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POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE NETHERLANDS
(Still) Little Ado About (Almost) Nothing

Rens Vliegenthart and Sanne Kruikemeier

Introduction
Political campaigning has changed fundamentally in the Netherlands in the past decades. As many other countries, it is argued that the Netherlands has moved into an era of “media logic,” with high levels of campaign professionalization, volatile voters and new opportunities to reach the electorate through online media. Given the fact that more voters change (last minute) voting preferences and the availability of new communication channels, it is remarkable, to put it mildly, that political marketing, in terms of advertising, has remained relatively limited. There might be multiple explanations for this, and part of it might also be regarded as a “silence before the storm.” Here, we explore those explanations that are grounded in institutional, judicial and cultural arrangements.

In this chapter, we first introduce the political and electoral system of the Netherlands. This context, characterized by proportional representation, coalition formation and consensus seeking, offers a partial explanation for the limited presence of political advertising. Second, we discuss the historical development of political advertising in the Netherlands. Based on an analysis of campaign posters, we discuss the main changes that have taken place since World War II. Furthermore, we introduce a particular characteristic of the Dutch system: advertising time on public television that has been distributed freely to political parties. We also discuss some examples of recent activities by political parties in this realm – mainly some first examples of negative campaigning, personalization and targeting. Third, we provide an overview of the regulations for political advertising and show that parties in principle do not face many formal constraints on employing this kind of campaign tool. They are, however, limited in terms of financial resources constraining their opportunities to buy for example airtime on national television. In the final section, we discuss the limited research that exists on the reception and effects of political advertising in the Dutch context.

The chapter sketches a picture of a country that has so far, at least when it comes to political advertising, not been “Americanized.” Part of the explanation lies in the “muting” effect of the political system that does not yield “head-to-head” races where political ads might be most effective. Furthermore, due to the abundance of free media attention, many political parties do not need other sources of communication very much. In addition, there still exists a general unease with the professionalized political campaign and related developments such as the rise of spin doctors and political ads. The context, however, offers fertile ground to expand its use of political ads: a highly volatile electorate results in political campaigns where something can be gained (or lost), regulations offer limited constraints and the omnipresence of Dutch citizens on social media provides a clear channel for personalized and targeted communication. It remains questionable, however, whether such
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an expansion will yield the desired outcomes by users: the research into political advertising in the Dutch context so far suggests only limited effects, but this might be different in a context where it is more heavily and consistently used.

The Dutch Political and Electoral System

The Netherlands has a bicameral parliamentary system. Officially being a monarchy, the power of the king is largely ceremonial. The Senate (Eerste Kamer), consisting of 75 members, is elected indirectly by regional representatives after provincial elections. The main chamber is the Tweede Kamer, which is elected directly. Proportional representation is at the heart of the Dutch political system. There are no electoral thresholds, and any party that is able to gain enough votes to obtain at least one of the 150 seats (i.e. 0.67% of the total votes) gets its place in Parliament. During the previous elections in 2012, 10 parties were elected. The system of proportional representation results in a situation in which after each election parties enter into government negotiations and coalition formation takes place. Typically, governments have majority support in parliament and consist of two or three parties. The consensus-seeking behavior typically extends beyond the formal political realm and all kind of institutional arrangements exist to involve stakeholders (e.g., employers organizations and labor unions) in decision-making processes.

Elections take place using open party lists. In principle, the list order determines which candidates are elected in parliament. Additionally, candidates can move up in the list order if they obtain a certain threshold of preferential votes – equaling 25% of the votes necessary for one seat. This threshold is considerably lower than it was in the past and has resulted in a personalized election campaign.

Members of government are not members of parliament. If the government loses its majority support in parliament, it typically calls for new elections. This happened on several occasions in the past 12 years. The past decades, since 1989, have also shown both a large increase in electoral volatility (as much as between 15 and 31 seats changing parties in every single election between 1994 and 2012) and the rise of various new parties, mainly at the right side of the political spectrum, with several of them gaining substantial numbers of votes: Lijst Pim Fortuyn with 26 seats in 2002 and Geert Wilders’ Partij voor de Vrijheid with 24 seats in 2010 (Andeweg & Irwin, 2014).

Historical Overview of Political Advertising in the Netherlands

As in many other Western countries, political campaigns have changed substantially in the Dutch situation in the past decades. A useful distinction to map those changes is the three-stage model of political communication as introduced by Kees Brants and Philip van Praag (2006).

Political Logic

The first stage they identify is that of the party logic, which was in place in the Netherlands after World War II until approximately the mid 1960s. It was characterized by a pillarized society and a consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1975). The society was clearly divided and organized (“pillarized”) along religious and ideological cleavages. Interaction between people belonging to different pillars hardly took place, except at the level of political elites. Political parties were very powerful political institutions and had also substantial influence and power over media (mainly newspapers and radio broadcasts) in their own pillar. It was not uncommon that political leaders were part of the editorial board of newspapers and coverage in individual outlets was highly favorable toward the party with the same denomination. These newspapers were the main source of information for the large majority of citizens and reached very high circulation numbers. The electorate was characterized by high stability, with only small changes in composition of
the parliament over time. This stability was also reflected in the election campaigns. They were relatively short and directed toward mobilizing their own electorate. Outside of the main party communication channels and free media, parties used little other formal campaign channels to reach their voters, except for campaign posters. These posters have been used for over a century in the Dutch context and offer an interesting and insightful image of the changes that have taken place in the past decades. An analysis of all posters used in parliamentary election campaigns since World War II is provided by Vliegenthart (2012a). For the era of political logic, the analysis reveals that posters combine a relative strong emphasis on visual representations of ideology (and religion) with textual references to the party leader. This indicates the importance of both ideological aspects as well as the familiarity of voters with the political leaders belonging to their own pillar.

Public Logic

The second era Brants and Van Praag identify is that of a public logic, running from the end of the 1960s until the early 1990s. It was characterized by fundamental changes in society, with processes of secularization, individualization and depillarization. Also the media quickly underwent professionalization and the rise of television fundamentally altered the media landscape. While the television broadcasting system remained structured by broadcasting organizations that all represented one of the initial pillars, viewers did not stick to broadcasts belonging to their “own” organization. Political parties lost their central position and solid basis of support, with several new parties being successful in gaining a stable place in parliament (e.g., the social-liberal party D66). Journalists approached politicians more critically, but still with some distance and respect. They were, perhaps somewhat idealistically, considered to work in the interest of the general public and aimed to inform the public adequately. Other means of campaigning occurred, most notably television debates made their entry in the Dutch political scene relatively early (in 1963, Vliegenthart, 2012b). Furthermore, the government also assigned broadcast time to political parties on Dutch television. They already received some free airtime on public radio and with the rise of the television, they were also allocated time slots in 1959, and more regularly since 1962 (Aalbers, 2014). The “political party broadcasts” were 10 minutes long and initially broadcast right after the main news broadcast and during halftime of the European soccer matches, therefore attracting a substantial audience. This changed quickly after the broadcasts were rescheduled to other time slots and the length was limited after 1989, initially to five and later on to two minutes, but there was no change in the low viewing numbers (Aalbers, 2014).

The changes that took place during the era of public logic are also reflected in campaign posters: they became more professional (i.e., in design and the use of the party’s logo) and more frequently had a picture of the political leader on them. This latter observation is in line with the increasing importance of visualization associated with the rise of television.

Media Logic

The third era that Brants and Van Praag distinguish is that of media logic, which is argued to have begun in the 1990s and is still in place. It is characterized by a further professionalization of political campaigns, a situation where media establish the informal “rules of the political game” and the disappearance of boundaries between politics and entertainment (i.e., the rise of “infotainment,” Brants, 1998), with for example politicians appearing in all kind of entertainment shows. The pressures of commercialization arguably resulted in coverage that is less substantial and more focused on persons and the horse race (though empirical evidence for personalization is mixed, see Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011; Kleinnijenhuis, Takens, & Oegema, 2009). Television gained even more prominence and is the main source of information about politics. Other types of programs,
such as (late night) talk shows offer a mixture of politics and entertainment (infotainment, see Brants, 1998). Among voters, we saw a strong increase in volatility, with considerable shifts and the rise of various new, mainly far-right, political parties.

Since the end of the 1990s, the Internet became a factor of importance. Political parties started to use websites as a means of communication and now use it as a means to communicate (through text, but also visuals and videos) and interact with potential voters. In the past years, politicians became increasingly active on social media sites, such as (initially) Hyves, Facebook and Twitter. We see those developments also reflected in the campaign posters that remain, though being an “old-fashioned” communication channel, widely visible and frequently used. They have become even more professionalized, with a stronger match between visual and text, and an ever more prominent place for the party leader.

Recent Examples in Dutch Political Advertising

In this section, we discuss some of the recent examples that can be considered prototypical for the changed media environment in which political communication nowadays takes place. Several characteristics have been mentioned as central features of the current “mediatized” constellation (see Strömbäck, 2008). These include, among others, personalization and negativity (or negative campaigning, see Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Furthermore, the search for “authenticity” (Donsbach & Jandura, 2003) can be regarded as an important struggle in a situation that is dominated by a media logic and the omnipresence of strategy framing. We illustrate the presence of these three aspects in three recent videos, the first two being purposefully edited for an election campaign, a third one going “viral” on the Internet without having that purpose.

Campaign Videos

The first example is a clip called “Roos” which could be found on the website of the liberal-conservative party VVD during the weeks before the municipality elections. It has been labelled a “breakthrough” in campaign culture by one of the national newspapers (De Fijter, 2006). “Roos” refers to “rose,” the symbol of the Labor Party, PvdA, and shows an animation of a rose that loses one petal after the other, not being able to provide a clear stance on some of the major political issues municipalities faced back then. It was clearly designed to provide an image of the PvdA as a flip-flopping party with no clear stance and changing opinions on key issues. It can be regarded as one of the first clear examples of negative campaigning in the Dutch context, with its simplicity contributing to the clarity of the message.

The second example is the television clip for the 2012 parliamentary elections by the PvdA, focusing on its party leader, Diederik Samsom. It is a highly personalized video that shows his disabled 10-year-old daughter, one of Samsom’s main motivations to be a politician and make the country better. It can be regarded as a clear example of a specific form of personalization, namely privatization (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). While Van Santen and Van Zoonen argue that personalization and privatization are not new in the Dutch context and have already been present for decades, it is one of the first times that a politician so clearly “uses” his family to put forward a political message. The specific clip mentioned here received considerable media attention and was discussed elaborately for its potential effectiveness. Again, however, it is important to keep in mind that this video clip only reaches a limited part of the electorate, especially compared to general media coverage and, for example, election campaign broadcasts (Vliegenthart, 2012b).

A third example is not a campaign spot, but a clip that does show the potential of the Internet when it comes to political messages. This clip was a small part of a debate on refugees held in parliament in October 2015. Far-right politician Geert Wilders was mentioning a list of incidents
that involved asylum seekers, but was interrupted by the leader of the Greens, Jesse Klaver, who took over and came with a list of extreme-right violent acts against and intimidation of asylum seekers. Klaver explicitly stated that he would not blame Wilders for those actions, but that in a similar vein not all asylum seekers should be blamed for the incidents that involved one or a few asylum seekers. This message was not intended for campaign purposes, was not broadcast on the official YouTube channel of the Greens, but was posted only on Facebook and within a week reached 1.4 million views. In comparison, the much-discussed clip with Diederik Samsom's family only had 150,000 views on YouTube over more than three years (Bellemakers, 2015). It shows that new media have a great potential and can reach large audiences, but also that it is, to a large extent, unpredictable when this will happen and that party strategists have only limited steering options.

**Micro-targeting**

Also the practice of micro-targeting has gained some ground in the Netherlands during recent years. Again often discussed as an “Americanization” of politics, the idea of targeting specific (groups of) voters during election campaigns is a practice that also started to be used by Dutch political parties, though so far only to a limited extent. The Christian Democratic party CDA is ahead in this respect. During the 2012 parliamentary election campaign, it used a system that combined data from the Dutch statistical office, research on lifestyles conducted by an independent research company and its own member administration to decide where more traditional forms of campaigning (e.g., canvassing, sending letters) should be concentrated. Political parties also target specific groups online. PvdA, for example, uses Facebook ads for specific groups – based, for example, on age and place of residence. Additionally, they use the opportunity to advertise on Facebook pages of friends of those who shared official party messages. Finally, a specific online means of social targeting mentioned by political parties is ads via Google search. If an Internet user searches for certain keywords (political issues, but also names of competing parties for example) an ad for the PvdA appears as the first option in the search results.

It is clear that Dutch political parties only just started to explore the possibilities of micro-targeting. Again, they are seriously constrained by campaign budgets. The Dutch Labor Party, for example, spent, €2.1 million on the campaign for parliamentary elections in 2012. Only €150,000 was spent on online campaigning, which included a whole range of activities and products. Also privacy regulations make it more difficult in the Netherlands to employ the full possibilities of data mining strategies (Nieuwboer, 2012).

**Regulation of Political Advertising**

Political parties and candidates try to persuade voters in many different ways. Political actors adopt an extensive marketing mix to inform citizens, discuss policy issues and convince voters to vote for them. In the previous section, we mentioned a variety of forms in which parties reach potential voters, many of those using media. As media play a central role in how citizens are informed and persuaded, it is important to discuss the regulations that “control” the extent to which political parties use media to influence their electorate. Compared to other countries, in the Netherlands, political actors enjoy a lot of freedom in choosing how they distribute their messages. Still, political parties and candidates have to follow certain rules when they organize their political campaigns.

The current regulations focus almost solely on (public) broadcasting media. It is important to note that no formal rules exist regarding the content of media coverage. In other words, the current regulations do not apply to the political issues or actors themselves, but they do apply to, for instance, the distribution of airtime on public broadcasting channels. As we mentioned in the previous paragraph,
the allocation of free airtime (“airtime for political parties”) is an important aspect of the Dutch system. According to the Dutch media law, the Dutch Media Authority gives political parties that have a seat in the parliament (house of representatives and senate) free airtime. Political parties present themselves during the airtime—which lasts a few minutes—to citizens, give information, invite citizens to become members, and persuade citizens to vote for them. Although the broadcasts enjoyed large audiences in the 1960s, they were never popular. As argued earlier, nowadays, the programs do not have a large audience anymore which is mainly due to the abundant choice of broadcasters and programming decisions (Aalbers, 2014). The Minister of Education, Culture and Science decides upon the amount of airtime. During elections, the Dutch Media Authority also allocates airtime to political parties that participate in national and European elections. Using a lottery, the Dutch Media Authority selects the order of the broadcasts (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2015; Wet- en regelgeving, 2015).

Turning toward political advertising more specifically, some rules are important here. Both public and commercial broadcasters are not permitted to obtain sponsoring for broadcasting political information. Since 1998, Dutch political parties can buy commercial airtime (Mediaredactie, 1997). The cost of buying (commercial) airtime is nonetheless very expensive; especially because of the small budgets parties have for each election (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Therefore, outside of election campaigns, parties do not buy airtime on a regular basis mainly due to the lack of financial resources. Even during election campaigns, political parties rarely buy commercial airtime (Parlement, 2015).

Today, no formal regulations apply to online media and social media. This might be surprising, as social media advertising (such as promoted Facebook posts that appear in users’ timelines or buying ads on GoogleAd) and online micro-targeting (i.e., targeting specific users with political advertisements based on their online surf behavior or background characteristics) become more popular among and used by political parties (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014).

### Spending and Efforts of Political Parties

In the Netherlands, election campaigns are amongst the “cheapest” in the world. All costs that political parties have are—in general—funded from their total budget. To get some insight in the total spending of political parties, it is thus important to take a closer look at the entire budget of political parties. Political parties are funded in many different ways, via internal revenues, such as membership fees and salary payments of representatives, and external revenues, such as donations and (governmental) funding.

With regard to the internal revenues, membership fees are the most important source of income. Half of the total budget is based on the membership fees. This is quite high compared to other European countries. In those countries, on average, only a quarter of the total budget consists of membership fees. Another important source of income is the salary payments of representatives (i.e., party tax). In general, around 10% of the total income of representatives must be handed over to the party, and mostly left-wing parties, such as the Labor Party and the Greens, ask (or require) their representatives to give up a part of their salary. However, the Socialist Party is an exception to this rule and asks its representatives to hand in their entire salaries. In turn, the representatives receive a middle or average income as payment. The last internal sources of income are fund-raising activities, such as organizing events (Parlement, 2015).

With regard to external sources, the Netherlands has a specific regulation that provides governmental funding for political parties that have a seat in the parliament. The total budget is €15 million for each year (Stuiveling & Van Schoten, 2011). The funding amounts are quite low compared to other countries. The amount depends partly on internal funding (such as the number of paying party members), but also on whether or not the party has a scientific bureau and a youth organization. The Netherlands is reluctant to regulate the donations and other private sources of funding of political
parties, which often leads to serious discussion. In general, donations more than approximately €4,500 that are not from individuals must be included in party annual financial reports. This is a fairly high amount compared to other countries (Stuiveling & Van Schoten, 2011).

Turning to specific financial resources – especially for election campaigns – of parties, it should be noted that the budgets are quite small as well. For the last two elections, the two largest parties in the Netherlands (the Conservative-Liberal and Labor Party) had a total budget of around €2 million, while another party (the Social Liberals party, D66) had a much smaller budget – about €900,000. Around 60% of that budget is spent on advertising, broadcast and social media. The other 40% is spent on employees, conference expenses, merchandising and printing.

Turning to social media, political parties recognize the opportunities that online platforms bring. Research by Jacobs and Spierings (2016) shows several important insights into the resources used for online campaigns. In general, politicians in the Netherlands are often enthusiastic about online and social media, because it is inexpensive and many citizens can be reached at once. However, resources are still necessary to provide a more professional online campaign, for instance by hiring a (full-time) social media team, buying software to analyze online media, being aware of tweets from journalists, answering immediate questions, offering training from consultants or to enhance the quality of online messages (e.g., including info-graphics; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). The parties in the Netherlands are also more likely to deploy a more professional social media team, for the simple reason that they have more resources. The Conservative-Liberal Party, for instance, bought sponsored stories to generate more “likes” on Facebook. Yet, these paid “ads” are far more expensive than unsponsored ads. Also the small Christian Party invested in Facebook to “boost a message.” Smaller but more active parties have fewer resources to invest in social media, but they do invest in paid social-media managers, staff and web care teams. However, interestingly, they do so only during election campaigns. In addition, some smaller parties have volunteers that also helped with the online campaign. Some smaller parties, which are often more traditional, decide not to invest in online campaigning at all, because of their limited resources (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016).

Research into Content, Reception and Effects of Mediatized Information

In the Netherlands, political advertising comes in many forms, such as advertising in traditional media, online media and other channels that are used for campaigning, for instance campaign posters (Vliegenthart, 2012a). Political parties still use free airtime on public broadcast television, although they know that these programs are not popular. Politicians perceive online media as very important, although less important than newspapers (Weber Shandwick, 2014). Effects of all kinds of communication have been studied in the Dutch context. Unfortunately, but maybe also not surprisingly, research into actual campaign ads has been relatively limited, first because of their limited audiences (on television) and for online ads also because of the relative novelty of the phenomenon. In this section, we briefly discuss studies that looked into the content and effects of a wide variety of mediatized online information, which also might give an indication of the potential impact of sponsored and targeted ads.

First of all, research shows that the content of the free airtime broadcasts did not change that much over the course of time (Klinkenberg, Willemsen, & Hermans, 2006). Klinkenberg et al. found that the only notable persuasive strategies that did change were personalization and dramatization. The broadcasts showed an increased focus on the politician as a private person. For example, party broadcasts were more often about the politicians’ personal characteristics instead of their records as politicians. There is an increased focus on the emotional aspects of political issues. Most changes took place at the end of the 1980s. Klinkenberg et al. believe that this can be explained by the arrival of commercial television, as political parties tried to compete with an abundance of new media.
channels. The reason why not many strategies changed might be the relative big role and stable format of the free airtime broadcasts and the rather limited use of paid ads on commercial television (due to limited financial resources). Lastly, the political system in the Netherlands may hinder the use of more confrontational strategies such as the use of a conflict strategy. As parties do not want to be excluded from possible involvement or inclusion in the government, a conflict strategy is in many instances not a good idea.

Compared to traditional advertising on television, in recent years, online campaigning became very popular. This might be caused by the fact that offline campaigning (via traditional media) is too expensive for Dutch political parties. Besides, in the Netherlands, almost every Dutch citizen has Internet access, which makes the threshold for using online media for advertising much lower. In a direct way, a large audience can be reached. Political parties seized this opportunity and today they often engage in communication with their electorate online – especially during elections – and almost every politician (even at local levels) uses online media to communicate with citizens. They mainly use social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and party websites. Also email seems to be quite frequently used during elections (Kruikemeier & Van de Pol, 2015). Blogs, personal websites and YouTube are less popular. This latter finding is confirmed by Walter and Van Praag (2012), who found that YouTube did not mobilize the audience. Instead, it is mainly used to broadcast advertisements. The ads did not enjoy large audiences and did not influence both online and traditional media. Furthermore, they found that “short, comparative ads that contain the party leader, that are uploaded early on in the campaign, that stem from small or winning parties and that have numerous links on external websites are likely to reach more viewers” (p. 443). So the general conclusion is that online, and social media in particular, foster personalized communication, because politicians have their own profiles on these social networking sites and are more visible in online YouTube ads (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Another important tool, which is very popular in the Netherlands, is Voting Advice Applications (VAAs, Van de Pol, Holleman, Kamoen, Krouwel, & De Vreese, 2014). VAAs are online “applications [that] assist voters in the electoral decision by comparing their policy preferences with the programmatic stances of political parties and/or candidates” (Marschall & Garzia, 2014, p. 1). Around one-third of the population consults a VAA during an election (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2014a). Research shows that VAAs can increase citizens’ intention to go out and vote (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2014b). The most popular VAAs are principally developed independently (i.e., Stemwijzer and Kieskompas), with financial resources from the Dutch government or developed by Dutch universities. Parties have limited to no power to strategically influence VAAs. However, they do try to do so (Krouwel, Vitiello, & Wall, 2012). For instance, a spin doctor from the Christian Democratic Party tried to manipulate a statement from a VAA, by not providing the party position according to its manifesto, but by giving the most popular answer. This instance led to a debate in the Netherlands about the quality of VAAs (Krouwel et al., 2012).

Another important campaign activity, at least according to (local) candidates, that involves political advertising, is distributing folders and other promotion materials (such as campaign gadgets) on the street. Municipalities make market stalls available and volunteers and party leaders are present. The folders (that often contain a summary of views and positions of the parties) are also delivered to people’s homes. Especially during local elections, parties engage in creative activities such as distributing rain covers for bike seats (Rosema & Boedeltje, 2011).

Lastly, campaign posters are also popular, especially during election campaigns. Municipalities decide which locations are available for posters, by placing specific boards at different locations. Specifically during local elections, but also during national elections, the municipalities make specific rules about the sizes of the posters and where to place them, which parties seem – to some extent – to follow (Rosema & Boedeltje, 2011). Research shows that since World War II, campaign posters did change over time, as we also discussed in the section on the three stages of political communication. For instance, posters more often include a party logo and a picture of the party leader, showing no
clear evidence of increased personalization. Over the last 60 years, posters refer less to ideology in the visuals, but references to ideology were more often present in the text. Interestingly, a focus on negativity was – in general and in line with YouTube videos – not present on the posters (Vliegenthart, 2012a).

Research examining the effects of political advertising is scarce, because it is, in general, difficult to measure the effectiveness of political marketing (Van Steenburg, 2015). However, turning to the literature on the use of online media during online campaigns, there are some interesting findings. Research shows that typical online communication styles used on social media by political candidates and parties can be successful. For instance, politicians’ interactive communication style on social media makes citizens more likely to feel involved in politics. Interactive communication includes starting and responding to conversations, but also the use of interactive features on, for instance, websites (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2013). This interactive communication can result in a greater number of preferential votes (Kruikemeier, 2014). Also a more personalized communication style (e.g., communication that stems from an individual politician, instead of the party) is likely to instigate political involvement among citizens (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). This is also in line with the research above focusing on the effectiveness of YouTube, that shows that those videos are more successful if they contain the party leader and links are included (Walter & Van Praag, 2012).

So, we can observe a general trend toward more personalized communication in an online media environment, which is also, in light of the positive effect of personalization, maybe not that surprising.

Some anecdotal evidence additionally suggests that online political micro-targeting might be not that successful in the Dutch context. Research shows that Dutch citizens are more negative toward micro-blogging practices, such as promoted tweets, as these tweets activate citizens’ knowledge that they are being persuaded (Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2014). As there is a widespread normative belief among citizens that political actors should not buy advertising or engage in such persuasion tactics, this could explain why Dutch citizens are more negative toward these practices.

**Conclusion**

Politics in general, and campaigning in general, has changed fundamentally during previous periods. On the one hand, voters were said to be adrift, with many of them changing voting preferences from one election to the other and deciding only at the last minute whom to vote for. On the other hand, political parties try to get a grip and even profit from this new insecure situation by professionalizing their campaigns and relying on new means of communication. It might be appealing to focus on the dynamics here and argue that turbulence and insecurity are the most outstanding characteristics of the current situation. Remarkably enough, however, we find considerable stability when it comes to political advertising. Due to the limited resources political parties have, they hardly expanded their traditional forms of political ads. The most well-known ones are still those that are broadcast on public television. Television ads may be well-known, but they are also poorly watched and often criticized for being unprofessional (Aalbers, 2014). Political parties commonly still use traditional campaign posters and distribute flyers door-to-door or at weekly markets. In that sense, there is a remarkable parallel between advertising and media coverage of Dutch politics. Fundamental changes are often discussed, but stability is greater than often assumed (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2009; Vliegenthart, 2012a), with content, for example, still being substantive and not increasingly personalized for the past two decades.

There is a set of reasons that can account for this stability in political advertising. First of all, the system of proportional representation and coalition governments might restrain the use of political advertising. As we know from the US context, political ads are often negative and target political opponents (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). In the Dutch context, it is often unclear who the main opponent is and the main opponent is likely to be also the one to negotiate about a joint coalition
after the elections. Keeping relationships good might be an important consideration to not use political ads and not to “go negative.” Second, the limited financial resources seriously constrain political parties in their campaigns. For national campaigns, the largest political parties have a budget of around €2 million, for which they have to organize a wide range of activities. They use some of the money for research and new forms of advertisements, such as micro-targeting, but to a very limited extent. Third, political advertising still has a somewhat negative connotation among Dutch politicians and citizens, being associated with a focus on persuasion and negativity, rather than content (Vliegenthart, 2012b).

Of course, this does not mean that the Netherlands is at a standstill. When it comes, for example, to employing the opportunities of social media, Dutch politicians are active, being among the early adopters and frequent users of Twitter. Also political advertising increasingly takes place over the Internet. In recent election campaigns (and also somewhat outside that), political parties have started to use micro-targeting strategies, both online and offline. The question is whether or not these activities will increase in the future. Though hard to predict, one can at least argue that there are relatively few legal constraints. Political parties face relatively few legal hurdles when it comes to advertising, though for micro-targeting and data mining somewhat strict privacy regulations do exist. Also, in the general political culture, we have witnessed a shift in focus, with a greater emphasis on the political horse race (Vliegenthart, 2012b) and an increased emphasis on which party will become the largest and is thus most likely to deliver the prime minister (as reflected in, for example, the “prime ministerial debate” organized by the main commercial broadcaster, RTL, during recent election campaigns). This yields a situation in which it is easier for political parties to identify a clear opponent and use political advertising in the mix of communication efforts directed toward “winning” the race. In the long run, it might be mainly an issue of attracting enough financial resources to finance such a strategy. The fact that political parties have almost continuously struggled with their finances in the past decades suggests that this might remain a serious constraint in the future as well.

Notes

1  www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQcN4w0_VqU.
2  www.youtube.com/watch?v=Js-3TYjx30.

References


