategic way, this may affect the way citizens think about these political actors and politics in general and in this way it may invoke political cynicism and decrease turnout. Before elaborating on this study, we first pay attention to the changes in citizens' attitudes and behavior in the Netherlands and in a broader context. To what extent has political cynicism grown and to what extent has voter behavior changed in an unfavorable way?

Citizens: Grown Political Cynicism and Changed Voter Behavior

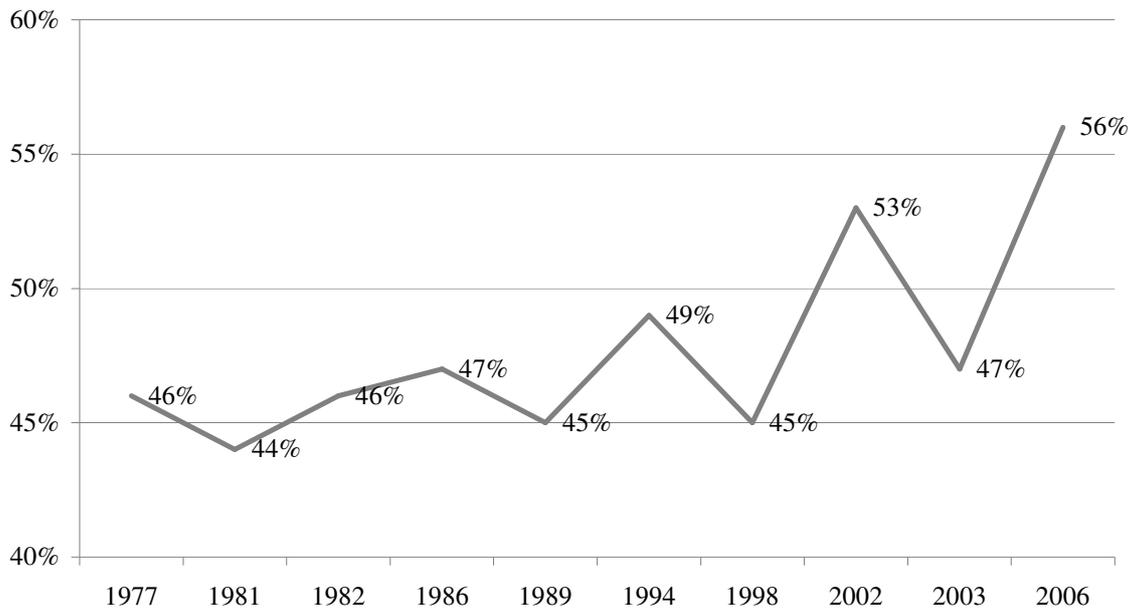
Citizens have changed fundamentally in the past decades. The importance of class and religious cleavages for voter behavior has decreased and citizens more consciously decide which party to vote for (Rose & McAllister, 1986). This has led to an increase of electoral volatility, because citizens more often switch between parties. Additionally, in some countries turnout has gone down. At the same time, citizens have become more cynical towards political actors. In this section, we give an overview of the developments and if necessary place them in perspective. Also, we compare younger citizens (18-25 year-olds) with non-young ones.

Political cynicism. In the following chapters, we pay more attention to our definition of political cynicism. For now, we suffice to say that we regard political cynicism as strong distrust towards political actors or the opposite of political trust. Several authors have shown that political cynicism and distrust have grown in many modern democracies, but there are exceptions (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007; Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Cynicism has grown in the Netherlands as well, but the pattern differs from other countries. Before the turn of the millennium cynicism increased in most Western democracies, while trust remained high in the Netherlands. After the turn of the millennium this changed, when political cynicism increased in the Netherlands (Bovens & Wille, 2008).

Since 1977, political cynicism is measured in the Netherlands in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES), which includes a three item scale.² Figure 0.2 displays the level of political cynicism in the past three decades. In the 1980s, 45 percent of Dutch citizens could be regarded as politically cynical. A sudden rise was visible in 1994 and in that year the level of political cynicism started to rise; the highest level was 56 percent in 2006. Additionally, political cynicism has not only increased, but the differences between subsequent years have grown as well. In other words: political cynicism has also become more volatile. Among younger citizens 50 percent can be counted as cynical, which is a significant difference with non-young citizens, though small (significant difference 18-25 year-olds with others, $p < .01$).

² The three items of the DPES political cynicism scale are: (1) politicians promise more than they can deliver, (2) ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than abilities to become MP. Respondents can score between 0 and 3 on the scale (for 2006, $M = 1.71$, $SD = .87$). Respondents who agree on two or more of the statements are counted as cynical.

Figure 0.2: Level of Political Cynicism



Note. Source: CBS 1997; DPES (1977 – 2006). These data are not weighted.

Tested with Chi Square test. Significantly deviant from 1977 are 1994, 2002 and 2006 (at 0.01 level).

Uncertainty and Volatility. Voter behavior has become less stable in many democracies in the past 50 years. Gallagher, Laver, & Mair (2005) showed that the average electoral volatility³ of sixteen European democracies was 8 percent in the 1950s and has grown to 12 percent in the early 2000s (see also Drummond, 2006; Pellikaan, De Lange, & Van der Meer, 2007; Pellikaan, Van der Meer, & De Lange, 2003). The fact that electoral volatility has grown in the Netherlands is not remarkable, since electoral volatility has increased in many countries. The scope of the growth is striking however: while the Netherlands used to be one of the steadiest countries in the early postwar period, it became the most volatile of all. In the top ten of the *most volatile elections* from 1950 to 2006, the Netherlands is the only country with three recent elections (1994, 2002 and 2006). The Dutch level of electoral volatility was around 5 percent in the 1950s, rose to about 10 percent in the 1960s and afterwards fluctuated around this level. In 1994 there was an unprecedented political upheaval of electoral volatility and the two largest parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) lost between a quarter and a third of their followers. Electoral volatility rose to 22 percent in 1994 and stayed around this level, with a striking peak at 31 percent in 2002 (Mair, 2008).

³ Electoral volatility is measured on the aggregate level and reflects the percentage of seats that changed party.

VERSATILE CITIZENS

Electoral volatility is measured on the aggregate level and shows net effects. In this dissertation, we zoom into the individual level, for which we distinguish between *changing and hesitating*. A changing voter, on the one hand, is someone who does not vote for the same party in two successive elections, we refer to this phenomenon as volatility.⁴ *Voter volatility* reflects the share of citizens not choosing the same party in two successive elections. A hesitating voter, on the other hand, is someone who hesitates which party to vote for and who does not make a party choice until shortly before the elections. We refer to this phenomenon as *voter uncertainty*, which reflects the share of citizens not making a party choice long before the elections or hesitating which party to vote for or contemplating not to vote at all (see also Van der Kolk, 2000; Van der Kolk, Aarts, & Rosema, 2007).

Table 0.1 shows voter uncertainty and volatility in the Netherlands in the past decades. With regard to individual voter volatility, more citizens than before change their party choice between two successive elections, or switch between voting and nonvoting. In 1981, 27 percent of the citizens could be regarded as changing voters, while after 1994 this had grown to 34 percent in 2006.

Voter uncertainty is generally measured in two ways: the percentage of voters which considered to vote for another party than the one they ultimately voted for (hesitators) and the percentage of voters which made its party choice just before the elections were held (late deciders). In 1986, 22 percent of the Dutch voters considered voting for another party than the one they ultimately voted for. Since 1994 this has grown, up to 46 percent during the last elections in 2006. Among younger voters this percentage is higher: 57 percent (significant difference 18-25 year-olds with others, $p < .001$). Citizens do not only hesitate *more* about which party to vote for, but they hesitate also *longer*. In 1981, 28 percent of the Dutch voters decided in the last days or weeks before the elections were held which party they want to vote for, while 72 percent decided earlier.⁵ In 2006 half of the Dutch voters (53 percent) decided in the days or weeks before the elections were held. This was much higher among younger voters: 71 percent (significant difference 18-25 year-olds with others, $p < .001$). In other words: younger citizens hesitated more and longer than non-young ones.

⁴ This concerns voters who have voted for another party than during the previous election, but also voters who did not vote during the previous election and who did vote during the present election and the other way around.

⁵ In DPES the question when the respondent decided which party to vote for initially had four answering categories: "last days", "last weeks", "a few months before" and "longer beforehand". From 1998 on an extra category was added: "on election day". Our category last days or weeks before the elections included "last days", "last weeks" and from 1998 on also "on election day".

Table 0.1: Individual Level Voter Volatility and Uncertainty

	1981	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002	2003	2006
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Voter volatility¹									
• changing voters	27	27	28	26	34**	34**	39**	34**	34**
Voter uncertainty²									
• considered vote for other party	-	-	22	25	32**	31**	37**	36**	46**
• decided in last days or weeks	28	22**	22**	29	43**	40**	46**	40**	53**
N=	1488	1327	1256	1385	1389	1645	1517	2454	2178

Note. 1: Source: Van der Kolk, Aarts & Rosema 2007.

2: Source: DPES 1981 – 2006. Scheme based on Van der Kolk (2000) and completed. Chi Square test used.

Changing voters: significantly deviant from 1981 at (**) 0.01 level or at (*) 0.05 level.

Considered vote for other party: significantly deviant from 1986 at (**) 0.01 level or at (*) 0.05 level.

Decided in last days or weeks: significantly deviant from 1981 at (**) 0.01 level or at (*) 0.05 level.

Both uncertainty and volatility have risen in the Netherlands since 1994, but we have to put these data into perspective. Most citizens hesitate and change between ideologically comparable parties; only a small minority of the electorate switches between the left and the right block. A comparison of party choice in 2003 and 2006 in the DPES 2006 data⁶ reveals that the majority of the electorate either voted for the same party in these two successive elections (46 percent), or changed between parties within one block (20 percent).⁷ The rest of the electorate changed between the left and the right block (8 percent) or did not vote in one or both of these elections (25 percent).⁸ In summary, the growth of volatility and uncertainty does not mean that voters have no direction and roam aimlessly from left to right, but they do often have their doubts and switch from one party to another similar one (Adriaansen, Van der Brug, & Van Spanje, 2005). The fact that party loyalty has declined is not only visible in electoral behavior, but also in decreasing membership figures of political parties (Voerman & Van Schuur, 2009).

⁶ For this overview these data are weighted by turnout rates and vote choice, in order to get an exact picture.

⁷ The ‘left block’ consists of PvdA, SP, GroenLinks, D66, Partij voor de Dieren, while the ‘right block’ consists of CDA, VVD, Partij voor de Vrijheid, ChristenUnie, SGP.

⁸ Turnout was 79.9 percent in 2003 and 80.3 percent in 2006. Our data – for this analysis weighted by turnout rates and vote choice – showed that the 25.9 percent of the electorate that did not vote during one or two of these elections consisted of stable non-voters (13.9 percent), those who only voted in 2003 (5.8 percent) and those who only voted in 2006 (6.2 percent).

Turnout. With regard to turnout, there is no clear trend in modern democracies. Dalton (2002) compared 21 democracies and showed that while turnout was on average 82 percent in the 1950s and 1960s, it has declined to 81 percent in the 1970s, 79 percent in the 1980s and 76 percent in the 1990s. Nevertheless, differences between countries are large – in the 1990s turnout ranged from 44 percent in Switzerland to 94 percent in Australia – which can only partly be explained by the fact that voting is compulsory in some countries.

In the Netherlands, voting was compulsory until the late 1960s. In these days, turnout was 95 percent during parliamentary elections. After this period, turnout fluctuated between 73 percent and 88 percent, as is visible in Table 0.2. When voting became voluntary turnout dropped to 84 percent in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s it decreased to 76 percent, but in the early 2000s it increased to 80 percent. There is no clear upward or downward trend in turnout during parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. We have to add that while turnout is high during first order parliamentary elections, turnout is lower during second order local, provincial and European elections⁹ and that in these second order elections turnout has declined in the past decades.

Table 0.2: Actual and Intended Turnout

	1971	1972	1977	1981	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002	2003	2006	2010
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Actual turnout¹													
• on Election Day	79	84	88	87	81	86	80	79	73	79	80	80	75
Turnout intention²													
• intends to vote			87	85		86	84	80**	76**	88		79**	
• intends not to vote			5	6		9	7	9	14	6		9	
• don't know yet			7	9		6	8	11	10	5		12	
N=			1856	2305		1256	1385	1389	1645	1517		2178	

Note. 1: Source: Central Statistical Office of the Netherlands (CBS), online available at <http://statline.cbs.nl>. The elections of 1971 were the first national elections after the abolishment of compulsory voting.

2: Source: DPES 1977 – 2006. Data weighted by actual intention, because non-voters are underrepresented in election studies. Not measured in 1982 and 2003. Tested with Chi Square test. Significantly deviant from 1977 at (**) 0.01 level or at (*) 0.05 level, tests performed on non-weighted data.

Additionally, Table 0.2 shows citizens' turnout intention, which fluctuate between 76 and 88 percent. Although there is no clear trend, there were peaks during exciting elections.

⁹ Turnout was 46 percent during 2007 provincial elections, 37 percent during the 2009 elections for European Parliament and 56 percent during the 2010 local elections.

This suggests that most citizens tend to vote, although this tendency can be weakened or strengthened by circumstances, which can be related to the election campaign, but also to eventualities like the weather or someone's personal agenda. Voting is not a given anymore and turnout rates fluctuate in a wave-like motion, but the underlying tendency to vote has not changed. However, among younger citizens, turnout intention is much lower than among non-young ones: 66 percent, while the average was 85 percent (significant difference 18-25 year-olds with others, $p < .001$). This difference was due to the fact young ones very often said they did not know yet (26 percent, significant difference 18-25 year-olds with others, $p < .001$). Consequently, their actual turnout as measured in DPES was 72 percent, which is higher than their intention. For this group, the underlying tendency to vote is lower, voting is not a given, but neither is abstention.

In summary, we can say that citizens have changed fundamentally, both in the Netherlands and abroad. In the past decades, citizens have become more politically cynical and they hesitate and switch more during elections, but most of them still intend to vote. Although the speed and scope of the developments in the last decades in the Netherlands are remarkable, a pattern of increasing cynicism, volatility and uncertainty is visible in most modern democracies. In the 1990s and 2000s citizens became more cynical and their voter behavior more uncertain and volatile and at the same time the media adopted a more consumer centric attitude and developed different style of reporting. The question arises to what extent these parallel developments are related. In this dissertation we therefore aim to study to what extent political attitudes and behavior are affected by media reporting.

This Dissertation

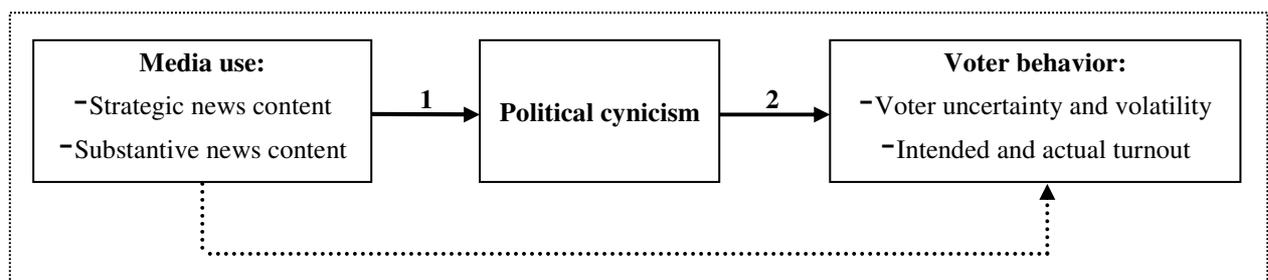
Research Questions

Previous research has suggested that in particular information which frames politics as a strategic game can invoke political cynicism and decrease turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). If strategic news content induces cynicism and reduces turnout, other sorts of news content may reduce it. For this reason, we study not only the possible *unfavorable* effect of exposure to strategic news on political cynicism and voter behavior, but also the possible *favorable* effect of exposure to substantive news on political cynicism and voter behavior. In addition, we add another aspect of voter behavior most media effects studies neglect: voter uncertainty and volatility.

Changes in political cynicism and voter behavior also occurred simultaneously, and the question arises whether there is a relationship between these two developments as well. Since the level of political cynicism has risen in the past decades, citizens have more doubts about the motives and competences of political actors and the political process as a whole. Citizens who have these doubts can be expected to have more difficulty in deciding for which party to vote and to more easily switch to another party. In this way political cynicism may lead to voter uncertainty. Citizens who have doubts about the motives and competences of political actors may also decide not to vote at all. Although the effect of political cynicism on vote choice, turnout and mobilization has been studied in the past (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Van der Brug, 2004), no attention has been paid to the effect on voter uncertainty and volatility.

Figure 0.3 summarizes the main research questions of this dissertation: (1) *To what extent do strategic and substantive news content affect the level of political cynicism*, and (2) *to what extent does political cynicism affect voter behavior?* Additionally, we look at the direct effect of strategic and substantive news content on voter behavior. We do not aim to conduct a meditational analysis. In the following we first give a short overview of the studies used to answer these research questions, and afterwards give a more detailed explanation of the research design.

Figure 0.3: Research Model



Research Design

This dissertation includes four chapters. Before presenting the studies designed to answer our research questions, we pay attention to the question what political cynicism is in Chapter 1. The growth of cynicism and its possible causes and consequences have been discussed extensively. Remarkably, no one has systematically studied what political cynicism or distrust actually means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these attitudes. To fill

this gap, we first conducted a review of the political trust and cynicism literature. We apply open-ended and closed-ended questions to study what trust or distrust/cynicism actually means for citizens and how the concept should be defined.

Chapter 2 serves to answer our first research question concerning the effects of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism. We combine content analysis data with panel survey data to answer this question. Since we expect younger citizens to be more susceptible to information from the media to which they are exposed, we compare the effects for younger citizens (18–34 year-olds) and non-young citizens.

In Chapter 3 we use panel survey data to answer our second research question concerning the effect of political cynicism on voter behavior. Discontented citizens can give voice to their grievances in two ways: either by choosing another party or by not voting at all. For this reason we look at the effects of political cynicism on uncertainty and volatility on the one hand on turnout on the other hand. With regard to uncertainty and volatility we determine whether citizens hesitate and change between ideologically different parties and thus float between the left and the right end of the political spectrum – or between ideologically similar parties.

In Chapter 4 we use two survey experiments to further explore the first research question: the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism. Additionally, we study the effects of news content on turnout intention and uncertainty. In Chapter 2 we find that effects are stronger for younger citizens and for this reason we focus on this group in Chapter 4. Additionally, we aim to get a deeper understanding of the differences among young citizens and study the moderating effects of political knowledge.

The final chapter summarizes the key findings of the four chapters, discusses their implications and reflects relevant shortcomings.

To answer our research questions, we employ a multi-methodological research design and use several different data sources. We combine experiments, a content analysis of news media and a multi-wave panel survey. Our data are collected during a national as well as a local election campaign in the Netherlands.

A multi-methodological research design. We used different methods to answer our research questions. For our second question, about the relationship between political cynicism and voter behavior, we used a panel survey. The first research question about the effects of strategic and substantive news content could either be answered in an experimental setting or by combining a content analysis of news media with a panel survey. In an *experimental design*, participants are exposed to strategic and substantive news content and afterwards their

attitudes and behavior are measured. In a *content analysis and panel survey design*, the content analysis serves to measure the level of strategic and substantive news content in different media outlets. In the survey, respondents are asked how often they use the outlets. By connecting these data, one can estimate to what extent participants in the survey are exposed to strategic and substantive news and connect these exposure levels to their attitudes and behavior.

Both methods have important advantages as well as disadvantages. In an experimental design, a direct chain of causality is established, because of the controlled environment (Kinder, 2007). By randomly assigning participants to different versions of the stimulus material, one can fully rule out other influences than the media stimuli and it therefore leads to higher internal validity. The researcher can design the stimulus material, include specific elements and exclude other elements and ensure precise measurement in this way (Lecheler, 2010; McDermott, 2002), while in a content analysis and survey design the researcher is dependent on what journalists produce in a specific period. The latter is not only a disadvantage; the fact that the data are measured in a real world setting leads to a higher external validity, whereas experiments are of limited generalizability. Additionally, in an experiment, participants are “forced” to use specific information, but in the real world some people do use this information and others do not. In other words, experiments obliterate the distinction between the supply and consumption of information, which the combination of a content analysis and a survey take this into consideration (Kinder, 2007). Also, the latter can be used to study the effects of repeated exposure to specific content in different media outlets during a longer time period (Eveland & Morey, 2010).

Experiments are more often used in media effects studies that relate content to political attitudes and behavior (Lecheler, 2010), although in the last decade the combination of a content analysis and a survey is used more and more (e.g. Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006b; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis & Fan, 1999; Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006). Since both methods have advantages as well as disadvantages, and the supplementary use of these methods leads to a more balanced assessment of media effects (Kinder, 2007), we chose a multi-methodological research design combining both. In Chapter 2 we report on the combination of a content analysis and a survey to study the effect of news content on political cynicism and in Chapter 4 we report on an experiment to study the effect of news content on political cynicism as well as voter behavior.

Content analysis of campaign news. Our quantitative media content analysis data are collected within the framework of the 2006 ASCoR election study. We analyzed the Dutch media in the eight weeks prior to the elections (between September 27 and November 22, 2006). We included all television news programs (NOS Journaal, RTL Nieuws, Hart van Nederland), the major current affairs programs (Een Vandaag, Nova/Nederland Kiest), all major national newspapers (Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf, Trouw, de Volkskrant) and the free newspapers available at that time (Metro, Sp!ts). The content analysis was conducted by eleven native Dutch speakers. The unit of analysis was the individual news story.

For the selection of regular newspapers, we used the online newspaper database LexisNexis (2006), and searched a wide variety of keywords related to the election campaign. Free newspapers were selected by hand from their own websites. We took a systematic sample¹⁰ of the articles found in each newspaper, and coded 41 percent of the articles in our target population. For the television news and current affairs programs, we analyzed all programs that were broadcast in the research period.

We recognize that the use of the internet is growing, but television and newspapers are still more often used for gathering political information. Our data consider the year 2006. Data of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) show that in 2006 (the year we study), 70 percent watched one of the two main national news programs (almost) daily, 56 percent read a regular or free newspaper almost daily and only 8 percent visited internet sites with political information. Recently, Trilling & Schoenbach (2010) have shown that for getting an overview about what is going on in the world, 67 percent uses media at least 7 times a week. Only 11 percent uses the internet at least 7 times a week for the same purpose. They have also shown that almost all citizens who use online news sources for gathering information use offline sources as well, while the opposite is not true. Although the internet is used by a specific segment of the electorate, it is not yet as popular as television and newspapers.

Panel survey data. The survey data set we used was collected by market research company TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and news paper *De Volkskrant*, within the framework of the 2006 ASCoR election study. These data were

¹⁰ We ordered the newspaper articles chronologically and by outlet. We decided to separate the articles into two periods: (1) the actual campaign phase – which was the four weeks before the elections – and (2) the four weeks prior to the actual campaign phase. Since the actual campaign phase is the most important phase we wanted to place larger weight on this period. We randomly selected articles in both phases. We coded 49 percent ($n = 1735$) of the articles in the actual campaign phase and 17 percent ($n = 508$) of the remaining articles.

gathered during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections. The data had a panel component, with four time points in 2006: February (t0), September (t1), and in November just before (t2) and just after Election Day (t3). The last wave (t3) only included questions about voter behavior. The other waves included questions concerning opinions about political issues and political actors, political attitudes, political behavior and demographic characteristics of the respondents. We also included an extensive battery of news media use questions, which enabled us to connect our content analysis to the survey data. Measurement t1 was around September 27, the start of the content analysis. In Chapter 2 we explain how we connected the content analysis data to the panel survey data.

TNS NIPO used a computer assisted self-interviewing method (CASI), which means that the selected respondents ($n = 1700$) received an email inviting them to participate and fill in the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. In this way we could minimize socially desirable answers. At t0, the response rate was 66 percent ($n = 1115$). At t1, the recontact rate was 78 percent ($n = 870$), at t2 it was 81 percent ($n = 703$) and at t3 it was 91 percent ($n = 638$). Our data were by and large representative of the Dutch population; in Chapter 2 and 3 we show that our respondent data mirrored census data.

Experimental data. For the experiments we used a post-test only, within-subjects design, in which participants are randomly assigned to two or more conditions (including a control group) and differences between participants in the conditions are measured ($n = 451$, 18–25 year-olds). Alternatively, one can use a pre-test and post-test within-subjects experimental design, which measures to what extent participants' attitudes and behavior have changed after exposure to specific content. The risk of this method is that in the post-test participants remember the questions from the pre-test and that specific participants remember more than others, dependent on for example their level of political interest or their education. We did not aim to determine within-subject change before and after exposure, but we aimed to focus on differences between those who are exposed and those who are not, and therefore chose a between-subjects design.

Recently, some scholars have argued that the importance of the topic in the stimulus material can affect the size of framing effects (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Lecheler, De Vreese, & Slothuus, 2009). Although it is not fully clear how the issue affects the framing effects, it is clear that the issue can moderate the effect and we for this reason we chose to conduct two survey experiments, in which only the policy issue in the stimulus material differed. We conducted these experiments in the period before the local elections in March

2010 in Amsterdam. Our data were collected by the department for research and statistics of the City of Amsterdam, in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam.

Additional data. In Chapter 1 we study what political cynicism means for citizens. For this study, we used two datasets collected in May 2009 (study 1 $n = 436$, study 2 $n = 426$) by market research company Veldkamp, commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). These datasets included open-ended and closed-ended questions, which we used to study what distrust or cynicism means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes.

In Summary

We have seen that citizens have changed fundamentally: they have become more politically cynical and they hesitate and switch more during elections, while they still intend to vote. At the same time, there have been large changes in the way media work, how they interact with political actors and their relationship with citizens. Media have to survive in a fragmented and competitive media market and this affects the way they work. Media try to present the news in an attractive way and this has consequences for the way political actors and events are covered in the news. Most remarkably, news content has become more focused on strategic aspects, partly at the expense of substantive news.

When political actors and their actions are presented in a strategic way, this may affect the way citizens think about them and how they vote. Therefore, we study both the *unfavorable* effects of strategic news content on cynicism and voter behavior and the *favorable* effects of substantive news content. To study these effects of news content on cynicism and the effects of cynicism on voter behavior, we employ a multi-methodological research design consisting of an experiment, a content analysis and a panel survey. This combination of methods leads to a confirmation of extant research, but also to surprising results. Before elaborating on these results, in the next chapter we first present a study on the elements of political cynicism: which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes towards political actors?

Chapter 1

**DEFINING POLITICAL TRUST AND CYNICISM:
DISSECTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL ACTORS**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,
co-authored by Will Tiemeijer.*

Abstract

Common wisdom and scholarly literature emphasize the risks of growing political distrust and cynicism. We study what trust or distrust/cynicism actually means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our scrutiny of the political trust and cynicism literature reveals two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. We test the validity and comprehensiveness of these dimensions using two surveys. The first study ($n = 436$) builds on closed-ended questions and confirmed that both reliability and competence are important dimensions. The second study ($n = 426$) uses open-ended questions and showed no important additional dimensions. In both studies we found that reliability and competence consist of more elements than most scholars have suggested and that reasons for distrust are not the same as reasons for trust. Therefore we argue that all those elements should be included in measurement instruments for attitudes towards political actors.

Introduction

The rise of negative attitudes towards political actors (politicians and political parties) is a widely debated phenomenon. Political cynicism and distrust are rising in a lot of modern democracies: citizens are less trustful towards political actors than they were a few decades ago (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007; Nye, et al., 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). The growth of negative attitudes, and its possible causes and consequences, have been discussed extensively. The Netherlands are an odd case when it comes to trust. While trust declined in most western democracies, trust remained high in the Netherlands. This rapidly changed at the turn of the millennium, when trust decreased sharply (Bovens & Wille, 2009). Recently, two interesting articles were published about the possible causes of this rapid change. Bovens & Wille (2008) showed that political and economic contingencies are the most important short-term causes, while Hendriks (2009) studied the impact of more structural factors which are concealed behind these short-term factors. Although these articles yielded highly relevant insights, we think we should first find an answer to a more fundamental question: what does trust or distrust actually mean for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes towards political actors?

In definitions of political trust and cynicism two dimensions are prevalent (Dekker, Meijerink, & Schyns, 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007). The first dimension is related to political actors' reliability: are they honest? The second dimension is related to political actors' competence: are they skillful? In this chapter we study the dimensions of attitudes towards political actors in depth, by reporting on two survey studies measuring attitudes towards government. First, we use closed-ended questions to test the validity of the two dimensions *reliability* and *competence*. Second, we analyze open-ended questions to examine whether there are other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses open-ended questions to dissect attitudes towards political actors and that questions the validity and comprehensiveness of reliability and competence as dimensions of these attitudes.

Trust and Cynicism: Attitudes Towards Political Actors

Different concepts are developed to measure attitudes towards political actors. Political cynicism and political (dis)trust are frequently measured attitudes and often the concepts are used interchangeably. The ninth edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary described trust as a firm belief in the reliability or truth or strength of a person. Cynicism is described as a nickname for a cynic: a person that has little faith in human sincerity or integrity. We

think that the absence of a firm belief in reliability or truth can be regarded as the same as little faith in sincerity. Linguistically trust and cynicism can thus be seen as opposites.

In the literature, political cynicism is often regarded as the negative end of political trust. Eisinger (2000: 55-56) for example made a comprehensive inventory of definitions of cynicism and concluded that definitions of political cynicism: "...collectively denote that cynicism is more than mild distrust. Cynicism entails intense, antagonistic distrust or contempt for humanity. A cynic has a sense of the political; she is not politically indifferent, but rather keenly aware of her politics and her political environment by self-consciously distancing herself from it". Eisinger (2000) accordingly described cynicism as *harsh distrust*, in line with Miller (1974a) who described a dimension of trust which runs from high trust to political cynicism. In this vein, Krouwel and Abts (2006; 2007) developed a more comprehensive scale of the degree of negativity of political attitudes, ranging from trust, scepticism, distrust and cynicism to alienation.

Several other authors explicitly regarded political cynicism as the opposite of political trust as well (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dalton, 2002; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber & Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008), most of them referring to Miller. In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes towards political actors. We are nevertheless aware that trust and cynicism can be defined in a variety of other ways. However, we are primarily interested in which dimensions underlie attitudes towards political actors, instead of the possible conceptual differences between trust and cynicism.¹¹

Political attitudes have many possible objects. Easton (1965; 1975) made a study of the objects of political support, which also applies to other attitudes. He made a distinction between three levels, later refined by Dalton (1999; 2004), based on the idea that positive or negative attitudes can be directed towards different objects: (1) the political community in general, (2a) regime principles which are the democratic principles, (2b) regime norms and procedures which include system performance and (2c) regime institutions which are parliaments and government and (3) the political authorities which consist of the political actors representing these institutions. In general, in developed democracies, support for the political community and the regime principles, procedures and institutions are high; even the most cynical citizen is more or less supportive (Dalton, 1999, 2004). The recent rise in cynicism

¹¹ We acknowledge that some studies suggest that trust and cynicism are not opposites, but for the argument put forward in this article this additional distinction is of little relevance.

and distrust in many countries seems to apply to the level of the authorities. Although we do not argue that negative attitudes cannot be directed to other levels, this study therefore focuses on the authorities, which are the political actors that represent the institutions.

Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Political Actors

We use the political cynicism and trust literature to make a first overview of the possible dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. Although not all authors studying trust and cynicism explicitly defined the concepts, we can trace back their implicit theoretical premises by studying the measurement instruments they chose. In the following, we summarize and order the literature. Most scholars who defined cynicism or trust mentioned that these attitudes had to do with (aspects of) political actors' reliability. Many authors also referred to (aspects of) political actors' competence. Some authors referred to both reliability and competence (Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007). However, definitions were operationalized in a variety of ways, which we discuss in this section and summarize in Table 1.1.

Elements related to reliability. Almost all scholars who have studied political cynicism and trust referred to attitudes towards political actors' reliability, but they referred to many different elements, which we summarize in three elements. A first element of reliability that appears in the literature is *honesty*. Political actors have to be honest (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Eisinger, 2000; Ulbig, 2002) and fair (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Owen & Dennis, 2001; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), they have to be sincere and trustworthy, but are blamed to be crooked (Aberbach, 1969; Miller, 1974a; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and manipulative (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Some authors added corruption as a specific element of integrity (Bennett, 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). Also, citizens expect political actors to be open and clear (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), while they think that too many political decisions are made in secret (Listhaug, 1995).

A second element of political actors' reliability is the extent to which they keep their *promises*. The idea is that they consciously promise more than they can deliver (Listhaug, 1995; Van der Brug, 2003). Political actors are not able to do what they promise, because they have to make compromises and this may result in undesirable commitments (Agger, et al., 1961). In election times they promise the world, while they know that after the elections they cannot fulfil these promises, especially in consensus democracies, where government decisions are based on compromises between the different parties in government.

Table 1.1: Literature Summary: the Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Political Actors

Category	Good and bad qualities
reliability - honesty	honest, fair, trustworthy, sincere (good), crooked, manipulative (bad) corrupt (bad) politics open and clear (good), politics to closed and secret (bad)
reliability - promises	promise more than they can deliver, too much (bad)
reliability - motives	motivations and ethics, do what is best for the country (good) represent the public interest (good) self-interested and look after their own interest (bad) subcategory: too concerned with public opinion and getting re-elected subcategory: money is primary motivation represent special interests, the elite or a few big interests (bad) favoritism (bad)
reliability - responsiveness	listen to the public, responsive (good), not interested in opinions (bad) reference to people like themselves, the ordinary citizen (good)
competence - general	are competent, smart, do the right things (good)
competence - taking charge	decisiveness, effective (good) efficient (good), wasting tax monies (bad)
competence - awareness	are aware of problems (good) politicians are precise (good) or superficial when dealing with problems (bad) politicians give sufficient information for citizens to form an opinion (good)

A third element is political actors' *motives*. Some authors referred to political actors' motivations (Eisinger, 2000; Krouwel & Abts, 2006) and ethical norms (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998); political actors should do what is best for the country (De Vreese, 2005). Many scholars focused on the question in whose interest political actors act. The main question is whether political actors act in the public interest and for the benefit of all the people (Bennett, et al., 1999; Miller, 1974a). Political actors are blamed to be self-interested, self-serving and look after personal interests (Bennett, 1997; Eisinger, 2000; Listhaug, 1995; Miller, 1974a; Van der Brug, 2003). More specifically they are blamed to be primarily motivated by money (Agger, et al., 1961) or to be too concerned with public opinion and getting re-elected (Agger, et al., 1961; De Vreese, 2004). Also, political actors are blamed to serve special interests, the elite or a few big interests (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Agger, et al., 1961; Bennett, 1997; Bennett, et al., 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974a). Related to this is perceived favoritism, the suspicion that political actors are in position because of their friends (Listhaug, 1995; Van der Brug, 2003).

A fourth element of political actors' reliability is their *responsiveness*. Although this is related to the concept of external political efficacy, some scholars included it in their definitions and measurement instruments of political trust and cynicism. Scholars mentioned that people expect their voices to be heard (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Ulbig, 2002) and that they want political actors to be responsive to their needs, concerns, values, interests and demands (Owen & Dennis, 2001; Van Wessel, 2009). On the contrary, political actors are accused to be mainly interested in votes instead of opinions (Listhaug, 1995). Also, a reference to ordinary people is often made: political actors are blamed to be unresponsive to ordinary people (Listhaug, 1995; Van Wessel, 2009) and not to care about the opinions of ordinary people (Bennett, 1997).

Elements related to competence. Although reliability was most referred to in the political cynicism and trust literature, many authors included political actors' *competence* as well. We distinguish three elements in the literature. First, authors often referred to *general elements of competence*: political actors are expected to be competent (Dekker, et al., 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Schwartz, 1976; Ulbig, 2002), they have to be smart and they have to know what they are doing (Aberbach, 1969; Miller, 1974a) and they have to do the right things (Aberbach, 1969; Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Miller, 1974a; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001).

A second element of political actors' competence is that they have to *take charge* of important political problems. Political actors have to be decisive when dealing with problems (Owen & Dennis, 2001) and they have to be effective (Owen & Dennis, 2001; Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998). Also, political actors have to be efficient (Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998; Ulbig, 2002) and should not waste tax money (Aberbach, 1969; Bennett, et al., 1999; Listhaug, 1995; Miller, 1974a).

A third and final element of political actors' competence concerns their *problem awareness*: they have to know what is going on and to be aware of important problems (Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006). Political decisions have to be well considered and negative attitudes may have to do with the idea that political actors are too superficial when dealing with specific issues (De Vreese, 2004, 2005; Owen & Dennis, 2001). Also, since citizens have to monitor government, they need sufficient information to form an opinion and political actors should help them gathering the information about relevant political issues (De Vreese, 2005; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008).

Key Questions

The main question of this study is what the dimensions of positive and negative attitudes towards political actors are. Based on the literature, we hypothesize that (H1) the perception of political actors' reliability is a dimension of attitudes towards political actors and that (H2) the perception of political actors' competence is a dimension of attitudes towards political actors. Although our literature review revealed these two dimensions, they have not been studied systematically in one study. In addition, we assess whether other dimensions, not yet emphasized in the literature, are of relevance too. We therefore formulate an additional research question (RQ): are there other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, apart from perceptions of reliability and competence?

We use two surveys to address our expectations. In Study 1, we use closed-ended questions with several items to test whether reliability and competence are indeed important dimensions of positive and negative attitudes. In Study 2, we use open-ended questions to disentangle possible other dimensions. To our knowledge this study is the first to employ open-ended questions for studying attitudes towards political actors.

Study 1: Testing the Dimensions Reliability and Competence

Data and Method

To measure the dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, we needed an unbiased question. Asking respondents whether they are cynical about political actors is *not* sufficiently neutral given the negative connotations of cynicism. We therefore chose a question about degrees of trust in political actors.

We used a dataset which was collected in May 2009 by market research company Veldkamp, commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). From a panel of approximately 120.000 Dutch citizens, a sample of the population of 18 years and older was selected, 600 persons, and invited to participate in a questionnaire. Of these persons, 436 completed the questionnaire, which yields a response rate of 73 percent. Appendix B shows that our respondents mirror census data in terms of age, gender, and education. We used a Computer Assisted Self Interviewing method (CASI), which means that the selected respondents received an email to participate and they filled in the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. To tap attitudes towards political actors, respondents were asked whether they trust government. In a follow up question these respondents were asked to indicate why they trust (34 percent) or distrust (61 percent) govern-

ment. Respondents were asked for their arguments in closed-ended questions showing several possible answer categories. These answer categories include the four elements of reliability and the three elements of competence. The exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix C. Those who answered “don’t know” (5 percent) were not asked for reasons.

We note that our question addresses government. However, additional analyses of the data did not provide a different pattern in answers for individuals favoring incumbent parties. We compared respondents who voted in 2006 for the parties that formed the government after the 2006 elections, with respondents who voted for parties that were not in government after the elections. Although respondents who voted for a governmental party felt more often positive about government than those who voted for a party that was not in government, the reasons for positive and negative attitudes were not significantly different for these two groups.

Results

Table 1.2 shows the elements of positive as well as negative attitudes towards government.

Reliability. A large majority of the respondents mentioned an argument related to reliability, on the part of respondents with a positive attitude towards government (87 percent) as well on the part of respondents with a negative attitude (74 percent). The four elements related to reliability distinguished in the literature above are not equally often mentioned by respondents with positive and negative attitudes. *Honesty*, the first element, is not often mentioned, neither by respondents with a positive attitude (13 percent), nor by respondents with a negative attitude (10 percent). Second, *promises* were important for respondents with a negative attitude, half of them mentioned that government does not do what it promises (47 percent), while the opposite (government fulfils promises) was hardly mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude (1 percent). Third, *motives* were relevant for all respondents. A large majority of the respondents who expressed a positive attitude argued that what is best for the country (83 percent) prevails for government. Motives also lie behind negative attitudes; the idea that governmental actors only care about their own interests or the money they earn (combined 36 percent) was often mentioned by respondents with negative attitudes. Fourth, *responsiveness* to people like themselves, is not frequently mentioned, neither by respondents with a positive attitude (4 percent), nor by respondents with negative attitude (12 percent).

Table 1.2: Attitudes Towards Government, Closed-Ended Questions

Elements of positive attitudes	%	Elements of negative attitudes	%
Reliability	87	Reliability	74
honesty:		honesty:	
are honest and integer	13	are dishonest and not integer	10
promises:		promises:	
do what they promise	1	do not do what they promise	47
motives:		motives:	
try to do what is best for country	83	only care about own interests	31
-	-	only care about money they earn	10
responsiveness:	4	responsiveness:	
stand up for people like me		do not care about people like me	12
Competence	59	Competence	74
general:		general:	
are competent and able to do their job	45	are incompetent and unable to do job	14
taking charge:		taking charge:	
are decisive in taking care of problems	18	not decisive in taking care of problems	38
awareness:		awareness:	
know what is important for the people	10	don't know what is important for people	56
other reasons	2	other reasons	5
no reason	5	no reason	7
<i>average number of answers</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>average number of answers</i>	<i>2.2</i>

Note. Respondents could give 3 answers maximum. $n = 436$, positive $n = 147$, negative $n = 266$. Those who responded "don't know" ($n = 23$) were not asked for arguments.

Competence. Arguments related to competence are also mentioned by a majority of the respondents, by those with a positive attitude (59 percent) and even more by those with a negative attitude (74 percent). The first element of competence, *general competence*, was often mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude; they qualified government as competent and able to fulfil their tasks (45 percent), while respondents with a negative attitude not often mentioned this element (14 percent). Second, the idea that political actors have to *take charge*, was relevant for the respondents with a negative attitude, they mentioned the argument that government is not decisive in taking care of problems (38 percent), while the opposite was not often mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude (18 percent). Third, *problem awareness*, the perception that the government does not know what is important, was also more often mentioned by respondents with a negative attitude (56 percent), than the opposite was mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude.

Conclusions Study 1

The results of Study 1 suggest that both reliability and competence are important dimensions of negative as well as positive attitudes and the results provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Remarkably, respondents who expressed negative attitudes mentioned *more* arguments than those who were positive. Also, we found that elements of positive attitudes (trust) are not necessarily the same as elements of negative attitudes (distrust). In Study 2 we pay more attention to these differences.

Study 2: Testing for Other Dimensions

In our second study, we use open-ended questions to tap respondents' attitudes towards government. This study tests whether there are other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, apart from reliability and competence. This study also provides a second test of the validity of reliability and competence.

Data and Method

The dataset for this study was collected in May 2009 by market research company Veldkamp, commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). A sample of the population of 18 years and older was selected from the same panel as in Study 1 and the CASI method was used as well. 600 persons were invited to participate in a questionnaire. Of these persons, 426 completed the questionnaire, which yields a response rate of 71 percent. Appendix B shows that our respondents mirror census data in terms of age, gender, and education.

Respondents were asked whether they trust government and in a follow up question they were asked why they trust (35 percent) or distrust (57 percent) government. Those who answered "don't know" (8 percent) were not asked for reasons. Respondents were asked for their reasons in open-ended questions and could mention as many reasons as they wished. The exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix C. The data collection for Study 1 and 2 was highly comparable; the only difference is that the respondents in Study 1 were asked for arguments in a closed-ended question, while respondents in Study 2 were asked for arguments in an open-ended question.

Reasons for using open-ended questions. There are several advantages and disadvantages of open-ended questions, which are extensively summarized by Van Holsteyn (1994) and Swyngedouw (2001). Some advantages of open-ended questions compared to closed-ended questions apply specifically to this study. First, open-ended questions are useful

for exploring dimensions in reply behaviour, which is the aim of this study. Second, respondents can give replies from their own perspective. Academic scholars are usually politically interested and the way they talk about political actors may deviate strongly from the way “normal” citizens express their attitudes. Third, open-ended questions pose no limitations on reply alternatives: respondents can give as many answers as they wish. Fourth, open-ended questions limit the danger of socially desirable answers, especially when using a Computer Assisted Self Interviewing method (CASI), which we did.

Some disadvantages of open-ended questions that apply to the study of attitudes are that respondents give answers that are most accessible to them and that the answer may be dependent on verbal skills (Swyngedouw, 2001), although Geer (1988) has questioned this. In this study it is not relevant to know exactly how often reasons are mentioned, but to determine the existence of reasons. We prevented the disadvantage of greater interviewer effects (Shapiro, 1970) by using the CASI method.

The coding procedure. The answers to the open-ended questions were coded in two steps. We used the literature summary in Table 1.1 to make a first version of the coding scheme. This first version of the coding scheme was pretested (on 25 percent of all open answers) and adapted to allow every substantive answer given by respondents to be coded uniquely. The final version of the coding scheme is included in Appendix D and shows which categories are based on the literature and which are based on the pre-test. All categories are coded as dichotomous variables. All aspects of the answers respondents gave were coded.

The coding was carried out by two coders¹² who both coded all answers independent of each other. To test for inter-coder reliability we compared all answers given by both coders. We calculated mean pair-wise agreement and Cohen’s Kappa, which is a measure that controls for chance (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). The values for the mean pair-wise agreement range between 93 percent and 100 percent. The Cohen’s Kappa values range between .87 and 1.00. Overall, we find that the reliability of our measures was good.

Results

Table 1.3 displays the results of the coding. We first have to make a general observation. The respondents were asked about government, which can refer to the institution or to the authorities, which are the political actors that represent the institution. Respondents’ answers revealed that they clearly thought of the latter. Most of the respondents referred to

¹² The coders have at least a master’s degree in political sciences.

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politicians in government and / or to politicians in general, but respondents never referred to government as an institution.

Reliability. Arguments related to perceptions of political actors' reliability were mentioned by more than a third of the respondents with a positive attitude towards government (38 percent) and more than half of the respondents with a negative attitude (58 percent).

First, the element of governmental actors' *honesty* was mentioned, as an element of positive attitudes (8 percent) as well as negative attitudes (18 percent). More precisely, respondents with a positive attitude mentioned that actors are trustworthy and sincere (5 percent). Respondents with a negative attitude mentioned the opposite, that actors are dishonest, crooked and manipulative (12 percent), but also that there is too much quarrel or actors blaming each other (6 percent).

The second element, concerning promises, was often mentioned by respondents who expressed negative attitudes; they complained that politicians in government do not hold their *promises* (26 percent), while the opposite – that they do hold their promises – was not often mentioned to explain positive attitudes (3 percent).

Third, perceived *motives* are used to explain positive (31 percent) as well as negative attitudes (20 percent). An often mentioned argument for a positive attitude was the idea that governmental actors have good intentions and will do what is best for the country (25 percent) and that they represent the general interest (8 percent). On the contrary, those who express negative feelings stated that actors represent their own interest (12 percent) or special interests (7 percent), instead of the general interest (5 percent).

The fourth element, a lack of *responsiveness*, was an argument for a negative attitude for some respondents (11 percent), while responsiveness was hardly ever mentioned to explain a positive attitude (1 percent). Respondents with negative attitudes complained that political actors do not listen to the public and that their voice is not heard and had the idea that political actors are more interested in their vote than in their opinion (6 percent). Also, respondents claimed that political actors do not stand for the common man or people like themselves (7 percent). Like in Study 1, responsiveness was not a very important element, but well over ten percent of the respondents with negative attitudes mentioned it.

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Table 1.3: Attitudes Towards Government, Open-Ended Questions

Elements of positive attitudes	%	Elements of negative attitudes	%
RELIABILITY	38	RELIABILITY	58
reliability - honesty	8	reliability - honesty	18
honest, not manipulative	5	dishonest, crooked, twisters, manipulative	12
not corrupt	-	corrupt	0
politics open, no backroom politics	3	politics to closed, backroom politics	2
not too much quarrel, blaming each other	-	too much quarrel, blaming each other	6
reliability - promises	3	reliability - promises	26
do what they promise	3	do not do what they promise	26
reliability - motives	31	reliability - motives	20
good intentions, do what is best for country	25	bad intentions, do not what is best for country	0
represent general interest	8	do not represent general interest	5
do not represent their own interest	1	represent their own interest	12
with getting re-elected, own career	1	not with getting re-elected, own career	2
money is not primary motivation	-	money is primary motivation, pocketbook	4
do not represent special interests, elite	-	represent special interests, elite	7
no favoritism	-	favoritism	0
reliability - responsiveness	1	reliability - responsiveness	11
responsive to the public	1	unresponsive, mainly interested in votes	6
refer to people like them, common man	-	refer to people like them, common man	7
COMPETENCE	47	COMPETENCE	52
competence - general	31	competence - general	22
competent, government performs or is good	25	not competent, government performs or is bad	12
things look good for country, will work out	6	things look bad for country, it is going worse	10
competence - taking charge	15	competence - taking charge	36
decisiveness, effective	15	no decisiveness, put things off, not effective	29
efficient, using tax money efficiently	-	not efficient, wasting tax monies	7
competence - awareness	3	competence - awareness	9
aware of problems, what is important	-	not aware of problems, what is important	7
precise when dealing with problems	3	superficial when dealing with problems	1
sufficient information to form opinion	-	not sufficient information to form an opinion	1
POLICY AGREEMENT	14	POLICY AGREEMENT	22
respondent agrees with policy, ideology, political parties	14	respondent disagrees with policy, ideology, political parties	22
DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM	15	DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM	0
democratic elections or decision-making	15	not democratically chosen, decision-making	0
OTHER	15	OTHER	7
focused on the long term	-	focused on short term, instead of long term	4
stable	4	not stable	1
cannot satisfy all, do everything perfectly	7	-	-
politics is important, interested	-	politics is unimportant, not interested	0
negative motivation	4	positive motivation	0
<i>average number of answers</i>	1.6	<i>average number of answers</i>	2.0

Note. Respondents could give as many answers as they wished. $n = 426$, positive $n = 150$, negative $n = 241$. Those who responded “don’t know” ($n = 35$) were not asked for arguments.

Competence. Arguments related to competence were mentioned by half of the respondents with a positive attitude (47 percent) as well as the respondents with a negative attitude (52 percent).

First, respondents referred to *general elements of competence*, though this was mentioned somewhat more often by the respondents who expressed positive feelings (31 percent) than the ones who were negative (22 percent). The idea that political actors are competent, capable, skilful or smart, and that government performs good was most often mentioned by respondents who had a positive attitude (25 percent), and the opposite was also mentioned by respondents with a negative attitude (12 percent). Both respondents who were positive (6 percent), as well as those who were negative (10 percent) referred to the general state of the country.

The second element, about governmental actors *taking charge* of problems, was especially important for respondents with negative attitudes (36 percent), but also for respondents with positive attitudes (15 percent). Respondents with negative attitudes disapproved the lack of decisiveness, they claimed that the government puts too many things off and fails to do what is necessary (29 percent), respondents who were positive mentioned the opposite argument as well: that government is decisive (15 percent). Some negative respondents explicitly claimed that the government wastes tax money and is inefficient (7 percent), while the opposite argument was not mentioned by respondents who were positive.

The third element, *awareness*, was not as often mentioned as the other elements, neither by positive respondents (3 percent), nor by negative respondents (9 percent). This is remarkable, since it was often mentioned by negative respondents in Study 1.

Other elements. Respondents mentioned many other elements, which do not clearly belong to the dimensions reliability and competence. First, many respondents mentioned arguments related to *policy agreement*. Respondents' view on specific policy decisions or political ideology was a reason to express positive attitudes towards government and some people said they agreed with specific political parties in government (14 percent). For respondents with negative attitudes, policy disagreement was also an important reason (22 percent). Second, many respondents who were positive about government referred to the electoral system (15 percent). Respondents mentioned that political actors are democratically chosen and at the end of the electoral cycle one can choose someone else. Also, parties in government have to negotiate with other parties, which is good for democracy.

Finally, other arguments were mentioned as well, but not very often. Some respondents who were positive wanted to put negativism into perspective; they stated that

they do think government will do the best possible although nobody performs perfectly and argued that since one cannot satisfy everybody there will always be people complaining (7 percent). Some respondents who expressed a positive attitude gave a negative argument: it could have been worse or there is no alternative (4 percent).

Conclusions Study 2

Study 2 reinforced our conclusions of Study 1: both reliability and competence are important dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. This provides additional support for our first and second hypothesis. Remarkably, the dimensions reliability and competence consist of more sub elements than most scholars suggest. Most scholarly definitions of political trust and cynicism include general references to reliability and competence, without specifying it. Most measurement instruments of attitudes towards political actors measure some specific elements, but not all elements. Based on the findings of this study, we think that a measurement instrument should comprise *all* these elements.

Two other elements were often mentioned as well, policy agreement and references to the electoral system, but we do not think we should see these elements as dimensions. With regard to the first element, it is questionable whether we should see policy agreement as an extra dimension or as a cause of negative or positive attitudes. Low policy satisfaction can lead to negative attitudes towards government and high policy satisfaction can lead to positive attitudes. Also, citizens who voted for a governmental party have more positive feelings about government than those who voted for another party (Anderson & Guillory, 1997). We do not think, however, that policy (dis)satisfaction should be regarded as an extra dimension. The second element, the fact that respondents refer to the political system, has to do with democracy as a safeguard for political actors' behaviour. In other words, trusting the regime principles as well as norms and procedures (Easton's second level) seems to be a precondition for trusting political actors. The electoral system is rather a precondition than a dimension of attitudes towards political actors. With regard to the research question we therefore conclude that there are no other important dimensions.

Other results were worth mentioning as well. First, when we asked respondents why they trust or distrust government, most of them referred to politicians in government and sometimes to politicians in general, but never to the institution. This is a relevant notion for scholars studying attitudes towards political actors and institutions. Although scholars might distinguish between government as an institution and the actors that work for the institution, many citizens seem to focus on the latter. Related to this finding, Tiemeijer (2006; 2008)

argued that most respondents in opinion surveys do not differentiate between politicians in government and in parliament. Although Easton's three levels are of great value, we need to realize that for many citizens this distinction is not fully clear. Nevertheless, some respondents mentioned that the political system as a safeguard for untrustworthy politicians and these citizens do seem to be able to distinguish between the levels.

Second, although overall reliability and competence are both important dimensions of positive and negative attitudes towards political actors, elements for positive attitudes are not always the same as elements for negative attitudes. We found this in Study 1 as well as in Study 2. While respondents with positive attitudes towards government mentioned that political actors try to do the best, respondents with negative attitudes were more precise and mentioned that political actors fail to do what they promise and represent their own interest. Also, respondents with positive attitudes said that governmental actors are competent, while those who are negative claimed more specifically that they are not decisive and do not know what is important. Those who expressed negative attitudes thus gave more specific arguments than those who expressed positive attitudes.

Third, those who expressed negative attitudes mentioned on average *more arguments* in the open-ended questions than those who expressed positive attitudes (on average 2.0 arguments compared to 1.6, significant $p < .001$). In Study 1 we also saw that respondents with negative attitudes gave more arguments than respondents with positive attitudes. In summary, those who express negative attitudes not only mention more arguments, but also give more specific arguments. This suggests that people who expressed negative attitudes about political actors either feel more obliged to come up with arguments or they feel more emotional arousal when thinking about political actors, and that they consciously express themselves.

General Discussion

This chapter used two survey datasets to further develop the validity and comprehensiveness of reliability and competence as dimensions that underlie attitudes towards political actors. In our first study we analyzed closed-ended questions and reinforced the validity of reliability and competence. In our second study we examined open-ended questions and found again that these are the most important dimensions, but we also found that reliability and competence consist of more elements than extant research suggested.

We used datasets that asked respondents about (dis)trusting *government*. We do think however that the results of Study 1 and 2 can be generalized to political actors in general.

First, the answers of Study 2 and other studies (Tiemeijer, 2006; 2008) revealed that many citizens are not aware of the distinction between Easton's three levels. When asked about government, most respondents thought about *politicians* in government or in general, not about the institution. Second, we compared the results of Study 1 with a study that included questions about (dis)trusting national politicians, with answering categories that were almost equal to Study 1 (Steenvoorden, Van der Meer, & Dekker, 2009).¹³ The results of this other study were highly comparable to Study 1, which suggests that the elements of (dis)trust towards government are the same as the elements of (dis)trust towards national politicians.

Lessons for Future Research

Both Bovens and Wille (2008) and Hendriks (2009) showed that trust has become volatile in the Netherlands. After a sharp decrease at the turn of the century, trust figures seemed to recover in 2007, but dropped again the year after. As Hendriks points out, it is hard to determine what exactly grows if trust declines. In other words: what does an increase of negative attitudes mean? In our view, this question has two aspects: how strong negative attitudes are and which dimension attitudes are directed to. An adequate measurement instrument should enable us to answer both questions.

First, a measurement instrument should differentiate between levels of negativity (and positivity). A simple measurement item like "to what extent do you trust government" only fulfils this first criterion if the answers are not dichotomous. Both Bovens and Wille (2008) and Hendriks (2009) used Eurobarometer data, which have the advantage of regular measurement, but the disadvantage of dichotomous answer categories. A measurement instrument should enable a researcher to distinguish between different levels of negativity or positivity, not only between those who trust and those who distrust. Some large data collection projects such as World Values Survey and European Social Survey do use answer categories with more variation – they allow the respondent to tell to what extent s/he trusts actors – and fulfil this criterion.¹⁴ Additionally, we would prefer a measurement instrument that consists of several statements with different levels of cynicism, instead of a single measurement item.

¹³ The question about government in our Study 1 permitted a maximum of 3 answers. The question about national politicians in the SCP study permitted a maximum of 2 answers. Also, the answer category on motives differed slightly in the surveys.

¹⁴ Eurobarometer measures trust in government, parliament and political parties, using two answer categories: 0 (tend not to trust) and 1 (tend to trust). World Values Survey measures confidence in six different institutions, using four answer categories, ranging from 1 (none at all) to 4 (a great deal). European Social Survey measures trust in parliament, political parties and politicians, using eleven answer categories ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust).

Second, attitudes towards political actors consist of several elements of the dimensions reliability and competence. Therefore we would like to argue that a measurement instrument should at least include the key elements of *both* dimensions, while existing measurement instruments either map a general sense of trust or only a few elements. With respect to reliability, a measurement instrument should not only map general feelings of political actors' honesty, but also map to what extent respondents think that political actors hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country instead of their own interests or special interests and whether they are responsive to the public or only interested in their votes. With respect to competence, a measurement instrument should map to what extent respondents think political actors are competent and able to do their job, but also whether they are decisive in taking care of problems and whether they are aware of important problems. A measurement item like "to what extent do you trust government" does not fulfil this second criterion. In summary, a measurement instrument should comprise several statements which vary in their level of negativity and positivity and contain several elements of reliability and competence. Further research is necessary to develop such statements.

Attitudes in Different Political Systems

When measuring attitudes towards political actors we should be aware that these attitudes may be contingent on the democratic system; different systems may lead to more positive or negative attitudes towards political actors. Some authors compared attitudes in consensus democracies with attitudes in majoritarian democracies. Whereas majoritarian democracies are characterized by disproportional two-party electoral systems and the concentration of governmental power in one-party, consensus democracies are characterized by proportional multiparty electoral systems and power sharing in coalition cabinets (Lijphart, 1984, 1999). Anderson and Guillory (1997; see also Lijphart, 1999) and Van der Meer (2009) found higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust in consensus democracies compared to majoritarian democracies, while Norris (2002) did not find this relationship. Banducci, Donovan and Karp (1999) studied the transition from majoritarianism to proportionality in New Zealand and found that political trust had risen after the transition.

Several aspects of the democratic system may affect attitudes towards political actors. On the one hand, in consensus democracies with multiparty governments more different voices are represented, in parliament as well as in government, and this may induce positive attitudes (Van der Meer, 2009; Wattenberg, 2007). Also, the consensus culture of proportional systems may make citizens realize that politics is the art of compromise and may therefore

make them milder when judging political actors (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). On the other hand, in majoritarian systems with single party governments it is easier to assign responsibility for policy choices to a specific party and this may induce positive attitudes (Van der Meer, 2009). Also, political actors in proportional systems have to reach consensus with their opponents, since government is always run by more than one political party. For this reason, parties cannot fulfil all promises they made during election time (Hendriks, 2009). Furthermore, political actors in proportional systems have to deliberate carefully to reach consensus and therefore cannot take charge of problems quickly (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Hendriks, 2009). Also, publicly claiming a victory after a political deliberation process can destroy the relationship between politicians of different parties. Following, political actors in proportional systems may seem to be less decisive in taking care of problems.

Some of the elements we found may be related to the proportional democratic system of the Netherlands and results in a majoritarian system could have been different. We suppose that two elements may be found more often in proportional systems than in majoritarian systems. First, the idea that political actors do not fulfil their promises was an important element of negative attitudes in our study. Politicians in consensus government simply cannot fulfil all their promises, because they have to negotiate with other parties. This element may not be equally important in majoritarian systems, since it is much easier for parties in single party governments to do what they promised – which does not necessarily mean that they do. Second, the idea that political actors are not decisive in taking care of problems was often mentioned in our study. This may be related to the fact that political actors have to reach consensus with many other actors and with the fact that they cannot claim victory. This element may therefore be less important in majoritarian systems as well.

Other elements may be found more often in majoritarian systems than in proportional systems. First, political actors' responsiveness was mentioned in our study, but not very often. Due to the proportional electoral system, many different voices are represented in parliament and government. In majoritarian systems, government is formed by only one party and parliament consists of just a few parties. For this reason, it is possible that the idea of responsiveness is a more relevant element in majoritarian democracies. Second, political actors' awareness might be mentioned even more in majoritarian systems. Because not so many different voices can be represented in majoritarian systems, citizens might more often think politicians do not know what is important for people like them. When a specific group

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of citizens is not heard in a consensus democracy, one of them can decide to found a new party and fill this gap.

In summary, it is likely that some elements are more important in consensus democracies, while other elements are more important in majoritarian democracies. We have no reason to expect that in one of the systems there will be more cynicism towards political actors' reliability or competence. In consensus democracies, both an element of reliability (promises) and competence (taking charge) is specifically vulnerable. Equally, in majoritarian democracies, one element of reliability (responsiveness) and competence (awareness) is a vulnerable spot. Future research could shed more light on these potential differences. It would be highly interesting to compare all the elements in the different systems. We do think however, that all elements will be found in both systems and that the findings of this study therefore apply to all democratic systems.

Chapter 2

SUBSTANCE MATTERS:**HOW NEWS CONTENT CAN REDUCE POLITICAL CYNICISM**

This chapter was published in International Journal of Public Opinion Research, co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.

Abstract

This chapter compares the impact of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism among younger people (18–34 year-olds) as compared to non-young citizens. While studies on the *unfavorable* impact of strategic news have yielded mixed results, the possible *favorable* impact of substantive news has not been studied extensively. This chapter draws on a panel survey ($n = 703$) conducted before the 2006 Dutch elections, together with content analysis of television and newspaper items during the campaign period. Contrary to what we expected, we did not find any effect of strategic news on political cynicism. Also, we did not find any effect of exposure to substantive news on political cynicism among non-young citizens. Among younger citizens, however, we found a clear negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism. This suggests that young adults can experience a process of secondary socialization, in which exposure to substantive news may reverse the “spiral of cynicism”.

Introduction

Common wisdom and recent research emphasize increasing discontent among citizens in several democracies (e.g. Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007). The possible causes have been extensively discussed. The mass media are often mentioned as causes of cynicism. Since Robinson (1976) used the term “media malaise” for the perceived detrimental effects of media use on political attitudes and behavior, many scholars have scrutinized the effects of media use on political attitudes and behavior. Attention has been directed at the medium as well as its content (Newton, 1999). The *medium* that is most often related to unfavorable attitudes is television (Putnam, 2000; Robinson, 1976). Most authors who study *news content* focus on the unfavorable effects of specific coverage, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative or uncivil coverage (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996) or strategic coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Our focus is on the effects of the latter on cynicism, and specifically on the idea that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political trust, a process that has been labeled the “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

In response to the media malaise theory, other scholars have described a “virtuous circle” in which news media use increases political trust and knowledge and leads to mobilization (Norris, 2000b). Several authors have found favorable effects of specific media forms such as newspapers (Aarts & Semetko, 2003) and even television (O’Keefe, 1980; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998), or more specifically public broadcast television (Aarts & Semetko, 2003) and broadsheet newspapers (Newton, 1999). Nevertheless, little attention has been directed to the favorable effects of news content. We argue that if strategic news content can induce cynicism, other sorts of news content may reduce it. Therefore we focus not only on the possible detrimental relationship between exposure to strategic news and political cynicism, but also on the possible beneficial relationship between exposure to substantive news and political cynicism. We have therefore studied the relationship between news exposure and political cynicism over the course of a national election campaign and combined a content analysis of news media with a panel survey.

The effects of news content on political attitudes are not the same for every citizen (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). This study focuses on the possible effects of news content among younger citizens. Younger citizens have less stable attitudes than older ones and may not yet be politically sophisticated since they have less political experience and

weaker partisan ties. We therefore expected young people's attitudes to be particularly affected by media coverage, either favorably or unfavorably (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008).

Changing News Content

Media systems in modern European democracies have changed dramatically in recent years. On the one hand there has never been more political information available to citizens (Esser, et al., 2010). On the other hand, some research also suggests that the way the media report the news has shifted from a mostly descriptive manner to an interpretative style. Substantive news has become less prevalent as strategic news becomes more prevalent and polls are published on a daily basis (e.g. Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008a; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). What exactly defines substantive and strategic news? *Political substantive news coverage* — also called policy-oriented or issue-oriented coverage — provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).¹⁵

Strategic news coverage includes coverage of gains and losses (often based on poll results), power struggles between political actors, the performance of political actors, and public perception of their performance. Strategic news also includes “horse race” news or game-oriented news; words of warfare and (sports) games are often used (Jamieson, 1992 in: Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Other scholars have included the electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalition formation, and the non-substantive attacks of one political actor on another (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

Political Cynicism: Distrust in Reliability and Competence

Political cynicism is regarded by several scholars as the opposite of political trust (Dekker, et al., 2006), as harsh distrust (Eisinger, 2000), or as the absence of trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In other words, there is a scale that runs from high trust to high distrust or political cynicism (Miller, 1974a). In this vein, Krouwel and Abts (2006; 2007) have developed a more comprehensive scale of the degree of negativity of political attitudes, ranging from trust to skepticism, distrust, cynicism, and alienation. Several other authors explicitly regard political cynicism as the opposite of political trust (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber & Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Peterson & Wrighton,

¹⁵ Some scholars also state that substantive news deals with proposed solutions to problems that matter to citizens. Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.* add that it describes parties and candidates as actors who sincerely try to identify and solve problems, which would mean that it gives no judgment on politicians' motivations and therefore offers a neutral assessment. The latter is not necessarily true, since a news item can be both substantive and strategic.

1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008). In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes. We focus on political actors (politicians and political parties) as the object of these attitudes, because we expect attitudes towards political actors to be more likely to be affected over the course of a national election campaign than, for example, attitudes towards the political system (for an overview of the possible objects of political attitudes, see Easton, 1965, 1975; Norris, 1999).

Two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: trust in *political actors' reliability* and trust in *political actors' competence* (Aberbach, 1969; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). In Chapter 1, we used closed-ended as well as open-ended questions to test the possible dimensions of cynicism. In this study we confirmed the dimensions reliability and competence. Political actors' reliability is related to their integrity, the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they act in the public interest and whether they are responsive to the public. Political actors' competence has to do with their ability to do their job, the extent to which they take charge of problems, and whether they know what is important for the people. We regard *political cynicism as strong distrust in political actors' reliability and / or competence*.

The Potential Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism

Political trust has declined and cynicism has risen in the past decades (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007), and this is often blamed on the media, which has shifted from substantive to strategic news. To most citizens, the media are important sources of political information, as are conversations they have with acquaintances who in turn also receive their information from the media (Graber, 1988, 2001; Mutz, 1998). One can thus speak of a mediated reality. If a source has such a large impact on what citizens know about political actors and their actions, one may wonder what impact their style of coverage has on citizens' attitudes. Political journalists exert power over the public sphere, simply because they determine what is politically relevant and what is not (Habermas, 2006). The media thus affect the formation of public opinion as well as individual opinions and attitudes. Evidence suggests that citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, as well as for an interpretation of the context in which they place the information (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001).

The media malaise theory suggests that the media unfavorably affect political attitudes. If indeed they do, which aspect of media reporting is responsible? As mentioned

earlier, many researchers point to the shift from purely descriptive to more interpretative journalism. News reporting is to a high extent defined by the strategic frames that provide meaning to political events and political actors' behavior. When the media report mainly about the strategies political actors pursue in order to gain or affirm their positions, and political actors' motives are reduced to their individual interests, citizens may start to believe that political actors primarily act in their own interest, and strategic news coverage may in this way induce political cynicism. In other words, strategic framing in terms of political actors' personal interests instead of the public interest results in political cynicism.

Evidence of the effect of strategic news is mixed. Several scholars have shown that strategic news coverage unfavorably affects political attitudes; it induces political cynicism and lowers levels of political interest and trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). Some remarks have been made on the evidence regarding this "spiral of cynicism", and scholars have shown that the effects are contingent on several factors. Valentino, Beckman et al. (2001) have shown that the effect of strategic news on participation and trust in government is moderated by personal characteristics. De Vreese (2005) has shown that the unfavorable effects of news on issue-specific cynicism are contingent on the level of strategy reporting in the news. Also, the effects might be short lived: De Vreese (2004) has shown that while strategic news fuels political cynicism and activates negative associations with a specific issue, these effects do not persist over time.

In this chapter, we study the relationship between strategic media reporting and political cynicism. We consider citizens' cynicism towards political actors in general, whereas most previous studies have considered cynicism towards a specific issue or towards a political campaign. Also, we look at all strategic news reporting, while most research has focused on strategic news reporting on a specific issue. We are interested in the extent to which strategic news content in general affects the level of the "generic" political cynicism of media users. We do not have any reason to expect that strategic news affects cynicism towards political actors' reliability in a different way than cynicism towards their competence. Therefore, we do not distinguish between the two and formulate the following hypothesis: *(H1) Strategic news content induces cynicism on the part of citizens about political actors' reliability and competence.*

If a specific kind of news content can *induce* cynicism, other kinds of news content may *reduce* it. In other words, there may be a sort of news content that reverses the spiral of cynicism. In line with Cappella and Jamieson (1997), we expect that substantive news coverage, that is, news about issues, may have this effect. When citizens are exposed to media

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that mainly report the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes, this may induce cynicism. Conversely, if citizens are exposed to media that report mainly substantive issues and political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, citizens may believe that political actors act primarily in the public interest. This line of reasoning is similar to Iyengar's (1991) about the impact of thematic news reporting that places single events in a broader context.

How exactly can substantive news be influential? Citizens do not process all the information they are exposed to, and afterwards remember only a part of it. Graber (1988; 2001) describes how people use "on-line processing"; they merge the details of information into a general meaning and pay less attention to the rest of it. Later, when they are exposed to new information, this general meaning may attach itself to it. In addition to the meanings they have attributed themselves, citizens rely on meanings that journalists assign to information. When repeatedly exposed to substantive news coverage, in which journalists give meaning to the acts of political actors in a substantive manner, citizens may adopt this interpretation. News that explains which issues are addressed by political actors — instead of what political actors' strategic motivations are — may remind citizens of the public interest political actors pursue and can thus reduce the aspect of cynicism towards political actors that concerns *reliability*. Similarly, news coverage about political actors' policy actions — instead of what they have achieved in the polls — can reduce the aspect of cynicism that concerns *competence*. In this way, substantive media reporting may lead to an increase instead of a decrease in trust.

Studies relating substantive news coverage to political cynicism are less prevalent than those relating strategic news to political cynicism. As Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) have noted, studies that use aspects of the news as a predictor for trust tend to concentrate on unfavorable effects of the news, like negative statements, strategic news, and uncivil behavior. There are exceptions, but these studies do not concentrate on substantive news. Valentino, Beckman et al. (2001) have shown that people who are exposed to strategic frames express lower levels of trust in government than those exposed to issue news, but their study did not take into account what would happen if these respondents were exposed neither to strategic nor to substantive news. In a series of studies on the effect of strategic news, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that issue frames did not reduce issue-specific cynicism and that in some cases it did not even evoke less cynical reactions than strategic news. Their study, however, was on the impact of news coverage in a certain policy field on issue-specific cynicism, not on cynicism towards political actors in general. In this study, we investigate the impact of substantive news in all kinds of prevalent news stories on general political cynicism. We formulate the

following hypothesis: (H2) *Substantive news content reduces cynicism among citizens about political actors' reliability and competence.*

The Next Generation: a Focus on Younger Citizens

Younger citizens have less stable attitudes than older ones and they therefore may be more susceptible to information from the media to which they are exposed (McLeod & Shah, 2009). Jennings and Niemi (1978) have shown that though political orientations are far from stable at any stage of life, younger citizens' orientations are less stable than those of their parents. If younger citizens have less stable attitudes, we can also expect those attitudes to be more easily affected by media coverage. Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) have focused specifically on the effects of strategic news exposure and argued that younger citizens may be more receptive to negative and strategic news because of their more volatile attitudes. Younger citizens would thus more likely be caught in a spiral of cynicism.

Two reasons why younger citizens have less stable attitudes may be that they are less politically sophisticated and that they identify less with political parties. Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that the strength of media effects depends on the level of sophistication and party identification of the news consumer. First, the least sophisticated citizens are the most likely to be prone to cynicism because they are less able to put a news item into perspective (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Younger citizens are less politically sophisticated because they lack political experience and they cannot yet rely on a broad base of knowledge to which they have been exposed in the past; they process information less readily (Lau & Redlawsk, 2008). It is therefore harder for young people to place a news item in a broader context or to put it into perspective. Graber (2001) has argued that as people grow older, they interpret new information with schemas they have in memory, because this saves mental energy. These schemas are formed during the formative years of one's life and often remain intact afterwards. Only when exposed to new facts or unfamiliar situations are people likely to attach meaning to the information and store it in their memory. We would like to argue that the formative years of a person politically are not only those of childhood, but also those in which s/he first experience election cycles. Younger citizens have not yet attached meaning to all aspects of the political and are therefore more open to new information (Graber, 2001).

Secondly, non-partisans do not have ties to a specific party and are therefore more easily persuaded by short-term influences, such as news coverage (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that trust can only exist when there is a relationship between political actors and the public. In this relationship, trust is based on the

idea that the political actors represent the public interest. Political cynicism can exist when this relationship is weak or absent. Party identification is lower among younger citizens as compared to older citizens (Converse, 1976; Dalton, 2002), since younger citizens have not yet developed a strong relationship with specific political parties or politicians and their vulnerable relationships with them can be damaged more easily. Younger citizens' lower levels of party identification may therefore be another reason for the larger effect of news coverage on political cynicism.

The evidence on the relationship between media use and political cynicism among the younger generations is limited. There is some evidence concerning the level of political cynicism. Dalton (2004) showed that although trust was relatively high among the young in the past, in several countries trust has declined sharply in this group. Van der Brug and Van Praag (2007), for example, studied the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in the Netherlands and showed that differences between generations are small and have not changed in the past three decades. Contrary to this finding, Bennett (1997) showed that while young Americans are as cynical as their parents, their parents express significantly higher levels of involvement. Many young Americans do not vote, do not engage in political conversations, and seldom or never follow what is going on in politics. Others argue that younger generations' engagement is not declining, simply changing. Citizens nowadays are more actively involved in democratic decision-making, and authors have pointed to a shift from traditional participation to elite-challenging forms of political action (Dalton, 2006, 2008; Inglehart, 1977, 1990).

As mentioned, Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) studied the impact of strategic news on political cynicism among young Dutch adults and found a positive effect of exposure to strategically framed referendum campaign coverage on cynicism towards the campaign. They argued that young citizens are more likely to be prone to media-induced cynicism than older ones. Their study was concentrated on young citizens and the differences within the youngest age cohort. They had to rely on other studies to compare young citizens with older ones. In our study, we compare younger citizens (18–34 year-olds) with older ones to determine to what extent the effects noticed in the younger cohorts differ from those in the older cohorts. We look at the differential effects of strategic as well as substantive news coverage among the younger generation. This is relevant because it can deliver more insight into how political cynicism develops, since we expect younger citizens to be more susceptible to change. It is also important to know how cynicism develops among younger citizens because they are the future of democracy. To gain more insight into the development of cynicism among younger

citizens, we formulated two extra hypotheses: (H3) *the effect of strategic news content on cynicism is stronger for younger citizens than for non-young ones*; and (H4) *the effect of substantive news content on cynicism is stronger for younger citizens than for non-young ones*.

Data and Methods

In this chapter, we focus on the 2006 Dutch national election campaign. After decades of relative stability of political cynicism in the Netherlands, the aggregate level of political cynicism increased substantially prior to the unique elections of 2002, and while the level of cynicism fell again in 2003, in 2006 it rose again (DPES, 1977-2006). Political cynicism among Dutch citizens has not only grown, but also seems to be more volatile. This combined increase and volatility render the Dutch electorate a useful site for studying the causes of political cynicism. This chapter draws a combination of a content analysis and survey data.

The Content Analysis

We analyzed the content of the Dutch national television programs and newspapers in the eight weeks prior to the elections (between September 27 and November 22, 2006). The content analysis was conducted by eleven native Dutch speakers. To test for inter-coder reliability we randomly selected a subset of 73 newspaper and television stories from the included news outlets. The reliability estimates for the various measures are given below. We report mean pair-wise agreement and Cohen's Kappa, which is a measure that controls for chance (Riffe, et al., 1998). Overall, we found that the reliability of our measures was sufficient.

The news content is analyzed separately for news programs (NOS Journaal, RTL Nieuws, Hart van Nederland), current affairs programs (Een Vandaag, Nova/Nederland Kiest), regular newspapers (Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf, Trouw, de Volkskrant) and free newspapers (Metro, Sp!ts). We analyzed all television news and current affairs programs that were broadcast in the research period. For the selection of regular newspapers, we used the online newspaper database LexisNexis (2006), and searched keywords related to the election campaign. Free newspapers were selected by hand from their own websites. From all the newspapers, we took a systematic sample¹⁶ of the articles found, and coded 41 percent of the articles in our target population. For the analyses in this chapter, all

¹⁶ We ordered the newspaper articles chronologically and by outlet. We decided to separate the articles into two periods: (1) the actual campaign phase – which was the four weeks before the elections – and (2) the four weeks prior to the actual campaign phase. Since the actual campaign phase is the most important phase we wanted to place larger weight on this period. We randomly selected articles in both phases. We coded 49 percent ($n = 1735$) of the articles in the actual campaign phase and 17 percent ($n = 508$) of the remaining articles.

items coded as campaign news are included.¹⁷ We coded items as campaign news when they were presented as such, or when they satisfied one of the following criteria: the presence of a national party leader; events within the framework of the elections; reference to the elections, election programs, or election campaigns; or reference to the (present or future) government, its composition, or its policies (*pair-wise agreement* = 82.27 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .65).

The unit of analysis was the individual news story. In order to give larger television items more weight than smaller items, the data were weighted by the size of the item. For example, a 60-second item counted twice as much as a 30-second item. Also, we gave newspaper articles on the first page twice as much weight as articles on other pages. We conducted our analyses on the weighted as well as on non-weighted data. Results were similar; the weighting affected neither the direction nor the level of significance of the effects.

Our indicators of substantive and strategic news were based on Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and De Vreese (2005). As indicators for the presence of substantive news we registered whether the story: (1) predominantly dealt with substantive public policy issues, problems, and solutions, (2) described the substance or detail of legislation, proposed legislation, or government programs, (3) provided descriptions of politicians' stances or statements about substantive policy issues or (4) dealt with general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public. If one of these elements was present, we coded the item as being substantive (*pair-wise agreement* = 82.80 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .66). The percentage of substantive news, then, was the percentage of stories in which the news was depicted in a substantive way.

As indicators of the presence of strategic news we registered whether the story: (1) was mainly about politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, or generally winning or losing, (2) predominantly dealt with politicians' or parties' strategies for winning elections or issue debates (e.g., campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers), (3) dealt with a future coalition or government formation, (4) made use of the language of wars, games, or competition, or (5) paid attention to polls. If one of these elements was present, we coded the item as being strategic (*pair-wise agreement* = 79.20 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .58). The percentage of strategic news was the percentage of stories in which the news was depicted with a strategic frame. Items could be substantive and strategic, or both or neither. 68.4 percent of the items were coded as substantive news, and 49 percent as strategic news. More precisely, 40 percent of the items was only substantive, 20 percent was only strategic, 29

¹⁷ For the analysis in this article 2,148 items were used: 1,367 regular newspaper articles, 138 free newspaper articles, 413 TV news items and 230 items in current affairs programs.

percent was both substantive and strategic, and 12 percent was neither strategic nor substantive. We included the values for the different news outlets in Appendix E.

The Survey Data

The survey data set we used was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and news paper *De Volkskrant*. These data were gathered during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections. The data had a panel component, with three time points in 2006: February (t0), September (t1), and in November before Election Day (t2). We used a computer assisted self-interviewing method (CASI), which means that the selected respondents ($n = 1700$) received an email inviting them to participate and filled in the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. At t0, the response rate was 66 percent ($n = 1115$). At t1, the recontact rate was 78 percent ($n = 870$), and at t2 it was 81 percent ($n = 703$). We used the t1 and t2 data ($n = 703$). Our data were by and large representative of the Dutch population; Appendix F shows that our respondent data mirrored census data in terms of age, gender, and education. The survey data had an extensive battery of news media use questions, which enabled us to connect our content analysis to this data. This chapter is based on the t1 news media use data. For every medium we asked how much respondents use these media normally (from never to almost daily). To test our third hypothesis, we distinguished between younger and older citizens. Younger citizens were those aged 18 to 34 years ($n = 144$). Ideally, we would have preferred to narrow down this group, but the number of respondents in the younger group would have been too small to run a multivariate analysis.

In media effects research, most scholars use an issue-specific measure for political cynicism. For example, following Cappella and Jamieson (1997), Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) measured political cynicism among citizens with statements concerning the content of the campaign, politicians' attitudes during the campaign, and citizens' perceived ability to gather information. The political cynicism scale we use in this chapter consists of statements tapping into more general political cynicism. To measure political cynicism, we draw on a standard set of items from electoral research in the Netherlands¹⁸ and add new items, inspired by the results of Chapter 1.

The standard items concerning political actors' reliability were: (1) "Politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver"; (2) "Ministers and junior ministers are primarily self-interested"; and (3) "In enabling someone to become Member of Parliament,

¹⁸ These items have been used in Dutch parliamentary election studies since 1977.

friends are more important than abilities”. We chose to keep these statements for reasons of comparability and to add others for reasons of conceptual completeness. Critics argued that the traditional items were not strong enough (Dekker, et al., 2006) and thus included what we considered a stronger statement: (4) “Political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion”. A large majority of the respondents agreed with this statement (see Appendix G), which means that in future research we should find an even stronger statement. We also added three statements about politicians’ competence: (5) “Politicians do not understand what matters to society”; (6) “Politicians are capable of solving important problems”; and (7) “Most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing”.

The seven items were measured in two waves and loaded on one dimension (t1 scale values: $M = 2.81$, $SD = .51$, $\alpha = .87$, t2 scale values: $M = 2.75$, $SD = .51$, $\alpha = .87$). We note that Chapter 1 and the literature suggest two dimensions. Apparently, when citizens are asked non-aided in an open-ended questionnaire, many of them mention either reliability or competence and therefore two dimensions arise. When they are prompted with closed statements about both reliability and competence, then the two aspects appear to coincide.

More information about the political cynicism scale and the exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix G. The t2 political cynicism data were used to test the effect of news content on the *level* of cynicism. The t1 and t2 political cynicism data were used to test the effect of news content on the *change* in degree of cynicism during the campaign.

Combining the Content Analysis and the Survey Data

To connect the content analysis data to the survey data, we analyzed the news content variables for each medium (based on the content analysis). In other words, for each television program and each newspaper, we determined the percentage of news items that could be called substantive and the percentage that could be called strategic. We merged these news content variables with the level of news media use (in the survey). So, for each television program and each newspaper, we connected the level of substantive news in content analysis to the extent to which the individual respondent uses it, ranging from never to almost daily. The extent of use of substantive news is thus based on the level of substantive news in all the media someone uses and on the level of usage. For strategic news we did the same. In this way, we constructed variables to determine to what extent respondents were exposed to substantive or strategic news.

Based on the content analysis data, for each medium the percentage of substantive news (SU) was determined, ranging from 0 to 1. For example, the score for the current affairs program Een Vandaag is $SU_{EenVandaag} = .826$. For every respondent, the use of each medium (M) was registered, ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (almost daily). For a respondents who uses Een Vandaag almost daily, $M_{EenVandaag} = 5$. The percentage of substantive news was then multiplied by the use, which yielded the substantive news exposure for this medium: $SU_{EenVandaag} \times M_{EenVandaag}$. This was done for every medium. The sum of all substantive news exposure ($\sum SU * M$) was calculated and divided by the total news media use ($T = \sum M$), in order to correct for the level of news media use. The average percentage of substantive news a respondent was exposed to in the media s/he used, was calculated as $SU_{average} = (\sum SU * M) / T$. In the same way, the percentage of strategic news a respondent was exposed to was calculated as: $ST_{average} = (\sum ST * M) / T$.

Control variables

Based on extant research, we expected political cynicism to be related to other political attitudes and we therefore controlled for these attitudes in our model. The political interest scale combined interest in the election campaign and talking about politics with acquaintances ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .70$, $r = .44$). The political knowledge scale was based on the number of politicians someone recognizes out of 11 national party leaders ($M = .84$, $SD = .17$, $\alpha = .79$). Furthermore, we controlled for socio-demographic factors likely to be related to political cynicism. Dalton (2004) showed that although trust used to be higher among the young and among those with higher education, in several countries trust has declined sharply among these two groups. As mentioned earlier, previous research has shown that satisfaction with the way democracy works in the Netherlands has been almost equal among generations in the past three decades (Van der Brug & Van Praag, 2007). Van der Brug and Van Praag also showed that satisfaction with the way democracy works is still positively related to education. We included age and education as well as gender, since there may be a relationship between these socio-demographic variables and political cynicism.

Results

To test the effect of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism, we used OLS regression. Table 2.1 shows models for the entire sample ($n = 703$), the younger respondents (18–34 year-olds, $n = 144$) and the non-young respondents (35 years and older, $n = 557$). We included both strategic and substantive news in one model and controlled for

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other variables. Contrary to what we expected, we found that the amount of strategic news citizens had been exposed to was unrelated to their level of political cynicism, both in the entire sample, as well as among younger respondents. This means that our first and third hypotheses are not supported: strategic news content does not induce cynicism about political actors' reliability and competence among citizens, neither in the whole population, nor among the youngest cohorts.

Table 2.1: Regression Model Explaining Political Cynicism

	<i>All respondents</i>			<i>Younger respondents (18-34 years)</i>			<i>Non-young respondents (35 years and older)</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
intercept	3.40	.41		4.61	.81		3.09	.48	
control variables:									
gender	-.06	.04	-.06	.03	.08	.03	-.07	.04	-.07
age	.00	.00	.00	-.01	.01	-.11	.00	.00	.00
education	-.05	.01	-.15***	-.07	.03	-.23**	-.04	.01	-.14**
political interest	-.04	.03	-.06	-.06	.06	-.09	-.04	.03	-.05
political knowledge	-.12	.12	-.04	-.07	.22	-.03	-.14	.14	-.05
news exposure:									
*strategic	.30	.64	.02	-.21	1.37	-.01	.40	.72	.02
substantive	-.56	.38	-.06	-1.54	.73	-.19	-.16	.45	-.02
adjusted R-square		.04#			.14#			.02	
N		703			144			557	

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized B coefficients, standard errors and standardized β coefficients. Data were collected during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; # R-square significant $p < .001$

We also expected a negative relationship between exposure to substantive news and political cynicism. This effect appears to be very weak for the entire sample. Considering the two age groups, there is a negative effect of substantive news and political cynicism for the younger group ($-.19, p < .05$), while there is no effect for the non-young group. This means that our second hypothesis is not affirmed, since there is no significant effect for the whole population. Our fourth hypothesis is supported: the negative effect of substantive news on cynicism is not stronger for younger citizens, but exists only among younger citizens. The more substantive news a young citizen is exposed to, the less politically cynical the person will be.

Considering that there might be a relationship between the effects of substantive and strategic news, we controlled for an interaction effect between substantive and strategic news, which appeared to be non-significant. The interaction effect did not affect the values for the main effect and was therefore not included in the models. This means that strategic substantive news affects political cynicism to the same extent as non-strategic substantive news.

The control factor that has a significant effect on political cynicism is education, which is negatively related to political cynicism for both age groups. This implies that less educated citizens express somewhat higher levels of political cynicism than highly educated ones. Other socio-demographic variables were not significantly related to political cynicism, nor were political interest and knowledge.

Table 2.2: Time Model Explaining Political Cynicism at t2

	<i>All respondents</i>			<i>Younger respondents (18-34 years)</i>			<i>Non-young respondents (35 years and older)</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>
intercept	.81	.29		1.01	.58		.72	.33	
cynicism t1	.74	.03	.73***	.76	.06	.76***	.73	.03	.73***
control variables:									
political interest	-.01	.02	-.02	-.01	.04	-.02	-.01	.02	-.02
political knowledge	-.00	.08	.00	-.02	.14	-.01	.00	.09	.00
news exposure:									
*strategic	-.00	.43	.00	.32	.87	.02	-.04	.49	-.00
substantive	-.15	.25	-.02	-.80	.47	-.10	.05	.30	.01
adjusted R-square		.54#			.62#			.53#	
N		702			144			557	

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized B coefficients, standard errors and standardized β coefficients. Data were collected during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; # R-square significant $p < .001$

Although the regression model in Table 2.1 suggests that substantive news reduces political cynicism among younger citizens, we considered that it was still possible that the relationship is the other way around. Therefore in a second model presented in Table 2.2, we added a time component: we added the political cynicism level at t1 (just before the actual campaign started) as a predictor for cynicism at t2 (just before the elections were held) and studied the causes of change in the level of cynicism during the campaign. We did not control

for socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational level. These variables do affect the level of political cynicism in the long term, but do not change over a period of one month. We did control for political interest and knowledge, since these variables can change during a campaign period.

Not surprisingly, in this model political cynicism at t1 (September) is a strong predictor for cynicism at t2 (November). Nevertheless, exposure to substantive news still predicts a part of the variance in political cynicism ($-.10, p < .05$). Even with the small group size ($n = 144$), the regression coefficient is still significant. These results mean that substantive media coverage can reduce political cynicism among younger citizens during a campaign period. It can thus cause a change in political attitudes during a relatively short period.

Discussion

We studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism in the context of the 2006 Dutch national election campaign and compared younger citizens with non-young ones. We found no impact of strategic news on political cynicism, contrary to what we expected. We did not find a significant effect of substantive news on political cynicism among the population as a whole. Among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds), however, substantive news had a clearly decreasing effect on political cynicism. It even explained changes in levels of political cynicism during the campaign.

Our results are in line with studies that have found a favorable effect of media use on political attitudes (O'Keefe, 1980; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). The idea that news content can not only induce cynicism, but also reduce it, was alluded to in earlier texts as well (Norris, 2000a), but had not been compellingly demonstrated in a combined analysis of panel survey data and news content analysis data. Previous studies showed that those exposed to strategic frames express lower levels of trust in government than those exposed to issue news (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001), but that issue coverage did not *reduce* issue-specific cynicism among the whole population (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Our study is also in line with the fact that others found an increase of political support for *all* politicians in a campaign, which suggests that the high information intensity of a campaign has a favorable effect on citizens' feelings about politicians (Van der Brug & Van der Eijk, 2005; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

It is remarkable that we did not find a relationship between strategic news and political cynicism because this is not in line with what we expected based on the available literature.

There may be several reasons for this. Different data collection methods are used in this literature, including both experiments (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and combinations of surveys and content analyses (e.g. Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). This makes it unlikely that the data collection method was the cause of the difference. The literature that showed a clear effect of strategic news on cynicism was based on data collected in the U.S. in the 1990s (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Studies in Europe have been conducted (2008) that posit some constraints on the relationship. It is possible that the relationship is less clear-cut in a European political setting than in the U.S. Another explanation may be the operationalization of strategic news content and political cynicism. In this chapter we have focused on all strategic news content during an election campaign, instead of strategic news content concerning a specific issue. We have also focused on the cynicism of citizens towards political actors in general, instead of cynicism towards a specific issue or towards a campaign. It is exactly these differences in conceptualizations that may explain why our results differ from those of Elenbaas and De Vreese (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), who found a relationship between exposure to strategically-framed referendum campaign coverage and cynicism towards the campaign among young citizens.

It has been argued that the impact of news content varies across individuals (Jennings & Niemi, 1978), but to our knowledge this is the first study that has compared the effects of strategic and substantive news on younger citizens with the effects on the non-young population. Exposure to substantive news coverage led to lower levels of political cynicism among younger citizens, while we found no effect among non-young citizens. This finding may be explained by the fact that young citizens' political attitudes and orientations are less stable than those of older citizens (2000b). Older citizens have relatively stable attitudes that do not change easily during a campaign. Younger citizens do not yet have such stable developed attitudes and thus can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

The Possible Favorable Effect of Substantive News – and its Constraints

We think that our findings have some relevant societal implications. Can we conclude that there is little reason to worry about strategic coverage, as long as it also contains substantive information? The results suggest that coverage of political actors' strategies for pursuing their goals will not induce cynicism as long as it concerns goals related to substantive issues. Neither will ideological differences of opinion between political actors lead to cynicism.

Substantive news coverage may reverse the spiral of cynicism and lead to a virtuous circle, as described by Norris (2002; 2004). Citizens use their experience with political

information to give meaning to new information. Younger citizens, being less experienced than older ones, are more dependent on journalists' interpretations. When news covers political actors' viewpoints and policy actions and journalists give meaning to political information in a substantive manner, this can lead young and less experienced citizens to feel more positively about political actors' motives and competencies, because it helps them to understand what is happening in politics. Surprisingly, younger citizens' political cynicism was not affected by strategic news. Although we cannot expect that all citizens will be willing to be exposed to substantive news, this at least suggests that education about how a democratic system works can reduce negative attitudes towards politics.

Extrapolating from this study, the question is how to confront cynical young citizens with politically substantive information. Of course, one can and should expose youngsters to political information at school, but this knowledge should also be maintained in adult life. A few decades ago, almost all citizens watched political news, not because they liked it, but because they were confronted with it on the same network in their favorite shows. Schoenbach and Lauf (2007) call television's ability to disseminate political information to non-interested citizens the "trap effect". Nowadays, many more networks are available and consumers can choose networks that do not broadcast political information. Most media companies are confronted with strong competition and have an incentive to provide the coverage that their users prefer. Prior (De Beus, Brants, & Van Praag, 2009) has shown that this fragmentation of the media market negatively affects American citizens' level of political knowledge, and that there is a growing gap between more highly educated news junkies on the one hand and the rest of the American public, which consumes less politically substantive information, on the other. The same pattern is visible in many European countries, where the growth of commercial networks and the internet have fragmented the media market as well.

Many young citizens — and specifically cynical young citizens — are not highly politically interested and make little use of so-called quality media that contain high levels of political information, such as public broadcasting and quality newspapers. Young citizens more often use commercial television, free newspapers, and the internet. On the internet, people are not confronted with news unless they are looking for it. Most commercial networks in the Netherlands — and in some other countries too — broadcast no news at all (2007) because they think their consumers are not interested in news. It is very unlikely that those networks will broadcast more news in the near future — let alone more substantive political information. The free newspapers include a reasonable amount of news about politics, and this is probably the only way to reach young citizens who are not highly politically interested.

In summary, it is very hard to expose youngsters to political information. This will be a very complex problem for governments in the future. Although exposure to substantive news can lead to a virtuous circle, it is also possible that a lack of exposure to substantive news limits citizens' understanding of politics and trust in political actors, and may then lead to a spiral of cynicism.

Lessons for Future Research

Our results have implications for future research as well. Mapping media effects in a survey with a short time interval is extremely difficult. In this study we found that younger citizens are more easily affected by media use than older citizens. The younger citizens in this study were between 18 and 34 years of age. The strongest media effects will most likely be visible among young adults, who can vote for the first or second time in their life and are starting to think about politics. Binnema, Adriaansen, and Verhue (2001) showed that in the first years of adulthood, citizens become more interested, less cynical, and more inclined to participate. These authors suggested that in these first years of adulthood (18–25 year-olds) a significant process of political socialization takes place. While the influence of parents and school decreases, other sources of influence — such as friends, colleagues, and the media — become more important and this leads to a process that could be called “secondary socialization”. The formative years for a citizen are during the first election cycles s/he experiences. In the Netherlands, young citizens, who have recently received the right to vote, being exposed to information they are not familiar with, start to attach meaning to it.

This chapter has shown that this process is visible among citizens between early adulthood and their mid-thirties, but it is probably most visible among the youngest adult citizens. For this reason, research on media effects among the youngest adult citizens would probably yield the most insight in attitude change. Further research on this group should therefore be carried out to provide a more detailed understanding of *why* substance matters and *how* news content can reduce political cynicism.

Chapter 3

**CAPRICIOUS CITIZENS:
THE EFFECTS OF POLITICAL CYNICISM ON VOTER BEHAVIOR**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,
co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.*

Abstract

Political cynicism has risen in many European democracies in the past decades, while in the same period voter behavior has become less stable. This study investigates the relationship between the two and distinguishes several aspects of individual voter behavior: hesitation which party to vote for (uncertainty), change between two successive elections (volatility) and turnout. We determine whether citizens hesitate and change between ideologically different parties and thus float between the left and the right end of the political spectrum. Our results, based on a panel survey (N=733) conducted before and after the 2006 Dutch elections, suggest that political cynicism affects both voter uncertainty and well as volatility. Politically cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout. While the distinction between ideologically proximate and distanced parties applies mostly to multiparty consensus democracies, this chapter concludes with a discussion about the implications and relevance of our results in different political systems.

Introduction

Citizens in most western democracies are less trustful and more cynical than they were a few decades ago (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007). At the same time, citizens more frequently hesitate which party they should vote for and often do not vote for the same party in two successive elections (Gallagher, et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Because of this simultaneous growth of political cynicism and voter uncertainty (hesitation) and voter volatility (change), the question arises whether there is a relationship between these developments. Cynical citizens have more doubts about political actors' motives and competences and we expect them to have greater difficulty in deciding which party to vote for. Scholars studied the relationship between cynicism and several aspects of voter behavior, such as vote choice, turnout and other forms of participation – but the effect of cynicism on the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior was never addressed. The main question we therefore address in this chapter is whether *political cynicism induces voter uncertainty and volatility on individual level*. We argue that discontented citizens can give voice to their grievances in two ways – either by choosing another party or by not voting at all – and for this reason we look both at party choice and turnout.

Cynicism, volatility and uncertainty are regarded as developments societies should be worried about (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Pharr & Putnam, 2000), both by academic scholars and by opinion leaders. By exploring the connection between these and other developments, this study can help to determine to what extent political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility are indeed worrying, under which circumstances it is worrying, and which citizens are most likely to be prone to it. First however, we elaborate on how we define our main concepts.

Political Cynicism: Distrust in Reliability and Competence

Political cynicism is also often regarded as the negative end of political trust. Eisinger (2000: 55-56) made a comprehensive inventory of definitions of cynicism and concluded that these definitions: "...collectively denote that cynicism is more than mild distrust. Cynicism entails intense, antagonistic distrust or contempt for humanity. A cynic has a sense of the political; she is not politically indifferent, but rather keenly aware of her politics and her political environment by self-consciously distancing herself from it". Political cynicism can thus be described as *harsh distrust* (Eisinger, 2000) or as the opposite of political trust (Dekker, et al., 2006; Miller, 1974a). Several other authors explicitly regard political cynicism as the opposite of political trust (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber

& Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008). In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes.

Political cynicism thus appears inversely related to trust. However, what kind of trust (or distrust) is it related to? In Chapter 1, we found that two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: trust in *political actors' reliability* and trust in *political actors' competence* (Aberbach, 1969; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). Closed-ended and open-ended questions in our study confirmed these two dimensions. In Chapter 2 we used seven statements to test the dimensional structure of cynicism and found that reliability and competence load on one dimension. Apparently, when asked about both dimensions, most cynical citizens confirm both, while when asked unaided, many citizens do not mention both. The results of Chapter 1 nevertheless suggest it is important to include both aspects of political actors' reliability and their competence in a measurement instrument of cynicism. Chapter 1 revealed that political actors' reliability is related to their integrity, the extent to which they hold their promises and whether they act in the public interest, while their competence has to do with their ability to do their job, the extent to which they take charge of problems, and whether they know what is important for the people.

This study focuses on political actors as the *object* of political cynicism. According to Easton (1965), positive or negative political attitudes can be directed towards different objects: the political community in general, the regime and the political authorities. Dalton (2004) and Norris (1999) refined this classification and distinguished between different aspects of the regime: regime principles (democratic principles), regime performance (satisfaction with the performance of democracy) and regime institutions (parliaments and government in general). In general, in developed democracies, support for the political community and the regime principles, performance and institutions are high; even the most cynical citizen is more or less supportive. The recent rise in cynicism in many countries applies to the level of the authorities. Although we argue not only that cynicism cannot be directed to other levels, this study therefore focuses on the authorities consisting political actors – which implies political parties as well as politicians in government, in parliament and in general – as the *object* of political cynicism.

To recapitulate, most authors regarded cynicism as strong distrust. Furthermore, all definitions of political cynicism stress the importance of cynicism towards the political actors' reliability, but the aspect of cynicism towards the political actors' competence should be

included too. For this reasons we regard *political cynicism as a strong distrust in the reliability and / or competence of political actors.*

Individual Level Voter Uncertainty and Volatility

We distinguish between two kinds of individual voter behavior: changing and hesitating. On the one hand, we define a *changing voter* as someone who does not vote for the same party in two successive elections,¹⁹ which is in line with Van der Kolk et al. (2000; 2007). We refer to this as volatility. *Electoral volatility* is measured on the aggregate level and reflects the percentage of seats that changed party. It gives an insight in macro level changes in voter behavior between consecutive elections, but it might neglect a part of voter movements. *Voter volatility* is measured on the individual level and reflects the share of citizens not choosing the same party in two successive elections.

A *hesitating voter*, on the other hand, is someone who hesitates which party to vote for and who does not make a party choice until shortly before the elections. This behavior we call *voter uncertainty*, which can only be measured on individual level and which reflects the share of citizens not making a party choice long before the elections or hesitating which party to vote for (for an overview of voter uncertainty in several countries see: Drummond, 2006; Gallagher, et al., 2005; Mair, 2008; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Obviously, volatility and uncertainty are related: in most cases volatility as expressed in the polling booth is preceded by hesitation during the campaign period. Someone who hesitates about vote choice and decides shortly before Election Day is more likely to vote for another party as compared to the last election than someone who does not hesitate during the campaign.

Central to our argument is that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties (e.g. a socialist party and a social democratic party) differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties (e.g. a socialist party and a conservative liberal party). A citizen that has very stable ideas about which set of ideological viewpoints a party should combine may hesitate and change between two ideologically related parties, which are both close to his or her ideal party. Another citizen may have no specific ideas about which set of ideological viewpoints a party should combine, and can therefore hesitate and change between ideologically different parties. While the first citizen votes according to a fairly stable ideological position, the second does not. For this reason, we argue that the ideological position of the parties a citizen

¹⁹ This concerns voters who have voted for another party than during the previous election, but also voters who did not vote during the previous election and who did vote during the present election and the other way around.

doubts about and changes between, should help to distinguish and differentiate between different types or degrees of voter uncertainty and volatility. The most often used indicator for an ideological position is the ideological left-right position. By including the left-right position of the parties someone doubts about, one can show the scope of the hesitation. Doubting between two related parties can then be regarded as a “smaller hesitation” than doubting between non-related parties. We call this scope of hesitation *ideological voter uncertainty*. Equally, changing between two related parties is regarded as a “smaller change” than changing between non-related parties and we call the scope of change *ideological voter volatility*.

This distinction between ideologically related and different parties applies mainly to multiparty consensus democracies. In most majoritarian democracies only two parties play a significant role in the political battlefield and the differences between these two parties are usually large. In most consensus democracies there are much more politically significant parties and consequently parties in these countries are often rather similar to at least one other party, while they differ fundamentally from other parties. Although this distinction specifically applies to consensus democracies, we debate the implications and relevance of our results for majoritarian political systems in the discussion section.

Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior: a Relationship?

The central question for this chapter is whether there is a relationship between political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility and more specifically ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. The idea that citizens that show low levels of trust, interest and knowledge are the ones that are most likely to hesitate and switch between parties is not new (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). It has however never been addressed whether those political attitudes are not only related, but in fact cause such voter behavior.

The rationale behind the idea that political attitudes can affect behavior is straightforward. According to Rosema (2004), attitudes concern the extent to which someone (dis)likes a certain object. The more positive the attitude towards an object is, the more likely a person is to act in favor of the object. Or the other way around, if the attitude is negative – for example politically cynical – the person is more likely to act to the detriment of the object – for example a politician (see Rosema, 2004 for an elaborate description of the relationship between attitudes and behavior). The relationship between political cynicism (or trust) and other aspects of voter behavior has been theorized in the past, but we have not found prior

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research on the relationship between political cynicism and voter uncertainty. Miller (1974b) showed that policy discontent and the unfulfilled desire for change among certain social groups (in this case among the blacks in post war US) leads to political cynicism. This political cynicism originating from policy discontent may in turn lead to a rejection of conventional modes of political participation (e.g. voting) and the use of noncustomary activities (e.g. sit-ins or riots) or even radical political change. Citrin (1974) rejected this idea. In his view, cynicism has to do with rejection of an incumbent government instead of the regime, while negative expressions in the political trust scales have more to do with a fashionable ritualistic negativism of complaining about politics than with an enduring sense of estrangement. He argued that for this reason mistrust of the government neither leads to political apathy nor to radical activism.

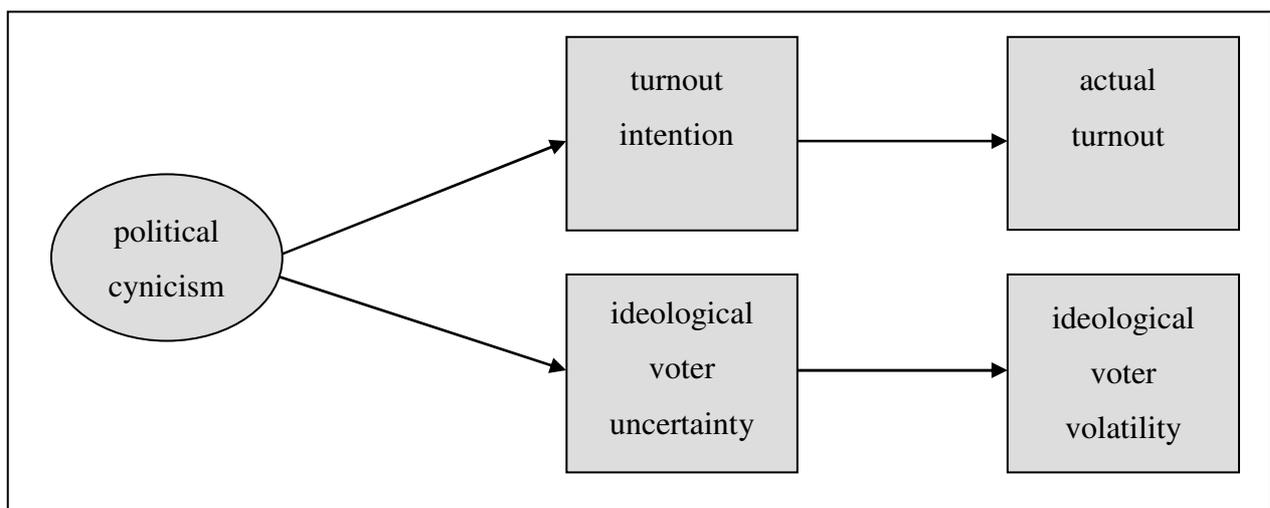
Empirical evidence on the relationship between cynicism and voter behavior is equivocal. Several scholars found that cynicism and distrust lead to lower levels of political interest and participation, especially lower turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). This pattern is particularly visible among the younger generations (Bennett, 1997; De Winter, Schillemans, & Janssens, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Partly contrary to these findings, others showed that distrust may not affect turnout, but only the support for third-party alternatives (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005) or challenger candidates and parties (Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). Cynicism is even shown to positively affect turnout for black citizens (Southwell & Pirch, 2003) and for citizens with a moderate sense of powerlessness (Southwell, 2008). Other scholars showed that, although cynicism affected vote choice in a referendum (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), it may not necessarily cause reduced turnout. Moreover, citizens can be cynical but still involved in politics (De Vreese, 2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). However, this can be nontraditional involvement: discontent or cynicism may coincide with different styles of political behavior, in which citizens engage in alternative actions intended to influence incumbent politicians (Craig, 1980).

The above mentioned studies have tried to establish a link between cynicism and several aspects of voter behavior, such as turnout and vote choice. We argue that cynicism potentially affects another aspect which has not been studied yet, namely the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior. Citizens that are politically cynical have more doubts about the motives and competences of political actors and the political process as a whole. We expect citizens that have these doubts to have more difficulty in deciding which party to vote for. Citizens that do not trust their political representatives may find it harder to decide which

party to vote for than their fellow citizens displaying higher levels of trust and they may more easily switch to another party. Also, they may more easily hesitate and change between ideologically unrelated parties. These citizens may not be searching for the party that represents their ideas best, but the parties that are most trustworthy. It might matter less what political actors stand for and what they promise, since they are not believed to hold their promises anyway. To these citizens political cynicism may operate as a heuristic (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989) which leads to hesitation and change between ideologically non-related parties, in other words to hesitation and change between the left and the right end of the political spectrum. This leads us to our two central hypotheses of this study: *political cynicism positively affects ideological voter uncertainty (H1) and subsequently ideological voter volatility (H2)*.

For cynical citizens, who have doubts about the motives and competences of political actors, choosing another party than the one they voted for during the last elections is not the only option. Discontented citizens that hesitate between parties can also decide not to choose at all and thus abstain from voting. For this reason, we consider uncertain voter behavior and fluctuating turnout as two related potential consequences of political cynicism. In order to get a broader picture – which is visualized in figure 3.1 – we study not only ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, but also turnout and we integrate these two aspects of voter behavior in this study. The main focus of the study however, is on voter uncertainty and volatility as this is *terra incognita* in extant research.

Figure 3.1: Research Model



Data and Method

In this chapter, we used the 2006 Dutch national election campaign as a research venue. Both political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility have increased in the past decades in the Netherlands, while turnout has fluctuated (Aarts, Van der Kolk, & Rosema, 2007; Mair, 2008; Van Holsteyn & Den Ridder, 2005). The case of the Netherlands fits into the wider pattern of grown political cynicism and changing voter behavior in Europe (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Gallagher, et al., 2005), but changes have taken place in a relatively short period, which makes the case useful for investigating the relationship between cynicism and voter behavior. We draw on original data collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with ASCoR/University of Amsterdam and newspaper De Volkskrant. These data are gathered around the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections. There were three time points of measurement in 2006: September (t1), early November (t2) and just after the Election Day on November the 22nd (t3). Party choice during the previous elections in 2003 was registered just after these elections (t0).²⁰ The data set has a panel component (N=733). We used AMOS 16.0 to build a structural equation model, because we could include ideological voter uncertainty and volatility and turnout as dependent variables in one model. This enabled us to also study the relationships between these dependent variables.

To determine how well the model fits, we show the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the parsimony-adjusted comparative fit index (PCFI). Based on Byrne (2001), we assumed values for CFI above .95 (above .90 is still acceptable) and for PCFI above .50 to indicate a good model fit. Also we assumed values below .05 for RMSEA to indicate a good model fit (0.08 is still reasonable). PCLOSE shows how likely it is that the RMSEA value is below .05 and PCLOSE is preferably higher than .50.

Voter Behavior

The measure for ideological voter uncertainty involves two components. As a first step regular *voter uncertainty* is constructed by measuring vote intention at t1 and t2 and the actual vote choice at t3 and in this way registered *party choice* (PC) at three time points. A comparison of t1, t2 and t3 yields two possible *vote hesitations* (VH),²¹ which were added up

²⁰ TNS NIPO registers party choice of her respondents shortly after each election and therefore has these data at their disposal for all respondents (N>200.000) in their database.

²¹ Two possible changes are registered: September – November, November – actual vote. Those who changed their vote choice were coded 1 and those who did not change were coded 0. Stable non-voters (those who did not intend to vote on in September or early November and who did not vote) are not certain voters but not uncertain

to a scale of *voter uncertainty* (VI) (0=no hesitations, 1=one hesitation, 2=two hesitations, 3=three hesitations). This scale registers whether someone indicates to favor different parties during different points in time. By measuring the hesitation early in the campaign ($t_1 - t_2$) as well as the hesitation in the “hot phase” of the campaign ($t_2 - t_3$), we made a distinction between those who did not hesitate, those who hesitated once in the campaign, and those who hesitated in both stages. Also, we compared intention early in the campaign with actual vote choice ($t_1 - t_3$). This makes sure that a citizen who indicates to vote for a party at t_1 , for another party at t_2 and again for the first party at t_3 has lower score than another citizen who indicates to vote for three different parties at the three moments in time.

As a second step we constructed the *ideological voter uncertainty* measure. To measure ideological party position, respondents are asked to place each party on a scale from (1) left to (10) right. We defined *ideological position* (IP) as the average score all respondents gave for each party to determine the left-right position of the party.²² The party choice variables PC were recoded such that it indicates the left-right position of the party a respondent intended to vote for and this variable is called *ideological party choice* (IPC). For someone who intended to vote for the Greens IPC was 2.58. The difference between a respondent’s ideological position on t_1 and t_2 was called *ideological vote hesitation* (IVH). A respondent that intended to vote Greens at t_1 and Social Democrats at t_2 , $IPC_{t_1}=2.58$, $IPC_{t_2}=3.55$ and $IVH_{t_1-t_2}=0.97$. For someone who intended to vote for the same party on t_1 and t_2 , $IVH_{t_1-t_2}=0$. Since the largest difference is between the Greens (2.58) on the left end and the national conservatives (7.50) on the right end, the largest possible ideological hesitation is 4.96.²³ The *ideological voter uncertainty* (IVI) scale was calculated by taking the average of the two ideological vote hesitation scores $IVH_{t_1-t_2}$, $IVH_{t_2-t_3}$ and $IVH_{t_1-t_3}$. This scale ranges from 0 (no hesitations in party choice) to 4.96 (maximum hesitations in party choice from left to

either and are therefore given the mean value, which has the same consequence as coding them as missing. Those who indicated they did not know which party to vote for were coded the middle value which is .50.

²² The question was: ‘Could you please indicate where you would place the following parties on a left-right scale? Where do you place <party> on a left-right scale?’ The average left-right positions respondents gave each party are: CDA (Christian democrats) 6.55, PvdA (Social Democrats) 3.55, SP (Socialists) 2.67, VVD (Liberals) 7.14, Partij voor de Vrijheid (National Conservatives) 7.50. GroenLinks (Greens) 2.58, ChristenUnie (Christian Conservative) 6.03, D66 (Social Liberal) 4.85, Partij voor de Dieren (Animal Rights Party) 4.35, SGP (Christian Fundamentals) 6.41. We chose to use the average score all respondents gave, instead of the score individual respondents give to the parties. Respondents might be inclined to place their preferred parties close to each other, in order to justify their own choices. Therefore we think the average score is a better measure.

²³ Respondents who said three times they would not vote are not certain voters but not uncertain either and are therefore given the mean score on ideological voter uncertainty, which has the same consequence as coding them as missing. Someone who does not know which party to vote for is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (2.5). To test the robustness of the model with this dependent variable, we have also tested a model in which these respondents are given highest score (5.0). The effects of and on ideological voter uncertainty were comparable with both measures.

right). With this ideological voter uncertainty, one can determine the “scope of the hesitation”, so it is possible to show to what extent a citizen hesitates ideologically.

Ideological voter volatility was constructed in a similar manner. We started by constructing regular *voter volatility*. We compared party choice (PC) during the previous elections in 2003 (t-1) with party choice during the 2006 elections (t3). A comparison of these two time points yielded one possible *vote change* (VC), which formed the *voter volatility* (VV) scale (0=no changes, 1=change).²⁴ This scale registers whether someone did not vote for the same party in 2003 and 2006. Again we constructed ideological party choice variables: IPC_{t_0} (2003) with IPC_{t_3} (2006) and compared these to measure *ideological voter volatility* (IVV).²⁵ For someone who voted Liberals in 2003 ($IPC_{t_0}=7.14$) and Christian Democrats in 2006 ($IPC_{t_3}=6.55$), $IPC_{t_0}=7.14$, $IPC_{t_3}=6.55$ and $IVI_{t_0-t_3}=0.59$. While voter uncertainty registers hesitation in the period before the elections, voter volatility registers changes between two consecutive elections.

Concerning turnout, we included intended as well as actual turnout. Actual turnout is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the respondent voted (1) or abstained (0). We also included turnout intention, which was measured by asking respondents to indicate with a percentage how likely they would vote during the next elections (0 percent = definitely not voting, 100 percent = definitely voting). This was measured at two time points before the elections (t1 and t2) and the turnout intention variable is the average of these two points divided by 100. Turnout intention can range from 0 (no intention to vote) to 1 (maximum intention to vote).

Political Cynicism

To measure political cynicism, the following standard items are used in the Netherlands:²⁶ (1) politicians promise more than they can deliver, (2) ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than abilities to become Member of Parliament. We chose to keep these statements for reasons of comparability and to add others for reasons of conceptual completeness. Since critics argued

²⁴ Respondents who did not vote in 2003 and who did not vote in 2006 are given the mean score on voter volatility. Someone who did not vote in the one election and who did vote in the other, is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (.50).

²⁵ Respondents who did not vote in 2003 and who did not vote in 2006 are given the mean score on ideological voter volatility. Someone who did not vote in the one election and who did vote in the other, is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (2.5). To test the robustness of the model with this dependent variable, we have also tested a model in which these respondents are given highest score (5.0). The effects on ideological voter volatility were comparable with both measures.

²⁶ These items are used in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies since 1977.

that the traditional items are not fierce enough and are therefore not capable of distinguishing cynics from non-cynics (Dekker, et al., 2006), we added a stronger statement: (4) parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion.²⁷ The above statements concern the reliability of political actors, but a series of statements about political cynicism should also entail elements about competence. For this reason, we added three additional statements: (5) politicians do not understand what matters to society, (6) politicians are capable of solving important problems and (7) most politicians are competent people that know what they are doing. For each statement, we used a four point scale: completely agree, agree, disagree and completely disagree. For every statement a respondent is given a score between 1 and 4 (from highly disagree to highly agree). We used the political cynicism items as measured in September and combined the scores for the seven items in a scale (Cronbach's alpha .87²⁸).

Control variables

Because we expected voter behavior as well as political cynicism to be related to other attitudes and predispositions, we included a number of controls in our model. Political interest, political knowledge and ideological orientation are generally regarded as indicators for voter behavior (see for example Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983). Our political interest scale combines interest for the election campaign and talking about politics with acquaintances (Cronbach's alpha .80²⁹). The political knowledge measure counts the amount of politicians someone recognizes.³⁰ We controlled for left-right self rating of the respondent (ranging from 1=left to 10=right) as a measure of ideological orientation.³¹

²⁷ Statement 4 is asked in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies as an item for political efficacy. Statements developed to measure political cynicism and external political efficacy are based on different operationalizations. On face value, however, they seem to measure the same concept and statistically they also relate to one dimension. We did a factor analysis as well as a reliability test on the political cynicism and external political efficacy items in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) 2006. These six items all load one factor. A scale of the six items combined has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.751.

²⁸ A reliability test on the September political cynicism items shows that the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .866. The inter-item correlation of all items is between .353 and .599. Factor analysis shows that all items load on a single factor with factor loadings between .670 and .810.

²⁹ The correlation between the two political interest items is: $r = .416, p < .001$.

³⁰ The politicians were: Balkenende (CDA), Bos (PvdA), Rutte (VVD), Marijnissen (SP), Halsema (GroenLinks), Stuger (Lijst Vijf Fortuyn), Pechtold (D66), Pastors (Eén NL), Wilders (Partij voor de Vrijheid), Rouvoet (ChristenUnie), Nawijn (Partij voor Nederland). Prime Minister Balkenende is best known (94 percent), while not so many know Stuger (22 percent). The Cronbach's alpha for the political interest scale is .801. The inter-item correlations are between -.343 and .950. Factor analysis shows that the items load on two factors. The first factor includes all politicians that had already been in parliament or government (factors loadings between .665 and .911), while the second factor includes three new politicians who were relatively unknown (factors loadings between .559 and .756).

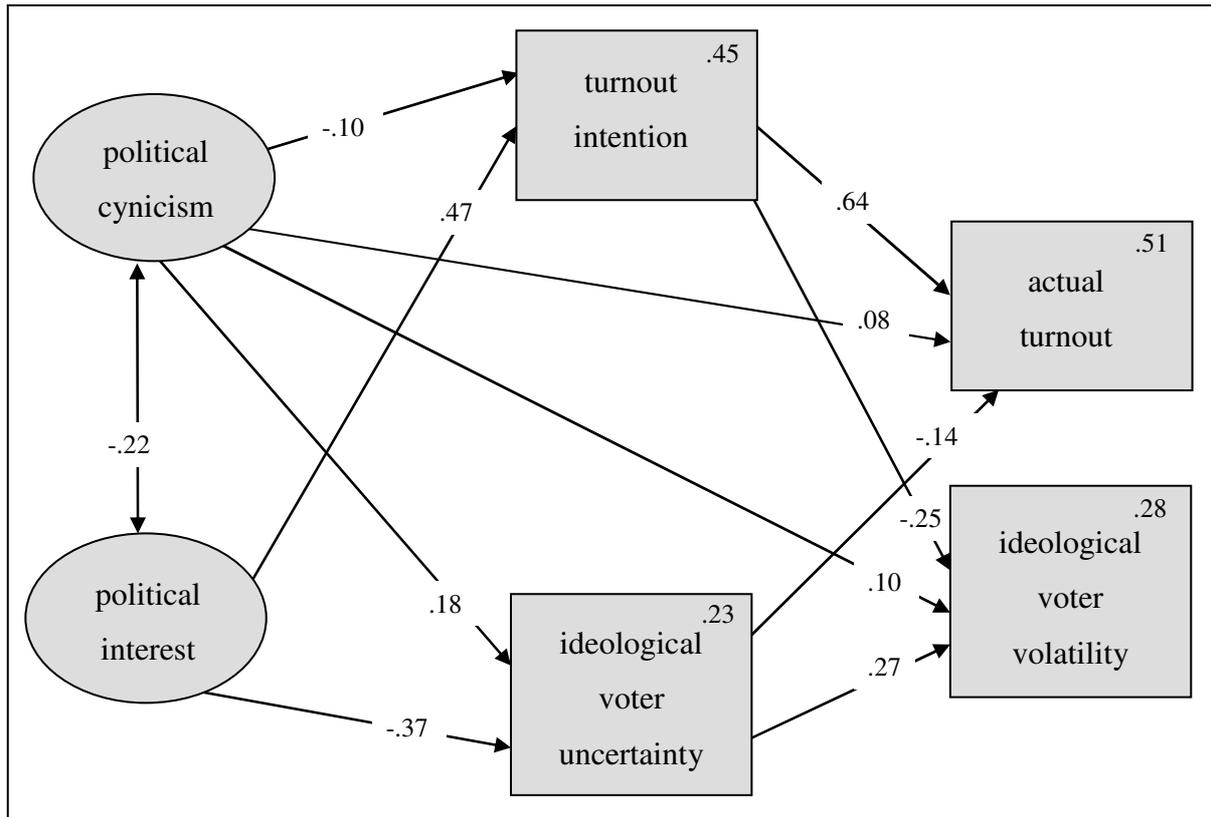
³¹ Although party identification is a useful predictor for voter behavior in majoritarian democracies with two-party systems, we think it should not be used in the setting of a multiparty system in consensus democracies like the Netherlands. Scholars studying German and Dutch voters found no evidence that party identification causes vote preference, or that the two concepts can even be distinguished genuinely (Kaase, 1976; Thomassen, 1976,

Furthermore, we controlled for socio-demographic factors likely to be related to voter behavior as well as political cynicism: age, gender and education.

Results

To test the causal relationships as hypothesized in the model in figure 3.1, we constructed a Structural Equation Model.

Figure 3.2: Structural Equation Model Explaining Voter Behavior



Note. The figure shows standardized regression coefficients, N=733. Only significant relationships are shown. Fit indices: CMIN=210.568, CMIN/DF=2.340, CFI=.962, PCFI=.506, RMSEA=.043, PCLOSE=.942.

Figure 3.2 visualizes the effects of political cynicism and political interest on ideological voter uncertainty and turnout intention (intermediary variables), as well as on ideological voter volatility and actual turnout (dependent variables). Because of its large effects on the intermediary variables and on political cynicism, political interest is shown too.

1996) and argue that although party identification does perform well in predicting vote choice in two-party systems, ideological identification is a more accurate predictor in multiparty systems (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983). Therefore we did not control for party identification, while we did include two measures tapping ideological orientation.

Figure 3.2 shows only significant effects, all effects on the intermediary and dependent variables are summarized in table 3.1 and 3.2.

Table 3.1: Direct, Indirect and Total Effects on Intermediary Variables

	ideological voter uncertainty			turnout intention		
	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects
independent variables:						
*gender (male)	0.03		0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.08
*age	-0.12		-0.12	0.08	0.03	0.12
*education	0.03		0.03	0.01	-0.01	0.00
*left right position	-0.05		-0.05	0.03	0.01	0.04
*political cynicism	0.18		0.18	-0.10	-0.05	-0.15
*political interest	-0.37		-0.37	0.47	0.10	0.57
*political knowledge	0.01		0.01	-0.05		-0.05
intermediary variables:						
*ideol. voter uncertainty				-0.27		-0.27
*turnout intention						

The SEM fits the data well; the main relationships we hypothesized are significant and work in the expected direction. The test values indicate a good fit, based on the criteria we described in the data section. CFI is above .90 (CFI =.962) and PCFI is above .50 (PCFI=.506), while RMSEA is below 0.05 (RMSEA=.043) and PCLOSE is above .50 (PCLOSE=.942). For reasons of presentational clarity, the measurement models for latent variables as well as the effects of control variables are displayed in Appendix G. The measurement models of political cynicism and political interest adequately represented the data: the standardized factor loadings were between .63 and .75 for political cynicism and between .57 and .75 for political interest.

As we predicted, political cynicism positively affected ideological voter uncertainty (.18), which suggests that cynicism makes citizens hesitate which party they should vote for. This provides support for our first hypothesis. Political cynicism directly as well as indirectly positively affected ideological voter volatility. The total effect of cynicism on volatility (.18) suggests that political cynicism makes citizens change between parties, this supports our second hypothesis. Overall, cynical citizens hesitate more often than average and consequently change more often.

VERSATILE CITIZENS

Ideological voter uncertainty and volatility are related to intended and actual turnout. Ideological voter uncertainty negatively affected turnout intention (-.27) and turnout (total effect .31). Those who hesitate which party to vote for also hesitate whether they should vote at all. Citizens that hesitate which party they should vote, more often decide not to vote, than those who do not hesitate about party choice. Also, turnout intention was related ideological voter volatility (-.25). Citizens that are not sure whether they should vote subsequently more often change to another party than citizens that strongly intend to vote.

Table 3.2: Direct, Indirect and Total Effects on Dependent Variables

	ideological voter volatility			turnout		
	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects
independent variables:						
*gender	0.00	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.04	0.09
*age	-0.11	-0.06	-0.17	-0.04	0.09	0.05
*education	-0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.03	0.00	-0.04
*left right position	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.02	0.03	0.02
*political cynicism	0.10	0.09	0.18	0.08	-0.12	-0.04
*political interest	0.00	-0.24	-0.24	0.02	0.42	0.44
*political knowledge	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.01
intermediary variables:						
*ideol. voter uncertainty	0.27	0.07	0.33	-0.14	-0.17	-0.31
*turnout intention	-0.25		-0.25	0.65		0.65

Political cynicism negatively affected the intention to turnout (-.12), but there is no significant effect on actual turnout (total effect -.04). Cynicism is thus indirectly related to turnout. Cynicism induces hesitation to cast one's vote; it does not induce abstention from voting. In other word, politically cynical citizens more often hesitate whether they should vote, but they do not more often decide not to vote.

Some control variables had important effects too. All effects of control variables are included in Appendix G, only some are highlighted here. While political knowledge was only related to other control variables, political interest was strongly related to several variables in the model. At first, political interest is related to political cynicism (-.22), which means those who are politically cynical tend to be less interested and the other way around. Political interest was a strong negative predictor for ideological voter uncertainty (-.37). Interest did not directly affect ideological voter volatility, but there was a strong indirect effect (total

effect -.24). Also, it strongly affected turnout intention (.47) and indirectly affected actual turnout (total effect .44). This suggests that low interest makes citizens hesitate which party they should vote for and whether they should vote at all. Ideological orientation had no significant effects.

The demographic control variables education was not directly related to one of the intermediary or dependent variables. Education was related significantly with political cynicism, interest and knowledge (see Appendix G). Gender was only weakly related to turnout intention; males are somewhat more inclined to vote. Age was related to the intermediary and dependent variables, as well as to other variables. Age negatively affected ideological voter uncertainty (-.12) as well as ideological voter volatility (total effect -.17). Age positively affected turnout intention (.08), but it did not affect actual turnout. Finally, age is positively related to interest (.18), but not related to cynicism. Age appears to be an important variable for explaining citizens' attitudes and behavior. The younger citizens are, the less interested they are, the more likely they are to hesitate and change, and the lower their turnout intention is, while actual turnout is not lower. Also, younger citizens are not more politically cynical than older ones.

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between political cynicism on the one hand and ideological voter uncertainty and volatility on the other. Our results showed that political cynicism affects ideological voter uncertainty as well as volatility. Those who are politically cynical have more doubts about political actors' motives and competences and the political process as a whole. Because of these doubts they have greater difficulty in deciding which party to vote for and ultimately are more inclined to choose another party than during the previous elections. Also, politically cynical citizens are not only more than average inclined to change their party choice, they are also more hesitant whether they should vote at all, but they do not abstain from voting more often. Politically cynical citizens who want to give voice to their grievance seem to have two options: switching to another party or abstaining from voting, but they do not (yet) use the latter.

The effect of political cynicism on the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior was not studied before, but various scholars have shown that cynicism and distrust lead to lower interest and participation (Bennett, 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and affect vote choice (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). Although scholars disagree about

the exact nature of the relationship, most studies show that political cynicism affects voter behavior and our study concurs. Nevertheless, one effect of political cynicism is disputed, which is the effect on turnout. Disagreement exists about this effect, even among studies that were conducted in European consensual democracies. While Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) showed that distrust in party leaders had a negative longer-term effect on turnout during the 2002 Dutch national election campaign, De Vreese & Semetko (2002) showed that cynicism did not reduce turnout in the 2000 Danish EU referendum. In this chapter, we have shown that, while cynicism did not affect turnout, it did make citizens more hesitant whether they should vote. Although these three studies seem to contradict each other, they agree on the absence of a short-term effect of cynicism on turnout. If cynicism decreases turnout intention, this may however result in a longer-term decline of turnout. On the other hand it is also possible that cynicism changes citizens' attitudes towards voting; the act of voting may not be an indisputable given for these citizens, while in general they do vote.

Our results showed that age is an important for explaining political attitudes and behavior. Younger citizens are less interested, more uncertain and volatile, but not less trustful than then older citizens (or just equally cynical). Also, they are more hesitant to turn out to vote, but eventually they vote as often as older citizens. The picture arises of a generation in the process of experiencing what it is like to be a citizen. In these formative years in the life of young citizens, they become more interested, less cynical, and more inclined to participate (Binnema, et al., 2007). This is a very important stage in ones political life, in which the news media easily affect ones attitudes, as we found in Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, we study in more detail how news content can affect attitudes and behavior, as well as the differences among young citizens.

How to Value the Changes in Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior?

As stated above, the growth of political cynicism as well as voter uncertainty and volatility are often considered to be worrying. We would like to put these concerns into perspective. First, not only citizens change, but political parties change their ideological position as well. Based on election manifesto analyses (Pennings & Keman, 2003) and voter perception (Adriaansen, et al., 2005) scholars showed that, while traditional Dutch political parties moved to the political center, new parties emerged and subsequently old parties moved back. One may say that citizens hesitate and change because parties adapt their ideology. Second, with regard to consensus democracies were many citizens used to vote according to class and religious cleavages without making their own decision based on ideological

evaluations, the growth of voter uncertainty and volatility has been interpreted as a sign that citizens make a party choice more consciously than before (Rose & McAllister, 1986). Third, when citizens hesitate and change between parties this does not necessarily mean they hesitate and change between substantially different ideologies. While ties to individual parties have weakened, ties to the broader identities of left and right blocks are maintained and most citizens in multiparty consensus democracies switch within one block (Adriaansen, et al., 2005; Gallagher, et al., 2005). Thus, while citizens are more uncertain and volatile in their voter behavior, most of them are not “adrift”. Nevertheless, there is a group that does ‘float from left to right’ or does not vote at all. If this group is growing, we should indeed be worried.

Concerning political cynicism, one has to consider that it is not mutually exclusive with political interest. De Vreese (2005) showed that there is a positive relationship between political sophistication and cynicism. He suggests cynicism might be little more than an indication of an involved and critical citizenry. We would like to argue that it is the *combination* of political cynicism and low involvement that is potentially worrying. We have shown that, while political cynicism induces ideological voter volatility and uncertainty, political interest reduces it. The effect of cynicism can thus be softened or strengthened by interest and citizens that are most prone to ideological voter uncertainty and volatility might highly cynical *and* uninterested. Cynical and uninterested citizens that show high levels of ideological voter uncertainty and volatility seem to have turned their back to politics and the image of “a voter adrift” does apply to these citizens. However, we should confine the image of a voter adrift to this group and not include those citizens who are cynical but also interested. The last group shows uncertain and volatile voter behavior but does not roam from the left to the right.

Limitations and Lessons for Future Research

The results of this study are particularly relevant for consensus democracies with multiparty systems, in which cynical citizens could possibly drift from the left to the right end of the political spectrum. When higher levels of cynicism make citizens hesitate and change from left to right, which our data suggest, this could lead to higher levels of system instability in these countries. The broader implications of our results, however, also have relevance to majoritarian democracies. In majoritarian systems, citizens can generally choose between two parties: one leftist and one rightist. These citizens cannot switch between ideologically related parties, since there is no (serious) alternative. Cynical citizens who want to voice their

grievances have two options: either switching to the other party at the other side of the political spectrum or abstaining from voting. While hesitation to vote caused by cynicism does not lead to abstention from voting in the consensus democracy we studied, abstention will more likely be the consequence in majoritarian democracies, since in these systems the other party often is no possible alternative for citizens that want to vote according to their ideology. When interpreting research results, we think it important to be aware of the differences between these political systems.

For the construction of the values of the ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, we have used the left-right position as a proxy for ideological position. Although it is the most often used indicator for an ideological position, we acknowledge that the left-right dimension is not the only relevant dimension. Traditionally, most European societies were divided by a class cleavage, and some countries also by another cleavage, such as a religious one in the Netherlands. Recently, Kriesi, et al. (2006; 2008) have shown that the electoral space in the Netherlands and many other European countries now consists of an economic and a cultural dimension, which both run from an open attitude and integration to a closed attitude and demarcation. According to Kriesi, et al., on the economic dimension the protectionist national market is opposed to the neoliberal free market with open borders and the cultural dimension entails a cosmopolitan multicultural view as opposed to a culture-protectionist one. Although not all scholars agree on the exact nature of the economic and cultural dimension, and some include religion as a third dimension, several authors have confirmed the existence of these two dimensions in voter preferences (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Pellikaan, et al., 2007; Pellikaan, et al., 2003; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009), although some argue that political parties are still positioned on one economic dimension (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Although we think that the inclusion of the economic left-right position is good first step to improve the voter uncertainty and volatility measures, future research should consider integrating both the economic and cultural dimension in a measure.

Obviously, a statistical model can never enable us to reach a final conclusion about the direction of causality. Our results make it plausible that cynicism causes voter uncertainty and volatility. Nevertheless, other possibilities might be plausible as well. Reversed causality seems at least counterintuitive. Perhaps both developments of grown political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility fit into a wider perspective of increased variability in politics: there might be another development that induces both. One can think of a “supply side” change in the political culture, when political parties change their strategies and position and citizens react on it. Also there might be “demand side” social changes that incline a general

instability. These limitations notwithstanding, this is a first study linking political cynicism with ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, and at the same times gives insights on the broader relationship between political attitudes and voter behavior.

Chapter 4

**A MIXED REPORT:
THE EFFECTS OF STRATEGIC AND SUBSTANTIVE NEWS CONTENT
ON POLITICAL CYNICISM AND VOTING**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,
co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.*

Abstract

This chapter examines the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism, turnout intention and voter uncertainty, drawing on two experiments ($n = 451$, 18–25 year-olds). We found that among lower political knowledgeable citizens, all news content induces turnout intention, but strategic news content also induces cynicism. For the higher knowledgeable citizens, we found that the combination of strategic and substantive news content slightly decreases cynicism and that substantive news makes these citizens reconsider their vote choice. Our results suggest that the effects of news content are not either stronger for lower knowledgeable citizens or for the higher knowledgeable: some effects are stronger among the first group and other effects are stronger among the second. Remarkably, we only found favorable or neutral effects among the higher knowledgeable, while we found both favorable and unfavorable effects among the lower knowledgeable.

Introduction

To most citizens, the media are important sources of political information, as are the conversations they have with acquaintances who also receive information from the media (Graber, 1988, 2001; Mutz, 1998). In recent years, evidence suggests that media reporting has changed: substantive news has become less prevalent as strategic news becomes more prevalent and polls are published regularly (e.g. Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008a; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Scholars worry about the unfavorable effects that this shift may have and indeed found that strategic news coverage can induce political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002) and reduce voter turnout (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). In Chapter 2, we found that substantive news content may have favorable effects; it can reduce cynicism on the part of younger citizens.

To further explore the effects news of content on political cynicism and voter behavior, this chapter draws on two experiments conducted during a local election campaign. We both study the potentially unfavorable effects of strategic news content and the potentially favorable effects of substantive news content. However, often news items do not consist of either strategic or substantive news, but they contain a combination of both. It is therefore highly relevant to determine the effects of strategic and substantive news content separately, as well as combined, which we both do in this chapter and which was not done before.

By studying the effects on both cynicism and voter behavior, we aim to obtain a bigger picture of news media effects on attitudes and behavior (see also the Introduction of this dissertation). Many scholars who study the effects of news use on voter behavior concentrate on turnout (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a; Min, 2004; Schuck & De Vreese, 2009; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). We propose to add another aspect of voter behavior: uncertainty (see also Chapter 3). Nowadays, citizens hesitate more and longer which party to vote for than a few decades ago (Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Surprisingly, the effects of different sorts of news content on voter uncertainty were not studied before.

In several studies, political knowledge was found to be an important moderator of media effects. The evidence is mixed however: some scholars find stronger effects for low knowledgeable respondents (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), while others find stronger effects for high knowledgeable respondents (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Nelson, et al., 1997). We argue that both may be true: some effects are larger for the lower knowledgeable, while other effects are larger for the higher knowledgeable. We argue that the unfavorable effects of

strategic news may be larger for lower knowledgeable citizens, while the favorable effects of substantive news may be larger for higher knowledgeable citizens.

This study focuses on younger citizens. They lack political experience and did not yet have the opportunity to develop stable attitudes and behavior, since politics is relatively new to them (Jennings & Niemi, 1978). Young people cannot yet rely on a broad base of knowledge they gathered in the past; consequently it is relatively hard for them to place a news item in a broader context (Graber, 2001; Lau & Redlawsk, 2008). The influence of parents and school decreases and peers – such as friends, colleagues and the media – become more important. Young citizens are therefore susceptible to news media information (McLeod & Shah, 2009; Sears, 1983; Sears & Valentino, 1997). Recently, some scholars studied the relationship between news use and political cynicism and found effects among the young (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), while we even found effects *only* among younger people (see Chapter 2). For this reason we focus on younger citizens in the age of 18 to 25 years old, who undergo their first voting experiences.

Unfavorable Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior

Many scholars who have studied the effects of media content on political attitudes and behavior have focused on unfavorable effects. In these studies, attitudes and behavior were linked to a variety of media content, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative coverage (Min, 2004; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996), and strategic frames in news coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). In this chapter, we focus on the latter: strategic frames in news coverage about political actors (politicians and political parties).

Framing concerns the way information is expressed, in which context information is placed and which aspects are emphasized (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Iyengar & McGrady, 2005). A framing effect occurs when emphasis on specific considerations causes an individual to focus on these considerations when forming his or her opinion (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). These effects can either be caused by an issue-specific frame which pertains to a specific topic or event or by a generic frame which is more general in nature and can pertain to all news topics (De Vreese, et al., 2001; De Vreese, 2003). In this study we focus on the effects of all strategic news content, which is a generic frame.

According to Cappella & Jamieson, *strategic news coverage* includes coverage of political gains and losses (often based on poll results), the power struggle between political

actors, their performance and the public perception of their performance. Strategic news also includes horserace or game-oriented news and often words of warfare and (sports) games are used (Jamieson, 1992 in: Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Other scholars have supplemented this with the electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalition formation and non-substantive attacks of one political actor on another (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). Metacoverage – stories about the role of the news media itself and about political actors' efforts to influence the media (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Esser & D'Angelo, 2003, 2006) – is also regarded as a feature of modern news reporting that is related to strategic news, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Cappella & Jamieson (1997) suggested that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political participation, a hypothesis which they have called the “spiral of cynicism”. Citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, as well as for an interpretation of the context in which they place the information (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). News reporting in the media is to a high extent defined by the strategic frames that provide meaning to political events and political actors' behavior. When the media mainly report the strategies political actors pursue in order to gain or affirm their positions, and their motives are reduced to their individual interests, citizens may start to believe that political actors primarily act in their own self-interest. In this way, strategic news coverage may induce political cynicism. In other words, strategic framing in terms of political actors' personal interest instead of the public interest, results in political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Also, since political actors are believed to act in their own interest, citizens may believe it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions and this may reduce their willingness to turn out (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, based on extant research, we hypothesize that *strategic news content induces cynicism (H1a) and reduces turnout intention (H1b)*.

Several scholars have found evidence for these hypotheses; they have shown that strategic news coverage unfavorably affects political attitudes: it induces political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, *et al.*, 2001) and reduces turnout intention (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001), although not equally for all citizens. These results have been put into perspective. In Chapter 2 we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism and De Vreese (2004) found that effects are short lived and nonexistent over time. Others found that effects on cynicism and turnout intention are contingent on other factors; they found that the effects are moderated by personal characteristics (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001) and contingent on the level of strategy

reporting in the news (De Vreese, 2005). The results of extant studies are mixed however and as we show in the next section, the media are not only attributed unfavorable effects, but favorable effects as well.

Favorable Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior

While unfavorable effects of media content have been studied extensively, only recently there has been attention for the favorable effects of media content. News coverage that may have favorable effects is substantive news content, also called issue news. Substantive news content provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). While strategic news may remind citizens about the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes, substantive news may remind citizens about the issues political actors try to solve and about their societal goals and viewpoints. For this reason, substantive news may reduce cynicism and induce turnout, while strategic news may induce cynicism and reduce turnout. Therefore, we hypothesize that *substantive news content reduces cynicism (H2a) and induces turnout intention (H2b)*.

There is evidence on the effects of substantive news content on cynicism and turnout. De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006a) showed that the use of news outlets with high levels of political content increases turnout intention. Likewise, in Chapter 2 we linked content analysis data to survey data and indeed found a negative relationship between substantive news and political cynicism, specifically among young citizens. Also, Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that strategic content leads to higher cynicism and lower turnout intention than issue news. Contrary to these findings, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. We conclude that the evidence is mixed and limited.

The Effects of News Content on Voter Uncertainty

While many scholars studied the effects of news framing on turnout (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a; Min, 2004; Schuck & De Vreese, 2009; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), we would like to add another aspect of individual voter behavior: uncertainty. As shown in the Introduction, citizens more frequently hesitate which political party they should vote for (uncertainty) and consequently more often do not vote for the same party in two successive elections (volatility) (Drummond, 2006; Gallagher, et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Media may have a role in this increased voter uncertainty and we therefore think it is relevant to explore the effects of different sorts of news content on this phenomenon.

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Some studies on volatility yield useful insights. Söderlund (2008) studied retrospective voting and found that dissatisfaction with the performance of governmental parties is an important reason to switch to another party during the next elections, while satisfaction is a reason to remain loyal. He concludes that policy issues matter when citizens are making a decision whom to vote for. Since citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, it is likely that they obtain the information about policy issues from the media and that the media can therefore induce hesitation and change. Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder (1998) studied electoral volatility and found that on an aggregate level issue news induces electoral volatility for two reasons. First, they found that media attention for issues owned by a specific party induces citizens to choose that party. Second, they found that when the media attribute a specific issue position to a party which resembles a citizen's issue position, this induces the citizens to choose that party. In this way substantive information can dissatisfy citizens with the party they wanted to vote for and induce hesitation. Likewise, substantive information can satisfy citizens with the party they wanted to vote for and also reduce hesitation.

The effects of strategic news on voter uncertainty have not been studied before. Yet if strategic news indeed induces citizens to think that political actors act in their own interest and that it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions, this may make them hesitate about their voting choice. If there is no party which can be trusted, it is much harder to choose. Strategic news can in this case induce uncertainty. However, the idea that no party can be trusted can also make citizens decide to always vote on the same party, because it does not matter which party is in office and in this way strategic news can reduce uncertainty.

In summary, it is hard to predict the effects of substantive and strategic news on voter uncertainty and because it was not studied before, we therefore formulate two open research questions: *(R1) what is the effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty and (R2) what is the effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty?*

Mixed Content, Mixed Effects?

Often, news items do not consist of either strategic or substantive news, but of a combination of both (see Chapter 2). Therefore, we also study the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in one news item, which was not done before. Cappella & Jamieson (1997) studied the effects of exposure to both a news item with substantive information and a news item with strategic information. In one of their studies, they found that the effect of a strategic frame on cynicism was mitigated by an issue frame. Thus, the net

effect seemed to be the sum of the positive effect of strategic news and the negative effect of substantive news. This net effect on cynicism can either be zero when the size of the effects of strategic and substantive news is equal; the effect can be positive when the effect of strategic news is stronger or it can be negative when the effect of substantive news is stronger.

The effect of a news item with both a strategic and substantive content is not necessarily the same as the effect of two items which both contain one of the frames. The combination of both frames in one item may lead to a different interaction. It could be that one of the frames is dominant and that for instance either strategic news always makes citizens more cynical or that substantive news always makes them less cynical. Also, it is possible that the effects of the combination are not the same for attitudes and behavior. Since it is hard to predict what the exact effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in one item will be, we have formulated an open research question: *(R3) what is the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content?*

Political Knowledge as a Moderator of Media Effects

Political knowledge is regarded an important individual level moderator of media effects, but scholars disagree about the direction of this moderation (De Vreese & Lecheler, forthcoming). Some argue that low knowledgeable citizens are more easily affected by news use. For citizens who possess high knowledge, one news item has less impact because it is integrated into a larger existing base of information. Also, high knowledge provides context for interpreting a news item and enables citizens to come up with opposing arguments. Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) therefore argued that less knowledgeable citizens have weaker longer-term internal motivations for their political attitudes and behavior. Others have argued the opposite, that higher knowledgeable citizens are more easily affected by news use. High knowledge facilitates the processing of a news item; since higher knowledgeable citizens make sense of a news item more easily, a news item will have more impact.

The empirical evidence on the moderating effects of political knowledge is mixed as well. Schuck & De Vreese (2006) studied support for EU enlargement and found that citizens with lower levels of political knowledge were susceptible to news frames and more specifically risk frames. Haider-Markel & Joslyn (2001) studied the effects of frames on opinion about gun laws and also found larger effects on low knowledgeable citizens. Likewise, Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that the effect of strategic news on confidence in government and turnout is largest among the least sophisticated citizens – although these authors used education as a proxy for sophistication. Other scholars found

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larger effects for high knowledgeable citizens. Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson (1997) studied the effects of issue frames on opinion and found that more sophisticated citizens were more likely to be affected. Krosnick & Brannon (1993) studied the effects of media priming of the Gulf crisis on presidential evaluations and also found that citizens with higher levels of political knowledge were more susceptible. Druckman & Nelson (2003) studied the effects of issue specific frames on support for a reform bill and found higher effects among more knowledgeable citizens as well.

In summary, we conclude that the effect of knowledge as a moderator is not clear. This can partly be explained by the fact that both the independent and dependent variables in these studies vary. An additional reason may be that the effect is not unidirectional: some effects are larger among lower knowledgeable citizens, while other effects are larger among higher knowledgeable citizens. We would like to argue that the unfavorable effects of strategic news are larger among lower knowledgeable citizens – which is what Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) found – while the favorable effects of substantive news are larger among higher knowledgeable citizens – which was not studied before. While higher knowledgeable citizens have enough context to put a strategic news item into perspective, lower knowledgeable citizens may more easily come to the conclusion that political actors act in their own interest, which in turn affects their attitudes and behavior in an unfavorable manner. Substantive news on the other hand may have a larger impact on high knowledgeable citizens, who can make sense of this information more easily, add it to the knowledge they already have and in this way substantive news can affect their attitudes and behavior in a favorable manner.

We aim to test these arguments and hypothesize that: *(H3a) the unfavorable effects of strategic news content are stronger among citizens with lower levels of knowledge, and (H3b) the favorable effects of substantive news content are stronger among citizens with higher levels of knowledge.* As mentioned before, it is debatable whether voter uncertainty is unfavorable or favorable and therefore we do not include an expectation on knowledge as a moderator of the effect of news content on uncertainty.

Data and Method

Design and Procedure

To investigate the effects of substantive and strategic news, we use an experiment. In a post-test only, between-subjects experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) a news report with a substantive frame, (2) a news report with a

strategic frame, (3) a news report with a strategic and substantive frame and (4) no news report for the control group. We chose a between-subjects design, because we wanted to compare experimental conditions, we did not aim to determine within-subject change before and after exposure.

We conducted two online survey experiments, which were comparable, only the policy issue in the stimulus material differed. In both experiments, all respondents first completed a pre-test questionnaire to measure the control variables. Second, respondents in condition 1, 2 and 3 read a news report containing one of the frames, the respondents in condition 4 (the control group) did not read a news report. Finally, all respondents answered the post-test questionnaire to map their levels of political cynicism.

Data collection. We used the period before the March 2010 local elections in Amsterdam as our research venue. Our survey data were collected by the department for research and statistics of the city of Amsterdam in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam, in February 2010. We selected a representative sample of young citizens in the age of 18 to 25 years old, who were allowed to vote in local elections for the first or second time in their life. The respondents were selected from the Register Office of the City of Amsterdam. The selected respondents received a letter to participate in an online questionnaire, which means that they filled out the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. Of these selected respondents, $n = 451$ respondents participated in one of the experiments.³² A between-group comparison of the control variables revealed no between-group difference and therefore successful randomization on several control variables, except age.³³ For this reason we controlled for age in our analysis.

Stimulus Material. In order to increase the external validity of the experiment, we used the same structure as newspaper reports in the Amsterdam based newspaper *Het Parool* have. Also, the newspaper reports were written by a scholar who has worked as a copy editor. For both experiments we made a version for each of the three conditions: a report with a substantive frame, a report with a strategic frame and a report with strategic and substantive frame. For each version, the title and the introduction paragraph were identical. The other paragraphs were different, but we tried to limit the differences between condition 1 and 3 as

³² The response rate was 10.26 percent ($n = 451$). We do not perceive this as a problem however. First, representativeness does not increase monotonically with response rates. Second, since we aim to study relationships instead of for example the level of political cynicism, variance is the primary precondition, instead of representativeness (Krosnick, 1999).

³³ No significant variation in cell counts was found for gender ($M = 1.59$, $SD = .492$, $p = .85$), education ($M = 8.00$, $SD = 1.38$, $p = .51$), political knowledge ($M = 1.57$, $SD = .88$, $p = .32$) and political interest ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .63$, $p = .75$). Significant variation in cell counts was found for age ($M = 21.94$, $SD = 2.30$, $p = .000$).

well as between condition 2 and 3 as much as possible. All news reports were of similar length.

The newspaper report in each experiment comprised coverage of an issue that was linked to the local election campaign. Recently, scholars have argued that the importance of the topic in the stimulus material can affect the size of framing effects and although the effect of the topic is ambiguous, it is clear that the issue can affect the framing effects and we for this reason we chose a high importance as well as a low importance issue.³⁴ A poll conducted by collected the department for research and statistics of the city of Amsterdam revealed that education was the most important policy issue for citizens in Amsterdam and for Experiment A we therefore chose this as a high importance issue (see Appendix I). For Experiment B we chose cycling policy as a low importance issue, to which respondents can relate nevertheless (see Appendix J). Almost every young citizen in Amsterdam has a bike and can relate to the topic, but it is not considered highly important.

Manipulation Check. We conducted a pilot study on a different convenience sample (students, $n = 349$) to test the manipulation. After being exposed to the stimulus material, respondents were shown five statements and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements, their answers were ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). Two statements were used to measure the “substantiveness” of the reports: (1) the report was mainly about substantive policy issues and (2) the report dealt with politicians’ viewpoints on policies. These two items were combined in a scale of “substantiveness”. Three statements dealt with the “strategicness” of the newspaper report: (1) the report was about parties’ strategies to win the elections, (2) the report was about the political battle between parties and (3) the report was about gains and losses in the polls. The manipulation check revealed successful manipulation: the groups differed on the scales of substantiveness and strategicness, as well on the five separate items.³⁵ We could therefore consider the stimulus material to be appropriate and ascribe differences between groups in the post-test to the experimental manipulation.

³⁴ Haider-Markel & Joslyn (2001) argued that attitudes towards an issue are stronger when a person attaches more meaning to it and therefore high salience issues have stronger framing effects. While Haider-Markel & Joslyn only studied high salience issues, Lecheler, De Vreese, & Slothuus (2009) found results that contradicted their argument: that low importance issue had large effects, while a high importance issue had no effects. Although the exact effect of high and low importance issues is ambiguous, it is clear that the issue can affect the framing effects and we for this reason we chose a high importance as well as a low importance issue.

³⁵ The perception of substantiveness differed significantly among Group 1 ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.08$) ($p < 0.01$), Group 2 ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.00$) and Group 3 ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.06$). The perception of strategicness differed significantly ($p < 0.01$) among Group 1 ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .93$), Group 2 ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .92$) and Group 3 ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.13$).

Measures

Political cynicism. We used seven statements as used in Chapter 2 and 3 to measure political cynicism: (1) politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver, (2) the mayor and aldermen are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than abilities to become city-councilor, (4) political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion, (5) politicians do not understand what matters to for the city, (6) politicians are capable of solving important problems and (7) most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing. The items in Chapter 2 and 3 were used to tap political cynicism about national political actors and therefore we translated item 2, 3 and 5 to the local level. The answers on the items were ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). The seven items loaded on one dimension and were recoded to a scale of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .78$). The distribution of answers on the seven items is reported in Appendix K.

Voter behavior. Turnout intention is measured by asking respondents to indicate with a percentage between 0 and 100 what the chance is that they will actually vote in the upcoming elections ($M = 80.73$, $SD = 29.50$). Voter uncertainty is measured by asking respondents what they would vote if the elections were held today. Those who mentioned a party were coded 0, while those who said they do not know were coded 1, those who said they would not vote were coded as missing (17.4 percent was undecided).

Political knowledge. The political knowledge scale is based on two open questions: which political parties constitute the Court of Mayor and Aldermen (score ranges between 0 and 2 parties) and what is the name of the Mayor (score ranges between 0 and 1). These questions were combined to a political knowledge score that ranges from 0 to 3 ($M = 1.57$, $SD = .88$).

Results

Table 4.1 shows the per condition means of political cynicism, for both experiments, as well as separately for Experiment A and Experiment B. Participants in the strategy condition ($M = 4.11$) expressed significantly higher levels of political cynicism than those in the substance and strategy condition ($M = 3.73$, $p < .01$) and those in the control group ($M = 3.81$, $p < .05$). This suggests that strategic news content induces cynicism and thus provides support for H1a. Participants in the substance condition did not express lower levels of cynicism than the control group and therefore H2a is not supported. Remarkably, respondents in the substance & strategy condition expressed the lowest levels of cynicism, especially in

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Experiment A, and while the differences with those in the strategy condition were significant, the difference with the control group was not significant. Nevertheless the results suggest that if news is both relevant in terms of issues and because parties emphasize the differences between them, this makes citizens most trustful about political actors.

Table 4.1: Political Cynicism and Turnout Intention by Experimental Condition

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
Political cynicism total	3.87 (.87)	4.11b (1.04)	3.73c (.94)	3.81x (.91)
*Experiment A: education	3.87 (.91)	4.27e (1.11)	3.61f (.80)	
*Experiment B: cycling	3.87 (.84)	3.95 (.95)	3.85 (1.05)	
Turnout intention 0-100 percent ¹	83.38 (26.12)	83.31 (28.43)	80.87 (29.05)	75.46 (33.45)
*Experiment A: education ²	85.48 (22.99)	81.00 (30.80)	80.36 (31.36)	
*Experiment B: cycling ³	80.98 (29.36)	85.63 (25.91)	81.34 (26.94)	

Note. Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). $n = 451$, Experiment 1 $n = 164$, Experiment 2 $n = 171$, control group $n = 116$. All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: bc, ef, ex $p < .01$, bx $p < .05$.

¹ The average of the three experimental groups ($M = 82.50$, $SD = 33.45$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

² The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment A ($M = 82.29$, $SD = 28.54$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

³ The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment B ($M = 82.71$, $SD = 27.26$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

All experimental groups displayed higher levels of turnout intention than the control group: the average of the three experimental groups together ($M = 82.50$) differed significantly from that of the control group ($M = 75.46$, $p < .01$). We did not find support for H1b, and results suggest that perhaps H2b should be adapted: not only substantive news, but all news content induces turnout intention. The other way around, one can say that a lack of news will reduce turnout intention.

Table 4.2 shows the level of voter uncertainty. The participants in the substance condition had the highest level of voter uncertainty, while those in the strategy condition had the lowest level, but the differences with the control group were not significant. For this reason, the answers to R1 and R2 are only indicative. It suggests that there is a negative effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty (R1) and that strategic news induces citizens to think it does not matter who is representing them and consequently reduces voter uncertainty.

There was a positive effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty (R2) and this suggests that substantive information makes people think about politics and for this reason consider more alternatives to vote for.

Table 4.2: Voter Uncertainty by Experimental Condition

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
	%	%	%	%
Voter uncertainty	27 ^a	11 ^b	16	17
*Experiment A: education	27	16	12	
*Experiment B: cycling	27 ^g	6 ^h	19	

Note. Data entries are percentages. $n = 451$, Experiment 1 $n = 164$, Experiment 2 $n = 171$, control group $n = 116$. All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Reading example: 27 percent of the respondents in the substance condition were undecided which party to vote for, 73 percent did mention a party. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: $ab p < .01$, $gh p < .05$.

We expected the effects of media exposure to be larger for low importance issues than for high importance issues, and we therefore included a high as well as a low importance issue, to make sure the importance of a specific topic would not blur the results. We found mixed results: the effects on cynicism were larger for the high importance issue, while the effects on voter uncertainty were larger for the low importance issue. For turnout intention there was no clear difference.

Table 4.3 shows that with regard to our moderator, we found different results among high knowledgeable respondents than among low knowledgeable respondents. We expected larger unfavorable effects of strategic news among low knowledgeable respondents and larger favorable effects of substantive news among high knowledgeable respondents. This expectation was confirmed for the effect on cynicism. The low knowledgeable in the strategy condition expressed significantly higher cynicism ($M = 4.45$) than those in all other groups, while this effect was absent among the high knowledgeable. This provides support for H3a. There was no favorable effect of substantive news on cynicism, neither among the whole sample nor among the high knowledgeable. However, the high knowledgeable in the substance & strategy condition express lower cynicism than all other groups, this difference is not significant and therefore not enough to support H3b.

Table 4.3: Political Cynicism and Turnout Intention by Condition and Knowledge

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
Political cynicism				
*Low knowledge	3.92 ^a (.88)	4.45 ^b (1.01)	3.89 ^c (.93)	3.85 ^d (.97)
*High knowledge	3.76 (.87)	3.67 (.92)	3.47 (.90)	3.74 (.79)
Turnout intention 0-100 percent				
*Low knowledge ¹	78.36 (29.62)	80.22 ^j (28.02)	76.99 (29.75)	65.40 ^l (37.74)
*High knowledge ²	93.00 (13.35)	87.29 (28.73)	87.19 (27.01)	90.77 (16.69)

Note. Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B $n = 451$, low knowledge $n = 279$, high knowledge $n = 172$. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: ab, bc, bd, jl $p < .01$.

¹ The average of the three experimental groups for low knowledgeable respondents ($M = 78.47$, $SD = 29.06$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

² The average of the three experimental groups for high knowledgeable respondents ($M = 88.56$, $SD = 24.68$) does not differ significantly from the control group.

The favorable effect of all news on turnout intention was only visible among the lower knowledgeable, while there was no effect at all among the higher knowledgeable. This means that the favorable effect of all news on turnout was stronger for low knowledgeable respondents, which is contrary to what we expected in H3a. This may be explained by the effect that turnout intention was very high among all high knowledgeable respondents: there was no room left for an effect. We therefore conclude that the evidence for H3a is mixed.

Table 4.4: Voter Uncertainty by Condition and Knowledge

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
	%	%	%	%
Voter uncertainty				
*Low knowledge	28	16	23	23
*High knowledge	25 ^e	4 ^f	5 ^g	9 ^h

Note. Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B $n = 451$, low knowledge $n = 279$, high knowledge $n = 172$. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: ef, eg $p < .01$, eh $p < .05$.

We had no prior expectation for knowledge as a moderator of the effects of news on voter uncertainty. Table 4.4 reveals only significant effects among the high knowledgeable respondents: those in the substance condition differed significantly from those in all other

groups. This suggests that new information makes only higher knowledgeable citizens reconsider their party choice.

Our last research question concerns the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content (R3). With regard to cynicism, we found that those exposed to a combination of substantive and strategic news content expressed the lowest levels of cynicism. Although the differences with the control group were not significant, the differences with the group exposed to strategic news were significant and we therefore conclude that there is a small effect. We also saw that this difference only existed for the higher knowledgeable; due to the small sample size the difference was not significant, but the difference is nevertheless rather large. This suggests that combination of substantive and strategic news content has a decreasing effect on cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. For voter behavior, there was no effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content. We have summarized all the results in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Hypotheses, Research Questions and Results

Hypotheses and research questions	Results	
H1a: strategy → cynicism ↑	strategy → cynicism ↑	✓
H1b: strategy → turnout intention ↓	strategy → turnout intention ↑	×
R1: strategy → uncertainty?	<i>strategy → uncertainty ↓</i>	.
H2a: substance → cynicism ↓	substance → cynicism no effect	×
H2b: substance → turnout intention ↑	substance → turnout intention ↑	✓
R2: substance → uncertainty?	<i>substance → uncertainty ↑</i>	.
R3: combination of substance and strategy → ?	substance and strategy → turnout intention ↑	.
	<i>substance and strategy → cynicism ↓</i>	.
H3a: low knowledge: unfavorable effects strategy ↑	low knowledge: strategy → cynicism ↑	✓
	low knowledge: strategy → turnout intention ↑	×
H3b: high knowledge: favorable effects substance ↑	<i>high knowledge: substance and strategy → cynicism ↓</i>	✓
	high knowledge: substance → uncertainty ↑	.

Note. When results do not differ significantly from another experimental group, but not from the control group, results are written in italics. We indicated whether results provide support for the hypothesis (✓) or do not provide support for the hypothesis (×) or whether there was no hypothesis (.).

Discussion

This chapter used experiments to study the effects of substantive and strategic news content on political cynicism and voter behavior. We focused on younger citizens, because we think media effects are strongest among this group. We aimed to give balanced picture on media effects, which can be favorable and unfavorable. We found that strategic news content had an unfavorable increasing effect on cynicism, but only among the lower politically knowledgeable. When especially those who have low levels of knowledge are affected by strategic news coverage, then an increase of strategic news content in the media may lead to a spiral of cynicism among this group. On the other hand, we found that all news content had a favorable mobilizing effect on the lower knowledgeable: those exposed to news content expressed higher turnout intention than those not exposed to any news content. This is contrary to Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) who found demobilizing effects of strategic news, but in line with De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006a) who found mobilizing effects of news outlets with high levels of political information. While substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small favorable decreasing effect on cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. A news item which explains an issue and suggests this issue matters because parties disagree about it, makes higher knowledgeable more trustful. This suggests that one need not be worried about the effects of strategic news, as long as it is substantive as well; the combination of strategic and substantive news has no effect for the lower knowledgeable and a decreasing effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable.

Other results are less easily valued. We found that substantive news makes specifically the high knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. Voter uncertainty is not clearly favorable or unfavorable, but this result suggests that substantive news makes the high knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between parties, which can be interpreted as a favorable development. In the postwar period, voter uncertainty and volatility were low, because many citizens used to vote according to class and religious cleavages, without making their own decision based on ideological evaluations. Our finding yields support for Rose & McAllister's (1986) idea that the increase of voter uncertainty and volatility is a sign that citizens make a party choice more consciously than before. Substantive news seems to stimulate this conscious choice, especially among the higher knowledgeable. On the individual level, we need not worry about these unstable voters. Nevertheless, an increase of hesitating and changing voters can have unfavorable consequences on the system

level. Large shifts in the percentage of votes for each party during elections can make the political system unstable and frequently changing parties in government can erode the stability of governmental policies, especially in consensus democracies with coalition governments.

Differences Between the Higher and Lower Knowledgeable

While earlier studies suggested effects of news content are either stronger for lower knowledgeable citizens or for the higher knowledgeable, we expected that some effects are stronger for the first group and other effects for the second group. Indeed some effects only existed among the lower knowledgeable: the unfavorable increasing effect of strategic news on cynicism as well as the favorable increasing effect of all news on turnout. Other effects only existed among the higher knowledgeable: the favorable decreasing effect of the combination of substantive and strategic news on cynicism as well as the increasing effect of substantive news on voter uncertainty, suggesting they consciously reconsider their choice. This means that we can conclude that knowledge moderates the effects of news content in a different way than most previous studies have suggested. Not all effects are larger for one group, but some effects are larger for the lower knowledgeable and other effects are higher for the higher knowledgeable.

We found both favorable and unfavorable effects on the lower knowledgeable, while we only found favorable effects on the higher knowledgeable. This is remarkable: especially lower knowledgeable seem to be prone to unfavorable media effects. This finding may be contingent on the aspects of citizens' attitudes and behavior which we have studied – media may have unfavorable effects on other aspects of higher knowledgeable citizens' attitudes and behavior. However, if it is true that media specifically affect the lower knowledgeable in an unfavorable manner, this may be a problem for democratic systems in the future.

The differences between lower and higher knowledgeable are increasing. A few decades ago, almost all citizens watched political news, not because they liked it, but because they were confronted with it on the same network as their favorite shows, an effect which was called the “trap effect” (Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002; 2004). Nowadays many more networks are available and consumers can choose to watch networks that do not broadcast political information or only political information related to a specific ideology. Prior (2007) showed for the US that the fragmentation of the media market resulted in a growing gap between more highly educated news junkies on the one hand and the rest of the citizens who consume less politically substantive information on the other hand. The same pattern is probably visible in many European countries. We have shown that any news induces participation among the

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lower knowledgeable and a lack of political information may therefore reduce participation among this group. In an experimental study, information exposure is controlled, while in the real world, citizens can choose to use information – or not to use it. Many lower knowledgeable citizens often choose the latter. If lower knowledgeable citizens consume little political information, this little information may have large effects on their levels of cynicism, either favorable or unfavorable. In this way information can lead to a spiral of cynicism – but also reverse it. For this reason it matters a lot which information they consume – substantive, strategic or both.

Conclusion

This dissertation studied the effects of strategic and substantive news content within different campaign contexts in the Netherlands. In many democracies political cynicism has grown, voter behavior has become less stable and turnout fluctuates. The media are blamed in part for these developments and indeed they have unfavorable effects. At the same time, the media have favorable effects as well, as we show in this dissertation. By showing a balanced picture of these effects, we aim to add to the academic and public debate on the role of the media. The studies in this dissertation suggest news content affects cynicism as well as voter behavior, but not equally for all citizens in all situations. In the following, we first summarize our findings, before elaborating on the consequences of our findings. We have summarized the main concepts of this dissertation in Appendix A.

Summary of the Research Findings

Before answering our research questions, we started in *Chapter 1* by scrutinizing what trust and distrust/cynicism means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our literature review revealed two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. Using open-ended and closed-ended questions, we confirmed these two main dimensions. However, our results also showed that these dimensions consist of more elements than earlier research suggested. Political actors' *reliability* concerns general feelings of their honesty, but also the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country and whether political actors are responsive to the public. Political actors' *competence* concerns general aspects of competence, but also being decisive in taking care of problems and being aware of important problems. Moreover, we found that reasons for negative attitudes are not the same as reasons for positive attitudes towards political actors: persons with negative attitudes had more specific arguments than those with positive attitudes. To our knowledge, this chapter was the first to use open-ended questions to study what citizens mean when they express positive or negative attitudes towards political actors.

In *Chapter 2*, we studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism. In a study combining a content analysis of news media with a panel survey, we tested the unfavorable effects of strategic content as well as the favorable effects of substantive content. We found no across the board effect of strategic news, which is contrary to what we expected based on extant literature. We did find a clear negative effect of

substantive news on political cynicism, but only among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds). In other words: substantive news can make younger citizens less cynical. This finding is in line with extant research that showed that older citizens' attitudes are relatively stable and are not easily changed during a campaign, while younger citizens are still developing their attitudes and can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

In *Chapter 3*, we studied the effect of political cynicism on voter behavior. We argued that cynical citizens can show their discontent in two ways: either by choosing another party or by not voting at all. We therefore studied the effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout. Additionally, we argued that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. For this reason, we included the similarity of the parties a person hesitates or changes between in our measures for voter uncertainty and volatility. Our results showed that cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, we found that cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout.

In *Chapter 4*, we again studied the effects of news content on political cynicism, but this time in an experimental design and furthermore focused on younger citizens (18-25 year-olds). Also, we studied the effects of news content on two aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and voter uncertainty. Additionally, we studied the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive content in one news item. While strategic news content had a positive effect on cynicism for lower knowledgeable persons and substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small negative effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable. With regard to voter behavior, we found that any news content increases lower knowledgeable person's turnout intention, while substantive news makes the higher knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. This chapter is the first to study the effect of a news item that combines substantive and strategic news.

We aimed to answer two main research questions in this dissertation. The *first research question* was to what extent strategic and substantive news content affect political cynicism. Our studies yielded a mixed picture. We found a negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism for younger citizens in Chapter 2, and found in Chapter 4 that specifically the combination of substantive and strategic news negatively affects political cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 where we combined a content analysis with a survey, we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism,

while we found a positive effect of strategic news on political cynicism in the experimental study in Chapter 4 for lower knowledgeable persons. The results of Chapter 4 are in line with other experimental studies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001) as well as with a study that combined a content analysis with a survey (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). The latter focused on issue-specific strategic news as well as issue-specific cynicism, while we focused on all strategic news content and cynicism towards political actors in general, which makes it hard to compare the studies.

There may be several reasons for the different results of the experimental designs in Chapter 4 and other studies on the one hand and the content analysis and panel survey design in Chapter 2 on the other hand. The results are probably partly related to methodological differences. In the first design, the short-term effects of exposure to one specific news item or at most a few are measured, while in the second design, the longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content are measured. Also, in the first design, all respondents are randomly exposed to specific news content, while in the second design, respondents select the news content themselves.

Apart from these methodological differences, we also think that the nature of strategic and substantive news have affected the results. Does strategic news only have a short-term effect on political cynicism which vanishes quickly? Does substantive news only have a longer-term effect which builds up after repeated exposure? Both may well be the case. On the short-term, when citizens are exposed to strategic news that mainly reports the strategies political actors pursue, this may induce cynicism. Exposure to substantive news may need some time to build up: if citizens are repeatedly exposed to media that report substantive issues about political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, this may slowly induce positive feelings about these actors.

Does strategic news induce cynicism only when substantive news is lacking or limited? In the real world, news is both strategic and substantive in nature. In the Netherlands, both kinds of news content are balanced (De Vreese, 2008). Moreover, as we have shown in Appendix E, all news outlets combine strategic and substantive news. On the long run, citizens are therefore exposed to a combination of both news frames. As we have shown in Chapter 4, substantive news neutralizes the unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism; the combination of strategic and substantive news even lowers cynicism. This is partly in line with Cappella and Jamieson (1997) who found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. This indicates that strategic content only leads to cynicism if it replaces substantive news, whereas in many countries,

strategic frames are added to substantive news. We think that the importance of substantive news is a noticeable contribution to the literature on the relationship between news content and cynicism.

The *second research question* we aimed to answer in this dissertation was to what extent political cynicism affects voter behavior. We have focused on several aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and actual turnout as well as ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Several authors have shown that cynicism reduces turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). We found that cynicism induces turnout intention in the Netherlands, but it does not affect actual turnout. This may be explained by the fact that apart from abstention, dissatisfied citizens have another option in the Netherlands; they can choose between many different other parties. Indeed, cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Remarkably, the effects of cynicism on uncertainty and volatility have not been studied before. For understanding the effect of cynicism on the complete picture of voter behavior, we think this is an important addition to the literature, especially in consensus democracies with multiparty systems, which we pay attention to later on in this Conclusion.

We discussed the particular implications of each of our studies in each chapter. In the following, we would like to pay attention to some overarching implications. First, we make a few remarks about measuring media effects, political cynicism and voter behavior. Second, we discuss how the increase of political cynicism and changes in voter behavior should be evaluated. Third, we argue that researchers should focus both on favorable and unfavorable effects of news content. Fourth, we discuss the differences between majoritarian and consensus democracies with regard to our research questions. Fifth, we discuss the usefulness of studying media effects among younger citizens, for social scientific research as well as for society.

Measuring Media Effects, Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior

Measuring Political Cynicism and Trust

Scholars along with opinion leaders are worried about the increase of negative attitudes towards political actors. In order to be able to interpret these changes in the level of political cynicism or distrust, we should be able to determine what an increase of negative attitudes means. We therefore argue that we need a more precise measurement instrument of political cynicism, which fulfills two conditions. It should enable the researcher to distinguish

between different degrees of positivity or negativity and it should include statements about attitudes towards political actors' reliability as well as towards political actors' competence.

First, those who have a moderate degree of cynicism (or even only criticism) differ from those who are not cynical on the one hand and from those who are highly cynical on the other hand. A researcher should be able to determine how cynical citizens are and how many citizens are very cynical. Critics argued that the traditional Dutch cynicism items are not strong enough and are therefore not capable of distinguishing cynics from non-cynics (Dekker, et al., 2006). A measurement instrument should enable a researcher to distinguish between different degrees of positivity or negativity, not only between those who trust and those who distrust political actors. For this reason, we think that a measurement instrument should include several statements that differ in their degree of cynicism. Furthermore, we think that the items should not be dichotomous, but should be scale.

Second, we found that two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: attitudes towards political actors' reliability and attitudes towards political actors' competence (Aberbach, 1969; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). The closed-ended and open-ended questions we used in Chapter 1 confirmed the relevance of these two dimensions. The seven statements we used in Chapter 2 to test the dimensional structure of cynicism revealed that reliability and competence load on one dimension. Apparently, when asked about both dimensions, most cynical citizens confirm both and we consequently found a one dimensional structure, while when asked unaided, many citizens do not mention both. Based on our findings in Chapter 1 we therefore think that a measurement instrument should at least include the key elements of both dimensions, but preferably all.

With respect to *reliability*, a measurement instrument should map (1) general feelings of political actors' honesty, (2) to what extent respondents think that political actors hold their promises, (3) whether respondents think politicians are interested in what is best for the country instead of their own or special interests and (4) whether respondents think politicians are responsive to the public or only interested in their votes. With respect to *competence*, a measurement instrument should map (1) to what extent respondents think political actors are competent and able to do their job, (2) whether respondents think politicians are decisive in taking care of problems and (3) whether respondents think politicians are aware of important problems. When a measurement instrument includes all these elements, this enables us to show which aspect(s) of citizens' attitudes towards political actors become more negative. Have citizens become more cynical about political actors' reliability or about their

competence? And if it is related to their competence, which aspects do they feel specifically cynical about?

In Chapter 2, 3 and 4 we have build on the three-item scale used in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies and added four new statements. Our new measurement instrument fulfills both criteria, but could be improved. With regard to the first criterion, we had seven items that each had a four point scale: completely agree, agree, disagree and completely disagree. With regard to the second criterion, both reliability and competence were included. Six of the seven elements were included, only general feelings of political actors' honesty were missing. We included what we thought was a stronger statement (political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion), but a large majority of the respondents agreed with this statement (see Appendix H). Even the statement the least respondents agreed upon (ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested), was still confirmed by half of the respondents. In future research we should find a few statements to which only a minority of the respondents answers in a cynical way. Also, it is important to include both positively and negatively formulated items in scale. The positively formulated items we have added are competence items and we would suggest adding positively formulated reliability items as well.

Measuring Ideological Voter Uncertainty and Volatility

In addition to our remarks about the measurement of political cynicism, we would like to discuss voter uncertainty and volatility. In Chapter 3, we have argued that measurement instruments for voter uncertainty and volatility should included an ideological component. A citizen that hesitates and changes between ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. In a measurement instrument, hesitating between two ideologically related parties should therefore be regarded as a smaller hesitation than hesitating between non-related parties and changing between two related parties should be regarded as a "smaller change" than changing between non-related parties. We used the ideological left-right position as a proxy for the ideological position. By including the left-right position of the parties someone hesitates or changes between, one can show the scope of the hesitation or change.

The left-right position is the most often used indicator for an ideological position, but we acknowledge that the left-right dimension is not the only relevant dimension. Recently, several scholars have argued that next to the economic left right dimension, a cultural dimension has become important for explaining voter preferences (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008;

Kriesi, et al., 2008; Pellikaan, et al., 2007; Pellikaan, et al., 2003; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). This cultural dimension entails a cosmopolitan multicultural view as opposed to a culture-protectionist one. Unfortunately our data did not enable us to include the cultural dimension in our measures of ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Even without the inclusion of the cultural dimension, we think that the inclusion of the economic left-right position is good first step to improve the voter uncertainty and volatility measures. However, we think that future research should consider integrating both the economic and cultural dimension in a measurement instrument for ideological voter uncertainty and volatility.

A Multi-Methodological Research Design for Measuring the Effects of News Content

We would also like to make a remark about the multi-methodological research design we have employed to measure the effects of news content on political cynicism and voter behavior. In Chapter 2, we used a content analysis and panel survey design to study the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism. We estimated to what extent people are exposed to strategic and substantive news content and what the effect on cynicism is. In Chapter 4, we used an experimental design to study the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism as well as voter behavior. We exposed participants to different versions of the stimulus material (substantive / strategic / substantive and strategic / no stimulus material) and afterwards compared their level of political cynicism, turnout intention and voter uncertainty.

As we argued in the Introduction, the supplementary use of these methods leads to a more balanced assessment of media effects, because both methods have advantages as well as disadvantages. While an experimental design exactly measures short-term effects of forced exposure to a specific news item, a content analysis and panel survey design estimates longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content in news outlets that people select themselves. We saw that these two methods can lead to different results and tried to explain why the results differ. Future research should be conducted to find out the exact differences between the two methods.

Evaluating the Developments

In the Introduction we have shown that political cynicism and distrust have grown in the Netherlands and many other countries. While cynicism has grown, voter behavior has changed a lot. More citizens hesitate which party to vote for and make a choice just before the elections. Consequently more citizens choose different parties in two successive elections.

One can wonder how worrying these developments really are. This thesis can yield some insights into the nature of political cynicism and voter behavior.

Evaluating Political Cynicism

Should we be worried about the fact that about half of the respondents could be regarded as politically cynical? Is cynicism towards political actors a problem – or is a moderate level of cynicism a normal attitude and therefore inevitable? To answer these questions, we need some nuances. We need to know what cynicism means for citizens and whether specific parts of the electorate are cynical.

First, for the evaluation of political cynicism, it matters what it means for citizens. With regard to reliability, most citizens do not doubt political actors' honesty and integrity, and they are not afraid of corruption, but they think that political actors do not deliver what they promise and that they only care about their own interests. With regard to competence, most citizens do not think that politicians are incompetent and unable to fulfill their job, but they have the idea that politicians are not decisive in taking care of major problems and that they don't know what is important for the people. It could have been worse; citizens do not accuse politicians of the worst: a lack of integrity and total incompetence. Nevertheless, an image arises of an inward-looking political elite, which cares about its own interests, does not know what is important for ordinary people and does not fulfill promises. These feelings have been successfully exploited by populist parties in the past decades.

Some of the complaints are inherent to the political system of a consensus democracy, which we discuss in more detail later on in this Conclusion. In a system with coalition governments, even incumbent politicians cannot fulfill every promise, because they have to make compromises with other political parties in their coalition. Also, when confronted with a problem, they cannot quickly decide on a solution, because they have to negotiate with their partners. These system characteristics cannot easily be changed (and have advantages as well). In recent years, politicians in The Netherlands have put a lot of effort in showing the people they care about their interests, talking to them to get to know what is important for them. Unfortunately they have put little effort in explaining how the system works, what its advantages and disadvantages are, and that some side effects of the system are inevitable. At the same time, newly established parties gained votes just because they claim they care about the peoples' interests and they know what is important for them, like the LPF and the PVV in the Netherlands. Since these new parties position themselves as political outsiders and blame the establishment for neglecting the people, it is not very likely that they will restore peoples'

trust in political actors in general. Also, when these new parties take part in government, they also have to make compromises, which may disappoint their voters again.

Second, not all citizens can be fully satisfied, but when specific citizens are systematically underrepresented this may be a problem. A part of the cynical feelings can be explained by dissatisfaction with governmental policies, as we have shown in Chapter 1. Those with an “average” opinion are probably more often satisfied than those with a more deviant opinion. Leftist and rightist voters are more likely to be dissatisfied than voters in the political centre, since parties in the political centre are more often in government than leftist and rightist parties. Yet what if specific parts of the electorate systematically feel cynical and underrepresented? The consequence can be that these citizens decide not to participate in the democratic process anymore. If their opinions deviate systematically from other citizens’ opinions, the result can be that indeed they will be underrepresented in the democratic process. In the Netherlands, a large majority of the citizens turns out to vote in parliamentary elections. The high proportionality of the Dutch electoral system and the possibilities for new parties that follow from that may be a reason for this high turnout. We discuss the differences between proportional representation in consensus democracies and the disproportional election systems in majoritarian democracies in further detail later on.

Bovens & Wille (2009) referred in this respect to the importance of an educational gap in what they call “diploma democracy”. They argued that the Dutch political system is a meritocracy with a gap between self-confident well-educated citizens with access to political arenas and elites on the one hand and less educated citizens who feel disqualified and excluded from these arenas on the other hand. They speak of an “exclusion bias”: particular opinions are not represented and the lower educated endorse these opinions more often than the higher educated. Especially in the open consensus systems in most European democracies, this is often only a temporary misfit of representation. Recently, immigration restrictions and strong punishment belonged to the opinions that were underrepresented in the political arena (Bovens & Wille, 2009). Mostly higher educated political entrepreneurs have founded new parties all over Europe to fill this gap and represent opinions more popular among the lower educated, but certainly not absent among the higher educated. Yet, even when a representational gap is filled, a feeling of being underrepresented by the political elites can still remain.

More generally, when evaluating the level of political cynicism, we think it is relevant to keep in mind that cynicism interacts with other political attitudes, such as political interest and knowledge, which are also related to education. It is exactly a specific combination of

these attitudes that is potentially worrying. As argued in Chapter 3, political cynicism is not mutually exclusive with political interest. A politically cynical citizen can have a critical and constructive attitude towards political actors and have sufficient political knowledge, but a politically cynical citizen can also be tuned out of politics: disappointed, uninterested and without sufficient knowledge. In Chapter 3, we found that the effect of cynicism can be softened or strengthened by political interest and that the citizens most prone to voter uncertainty and volatility are both cynical and uninterested. In Chapter 4, we found that news content only induces cynicism among lower knowledgeable citizens. While news content had both favorable and unfavorable effects among the lower knowledgeable, it had only favorable effects among the higher knowledgeable.

We would like to argue that it is the combination of political cynicism, low involvement and low knowledge that is worrying. Cynical, uninterested and low knowledgeable citizens are most easily affected by news use and are also most prone to ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. This group indeed seems to be caught in a spiral of cynicism: they seem to have turned their back to politics. Given the combination of their political attitudes, it is very hard to reduce cynicism in this group. Moreover, citizens with negative attitudes can explain precisely why they are cynical; they mention more reasons than those with positive attitudes and were also more specific, as we showed in Chapter 1. When this negative attitude is combined with low knowledge, in other words when citizens know exactly why they distrust political actors without knowing much about politics, these citizens may not be easily convinced to change that negative attitude. Nevertheless, it is important to get this group involved in the political process. For this reason, we think that in future research, more attention should be paid to the combination of high cynicism, low interest and low knowledge.

Evaluating Voter Behavior

Should we be worried about the growth of voter uncertainty and volatility or is it a sign that voters finally began to choose, as Rose & McAllister (1986) already argued almost 25 years ago? In majoritarian democracies two main parties play a dominant role and the differences between these two parties are large, while more political parties play a significant role in consensus democracies with multiparty systems. Therefore, parties in these countries are often ideologically close to at least one other party, but differ fundamentally from other parties. We have argued in Chapter 3 that a citizen who hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes

between two ideologically different parties. A citizen who hesitates between two ideologically related parties can have very clear ideas about his or her ideal party and vote according to a fairly stable ideological position. A citizen who hesitates between ideologically different parties will probably not have a clear view about what a party should be like and will probably not have a stable ideological position.

Uncertainty and volatility are related to the electoral system. The more proportional a system is, the more parties a citizen can choose between, and the higher the uncertainty and volatility can potentially be. Whereas voter uncertainty leads to volatility in consensus democracies, it may lead to abstention in majoritarian democracies, where a relevant alternative party choice is not available (we pay more attention to political systems later on in this Conclusion). In this light, voter volatility is a favorable development: it is a sign that citizens decide consciously. In Chapter 4 we found that substantive news induces uncertainty among the higher knowledgeable. This finding yields support for the idea that voter uncertainty and volatility are a sign that citizens make a conscious choice. However, ideological voter uncertainty and volatility are probably not caused by substantive information and could not be interpreted as a sign that citizens choose consciously.

Aggregate level electoral volatility as well as individual level voter uncertainty and volatility are very high in the Netherlands. The proportional representation system with an electoral threshold of one seat (which is .67 percent of the votes) offers small parties a place in parliament. When citizens hesitate and change between ideologically related parties, this does not necessarily point out a problem regarding their political involvement. However, when small individual level changes lead to larger aggregate level changes, this can lead to system instability. The chance that this happens is larger when citizens change between ideologically different parties. Yet even when citizens change between ideologically related parties, this can have large consequences. When citizens move to the outer sides of the political spectrum and the political centre becomes smaller, it is hard to form a stable coalition government. Also, frequently changing parties in government can erode the stability of governmental policies in consensus democracies.

As shown in the Introduction, most citizens do not hesitate and change between parties with strongly different ideologies. A majority votes for the same party or a comparable party and only a small minority switches between the left and the right block. Although ties to individual parties have definitely weakened, ties to the broader ideological identities of the left and right blocks are still strong (Adriaansen, et al., 2005; Gallagher, et al., 2005). Although voter behavior is more uncertain and volatile, most citizens are not “adrift”.

Nevertheless, there is a group that hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties and we should be worried about this, especially if this group would be growing. As shown in Chapter 3, political cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, while political interest reduces it. Consequently, those who combine low interest with high cynicism are most likely to hesitate and change between ideologically different parties. While cynicism and interest do not directly affect actual turnout, they do affect turnout intention. Although these cynical and low interested citizens choose to change between different parties now, they may choose to abstain from voting in the future. In the Introduction we have seen younger citizens are less inclined to vote. This might be temporary; they might be more inclined to vote ones they get older. For the younger cynical and low interested citizens it is very well possible that it is not a temporary phenomenon however. This is another reason to focus on this group in future research.

Favorable and Unfavorable Effects of News Content

Previous research on the effects of media content on political trust and cynicism has primarily focused on unfavorable effects of specific content, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative or uncivil coverage (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996) and strategic coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). The media malaise and spiral of cynicism theories start from a pessimistic viewpoint blaming the media for inducing political apathy. Starting from a rather neutral perspective, we have tried to distinguish between unfavorable and favorable effects of news use. In our studies we have shown that although unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism are visible under specific circumstances, the news media have favorable effects as well. All these effects are likely to be conditional rather than universal, which is in line with extant research (McLeod, et al., 2009). Thus, the media have both favorable and unfavorable effects, but these effects are not identical for everybody and in each situation.

Focusing on political cynicism in our longer-term study combining a content analysis with a panel survey, we found no effects of strategic news content, but we found favorable effects of substantive news content. In our short-term experimental study we found that while strategic news content unfavorably affected cynicism among the lower knowledgeable, the combination of strategic and substantive news content favorably affected cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. The combined results of both studies suggest that there is no need to be worried about the effects of strategic news on cynicism, as long as it is substantive as well; the combination of strategic and substantive news has no effect for the lower knowledgeable

and a decreasing effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable. In other words, news about substantive differences of opinion between political actors does not lead to cynicism and neither does news about their strategies for pursuing their goals as long as it is about strategies for pursuing substantive issues.

With regard to political behavior, we found only neutral and favorable effects of exposure to strategic and substantive news content. In Chapter 4, we found that all news content had a favorable effect on turnout intention. This means that exposure to any political content induces turnout intention. Furthermore, substantive news induces voter uncertainty among the higher knowledgeable. Although voter uncertainty is not necessarily favorable or unfavorable, the most plausible interpretation is that substantive news makes the high knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between political parties.

In summary, all news induces turnout among younger citizens. Also, on the longer-term, substantive news reduces cynicism among younger citizens. This suggests that by explaining what politics is about, substantive news makes younger citizens more positive about politics and more inclined to vote. In this way exposure to substantive news may reverse the “spiral of cynicism”. Younger citizens who are less experienced than older ones are more dependent on journalists’ interpretations. Information about political actors’ viewpoints and actions, interpreted by journalists in a substantive manner can invoke positive attitudes towards political actors, because it helps citizens understand the political process. However, a precondition is that citizens are willing to be exposed to substantive news, a topic we discuss later on.

Majoritarian Democracies and Consensus Democracies

For the interpretation of the results of our studies, it is important to be aware of the differences in the balance of powers in majoritarian and consensus democracies. Due to these differences, the nature and consequences of political cynicism might not be the same in the two systems. In this section, we discuss these potential differences and suggest some possibilities for future research. Let us first shortly define the two political systems. *Majoritarian or Westminster systems* are characterized by the concentration of governmental power in one-party and bare majority cabinets, cabinet dominance, two-party systems, majoritarian and disproportional election systems and interest group pluralism. *Consensus systems* are characterized by executive power sharing in coalition cabinets, executive-legislative balance of power, multiparty systems, proportional representation and interest group corporatism and compromises (Lijphart, 1984, 1999).

Lijphart (1999) showed that satisfaction with democracy, turnout and ideological government-voter proximity are all higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. Some authors have therefore suggested to introduce proportional representation as a way to cure low levels of trust (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Wattenberg, 2007). The question is what causes what, especially with regard to trust-related measures. It is possible that the consensus system induces trust. Levels of political cynicism or distrust are lower in consensus systems (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Banducci, et al., 1999; Lijphart, 1999; Van der Meer, 2009), and after the transition from majoritarianism to proportionality in New Zealand scholars reported an increase of political trust (Banducci, et al., 1999), though this is only one case. Possibly, the relationship is reciprocal: specific system characteristics might not only induce trust, but trust might also be a precondition for the development of these characteristics (Lijphart, 1999). Our aim is not to give a definite answer to the direction of causality between systems and trust, but we think we should acknowledge the differences when interpreting our results.

For comparing cynicism or distrust in majoritarian and consensus democracies, we think it would be interesting to distinguish between several aspects of cynicism. We have no a priori reason to expect that either cynicism towards political actors' reliability or cynicism towards political actors' competence is higher in one of these systems. We argue however, that some elements of cynicism might be stronger in consensus democracies, while others might be stronger in majoritarian democracies. On the one hand, in consensus democracies political actors have to make compromises, because they take part in coalition governments. This makes it harder to assign responsibility for policy choices than in majoritarian democracies. Therefore, we expect that cynicism towards political actors' promises and their ability to take charge of problems is higher in consensus democracies. On the other hand, in the open electoral systems of consensus democracies, more different voices are represented than in majoritarian democracies. For this reason we expect that cynicism towards political actors' responsiveness to citizens and their problem awareness is higher in majoritarian democracies. For the other elements of cynicism (towards political actors' general honesty, their motives and their general competence), we have no reason to expect it to be higher in one of the two systems.

Since cynicism is lower in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies, one can ask whether the elements most vulnerable in majoritarian democracies have a larger effect on the total level of cynicism than other elements. Equally, one could wonder whether the differences between the two systems are stable in time. To be able to answer these and

related questions, we think that it would be highly interesting to compare the differences between the two systems in future research. Also, when we are aware of what cynicism or distrust is all about, it is easier to interpret it and to find ways to decrease it.

Not only may the nature of cynicism differ in majoritarian and consensus democracies, its consequences might be different too. In Chapter 3, we found effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout intention. We found no effects on actual turnout, which is in line with others studies in consensus democracies. De Vreese & Semetko (2002) and Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, & Oegema (2006) also agreed on the absence of a short-term effect, while the latter found a longer-term effect of cynicism on turnout. Although studies in majoritarian democracies contradict each other, part of them found short-term decreasing effects of cynicism on turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Those majoritarian studies that did not find any effects of cynicism on turnout, found that cynicism affected support for third-party alternatives (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005) or challenger candidates and parties (Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). This suggests that in the absence of a relevant alternative, cynicism reduces turnout. When there is a relevant alternative, which is always the case in consensus democracies and sometimes in majoritarian democracies, cynicism does not reduce turnout, but leads to an alternative party choice. In other words: cynical citizens who want to voice their grievances can either switch to another party or abstain from voting. The number of parties available is much higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. Citizens are therefore probably more likely to switch to another party in consensus democracies and to abstain from voting in majoritarian democracies.

The question is whether the alternative party or parties available are acceptable to citizens. First, it can be dependent on the ideological differences between the citizen and the available parties. This would imply that, when the available alternatives differ too much with their preferences, they are more likely to abstain, while when there is an alternative available that is in line with their preferences, they are more likely to be volatile. Additionally, citizens prefer an alternative party with good chances of government participation (Tillie, 1995). While in majoritarian democracies only two parties have a chance to be in government, in consensus democracies many parties do. Second, it can also be dependent on the availability of parties from outside the political establishment. This would imply that when anti-establishment parties are not available, citizens are more likely to abstain, whereas when these parties are available, citizens are more likely to be volatile. A third option is a combination of both: some citizens prefer an ideologically related party, whereas others prefer an anti-

establishment party. Both ideological related parties and protest parties are available in consensus democracies, while they are not often available in majoritarian democracies. This can explain why cynicism reduces turnout in majoritarian systems, whereas it induces volatility in consensus systems.

Media Effects among Younger Citizens

Young adults are experiencing their first electoral cycles. They recently got the right to vote, are exposed to political information they are not familiar with and start to attach meaning to it. These young citizens acquire information from their family, friends, schoolmates and colleagues, but also from the media. Because voting is relatively new for younger citizens, they have not developed stable attitudes towards political actors yet and new experiences can affect these attitudes. The media can therefore have relatively large effects among this group (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Jennings & Niemi, 1978; McLeod & Shah, 2009). The less stable a person's attitudes are, the more likely it is that this person will be influenced by information from the news media. In line with this argument, we found that media effects are stronger among younger citizens and we think this has consequences for future research as well as for society.

Younger Citizens: the Future of Social Scientific Research?

We advise three strategies for future research. First, it would be fruitful to focus on younger citizens in media effects research. Mapping media effects in a survey is extremely difficult, because the effects of media content are often small, since citizens are affected by so many other variables. For this reason, it is attractive to focus on a group of citizens whose attitudes are relatively easily affected. The strongest media effects will most likely be visible among young adults, who can vote for the first or second time in their life and are starting to think about politics. Such studies can also include moderating factors and in this way yield a more detailed understanding of which young citizens are most easily affected.

Second, we suggest comparing young and non-young citizens more often. With regard to the independent variable, such studies can reveal which media outlets and media content more easily affect younger citizens, and which might not. With regard to the dependent variable, such studies can yield a better understanding which attitudes (and behavior) are more easily affected among younger citizens. It is possible that cynicism is most easily affected among the young, while other attitudes are more easily affected among older citizens

or equally affected among both young and non-young citizens. Additionally, the question can be until which age group younger citizens are more easily affected.

Third, we saw that young citizens' political cynicism is both lower than that of other citizens (in the Introduction) and also more easily affected by news use (in Chapter 2). An interesting question for future research is whether the results are the same for cynicism towards reliability and for cynicism towards competence. Are the differences between young and non-young citizens the same for reliability and competence? Are both reliability and competence equally affected by news use among younger citizens? News that explains which issues are addressed by political actors, instead of their strategic motivations, may remind younger citizens of the public interest political actors pursue and thus reduce cynicism towards their reliability. Similarly, news coverage about political actors' policy actions, instead of their strategic achievements, can reduce cynicism towards their competence. Which elements of cynicism are affected by substantive news is also an interesting question for future research.

Younger Citizens: the Future of Society?

Our results do not only have consequences for social scientific research, but also have broader societal implications. The favorable effect of substantive news in Chapter 2 was only visible among younger citizens. This means that if younger citizens are confronted with information, they start to understand what politics is about, why political actors act in a specific way and this makes them feel more positive about political actors. Exposure to substantive news can lead to a virtuous circle in this way. The other way around, it is also possible that a lack of exposure to substantive news limits young citizens' understanding of politics and trust in political actors, and may then lead to a spiral of cynicism. The question is to what extent it is possible to confront young citizens with substantive political news or other substantive political information.

One can improve civic education at school, by exposing teenagers to more political information at school. The more political knowledge one has, the more s/he is able to interpret political news. Apart from knowledge about how the political system works, citizens should acquire media literacy. For many citizens it is hard to interpret what they see or hear in the media, while they should be able to critically pose questions about it and judge the credibility of news sources. Although improving both civic education and media literacy can only have favorable effects on political attitudes and behavior, this is only a solution for the generation that is still in school. Moreover, the knowledge acquired at school should also be maintained

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afterwards and civic education will have the largest effects on those who are receptive to being educated (Wattenberg, 2007). Improving civic education is therefore a good but nevertheless insufficient solution.

A few decades ago, citizens were confronted with political information as a side effect of television use, in the Netherlands and in many other countries. During an evening of watching their favorite shows, citizens were confronted with political news. With only a few public broadcasting networks available on television, citizens had no choice. In today's competitive and fragmented media market, citizens have many choices. Esser et al. (2010) compared 13 European broadcasting systems and showed that the absolute amount of political information available is larger than ever before. At the same time, De Beus, Brants, & Van Praag (2009) showed that the relative amount of political information on television has decreased in the Netherlands and we have no reason to expect different results in other countries. Public broadcasting networks have to compete with commercial networks and most of the latter do not broadcast political information at all. Commercial networks are also most popular among the lower politically interested. Television's ability to disseminate political information to non-interested citizens (called a "trap effect" by Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002, 2004) has therefore disappeared. It is much easier to watch television without being confronted with political information. The same holds true for the internet, where citizens can find unlimited political information, but only if they are looking for it. In other words: citizens can now consume political information all day, but they can also avoid it entirely.

The fact that consuming political information has become a conscious choice can lead to a growing gap between highly interested and knowledgeable citizens on the one hand and low interested citizens consuming little political information and lacking political knowledge on the other hand (De Beus, et al., 2009; Prior, 2007). When citizens with a low level of political knowledge consume little political information, this little information may have large effects on their level of political cynicism and on their voter behavior, either favorable or unfavorable. For this reason it matters a lot which information they consume – substantive, strategic or both.

In the Introduction, we contrasted an optimistic modernist perspective on voter behavior with a pessimistic social capital perspective. The optimistic modernist perspective seems to apply to the highly interested and knowledgeable citizens, while the pessimistic social capital perspective applies to the low interested citizens lacking political knowledge. Younger citizens seem to be overrepresented in the second group. Although they use the internet for news gathering as often as older citizens, they use less offline media with high

levels of political information, such as public broadcasting channels and quality newspapers. Consequently, they consume less news overall than older citizens (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2010; Wattenberg, 2007). Unfortunately, the internet does not reach citizens that are not already reached by offline sources: almost everyone who uses online sources for gathering information uses offline sources as well. This means that younger citizens who use the internet for news gathering are already politically interested and use offline political information sources as well. The internet will therefore not be a fruitful way to expose young and low interested citizens to political news.

The free newspapers may be a better way to expose this group to political news. Data of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) in 2006 reveal that 54 percent of the 18–25 year-olds read free newspapers *Sp!ts* or *Metro* on a daily base, while in the rest of the population this was only 11 percent. Free newspapers include a reasonable amount of news about politics and may therefore be a channel to reach young and lower politically knowledgeable citizens.

A large majority of the Dutch electorate still gathers news on a daily base (Adriaansen & Van Praag, 2010; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2010). There is an advantageous opportunity structure for informed citizenship in the Netherlands: the amount of programs containing political information is high and scheduled in a way that enables citizens to watch these programs at any moment of the day (Esser, et al., 2010). Yet the fact that age is negatively related to news exposure is a reason to be concerned. The question is whether young citizens will consume more political information once they get older, or in other words whether it is an age effect. Several authors showed these generations differ from older generations, that they will most likely not be willing to catch up once they get older and it is therefore probably a cohort effect (Lauf, 2001; Peiser, 2000; Wattenberg, 2007). These authors focus on television and regular newspapers and the picture may be different after including the internet and free newspapers. The fact that a part of the younger generation may not be reached with “old” outlets is an extra reason to find out whether they can be reached with other outlets.

In Summary

This dissertation suggests that overall there is little need to worry about the consequences of news media use for political cynicism and voter behavior. The nature of the news has changed: strategic news has gained prominence, partly at the expense of substantive news, but the latter has by no means disappeared. Strategic news content can have unfavorable consequences, but not if it is alternated with substantive news content, which is

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the case. As long as media combine strategic items with substantive items, strategic news does not lead to cynicism across the board.

Nevertheless, there is a segment in the population we should be worried about: young citizens with low political knowledge and interest. We found favorable effects of news exposure for this group, but it was the only group for which we found unfavorable effects as well. For the current young generation it is much easier than for earlier generations to almost avoid political news. The little news young low interested citizens consume can therefore have a large effect on how they think about politics and on their behavior. The challenge for political actors is how to confront these younger citizens with political substantive information. It is necessary to do this however, because with a lack of political information this group can well be caught into a spiral of cynicism.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Introduction, Main Concepts of this Dissertation

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Appendix A: Introduction, Main Concepts of this Dissertation

Strategic news coverage: covers of gains and losses, power struggles between political actors, the performance of political actors, and public perception of their performance. Also includes “horse race” news or game-oriented news; words of warfare and (sports) games are often used.

Substantive news coverage: provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas.

Political cynicism: strong distrust in the reliability and / or competence of political actors. The opposite is political trust.

Electoral volatility: the percentage of seats that changed party between two successive elections, measured on the aggregate level.

Voter volatility: the share of citizens not choosing the same party in two successive elections, measured on the individual level. A **changing voter** is someone who does not vote for the same party in two successive elections. **Ideological voter volatility** includes the ideological scope of the change; changing between two related parties is regarded as a “smaller change” than changing between non-related parties and we call the scope of change ideological voter volatility.

Voter uncertainty: the share of citizens not making a party choice long before the elections or hesitating which party to vote for, measured on the individual level. A **hesitating voter** is someone who hesitates which party to vote for and who does not make a party choice until shortly before the elections. **Ideological voter uncertainty** includes the ideological scope of hesitation; hesitating between two related parties can then be regarded as a “smaller hesitation” than doubting between non-related parties.

Appendix B: Chapter 1, Survey Characteristics

Table B1 shows that our respondent data in Study 1 and 2 mirror census data by and large in terms of age, gender, and education.

Table B1: Respondent Characteristics Compared with Census Data

	Dataset Study 1	Dataset Study 2	Census
	%	%	%
Gender			
• male	47.4	50.7	49.1
• female	52.6	49.3	50.9
Age			
• 18-34	24.2	23.4	26.5
• 35-44	17.8	22.7	20.3
• 45-54	20.9	16.5	18.8
• 55-64	17.6	17.0	16.3
• 65+	19.5	20.4	18.0
Education			
• lower	34.5	34.4	27.1
• middle	40.6	44.3	41.6
• higher	24.9	21.3	31.4

Note. Study 1 includes 436 respondents. Study 2 includes 426 respondents. Census data concern the year 2009 and were obtained from “Gouden Standaard”, which is the reference instrument of the Dutch Market Research Association (MOA), these reference data are collected by the Dutch National Statistics Institute (CBS). Not all columns add up to 100 percent because of rounding to decimal places.

Appendix C: Chapter 1, Exact Wording of the Questions

Table C1: Questions in the Dataset of Study 1

Question	Answering categories
Q1. To what extent do you trust government?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. very little trust 2. little trust 3. much trust 4. very much trust 5. don't know
<p><i>If Q1=1 or Q1=2: Q2a. Could you explain why you have (very) little trust in government?</i></p> <p>(First 8 categories are in random order)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. are dishonest and not integer 2. they are incompetent and not able to do their job 3. they do not know what is important for the people 4. they only care about their own interests 5. they do not do what they promise 6. they do not care about people like me 7. they are not decisive in taking care of problems 8. they are only interested in the money they earn 9. I do not have a reason, it is mainly an impression 10. other reasons 11. I do not have a reason
<p><i>If Q1=3 or Q1=4: Q2b. Could you explain why you say you have (very) much trust in government?</i></p> <p>(First 7 categories are in random order)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. they are honest and integer 2. they are competent and able to do their job 3. they know what is important for the people 4. they try to do what is best for the country 5. they do what they promise 6. they stand up for people like me 7. they are decisive in taking care of problems 8. I do not have a reason, it is mainly an impression 9. other reasons 10. I do not have a reason

Table C2: Questions in the Dataset of Study 2

Question	Answering categories
Q1. To what extent do you trust government?	1. very little trust 2. little trust 3. much trust 4. very much trust 5. don't know
<i>If Q1=1 or Q1=2:</i> Q2a. Could you explain why you have (very) little trust in government?	Open-ended question
<i>If Q1=3 or Q1=4:</i> Q2b. Could you explain why you say you have (very) much trust in government?	Open-ended question

Appendix D: Chapter 1, Coding Scheme

Table D1: Coding Scheme for Positive Attitudes

Category	Based on	
	literature	pretest
Reliability - honesty:		
1. honest, trustworthy, sincere, not manipulative	x	
2. not corrupt	x	
3. politics open, no backroom politics	x	x
4. not too much quarrel, blaming each other		x
Reliability - promises		
5. do what they promise	x	
Reliability - motives:		
6. good intentions, do what is best for the country, do try to do the best, ethical	x	
7. represent the general interest, interest of the different groups in society	x	
8. do not represent their own interest	x	
8a. subcategory: not too concerned with public opinion, getting re-elected, own career	x	
8b. subcategory: money is not their primary motivation, in office for own pocketbook	x	x
9. do not represent special interests, the elite or a few big interests	x	
10. no favoritism	x	
Reliability - responsiveness:		
11. listen to the public, responsive, voice heard	x	x
12. reference to people like themselves, the ordinary citizen, the common man	x	
Competence - general:		
13. are competent, capable, skilful or smart, government performs or is good	x	x
14. things look good for the country, everything will work out all right		x
Competence - taking charge:		
15. decisiveness, effective, vigor, do what is necessary	x	
16. efficient, using tax money efficiently	x	
Competence - awareness:		
17. are aware of problems, know what is going on, what is important	x	
18. precise when dealing with problems, careful in general	x	x
19. give sufficient information for citizens to form an opinion	x	
Other categories:		
20. focused on the long term		x
21. are stable		x
22. respondent agrees with policy, ideology or vision, specific political parties		x
23. democratically chosen, decision-making democratic, citizens should trust		x
24. one cannot satisfy everybody, one cannot do everything perfectly		x
25. politics is important, respondent politically interested		x
26. negative motivation (it could have been worse, no alternative)		x
27. other		
No answer or no interpretation possible:		
28. no answer		
29. no interpretation possible		

Note. All categories are coded as dichotomous variables (yes or no). Categories 4, 14, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 were added after the pretest. In categories 3, 8b, 11, 13 and 18 extra aspects were added after the pretest.

Table D2: Coding Scheme for Negative Attitudes

Category	Based on	
	literature	pretest
Reliability - honesty:		
1. dishonest, not trustworthy, crooked, twisters, manipulative	x	
2. corrupt	x	
3. politics to closed and secret, backroom politics	x	x
4. too much quarrel, blaming each other		x
Reliability - promises		
5. do not do what they promise, promise more than they can deliver	x	
Reliability - motives:		
6. bad intentions, do not do what is best for the country, do not do try to do the best, not ethical	x	
7. do not represent the general interest, not the interest of the different groups in society	x	
8. represent their own interest	x	
8a. subcategory: too concerned with public opinion, getting re-elected, own career	x	
8b. subcategory: money is primary motivation, in office for own pocketbook	x	x
9. represent special interests, the elite or a few big interests	x	
10. favoritism	x	
Reliability - responsiveness:		
11. do not listen to public, unresponsive, interested in votes not opinions, voice unheard	x	x
12. reference to people like themselves, the ordinary citizen, the common man	x	
Competence - general:		
13. are not competent, capable, skilful or smart, government performs or is bad	x	x
14. things look bad for the country, it is going worse		x
Competence - taking charge		
15. no decisiveness, not effective, no vigor, put things off, do not do what is necessary	x	
16. not efficient, wasting tax monies	x	
Competence - awareness:		
17. are not aware of problems, do not know what is going on, what is important	x	
18. superficial when dealing with problems, superficial in general	x	x
19. do not give sufficient information for citizens to form an opinion	x	
Other categories:		
20. focused on the short term, instead of the long term		x
21. are not stable		x
22. respondent disagrees with policy, ideology or vision, specific political parties		x
23. not democratically chosen, decision-making is undemocratic		x
24. -		x
25. politics is unimportant, respondent not politically interested		x
26. positive motivation (one can always do better)		x
27. other		
No answer or no interpretation possible:		
28. no answer		
29. no interpretation possible		

Note. All categories are coded as dichotomous variables (yes or no). Categories 4, 14, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 were added after the pretest. In categories 3, 8b, 11, 13 and 18 extra aspects were added after the pretest.

Appendix E: Chapter 2, Strategic and Substantive News

Table E1 shows the percentages of substantive and strategic news in the different news outlets. The lowest share of substantive news was found for Hart van Nederland (37 percent), while the highest share was found for Een Vandaag (83 percent). The lowest share of strategic news was found for Trouw (40 percent), while the highest share was found for Nova/Nederland Kiest (70 percent).

Table E1: Substantive and Strategic News in the Different News Outlets

	Substantive news	Strategic news
	%	%
News programs:		
• NOS Journaal (public service)	71	58
• RTL Nieuws (commercial)	79	65
• Hart van Nederland (commercial)	37	57
Current affairs programs:		
• Een Vandaag (public service)	83	49
• Nova / Nederland Kiest (public service)	77	70
Regular newspapers:		
• Algemeen Dagblad (tabloid)	55	41
• NRC Handelsblad (quality)	75	42
• De Telegraaf (tabloid)	58	42
• Trouw (quality)	72	39
• de Volkskrant (quality)	69	45
Free newspapers:		
• Metro	51	60
• Sp!ts	78	58

Appendix F: Chapter 2, Survey Characteristics

From a panel of approximately 145,000 Dutch citizens, a representative sample (1,115 persons) of the population of persons 18 years and older was selected, and invited to participate in a questionnaire. Of these persons, 870 respondents completed the questionnaire at t1 (September), and 703 respondents completed the questionnaire at t2 (November). This yields an overall response rate of 63 percent. Table F1 shows that our respondent data mirror census data by and large in terms of age, gender, and education.

Table F1: Respondent Characteristics Compared With Census Data

	Dataset, <i>n</i> = 703	Census
	%	%
Gender		
• male	49.1	49.0
• female	50.9	51.0
Age		
• 18-34	20.6	27.3
• 35-44	21.6	20.6
• 45-54	20.8	18.3
• 55-64	17.2	15.6
• 65+	19.8	18.3
Education		
• lower	31.9	32.0
• middle	39.3	40.1
• higher	28.8	28.0

Note. Census data is from 2006. Reference data were obtained from Gouden Standaard, which is the reference instrument of the Dutch Market Research Association (MOA); this reference data were collected by the Dutch National Statistics Institute (CBS). Not all columns add up to 100 percent because of rounding off to decimal places.

Appendix G: Chapter 2, Political Cynicism Scale

For the political cynicism scale, respondents were asked the following question, as shown in Table G1 (exact wording).

Table G1: Questions political cynicism scale

Could you please indicate for each statement whether you agree or do not agree? Do you ...

	... fully agree	... agree	... dis- agree	... fully disagree	don't know / no answer
Politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver	232	382	50	1	38
Ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested	70	218	314	25	76
To become Member of Parliament, friends are more important than abilities	91	295	192	22	103
Political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion	153	329	170	8	43
Politicians do not understand what matters to society	87	282	264	9	61
Politicians are capable of solving important problems	52	293	279	8	71
Most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing	29	201	368	21	84

Note. $n = 801$. Cell entries are the frequencies for t2 (November).

For each statement, there were four possible answers: completely agree, agree, disagree and completely disagree. For the analysis, these categories were re-coded; higher values mean a more cynical response and the category “Don’t know / no answer” was coded “missing” For every statement a respondent is given a score of between 1 and 4 (from non-cynical to very cynical) and we combined the scores for the seven items in one scale.

Political cynicism scale t1: $mean = 2.806$, $sd = .503$, $Cronbach's\ alpha = .867$. The inter-item correlations are between .354 and .578. Factor analysis shows that all items load on a single factor, with factor loadings between .675 and .806.

Political cynicism scale t2: $mean = 2.761$, $sd = .510$, $Cronbach's\ alpha = .871$. The inter-item correlations are between .404 and .599. Factor analysis shows that all items load on a single factor, with factor loadings between .698 and .792.

Appendix H: Chapter 3, Overview of All Effects in the SEM

Table H1: Measurement Model for Political Cynicism

	unstandardized	standardized	
	factor loading	factor loading	significance
pol. cyn. statement 1	1.000	0.631	
pol. cyn. statement 2	1.487	0.722	0.000 ***
pol. cyn. statement 3	1.338	0.693	0.000 ***
pol. cyn. statement 4	1.399	0.732	0.000 ***
pol. cyn. statement 5	1.459	0.754	0.000 ***
pol. cyn. statement 6	0.942	0.573	0.000 ***
pol. cyn. statement 7	1.032	0.636	0.000 ***

Table H2: Measurement Model for Political Interest

	unstandardized	standardized	
	factor loading	factor loading	significance
pol. int. statement 2	1.000	0.568	
pol. int. statement 1	1.139	0.733	0.000 ***

Table H3: Causal Relationships between Independent, Intermediary and Dependent Variables

dependent variable	independent variable	unstandardized	standardized	significance
		effect	effect	
ideological voter uncertainty	age	-0.002	-0.122	0.002
ideological voter uncertainty	scale political cynicism	0.103	0.179	0.000
ideological voter uncertainty	scale political interest	-0.142	-0.371	0.000
ideological voter uncertainty	education	0.004	0.026	0.521
ideological voter uncertainty	gender	0.013	0.029	0.413
ideological voter uncertainty	knowledge	0.007	0.006	0.888
ideological voter uncertainty	left right position	-0.005	-0.047	0.185
turnout intention	scale political cynicism	-0.075	-0.101	0.006
turnout intention	ideological voter uncertainty	-0.354	-0.271	0.000
turnout intention	gender	0.047	0.083	0.008
turnout intention	education	0.001	0.008	0.835
turnout intention	age	0.001	0.084	0.013
turnout intention	knowledge	-0.078	-0.046	0.203
turnout intention	scale political interest	0.236	0.471	0.000
turnout intention	left right position	0.004	0.028	0.371
ideological voter volatility	turnout intention	-0.25	-0.253	0.000
ideological voter volatility	scale political cynicism	0.072	0.098	0.012
actual turnout	education	-0.006	-0.034	0.258
actual turnout	scale political interest	0.009	0.019	0.724
actual turnout	age	-0.001	-0.038	0.177
actual turnout	scale political cynicism	0.058	0.079	0.010
actual turnout	gender	0.024	0.044	0.102
actual turnout	turnout intention	0.632	0.645	0.000
actual turnout	ideological voter uncertainty	-0.179	-0.139	0.000
ideological voter volatility	ideological voter uncertainty	0.344	0.266	0.000
ideological voter volatility	education	-0.001	-0.007	0.853
ideological voter volatility	age	-0.002	-0.105	0.003
ideological voter volatility	scale political interest	-0.001	-0.001	0.987
ideological voter volatility	gender	0.001	0.001	0.972
actual turnout	knowledge	0.066	0.04	0.182
ideological voter volatility	knowledge	-0.025	-0.015	0.693
actual turnout	left right position	-0.002	-0.017	0.518
ideological voter volatility	left right position	-0.002	-0.018	0.590

Table H3 shows the effects of independent variables on intermediary variables and dependent variables, as well as the effects of intermediary variables on dependent variables.

Table H4: Relationships between Independent Variables

independent variable 1	independent variable 2	unstandardize d effect	standardized effect	significance
scale political interest	scale political cynicism	-0.046	-0.216	0.000
age	scale political interest	1.577	0.177	0.000
education	scale political cynicism	-0.121	-0.204	0.000
education	scale political interest	0.289	0.326	0.000
gender	scale political cynicism	-0.003	-0.014	0.733
age	scale political cynicism	-0.074	-0.012	0.760
gender	scale political interest	-0.034	-0.121	0.011
knowledge	scale political cynicism	-0.008	-0.13	0.002
knowledge	scale political interest	0.037	0.392	0.000
education	knowledge	0.047	0.176	0.000
age	knowledge	0.443	0.166	0.000
gender	knowledge	-0.002	-0.028	0.456
knowledge	left right position	-0.021	-0.055	0.137
gender	left right position	0.024	0.021	0.571
education	left right position	0.051	0.014	0.699
age	left right position	3.381	0.095	0.011
left right position	scale political cynicism	-0.038	-0.045	0.268
left right position	scale political interest	-0.099	-0.078	0.097
gender	education	-0.092	-0.117	0.002
age	gender	-0.707	-0.089	0.016
age	education	-4.361	-0.174	0.000

The direction of the relationships between independent variables in Table H4 is not defined. Although these relationships are interesting, it is beyond the scope of this study.

Appendix I: Chapter 4, News Paper Items About Education Policies

D66 = Liberal Democrats, CDA = Christian Democrats, GroenLinks = Green Party,
PvdA = Social Democrats, SP = Socialists, VVD = Liberal Party

Substantive version education policies

Education in Amsterdam important for all political parties

AMSTERDAM – The performance of educational institutions in Amsterdam is comparable to the national average. Nevertheless, there are some persistent problems in the school in Amsterdam. The improvement of education is therefore an important issue for the Election of the city council.

Each kind of school has its own problems. The quality of black primary schools is for example too low and many students in secondary schools have serious language deficiencies. Also, students too often play truant and the number of students that leave school without a certificate is too high. Furthermore, the waiting lists for education for children with special needs are long. The political parties in Amsterdam have different ideas to solve these problems. GroenLinks thinks that learning to live together in society and learning social skills are equally important as writing and calculating adequately. This party therefore aims to invest more in the “broad school”, in which education, community work and sporting are combined. PvdA reserves money in their election program to control more for non-attendance. In this way, the party tries to prevent students from playing truant or leaving school without a certificate.

VVD stresses the importance of safety in schools: many schools are confronted with vandalism and physical violence among students. VVD therefore wants to pay more attention to the safety plan each school is supposed to have. D66 does not solely want to focus on problematical case, but also pleads for a special talent program for excellent students. Some parties focus on specific schools. CDA for example aims to reserve money for Christian schools in new housing estates, because students from these neighborhoods have to travel too far. SP wants to give more money to schools in the poor areas of the city. All in all, each party has clear policy preferences for increasing traffic safety. At the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Strategic version education policies

Political parties squabble about education in Amsterdam

AMSTERDAM – The performance of educational institutions in Amsterdam is comparable to the national average. Nevertheless, there are some persistent problems in the school in Amsterdam. The improvement of education is therefore an important issue for the Election of the city council.

The political parties use the education policies to create a distinct profile for themselves: in this way they aim to attract parents with young children. The governing parties PvdA and GroenLinks emphasize the differences between them to attract voters, while their viewpoints hardly differ. GroenLinks uses education policies to underline its social image. PvdA performs badly in the polls and loose almost half of their seats. The party therefore asked their own Alderman to acquire publicity for the successes in the last four years.

VVD characterizes the governing parties as patronizing and calls the ideas of the governing parties “communistic”.

In this way, VVD tries to hold on to rightist voters in the city, without mentioning reasonable alternative policies. D66 performs well in the polls and does everything to maintain this position: the party therefore does not want to compel the voter to anything. Some parties appeal to specific groups, CDA aims to emphasize its image of a party for families and SP focuses on the poorer voters with its education policies. In this way these parties try to emphasize the contrast between themselves and the largest party in the city: PvdA.

We asked Piet de Jong, an expert on local politics, his opinion about this issue. He summarized the situation in this way: “Despite the successes, much more would have been possible in the last four years. A lot of things have not been done because parties in the city council thwart each other all the time. Now the elections will be soon they try to make a decisive impression after all and try to win seats in this way. They only care for a good election result.” At the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Substantive & strategic version education policies

Education in Amsterdam important in election contest

AMSTERDAM – The performance of educational institutions in Amsterdam is comparable to the national average. Nevertheless, there are some persistent problems in the school in Amsterdam. The improvement of education is therefore an important issue for the Election of the city council.

Each kind of school has its own problems. The quality of black primary schools is for example too low and many students in secondary schools have serious language deficiencies. Also, students too often play truant and the number of students that leave school without a certificate is too high. Furthermore, the waiting lists for education for children with special needs are long. The political parties in Amsterdam have different ideas to solve these problems. The political parties use the education policies to create a distinct profile for themselves: in this way they aim to attract parents with young children. The governing parties PvdA and GroenLinks emphasize the differences between them. GroenLinks therefore stresses how many policy plans it has, the party for example want more money for the “broad school”. PvdA performs badly in the polls and therefore asked their own Alderman to acquire publicity for the successes in the last four years. With more control for non-attendance, the party tries to prevent students from playing truant.

VVD characterizes the governing parties as patronizing and stresses the importance of safety in schools: many schools are confronted with vandalism and physical violence among students. D66 performs well in the polls and does everything to maintain this position. The party therefore does not want to compel the voter to anything; but D66 pleads for a special talent program for excellent students. CDA aims to emphasize its image of a party for families and therefore reserve money for Christian schools in new housing estates. SP focuses on the poorer voters and therefore wants to give more money to schools in the poor areas of the city. At the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Appendix J: Chapter 4, News Paper Items About Cycling Policies

D66 = Liberal Democrats, CDA = Christian Democrats, GroenLinks = Green Party,
PvdA = Social Democrats, SP = Socialists, VVD = Liberal Party

Substantive version cycling policies

Cyclists' traffic safety important for all political parties

AMSTERDAM – Amsterdam has almost a hundred dangerous cross roads, also called black spots. Many traffic incidents occur in the city and cyclists are especially vulnerable. Each party's electoral program mentions traffic safety; it is an important issue for the Election of the city council.

In the past years, a lot of money was invested in traffic safety. Some regulations are far-reaching, like the construction of separate cycle tracks in busy streets, but sometimes smaller solutions are possible. Despite these policies, still many traffic incidents occur. The political parties in Amsterdam have different ideas to solve this problem.

GroenLinks stresses the importance of the bike as an environmentally friendly transportation and therefore proposed a lot of policies. A new idea is to ban mopeds from cycle tracks. PvdA suggests in its election program to decrease the speed limit in the city to 30 kilometers an hour. This will decrease the difference in speed between cars and cyclists and will therefore decrease the risk of collisions.

VVD opposes a decrease of the speed limit, but suggests introducing mirrors that cover the blind spot at each dangerous cross road. Blind spot mirrors make sure that truck drivers can see cyclists next to their vehicle and therefore help preventing incidents. D66 wants to stimulate visitors to park their car on the large parking spaces outside the city center and continue their trip with public transportation. Some parties aim to increase traffic safety in specific places. CDA for example points at the areas around schools and SP points at the poor areas of the city. All in all, each party has clear policy preferences for increasing traffic safety. At the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Strategic version cycling policies

Political parties squabble about cyclists' traffic safety

AMSTERDAM – Amsterdam has almost a hundred dangerous cross roads, also called black spots. Many traffic incidents occur in the city and cyclists are especially vulnerable. Each party's electoral program mentions traffic safety; it is an important issue for the Election of the city council.

The political parties use the cycling policies to create a distinct profile for themselves: in this way they aim to attract young voters. The governing parties PvdA and GroenLinks emphasize the differences between them to attract voters, while their viewpoints hardly differ. GroenLinks uses traffic safety policies to stress its environmentally friendly image. PvdA performs badly in the polls and loose almost half of their seats. The party therefore asked their own Alderman to acquire publicity for the successes in the last four years.

VVD characterizes the governing parties as patronizing and calls the ideas of the governing parties "anti-car policies". In this way, VVD tries to hold on to car owners in the city, without mentioning reasonable alternative

policies. D66 performs well in the polls and tries everything to maintain this position: the party therefore does not want to compel the voter to anything. Some parties appeal to specific groups, CDA aims to emphasize its image of a party for families and SP focuses on the poorer voters. In this way these parties try to emphasize the contrast between themselves and the largest party in the city: PvdA.

We asked Piet de Jong, an expert on local politics, his opinion about this issue. He summarized the situation in this way: “A lot of things have not been done because parties in the city council thwart each other all the time. Now the elections will be soon they try to make a decisive impression after all and try to win seats in this way. They only care for a good election result.” t the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Substantive & strategic version cycling policies

Cyclists’ traffic safety important in election contest

AMSTERDAM – Amsterdam has almost a hundred dangerous cross roads, also called black spots. Many traffic incidents occur in the city and cyclists are especially vulnerable. Each party’s electoral program mentions traffic safety; it is an important issue for the Election of the city council.

In the past years, a lot of money was invested in traffic safety. Some regulations are far-reaching, like the construction of separate cycle tracks in busy streets, but sometimes smaller solutions are possible. Despite these policies, still many traffic incidents occur. The political parties in Amsterdam have different ideas to solve this problem.

The political parties use the cycling policies to create a distinct profile for themselves: in this way they aim to attract young voters. The governing parties PvdA and GroenLinks emphasize the differences between them. GroenLinks therefore stresses how many policy plans it has, among which the idea to ban mopeds from cycle tracks. PvdA performs badly in the polls and therefore asked their own Alderman to acquire publicity for the successes in the last four years. Also, the party considers decreasing the speed limit in the city to 30 kilometers an hour.

VVD characterizes the governing parties as patronizing. VVD opposes a decrease of the speed limit, but suggests introducing mirrors that cover the blind spot at each dangerous cross road. D66 performs well in the polls and tries everything to maintain this position. The party therefore does not want to compel the voter to anything; D66 only wants to stimulate visitors to park their car on the large parking spaces outside the city center. CDA aims to emphasize its image of a party for families and therefore points at the areas around schools. SP focuses on the poorer voters and therefore want to pay extra attention to traffic safety in the poor areas of the city. At the third of March, the voter can express its preferences.

Appendix K: Chapter 4, Political Cynicism Items

Table K1: Distribution of Answers on the Seven Political Cynicism Items

	fully disagree	2	3	4	5	6	fully agree
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Statements about reliability:							
*politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver	2	6	9	20	32	21	11
*the mayor and aldermen are primarily self-interested and	10	30	25	19	9	4	2
*friends more important than abilities to become city-councilor	6	19	19	25	16	12	3
*political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion	4	13	20	22	22	10	9
Statements about competence:							
*politicians do not understand what matters to for the city	8	28	24	21	10	5	4
*politicians are capable of solving important problems	4	13	23	27	22	8	2
*most politicians competent people who know what they do	4	10	18	27	27	11	2

Note. Data entries are percentages. $n = 459$.

English Summary

Before answering our research questions, we started in Chapter 1 by scrutinizing what trust and distrust/cynicism means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our literature review revealed two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. Using open-ended and closed-ended questions, we confirmed these two main dimensions. However, our results also showed that these dimensions consist of more elements than earlier research suggested. Political actors' reliability concerns general feelings of their honesty, but also the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country and whether political actors are responsive to the public. Political actors' competence concerns general aspects of competence, but also being decisive in taking care of problems and being aware of important problems. Moreover, we found that reasons for negative attitudes are not the same as reasons for positive attitudes towards political actors: persons with negative attitudes had more specific arguments than those with positive attitudes. To our knowledge, this chapter was the first to use open-ended questions to study what citizens mean when they express positive or negative attitudes towards political actors.

In Chapter 2, we studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism. In a study combining a content analysis of news media with a panel survey, we tested the unfavorable effects of strategic content as well as the favorable effects of substantive content. We found no across the board effect of strategic news, which is contrary to what we expected based on extant literature. We did find a clear negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism, but only among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds). In other words: substantive news can make younger citizens less cynical. This finding is in line with extant research that showed that older citizens' attitudes are relatively stable and are not easily changed during a campaign, while younger citizens are still developing their attitudes and can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

In Chapter 3, we studied the effect of political cynicism on voter behavior. We argued that cynical citizens can show their discontent in two ways: either by choosing another party or by not voting at all. We therefore studied the effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout. Additionally, we argued that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. For this reason, we included the similarity of the parties a person hesitates or changes between in our measures

for voter uncertainty and volatility. Our results showed that cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, we found that cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout.

In Chapter 4, we again studied the effects of news content on political cynicism, but this time in an experimental design and furthermore focused on younger citizens (18-25 year-olds). Also, we studied the effects of news content on two aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and voter uncertainty. Additionally, we studied the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive content in one news item. While strategic news content had a positive effect on cynicism for lower knowledgeable persons and substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small negative effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable. With regard to voter behavior, we found that any news content increases lower knowledgeable person's turnout intention, while substantive news makes the higher knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. This chapter is the first to study the effect of a news item that combines substantive and strategic news.

We aimed to answer two main research questions in this dissertation. The first research question was to what extent strategic and substantive news content affect political cynicism. Our studies yielded a mixed picture. We found a negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism for younger citizens in Chapter 2, and found in Chapter 4 that specifically the combination of substantive and strategic news negatively affects political cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 where we combined a content analysis with a survey, we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism, while we found a positive effect of strategic news on political cynicism in the experimental study in Chapter 4 for lower knowledgeable persons. The results of Chapter 4 are in line with other experimental studies as well as with a study that combined a content analysis with a survey. The latter focused on issue-specific strategic news as well as issue-specific cynicism, while we focused on all strategic news content and cynicism towards political actors in general, which makes it hard to compare the studies.

There may be several reasons for the different results of the experimental designs in Chapter 4 and other studies on the one hand and the content analysis and panel survey design in Chapter 2 on the other hand. The results are probably partly related to methodological differences. In the first design, the short-term effects of exposure to one specific news item or at most a few are measured, while in the second design, the longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content are measured. Also, in the first design, all

respondents are randomly exposed to specific news content, while in the second design, respondents select the news content themselves.

Apart from these methodological differences, we also think that the nature of strategic and substantive news have affected the results. Does strategic news only have a short-term effect on political cynicism which vanishes quickly? Does substantive news only have a longer-term effect which builds up after repeated exposure? Both may well be the case. On the short-term, when citizens are exposed to strategic news that mainly reports the strategies political actors pursue, this may induce cynicism. Exposure to substantive news may need some time to build up: if citizens are repeatedly exposed to media that report substantive issues about political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, this may slowly induce positive feelings about these actors.

Does strategic news induce cynicism only when substantive news is lacking or limited? In the real world, news is both strategic and substantive in nature. In the Netherlands, both kinds of news content are balanced. Moreover, as we have shown in Appendix E, all news outlets combine strategic and substantive news. On the long run, citizens are therefore exposed to a combination of both news frames. As we have shown in Chapter 4, substantive news neutralizes the unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism; the combination of strategic and substantive news even lowers cynicism. This is partly in line with other studies that found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. This indicates that strategic content only leads to cynicism if it replaces substantive news, whereas in many countries, strategic frames are added to substantive news. We think that the importance of substantive news is a noticeable contribution to the literature on the relationship between news content and cynicism.

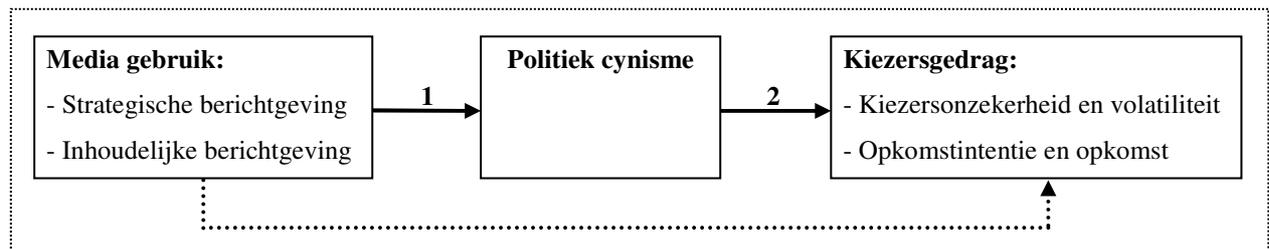
The second research question we aimed to answer in this dissertation was to what extent political cynicism affects voter behavior. We have focused on several aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and actual turnout as well as ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Several authors have shown that cynicism reduces turnout. We found that cynicism induces turnout intention in the Netherlands, but it does not affect actual turnout. This may be explained by the fact that apart from abstention, dissatisfied citizens have another option in the Netherlands; they can choose between many different other parties. Indeed, cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Remarkably, the effects of cynicism on uncertainty and volatility have not been studied before. For understanding the effect of cynicism on the complete picture of voter behavior, we think this is an important addition to

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the literature, especially in consensus democracies with multiparty systems, which we pay attention to later on in this Conclusion.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

De verhouding tussen politiek, media en burgers is de afgelopen decennia veranderd. Media doen meer dan voorheen hun best informatie te brengen die burgers kan boeien. Hierdoor berichten ze op een andere manier over politiek dan vroeger. Veel nieuws is tegenwoordig strategisch van aard; gaat over de machtsstrijd tussen politieke actoren, over winst en verlies en de prestaties van politieke actoren. Dit betekent overigens niet dat inhoudelijke berichtgeving is verdwenen. De media zijn niet meer een vanzelfsprekende spreekbuis voor politici. Veel meer dan in het verleden moeten politici hun best doen om op een positieve manier in de media te komen. Tegelijkertijd zijn burgers politiek cynischer geworden en is hun kiezersgedrag veranderd: ze twijfelen en wisselen vaker. Deze intrigerende ontwikkelingen vormen de inspiratiebron voor dit proefschrift. Aan de hand van de twee hoofdvragen (zie onderstaande figuur) bestuderen we de relatie tussen deze verschillende ontwikkelingen. De belangrijkste concepten die in dit proefschrift worden gebruikt, zijn samengevat in het kader op de volgende pagina.



De eerste hoofdvraag is in hoeverre strategische en inhoudelijke berichtgeving van invloed zijn op de mate van politiek cynisme onder burgers. Veel onderzoeken zijn alleen gericht op ongunstige effecten van mediagebruik op gedrag en attitudes. In deze studie kijken we niet alleen naar ongunstige maar ook naar gunstige effecten. Wanneer nieuws over politieke actoren (politici en politieke partijen) in een strategisch frame wordt geplaatst, dan kan de manier waarop burgers over politieke actoren denken beïnvloed worden. Uit eerder onderzoek is gebleken dat strategisch nieuws kan leiden tot meer politiek cynisme en een lagere opkomst bij verkiezingen. Dit ongunstige effect van nieuws op cynisme en opkomst wordt ook wel de cynisme-spiraal genoemd. Echter als strategisch nieuws leidt tot een toename van cynisme, dan kan ander nieuws, zoals inhoudelijk nieuws, leiden tot een afname van cynisme. Daarom hebben we zowel gekeken naar de mogelijke ongunstige gevolgen van blootstelling aan strategisch nieuws voor politiek cynisme, als naar de mogelijke gunstige gevolgen van inhoudelijk nieuws.

De tweede hoofdvraag betreft de mate van invloed van politiek cynisme op kiezersgedrag. Politiek cynisme is in de afgelopen decennia toegenomen en burgers hebben meer twijfels gekregen over de betrouwbaarheid en competenties van politieke actoren. Het is waarschijnlijk dat burgers met dit soort cynische gevoelens meer moeite hebben om te beslissen op welke partij zij stemmen en gemakkelijker overstappen naar een andere partij. Politiek cynisme kan derhalve leiden tot grotere kiezersonzekerheid en -volatiliteit. Tegelijkertijd kunnen cynische burgers ook besluiten om helemaal niet te stemmen. Hoewel het effect van politiek cynisme op de partijkeuze en de opkomst al vaker onderzocht is, worden onzekerheid en volatiliteit vaak buiten beschouwing gelaten. In dit proefschrift kijken we naar de effecten van cynisme op zowel opkomst als op de onzekerheid en volatiliteit van kiezersgedrag.

De belangrijkste concepten in dit proefschrift
Strategische berichtgeving (strategic coverage): berichtgeving over winst en verlies, de machtsstrijd tussen politieke actoren, de prestaties van politieke actoren en de publieke perceptie daarvan. Ook “horse race” nieuws en “game-oriented” nieuws horen hierbij en er wordt vaak gebruik gemaakt van oorlogsretoriek en sporttermen.
Inhoudelijke berichtgeving (substantive coverage): berichtgeving met informatie over de huidige en toekomstige overheidsbeleid, politieke standpunten van partijen en ideologieën en ideeën.
Politiek cynisme (political cynicism): sterk wantrouwen ten opzichte van de betrouwbaarheid en / of competentie van politieke actoren. Het tegenovergestelde van politiek vertrouwen.
Electoral volatiliteit (electoral volatility): het percentage zetels dat van partij wisselt tussen twee opeenvolgende verkiezingen. Dit wordt gemeten op geaggregeerd niveau.
Kiezersvolatiliteit (voter volatility): het percentage burgers dat niet dezelfde partij kiest in twee opeenvolgende verkiezingen. Dit wordt gemeten op individueel niveau. Een wisselende kiezer is iemand die niet op dezelfde partij stemt in opeenvolgende verkiezingen. Ideologische kiezersvolatiliteit betreft de ideologische omvang van de verandering; wisselen tussen verwante partijen wordt beschouwd als een "kleinere verandering" dan wisselen tussen niet verwante partijen. De grootte van de stap tussen deze twee partijen noemen we ideologische kiezersvolatiliteit.
Kiezersonzekerheid (voter uncertainty): het percentage burgers dat kort voor de verkiezingen een keuze maakt of dat aarzelt op welke partij te stemmen. Dit wordt gemeten op individueel niveau. Een twijfelende kiezer is iemand die twijfelt welke partij te stemmen en pas kort voor de verkiezingen een keuze maakt. Ideologische kiezersonzekerheid betreft de ideologische omvang van het twijfelen; twijfelen tussen verwante partijen kan worden beschouwd als een "kleinere twijfel" dan twijfelen tussen niet verwante partijen.

De verschillende studies

Alvorens de onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden, leggen we in **hoofdstuk 1** vast **wat vertrouwen en wantrouwen / cynisme precies betekenen voor burgers**. Welke dimensies liggen aan deze positieve en negatieve attitudes ten grondslag? In ons literatuuronderzoek komen twee belangrijke dimensies naar voren: de betrouwbaarheid en de competenties van politieke actoren. Deze dimensies zijn in het verleden niet systematisch onderzocht. Daarom gebruiken we een survey-onderzoek onder burgers, met daarin zowel open als gesloten vragen. Uit onze eigen analyse van de antwoorden blijkt dat betrouwbaarheid en competenties inderdaad de twee relevante dimensies zijn, maar dat ze uit meer elementen bestaan dan op basis van eerder onderzoek te verwachten was. De betrouwbaarheid van politieke actoren betreft een algemene inschatting van integriteit, maar ook een inschatting van de mate waarin politieke actoren zich aan hun beloften houden, of ze gemotiveerd worden door het publieke belang in plaats van hun eigen belang en of ze zich responsief opstellen ten opzichte van het publiek. De competentie van politieke actoren betreft een algemene beoordeling van de competentie, als ook een mening over of ze daadkrachtig zijn en zich bewust zijn van belangrijke problemen. Bovendien kunnen we vaststellen dat burgers met negatieve attitudes andere zaken noemen dan degenen met positieve attitudes. Degenen met een positieve houding noemen vaak algemeenheden; zo stellen ze dat politieke actoren hun best doen en competent zijn. Mensen met een negatieve houding zijn vaak specifiek en stellen dat politieke actoren niet doen wat ze beloven, gemotiveerd worden door eigen belang, niet daadkrachtig zijn en niet weten wat belangrijk is voor de burger.

In **hoofdstuk 2** bestuderen we in hoeverre **inhoudelijke en strategische berichtgeving invloed heeft op politiek cynisme**. Om de mogelijk ongunstige effecten van de strategische berichtgeving en de mogelijk gunstige effecten van de inhoudelijke berichtgeving te testen combineren we een inhoudsanalyse van de berichten over de verkiezingscampagne voor de Tweede Kamerverkiezingen van 2006 met een panel survey onder burgers, gehouden tussen september 2006 en november 2006. Met de inhoudsanalyse brengen we in kaart hoeveel inhoudelijk en strategisch nieuws er in de verschillende media (televisie en kranten) is verschenen. In de survey meten we in hoeverre burgers deze verschillende media daadwerkelijk gebruikten. Door het mediagebruik van burgers in de survey te koppelen aan de hoeveelheid inhoudelijk en strategisch nieuws in de inhoudsanalyse, kunnen we inschatten aan hoeveel inhoudelijk en strategisch nieuws individuele burgers zijn blootgesteld. Vervolgens onderzoeken we de invloed van blootstelling aan inhoudelijk en strategisch

nieuws op de mate van politiek cynisme. In tegenstelling tot sommige andere onderzoeken, vinden we geen effecten van strategische berichtgeving op cynisme. Wel vinden we een verlagend effect van inhoudelijke berichtgeving op politiek cynisme, maar dan alleen bij jongeren (18-34 jarigen). Met andere woorden: inhoudelijke berichtgeving maakt jongere burgers minder cynisch. Niet-jonge burgers hebben relatief stabiele attitudes, die in het algemeen niet zo snel meer veranderen tijdens een verkiezingscampagne, terwijl de jongere burgers hun attitudes juist nog aan het ontwikkelen zijn en daarom gemakkelijker kunnen worden beïnvloed door berichtgeving in de media.

In **hoofdstuk 3** bestuderen we **het effect van politiek cynisme op kiezersgedrag**. Hiervoor gebruiken we dezelfde survey als voor hoofdstuk 2. Burgers kunnen op twee manieren hun onvrede uiten: door een andere partij te kiezen dan de vorige keer of door helemaal niet te stemmen. Daarom meten we zowel de gevolgen van cynisme voor onzekerheid en volatiliteit als voor de opkomst. Een burger die twijfelt en wisselt tussen twee ideologisch verwante partijen verschilt sterk van iemand die twijfelt en wisselt tussen partijen die ideologisch zeer verschillend zijn. Onze meetinstrumenten voor kiezersonzekerheid en –volatiliteit meten daarom in hoeverre de partijen waartussen iemand twijfelt of wisselt ideologisch sterk verschillen. Het blijkt dat cynische burgers meer twijfelen over partijkeuze en vaker van partij wisselen dan minder cynische burgers. Bovendien heeft cynisme wel een verlagend effect op opkomstintentie, maar niet op de daadwerkelijke opkomst tijdens de verkiezingen.

In **hoofdstuk 4** beoordelen we wederom wat **de effecten van nieuwsberichten op politiek cynisme zijn**, maar dit keer in een experimenteel design, gemeten tijdens de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen in Amsterdam in 2010. Deze studie is bewust beperkt tot jongere burgers (18-25 jarigen). Naast de effecten op cynisme kijken we naar de effecten op twee aspecten van het kiezersgedrag: opkomstintentie en kiezersonzekerheid. Daarnaast onderzoeken we wat het effect is van een combinatie van inhoudelijke en strategische inhoud in één nieuwsbericht. Dat laatste is nog niet eerder gedaan. Terwijl strategische berichtgeving een verhogend effect blijkt te hebben op cynisme onder jongeren met een laag kennisniveau en inhoudelijke nieuwsberichten voor geen enkele groep een effect hebben op het cynisme, heeft de combinatie van strategie en inhoud een licht verlagend effect op de mate van cynisme onder jongeren met een hoog kennisniveau. Met betrekking tot kiezersgedrag vinden we dat alle soorten nieuwsberichten een verhogend effect hebben op de opkomstintentie onder jongeren met een laag kennisniveau. Met andere woorden: zodra deze jongeren over politiek lezen zijn ze meer geneigd te gaan stemmen. Het maakt dan eigenlijk niet zo veel uit wat voor soort nieuws ze lezen of zien. Jongeren met een hoog kennisniveau gaan daarentegen meer

twijfelen na het lezen van inhoudelijke berichtgeving. Zij heroverwegen hun partijkeuze naar aanleiding van nieuwe informatie.

De antwoorden op de onderzoeksvragen

De vier studies samen geven ons verschillende inzichten in de onderzoeksvragen. Ten aanzien van de vraag **in hoeverre de strategische en inhoudelijke berichtgeving van invloed is op politiek cynisme** – geven de studies een gemengd beeld. In hoofdstuk 2 vinden we een verlagend effect van inhoudelijke berichtgeving op politiek cynisme onder jongere burgers, terwijl we in hoofdstuk 4 vinden dat de combinatie van inhoudelijke en strategische berichtgeving een verlagend effect heeft op politiek cynisme onder jonge burgers met een hoger kennisniveau. Verder vinden we in hoofdstuk 2 op basis van de inhoudsanalyse en survey geen effect van strategische berichtgeving op de mate van politiek cynisme, terwijl we in hoofdstuk 4 in het experiment onder respondenten met een laag kennisniveau een verhogend effect vinden.

De verschillende resultaten hebben gedeeltelijk methodologische oorzaken, die we in de conclusie uitgebreid bespreken. Daarnaast zijn er waarschijnlijk ook substantiële oorzaken. Het is goed mogelijk dat strategisch nieuws alleen een korte termijn snel vervagend effect heeft op politiek cynisme en dat inhoudelijk nieuws juist een duurzaam effect heeft dat zich opbouwt door herhaalde blootstelling. Op de korte termijn kan nieuws over de strategieën van politieke actoren leiden tot cynisme onder burgers. Inhoudelijk nieuws heeft wellicht alleen effecten bij herhaling: als de burgers telkens worden blootgesteld aan media-berichtgeving over inhoudelijke standpunten en de maatschappelijke doelen van politici, dan kan dit geleidelijk leiden tot een toename van positieve gevoelens over deze actoren. Daarnaast is het mogelijk dat strategische berichtgeving alleen tot cynisme leidt als inhoudelijke berichtgeving niet of nauwelijks wordt aangeboden. In de praktijk is nieuws zowel strategisch als inhoudelijk van aard, vaak zijn beide zelfs gecombineerd in één nieuwsitem. Op de lange termijn worden burgers derhalve veelal blootgesteld aan een combinatie van zowel strategische als inhoudelijke berichtgeving. Zoals blijkt in hoofdstuk 4 “neutraliseert” inhoudelijk nieuws de ongunstige effecten van strategisch nieuws op cynisme.

De tweede onderzoeksvraag die we willen beantwoorden in dit proefschrift is **in hoeverre politiek cynisme kiezersgedrag beïnvloedt**. De focus ligt op verschillende aspecten van kiezersgedrag: zowel op de opkomstintentie en de daadwerkelijke opkomst als op kiezersonzekerheid en -volatiliteit. We vinden dat cynisme invloed heeft op opkomstintentie, maar niet op de opkomst. Het feit dat burgers als gevolg van cynisme wel

vaker twijfelen en wisselen, maar cynisme geen invloed heeft op de opkomst, heeft wellicht te maken met het politieke systeem. In Nederland hebben gemiddeld ongeveer tien partijen zetels in het parlement en nieuwe partijen kunnen relatief eenvoudig zetels bemachtigen. Dit is anders dan in sommige andere landen waar slechts enkele partijen zetels in het parlement hebben en er voor nieuwkomers weinig ruimte is. Ontevreden burgers hebben in Nederland derhalve, afgezien van niet stemmen, nog een tweede alternatief: overstappen naar een andere partij. Cynisme heeft dan ook wel een meetbaar effect op kiezersonzekerheid en -volatiliteit.

De implicaties

In de conclusie besteden we aandacht aan **enkele bredere implicaties** van het onderzoek. Hier vatten we die kort samen. Ten eerste stellen we dat **een meetinstrument voor politiek cynisme aan twee criteria zou moeten voldoen**. Allereerst moet het mogelijk zijn onderscheid te maken tussen verschillende niveaus van cynisme: tussen een beetje cynisch en heel erg cynisch. Bovendien moet er zowel aandacht worden besteed aan de verschillende elementen van de betrouwbaarheid van politici als aan de verschillende elementen van hun competentie. Met betrekking tot betrouwbaarheid van politieke actoren zou een meetinstrument de volgende elementen moeten bevatten: (1) een algemeen gevoel van hun eerlijkheid, (2) of ze zich aan hun beloften houden, (3) of ze gemotiveerd worden door het publieke belang in plaats van hun eigen belang en (4) of ze zich responsief opstellen ten opzichte van het publiek. Met betrekking tot de competentie van politieke actoren, zou een meetinstrument informatie moeten verschaffen over: (1) algemene aspecten van hun competentie, (2) of ze daadkrachtig zijn en (3) of ze zich bewust zijn van belangrijke maatschappelijke problemen. In de schaal die we in hoofdstuk 2, 3 en 4 gebruiken zijn deze elementen verwerkt.

Ten tweede evalueren we de ontwikkelingen. **Hoe “erg” is politiek cynisme en hoe “erg” zijn kiezersonzekerheid en -volatiliteit?** Met betrekking tot cynisme hangt het antwoord van verschillende aspecten af, zoals wat cynisme betekent voor burgers, hoeveel burgers cynisch te noemen zijn, of bepaalde groepen burgers specifiek cynisch zijn en met welke andere attitudes cynisme gecombineerd wordt. Met betrekking tot kiezersonzekerheid en -volatiliteit wordt wel gezegd dat burgers eindelijk bewust beginnen te kiezen, in plaats van vanzelfsprekend en automatisch elke keer op dezelfde partij te stemmen. Onzekerheid en volatiliteit worden gedeeltelijk bepaald door het electorale systeem. In een consensus-democratie zijn de onzekerheid en volatiliteit relatief hoog. Het is mogelijk dat kiezers met

zeer stabiele ideologische voorkeuren telkens tussen partijen wisselen, omdat die partijen veel op elkaar lijken. Het is daarom relevant tussen welke partijen burgers twijfelen en wisselen.

Ten derde beargumenteren we dat het belangrijk is om **in onderzoek te kijken naar zowel gunstige als ongunstige effecten van mediagebruik**. Eerder onderzoek was vaak specifiek gericht op de ongunstige effecten, terwijl we in hoofdstuk 4 zien dat berichtgeving tegelijkertijd gunstige en ongunstige effecten kan hebben. Zo blijkt dat mensen met weinig politieke kennis weliswaar iets cynischer worden van strategische berichtgeving, maar door alle soorten berichtgeving meer geneigd zijn te gaan stemmen. Wie alleen kijkt naar de effecten van nieuwsberichten op cynisme ziet een ongunstig beeld dat niet overeenkomt met de werkelijkheid, die veel genuanceerder is.

Ten vierde is het **verschil tussen meerderheidsdemocratieën en consensusdemocratieën** van belang. Veel onderzoek wordt in de Verenigde Staten uitgevoerd; een meerderheidsdemocratie. De onderzoeksresultaten uit de VS kunnen niet één op één met Nederland en andere landen vergeleken worden. Het democratisch stelsel kan immers van invloed zijn op de aard, omvang en gevolgen van politiek cynisme. Burgers in meerderheidsdemocratieën zijn gemiddeld cynischer, maar het is goed mogelijk dat burgers ook over specifieke elementen cynischer zijn in meerderheidsdemocratieën, terwijl burgers over andere elementen cynischer zijn in consensusdemocratieën. De gevolgen van cynisme zijn wellicht ook anders. In de Nederlandse consensusdemocratie leidt cynisme wel tot onzekerheid en volatiliteit, maar niet tot een lagere opkomst. Het is goed mogelijk dat cynische burgers in een meerderheidsdemocratie – waar burgers kunnen kiezen tussen maar twee partijen – wel besluiten af te haken, zodat cynisme wel van invloed is op de opkomst.

Ten vijfde leggen we de nadruk op het feit dat we **wel media effecten vinden onder jongere burgers, maar niet onder de rest van de bevolking**. Dit heeft zowel implicaties voor wetenschappelijk onderzoek als voor de maatschappij. Het is ontzettend lastig om media effecten in wetenschappelijk onderzoek in kaart te brengen, omdat ze vaak subtiel zijn. We denken dat het daarom verstandig is om onderzoek naar de effecten van mediagebruik uit te voeren onder jongere burgers, die in het algemeen de minst stabiele attitudes hebben. Op basis van ons onderzoek zijn de te verwachten effecten onder hen het grootst. Daarnaast denken we dat het zinvol is om jonge burgers te vergelijken met niet-jonge burgers, om te bepalen welk soort media effecten groter zijn onder jongeren en welke juist niet.

Ook de maatschappelijke gevolgen zijn relevant. Het door ons gevonden verlagende effect van inhoudelijk nieuws op politiek cynisme suggereert dat als jongere burgers geconfronteerd worden met inhoudelijke informatie, ze beter gaan begrijpen waar politiek over gaat

en waarom politieke actoren op een bepaalde manier handelen, waardoor ze een positiever beeld van politieke actoren krijgen. In de praktijk is het echter lastig om jongeren te confronteren met inhoudelijke informatie, vooral als ze niet meer op school zitten. Een deel van de cynische burgers is juist niet in politiek geïnteresseerd. Terwijl burgers vroeger, toen er maar een paar televisiezenders waren, op televisie bijna automatisch politiek nieuws zagen tussen andere programma's door, kunnen ze tegenwoordig op televisie en ook op internet precies die informatie consumeren die ze interessant vinden en dat is voor weinig jongeren politiek nieuws. De meeste Nederlanders zien, horen of lezen nog bijna dagelijks nieuws. Onder jongeren is het nieuwsgebruik echter lager dan onder ouderen en de uitdaging is hoe ze bij de politiek te blijven betrekken.

Ten slotte

De resultaten van dit proefschrift suggereren dat er in het algemeen **weinig reden tot zorg is over de invloed van nieuwsberichten op politiek cynisme en kiezersgedrag**. De aard van de berichtgeving over politiek is veranderd: strategisch nieuws komt meer voor. Dit gaat deels ten koste van de inhoudelijk nieuws, dat echter zeker niet is verdwenen. Strategische berichtgeving kan nadelige gevolgen hebben, maar niet als het wordt gecombineerd met inhoudelijke berichtgeving, hetgeen in Nederland het geval is. Zolang media strategisch nieuws combineren met inhoudelijke berichtgeving, leidt strategische berichtgeving als zodanig niet tot politiek cynisme.

Toch is er **een groep burgers waar we ons wel degelijk zorgen over moeten maken**: jonge burgers met lage politieke kennis en interesse. We vinden dat nieuwsberichtgeving in deze groep gunstige effecten heeft op de opkomst, maar het is ook de enige groep waarvoor we kunnen vaststellen dat strategisch nieuws leidt tot meer politiek cynisme. Voor de huidige jonge generatie is het veel gemakkelijker dan voor eerdere generaties om politiek nieuws te vermijden. Het kleine beetje politiek nieuws waaraan jonge burgers met weinig politieke interesse blootgesteld worden, kan derhalve grote effecten hebben op hun politieke attitudes en gedrag. De uitdaging voor politiek en media is daarom deze jongere burgers te bereiken met inhoudelijke politieke informatie. Dit is noodzakelijk, want het is juist deze groep die door een gebrek aan inhoudelijke politieke informatie in een cynisme-spiraal terecht kan komen.

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