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**Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior**

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## Introduction

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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

	<b>political logic</b>	====>	<b>media logic</b>
market type	supply market	====>	demand market
<b>commercialisation, market share more important:</b>			
1. <i>media identify with:</i>	general interest	====>	own interest of medium
2. <i>address public as:</i>	citizen	====>	consumer
<b>changing power relations media and politics:</b>			
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.

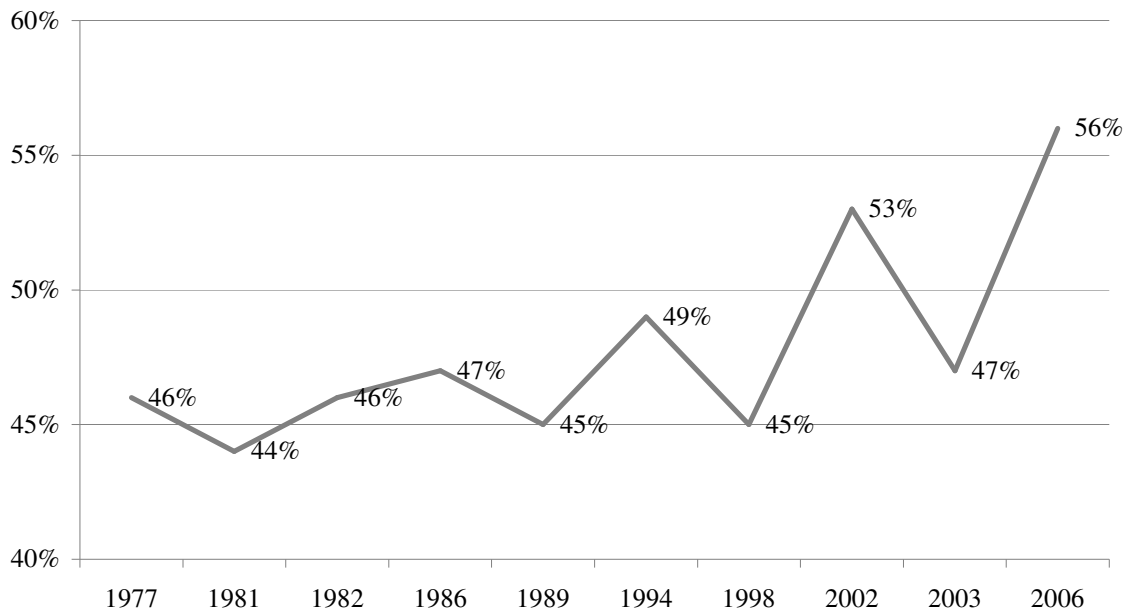
**Political cynicism.** In the following chapters, we pay more attention to our definition of political cynicism. For now, we suffice to say that we regard political cynicism as strong distrust towards political actors or the opposite of political trust. Several authors have shown that political cynicism 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,  $p < .01$ ).

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<sup>2</sup> 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 volatility<sup>3</sup> 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).

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

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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.<sup>4</sup> *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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Voter volatility<sup>1</sup></b>									
• changing voters	27	27	28	26	34**	34**	39**	34**	34**
<b>Voter uncertainty<sup>2</sup></b>									
• 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 data<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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).

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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 elections<sup>9</sup> 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
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Actual turnout<sup>1</sup></b>													
• on Election Day	79	84	88	87	81	86	80	79	73	79	80	80	75
<b>Turnout intention<sup>2</sup></b>													
• 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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**

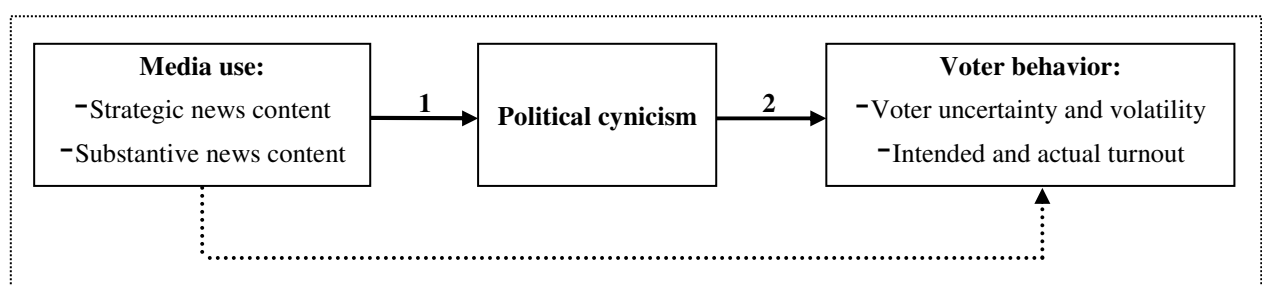
#### **Research Questions**

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 sample<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> 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, we 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?



