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Online battles

Conflict frames in political actors' online communication: Context, content, and consequences
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INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION

“Conflict, competition, leadership, and organization are the essence of democratic politics.” (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 136)

As Schattschneider famously argued, conflict lies at the heart of politics. The articulation of conflict defines and explicates public policy alternatives to the public. Politicians compete with each other to promote interests, ideologies, or leadership and to mobilize electoral support. This competition gets citizens involved in politics and offers them the opportunity to make deliberate political choices (Schattschneider, 1975). In that sense, conflicts have always had a central function in the working of (deliberative) democracy.

In today’s digitalized media landscape, these conflicts are no longer confined to the physical public realm, parliamentary chambers, television debates, or journalists’ accounts in mainstream media; they are now prominently displayed in the virtual realm (e.g., on social media) as well. Take the Netherlands, for instance. It is increasingly common for Dutch politicians to keep their smartphones ready during parliamentary debates (Kruyswijk, 2020). This enables them - and their social media teams - to swiftly go online to discredit their opponents’ arguments to inform and satisfy their electorate or attract the attention of the media. Additionally, politicians often cherry-pick fragments from parliamentary discussions in which they successfully undermine their rivals’ viewpoints, later sharing these fragments as videos on social media (Schimmelpenninck, 2023). This shift from offline to online battles has become a defining feature of our digital age.

Existing research shows that political conflict can inform citizens about the political options and motivate them to get involved in politics because conflict highlights that there is something at stake (Bjarnøe, 2022; Schuck et al., 2016). At the same time, concerns have been raised about conflicts as they may fuel distrust toward politicians, increase the gap between partisan groups, and disengage people from politics (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Skytte, 2021). In light of these diverging findings of conflict and the importance of social media for politicians, this dissertation will consider the context, the content, and the effects of different types of online political battles. It seeks to understand what types of conflict frames there are, how they impact citizens, and what influences politicians’ usage of conflict frames.

Social media are thus central in the political arena and matter for our understanding of the content, causes, and effects of conflict in political discourse. Politicians have

grown reliant on social media as a means of connecting with the public (Larsson, 2016; Lilleker et al., 2015). Social media provides them with the opportunity to circumvent journalists, directly communicate to and with voters, and control the content of their messages. By using these platforms they aim to make themselves more visible to voters and to convey their issue positions to the electorate (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). With the advent of social media, politicians have become involved in a “permanent campaign”, constantly concerned with maintaining or increasing their popularity, support, and influence, even outside of election periods (Larsson, 2016).

While social media serve as a direct communication channel to the public, they also function as an extension of traditional media. Politicians use social media to secure their presence in traditional media outlets (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). Receiving coverage in traditional media is still of importance for politicians because their visibility in these media, for instance, impacts their political success (e.g., van Erkel et al., 2020; Van Remoortere & Vliegthart, 2023). Moreover, the interplay between political elites, social media, and traditional media can help raise the importance of an issue, retain attention for it, and foster change (Langer & Gruber, 2021). Hence, politicians also need to attract the attention of traditional media and to do so, it is expected that they adapt their online communication to the logic of the traditional media (Blumler & Esser, 2019), including communication that fits journalists’ preference for conflict and negativity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

To stand out in a media environment that is characterized by an abundance of information, and to secure their presence in the mainstream media, politicians strategically frame their online messages. This means that they selectively highlight certain elements of a perceived reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). By ‘online messages’, I refer to their (unpaid) social media content (e.g., posts on X - formerly known as Twitter -, Facebook messages, Instagram posts or stories, TikTok videos) as well as their (paid) campaign advertisements. Considering that conflict is a key news value (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), highlighting contrasts with one’s political opponent is a core element of politics (Schattschneider, 1975) and people are naturally drawn to negativity and conflict (Soroka & McAdams, 2015), politicians often frame their message in terms of conflict with other politicians, political parties, individuals, groups, institutions, or viewpoints. While it is debated to what extent negativity and conflict are on the rise (Elmelund-Præstekær & Svensson, 2014; Klinger et al., 2022), it is clear that conflict is key in politicians’ online communication (Haselmayer, 2019; Sahly et al., 2019).

Existing research shows that messages containing conflict framing can have both positive and negative implications for democracy. On the one hand, studies have found

that conflict can help parties attract votes, inform citizens about political alternatives, and trigger citizens' involvement in politics, for example, yielding a higher turnout at elections (e.g., Geer, 2006; Schuck et al., 2016). On the other hand, studies have found evidence that conflict can lead people to evaluate politicians negatively, fuel distrust, and disengage citizens from politics (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). This inconclusive evidence potentially results from the binary classification of conflict as either present or not. However, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, not all conflicts are the same, and distinct kinds of conflicts may yield different outcomes. For instance, an ordinary substantive disagreement on the pros and cons of nuclear energy, when discussed civilly, can be informative for voters. On the contrary, uncivil, and deep disagreements concerning opposing viewpoints on whether climate change is due to human activity may contribute to growing dislike of citizens and politicians towards political opponents and hinder the reasonable exchange of arguments.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation aims to understand what kind of conflict frames politicians adopt in their political online messages, what their motivations are to employ them, and how these different kinds of conflict frames affect citizens and democracy. To assess the impact of online political battles on democracy, the ideal of deliberative democracy is considered. The overarching research question that guides the dissertation is the following:

Overarching research question: How and why do politicians in the Netherlands employ conflict frames in their online messages, what type of conflict frames exist, and what is the impact of these frames on citizens and democracy?

In this introductory chapter, I will first explore the concept of conflict framing, examine the potential consequences politicians anticipate when using it, and review the findings from previous research regarding its impact. On this basis, I will identify gaps in the literature and put forward a multi-dimensional framework of political conflict frames. Afterward, the role of conflict frames from a deliberative democracy perspective will be discussed. The chapter ends with an outline of the dissertation, including an overview of the empirical studies that test the content and consequences of conflict frames, and the influence of the mediatized environment on politicians' use of conflict frames. The empirical studies are all carried out in the context of social media in the Dutch political landscape.

What is conflict framing?

The framing literature forms the main theoretical angle of this dissertation. The concept of framing is, however, highly contested and many different conceptualizations exist (Cacciatore et al., 2016). This dissertation focuses on emphasis framing. This means that differences in the content and style of communication are investigated, as opposed to examining variations in how equivalent information is conveyed (i.e., equivalence framing; Cacciatore et al., 2016). An emphasis frame is often defined as “a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Emphasis framing refers to selecting and highlighting certain aspects of an issue, event, or topic while downplaying or excluding others. By doing so, a speaker, such as a politician or a journalist, suggests a certain problem definition, causal interpretation, treatment recommendation, and/or moral evaluation of the subject and tries to shape individuals’ perceptions (Entman, 1993).

The most common definition used for conflict framing originates from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who define it as a frame that “emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest” (p.95). This conflict emerges or is created because there is an opposition between the disagreeing actors in beliefs, values, or goals (Putnam, 2006). Empirically, this translates to instances in which political actors criticize one another, tensions between political parties are showcased, or incompatibilities between different viewpoints are emphasized (Putnam & Shoemaker, 2007). Because frames typically emerge from negotiated and contested interpretations of issues (Matthes, 2012), the use of the conflict frame is widespread in political communication (e.g., De Vreese, et al., 2001; Gronemeyer & Porath, 2017).

The framing literature also distinguishes frames that are issue-specific and generic frames that can be applied to a variety of issues (De Vreese, 2005). Studies that consider issue-specific frames investigate the framing of particular topics or events (see e.g., Shah et al. (2002) who study the framing of the Clinton presidency). These types of studies allow for a very detailed examination of frames but because the findings of these studies are often case-specific it is hard to generalize them to other contexts or settings. A conflict frame, instead, is a generic frame, and this type of frame transcends topics, persons, events, or situations. This allows for more cross-country or over-time comparisons and generalizations (see e.g., Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012; Schuck et al., 2016).

Conflict frames are primarily studied within the context of news content, focusing on how journalists emphasize conflict between political actors in their news articles. While there is less research on conflict framing by political actors, it is important to note that political actors play a crucial role in the frame-building process, also influencing the frames journalists adopt (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). Hence, in this dissertation, I focus on the communication of political elites. While conflict framing in the media typically involves the presentation of competing points of view by journalists, strategic framing by politicians can also take the form of one-sided criticism. Politicians strategically employ conflict frames to draw attention from the media and the public to their viewpoints (Matthes, 2012; Sahly et al., 2019). Studies investigating conflict in political actors' online messages, however, often tend to focus on the concept of negative campaigning rather than conflict framing. Hence, it is necessary to discuss the relationship, similarities, and differences between the conceptualization of negative campaigning and conflict framing.

Negative campaigning refers to the practice of political actors to portray their political opponents in a negative light, focusing on their downsides or those of their ideas (e.g., Geer, 2006; Lau & Rovner, 2009). This practice stands in contrast to positive campaigning, where the focus is on promoting one's own ideas (Geer, 2006; Lau & Rovner, 2009). It is possible to see negative campaigning as a form of conflict framing. Negative campaigning strategies, as well as conflict frames, involve political actors criticizing one another. However, while negative campaigning places the act of attacking the political opponent at its core, and thus specifies that a political actor should be targeted, conflict framing is not limited to a specific political target. Conflict framing highlights the contrast between two actors or opposing viewpoints. Consequently, conflict frames extend beyond merely targeting the political enemy; they also encompass conflicting information more broadly. For instance, conflicting perspectives on a particular issue or an attack on or disagreement with non-political actors, including social groups, or institutions such as the media. An example of a conflict frame - that cannot be classified as a negative campaign - is a politician who discredits an economic vision that favours state intervention while advocating for a free market economy. In this scenario, the conflict frame highlights the clash between these two contrasting economic perspectives rather than singling out a specific opponent. However, when a politician of a party criticises the economic vision of another party and that they offer a better alternative, this would be both an example of a conflict frame as well as a negative campaign.

In this dissertation, I focus on conflict framing, as this concept fits best with the political reality that is investigated: a multi-party system with a coalition government.

While negative campaigning is very common in a two-party system, it is less used in multi-party settings (Walter, 2014). It is argued that parties in multi-party settings benefit less from adopting a negative campaigning strategy and that this setting therefore constrains its usage (Walter, 2014). Parties are thought to rely on a cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether to adopt a negative campaigning strategy (Lau & Pomper, 2004). In a two-party system weighing the potential costs and benefits is quite straightforward. A potential benefit is that by lowering the popularity of the opponent, an attacking party can sway undecided voters and attract its partisans. A potential risk is that it may alienate voters who dislike negative campaigns (Lau et al., 2007). In a multi-party system, however, this cost-benefit analysis is more complex, lowering the incentive of using a negative campaign tactic (Walter, 2014). Since voters have many more political alternatives to choose from, it is uncertain if an attack on an opponent will help you attract voters. Furthermore, there is an additional cost. In a multi-party system, parties generally need to form a coalition after an election, and when they employ a harsh negative campaign strategy this may hamper their governing opportunities. While negative campaigning may thus be less widely adopted as a political campaign strategy, party conflict is still fierce in multi-party settings. These systems are, for instance, characterized by radical (populist) parties who are inherently antagonistic (i.e., anti-elite and anti-establishment), and constantly evolving ideological conflicts (Borbáth et al., 2023; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Kriesi, 2014). Additionally, in a context with a high number of political parties, often with overlapping party agendas, it may be essential for political parties to highlight how their ideas differentiate from those of their opponents. Conflicts can simplify complex political issues and thereby inform voters (Bjarnøe et al., 2019). Hence, in online communication of political elites in multi-party settings, conflicts may still play a crucial role. The conflict frames employed by politicians in multi-party systems may potentially differ from those in two-party systems. For example, rather than directly targeting a political party, politicians may find it more useful to focus on contrasting viewpoints without explicitly saying with whom they disagree. The importance of conflict in these settings is also reflected in the media coverage, with the conflict frame being commonly adopted by political journalists (Schuck et al., 2016).

Even though the focus of this dissertation is on conflict framing, throughout the dissertation I will also borrow insights from the negative campaigning literature. Both conflict frames and negative campaigning involve attacks, negativity, and at times incivility, so there is a significant overlap between the two concepts. Hence, the literature on negative campaigning provides us with crucial theories on how people might respond to conflict frames. In the remaining sections of this introduction chapter, I will refer to the literature on negative campaigning as well as on conflict

framing. I will now turn to the question of why politicians would adopt conflict frames and what effects conflict frames can have on citizens.

Why do politicians adopt conflict frames?

Before turning to the effects of conflict frames, this dissertation also investigates why politicians adopt conflict framing. If we regard it as a deliberate communicative act that politicians can choose to employ, it is relevant to consider under which conditions they do so. To understand the reasons for the usage of conflict frames, I consider potential consequences that politicians might anticipate when using them. First, negative information is expected to spark attention among citizens (Pratto & John, 1991) and is more likely to be remembered than positive information (Bradley et al., 2007). Cognitive psychological research has shown that people are inherently biased toward negative information: people respond more strongly to and show heightened awareness toward negative information (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Moreover, since negative messages elicit attention and arousal they leave a more lasting impression (Bradley et al., 2007). Hence, by adopting conflict frames, politicians seek to attract the attention of the audience and hope that their messages will continue to be prominent in the minds of people when they discuss or think about politics.

Second, political parties can criticize opponents during elections to discourage support for their rivals while simultaneously mobilizing their supporters and swaying undecided voters (Lau et al., 2007). However, it is important to note that attacking opponents can be a risky strategy with potential downsides. Negative campaigns may harm the reputation of the attacking party if voters find the attacks objectionable, leading to what's known as a 'backlash' effect (Lau et al., 2007).

Third, politicians potentially use conflict frames because they offer citizens valuable insights into distinct and conflicting positions of different political parties. Citizens often depend on the cues provided by politicians to make sense of the political alternatives (Zaller, 1992). By highlighting where a party stands in contrast to others, citizens can make a well-informed decision about which group best aligns with their political beliefs (Levendusky, 2010).

Finally, parties may adopt conflict frames in response to the mediatization of politics. The mediatization of politics refers to the process whereby the logic of the media, including the prioritization of news values of negativity and conflict, has extended beyond the realm of journalism and is generally more central to communication

processes (Strömbäck, 2005). By using conflict frames politicians can attract news coverage (Matthes, 2012) and impact the potential frames that the media will use (Entman et al., 2009). Even though social media allow politicians to circumvent their gatekeeping function, traditional media continue to serve as a crucial channel for reaching the public due to their extensive reach, substantial resources, and their role in generating original news content that is often picked up by other platforms (Langer & Gruber, 2021). Hence, politicians seek ways to attract the attention of the media. To achieve this, it is generally assumed that they adapt their behaviour to align with the media logic (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). When selecting and framing the news journalists prioritize their own routines and rules, including news values like negativity and conflict (Strömbäck, 2005). Thus, politicians can, for instance, strategically criticize opponents to cater to these journalistic news selection criteria. Both negativity and conflict have significant news value (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and by incorporating these news values in their online communication they can secure their presence in the news (Van Santen et al., 2015).

State of the art: How do conflict and negativity affect citizens?

Given that conflict and negativity are important elements of political communication strategies (Auter & Fine, 2016; Haselmayer, 2019; Klinger et al., 2022; Sahly et al., 2019), there is a large body of research that has sought to understand how conflict affects citizens' electoral preferences, political attitudes, and political participation (see Lau and Rovner, 2009; Nai and Walter, 2015 for extensive literature reviews). However, the evidence on the effects of conflict framing and negative campaigning is far from conclusive. While some find positive outcomes, others find negative effects or no effects at all. This inconclusive evidence may be the result of inconsistent conceptualizations or a binary classification of conflict. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine whether different types of conflict produce different effects. In the following sections, I will examine the effects found in the current literature. First, I will explore how negative campaigning and conflict framing affect the evaluation of political parties. Second, I will discuss how conflict frames can have unintended effects on political attitudes and participation.

Conflict and party preferences

Parties engage in negative campaigning or conflict framing to attract voters. Studies conducted in Western Europe (Ceron & d'Adda, 2016; Dassonneville, 2010) and the US (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014) have indicated that voters do not punish a party that runs a negative campaign and instead are inclined to support a party that engages in criticism of its opponents. Ceron and d'Adda (2016) show that a negative campaign is effective in a multi-party system when the party targets a rival party that is ideologically close,

attracting voters who are still deciding between these two parties. Moreover, they find that the impact of negative campaigning is strongest when the attacker is also under attack, indicating that people do not blame a party that tries to defend itself. These results show that voters see criticism as a legitimate part of the political environment, understand that parties need to defend themselves, and that negative campaigns can be informative for them (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014). Hence, these studies underscore the effectiveness of emphasizing conflict and negativity in (campaign) messages.

However, most research actually finds that negativity has backlash effects, and thus that voters evaluate the party that attacks less positively, both in the context of multi-party systems (Carraro & Castelli, 2010; Roy & Alcantara, 2016; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019) and in the US (Lau et al., 2007; Nai & Maier, 2021). Walter and Van der Eijk (2019) have found, for instance, that voters lower their preferences for parties that attack their opponents, and that this effect strengthens as the campaign progresses. Carraro and Castelli (2010) find that parties that did not engage in negative campaigns were viewed as warmer and more competent. Hence, these findings indicate that most of the time voters dislike it when parties adopt a negative campaign. As argued by Roy and Alcantara (2016) since political parties' main goal during campaigns is to win votes, voters may be suspicious about the motivations of parties to attack others and question their truthfulness.

Moreover, studies found that partisan conflict contributes to growing dislike between partisan groups and fosters out-group animosity (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Skytte, 2021; Sood & Iyengar, 2016). To explain this, studies rely on theories from social psychology that show that political competition makes your own political identity more salient and fosters an 'us' versus 'them' mentality (Cikara et al., 2011). Conflict framing is thus not always a successful political strategy and could have unintended consequences such as fostering affective polarization, which is the growing dislike between partisan groups.

Negative effects on political attitudes and participation

Several authors have raised concerns about the potential of negative campaigns and conflict to cause cynical attitudes and alienate citizens from the political process. It is assumed that conflict decreases trust in politics because people tend to dislike conflict and may perceive it as an obstacle to effective governing (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Studies within the context of the US show that negative campaigning can increase cynicism (Yoon et al., 2005) and negatively impact political trust (Lau et al., 2007). In addition, Uslaner (2015) shows that partisan conflict and political gridlock decrease trust in the government. Outside of the US, similar results have been found. For instance, Toros (2017), examined the Turkish context and found that negativity

reduced citizens' trust in their government. A study by Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) on conflict frames in the news spread during the 2002 Dutch election campaign indicated that conflict could lead to distrust of politicians, which, in turn, could make people less likely to engage in politics and vote.

Furthermore, studies conducted in the United States have shown that negative political campaigns and ideological conflict can have a demobilizing effect (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Krupnikov, 2011; Rogowski, 2014). For instance, Ansolabehere et al. (1994) found that negative campaigning harmed voter turnout in the United States. When criticism not only reduces the likelihood of someone voting for the target of the attack but also fails to increase the likelihood of someone voting for the source of the attack, it can lead to an overall decrease in turnout rates. Likewise, Rogowski (2014) shows that increasing levels of ideological conflict during campaigns, operationalized as dissimilarity in the ideological content of party platforms, can also result in reduced turnout. When ideological conflict increases and politicians move further away from the political centre, citizens who are located around the middle of the political spectrum may feel alienated by the limited choices available to them, leading to a decreased likelihood of them participating in the electoral process.

Positive effects on political attitudes and participation

However, findings from several recent studies on negative campaigning and conflict framing call for a more optimistic view. Research has shown that conflict framing can inform citizens about political options and motivate them to participate in politics. It is argued that conflict frames in the news can help people understand the differences between political parties on important issues and help them make more informed decisions (Schuck et al., 2016). Furthermore, negative information is also informative because, by attacking the opponents' character or their views, political actors lay bare any problems that might otherwise go unnoticed (Geer, 2006). After all, politicians are often unlikely to criticize themselves, and when campaigns are only positive, voters will miss crucial information.

Moreover, since conflict and disagreement often carry a negative valence, conflict can also spark citizens' interest in politics and get them more involved (e.g., Bene, 2017; Bjarnøe, 2022; Sahly et al., 2019; Schuck et al., 2016). This mobilization effect is found in different political contexts. Studies show that negative campaign advertising in the US increases political discussion (e.g., Cho, 2013) and turnout (Martin, 2004; Min, 2004). Furthermore, Schuck et al. (2016) conducted a comparative study across European countries and demonstrated that conflict frames in the news motivate people to cast their ballots. Similarly, a study by Bjarnøe (2022), focusing on Denmark,

indicated that conflict news framing causes people to discuss politics more often. Finally, Sahly et al. (2019) showed that the conflict frames of Trump and Clinton on Twitter attracted engagement with the message.

Overall, this review of the current literature indicates that the effects of conflict and negativity in politicians' communication on citizens are mixed. This underlines the importance of investigating what it is about conflict that could have positive or negative consequences. This dissertation unpacks what kinds of conflicts exist and how they impact citizens. Furthermore, since most of the literature discussed so far has focused on the bi-partisan setting of the US, this dissertation assesses if the found dynamics hold in a multi-party setting. Furthermore, although I have explored potential reasons for politicians to adopt conflict frames, our understanding of the underlying intentions behind politicians' adoption of these frames remains limited. Understanding these motivations is essential, as it could potentially inform the development of interventions aimed at fostering constructive political discourse.

What remains unknown?

There are three noticeable gaps in the literature that this dissertation aims to fill: (1) identifying different kinds of political conflict frames; (2) extending the research on the effects of different conflict frames to the multi-party setting; and (3) investigating how a media context focused on negativity and conflict influences politicians' decisions to adopt (different kinds of) conflict frames.

1. Identifying the dimensions of political conflict frames

First, most of the literature discussed so far has treated conflict or negativity as a unified concept. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that conflict frames are “multilayered and complex constructs” (Bartholomé et al., 2018, p. 1689), and “campaign messages clearly differ in ways that go well beyond a simple negative/positive distinction” (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 2). Consequently, studies have aimed to identify different types of conflicts and to understand their effects on citizens. These studies have made a valuable distinction between civil and uncivil conflict. Uncivil conflict refers to situations in which political actors behave disrespectfully and violate the social norms of conversation, while civil conflict involves political actors engaging reasonably and respectfully (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Nai & Maier, 2021; Otto et al., 2020). Additionally, scholars have differentiated between substantive conflicts related to specific policies or views, and non-substantive conflicts that involve attacks aimed at the personal characteristics of politicians or parties (Bartholomé et al., 2018; Brooks & Geer, 2007; Carraro & Castelli, 2010; Min, 2004; Nai & Maier, 2021). It is expected that the harsher forms of negativity such as uncivil discourse, as well

as personal attacks are detrimental to democracy. For example, a study conducted by Min (2004) in the United States demonstrated that negative campaigns focusing on policy issues motivated people to vote, while negativity aimed at a candidate had a demobilizing effect. Similarly, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that uncivil political discourse erodes trust, while civil discourse does not significantly affect citizens' trust levels. Thus, these studies underscore the importance of considering whether conflicts are uncivil and include personal attacks or not.

Additionally, it remains unclear how various other dimensions of conflict influence the attitudes of citizens. Within the philosophical field of political epistemology, the concept of disagreement has received ample attention (e.g., Frances, 2014; Kappel, 2018) and scholars have made further distinctions between different kinds of conflict. First, there is a difference between ordinary (or superficial/shallow) and deep disagreements (De Ridder, 2021; Knoll, 2020; Ranalli, 2018b). Politicians in an ordinary conflict share core moral values and epistemic principles but disagree on how these values and principles should be applied (De Ridder, 2021; Knoll, 2020). An example of an ordinary conflict is a situation in which politicians agree on the moral principle of protecting the environment but disagree on the specifics of regulations addressing climate change. Politicians in deep disagreement, in contrast, disagree about core moral or epistemic principles (De Ridder, 2021; Ranalli, 2018b). In other words, politicians in deep disagreement not only hold different opinions about an issue, but they also have fundamentally different understandings of what counts as reliable evidence or what is morally right. For example, a deep disagreement on the topic of climate change exists when political parties not only have different policy proposals but also fundamentally divergent views on the scientific consensus and moral obligations related to addressing climate change. Due to the lack of shared epistemic and moral principles, deep conflicts pose serious challenges to understanding each other's viewpoints and may lead people to view political opponents as irrational or immoral. Hence, according to De Ridder (2021), these deep disagreements may contribute to polarization. If people disagree deeply with others, and see them as fundamentally mistaken, they are less likely to take their opponents' viewpoints seriously and instead stick with information that confirms their existing beliefs. This, in turn, may cause people to become more confident about their own beliefs and potentially drive them to more extreme positions, ultimately resulting in polarization (De Ridder, 2021). Deep disagreements in politics could, thus, have important implications for the well-functioning of democracy. In this dissertation, I apply the concept of deep disagreement to the online communication of political parties. I explore the usage of deep conflict frames by politicians and political parties in their online communication and explore how these deep conflict frames affect citizens' political attitudes.

Second, a distinction has been made between conflicts involving normative or factual issues (Frances, 2014). Normative conflicts arise because politicians disagree about what *ought* to be the ideal state of affairs or what ought to be done, while factual conflicts revolve around contrasting beliefs regarding what *is* objectively the current state of affairs. In democratic societies, both normative and factual conflicts are a natural part of the political landscape and may not be cause for concern. However, when factual conflicts arise not because there is uncertainty about facts, but because there is disagreement about widely established and verifiable facts (e.g., whether human activities contribute to climate change; or whether vaccines are safe and effective), it may become more problematic. Especially in a post-truth era that is characterized by the spread of disinformation (Van Aelst et al., 2017), political actors who create factual conflicts about established facts may enhance the idea that politicians are spreading false information and are dishonest. This may have important consequences on how people view politics. In this dissertation, I also explore how factual and normative conflict frames are present in the communication of political actors and how they affect citizens.

In sum, given that both the distinctions provided by political communication/science and political epistemology may have a significant influence on how people perceive and engage with politics, I believe it is crucial to integrate these perspectives when assessing the effects of political conflict frames. I thus rely on the following dimensions in this dissertation: (1) the extent to which conflicts are *uncivil*; (2) the use of *personal* attacks or not; (3) whether they concern a *deep* or *ordinary* conflict; (4) and are about a *factual* or *normative* issue.

2. Studying the usage and effects of political conflict frames in the Dutch multi-party setting

Although there is a growing body of research on negative campaigning in multi-party contexts, the majority of research has focused on the US, which may potentially harm the generalizability of empirical research on the effects, content, and consequences of conflict framing. Studies that did consider the multi-party setting primarily focused on assessing the effectiveness of negative campaigns (Ceron & d'Adda, 2016; Dassonneville, 2010; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014), while paying less attention to potential side effects such as their impact on political trust or participation. The few studies that do examine these side effects tend to concentrate on conflict within political news coverage (e.g., Bjarnøe, 2022; Schuck et al., 2016), rather than the consequences of conflict frames in the communication of political elites. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by investigating how conflict frames in the communication of political actors influence voters' evaluations of political parties, their degree of political cynicism, and their political engagement.

It is important to address this question in a multi-party setting since findings from a bi-partisan setting cannot directly be applied to this context. First, as discussed before the risk of a backlash effect resulting from the use of conflictual language may be more pronounced in a multi-party system than in a bi-partisan system. In multi-party systems, voters tend to have weaker party loyalties and are more inclined to switch between parties (Mair, 2008). Consequently, if a preferred party crosses the line in terms of acceptable communication, voters may easily shift their support to their second-best alternative (Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019). Additionally, given the importance of consensus and cooperation in multi-party settings (Lijphart, 1999), conflicts may be perceived as more alarming by voters, potentially negatively impacting their levels of political cynicism or political participation. Finally, the nature of conflicts in a multi-party setting may differ from that in a two-party system. Since parties in multi-party systems often need to collaborate to form a government or to implement policies, conflicts may be less uncivil and deep. These less uncivil or deep conflicts could potentially yield more positive effects on citizens than negative ones.

3. Investigating the influence of the media context focused on negativity and conflict

Finally, our understanding of politicians' intentions and considerations behind the use of conflict frames is limited. Given the high news value of negativity and conflict and their prominence in political news coverage (Esser et al., 2016; Galtung & Ruge, 1965), it is assumed that political actors adopt conflict frames to align with the media's preferences for negativity and conflict to ensure their visibility in the news (Van Santen et al., 2015). This is also referred to as self-mediatization, which involves political actors actively integrating the principles and practices of the news media into their decision-making and actions (Blumler & Esser, 2019). However, the reasons for adopting conflict frames can be many-fold. Besides attracting attention from the media, politicians aim to attract attention from the audience, inform them, and sway their support by lowering the support for the opponent. Moreover, next to reaching out to the public and being visible, politicians may have other strategic political objectives in mind. They also need to be concerned with their parliamentary influence and their governing intentions (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). At the same time, they may also personally like or dislike conflict which may influence their behaviour (Maier & Nai, 2023). However, we know little about the underlying motivations and complex reasoning of politicians to focus on conflict and negativity in their communication.

Existing research examining politicians' self-mediatization predominantly relies on surveys or content analyses (Bastien, 2020; Cohen et al., 2008; Haßler et al., 2014; Ketelaars & Van Aelst, 2021). While this research has uncovered important patterns in politicians' behaviour, such as that political actors adopt more to the media logic during

election campaigns (Haßler et al., 2014), more in-depth methods such as interviews are needed to gain a detailed understanding of the reasons behind politicians' behaviour. In this dissertation, I address this gap by qualitatively investigating how politicians experience the impact of a media environment that focuses on conflict and how they adapt their communication in response to this media landscape. This offers valuable insight into the drivers of conflict in politics and where to potentially intervene to foster constructive political discourse that helps citizens get informed and engaged in politics.

Why should we care about conflict frames?

As discussed, political conflict frames can have diverging effects on individual voters' attitudes and behaviour and different types of conflict frames can be distinguished. The following questions then arise: what do these findings mean for a well-functioning democracy? What do we mean if we talk about a well-functioning democracy? What ideal do we strive for?

In this dissertation, I take the ideal of deliberative democracy to normatively assess the role of political conflict frames in democracy (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 2006). According to this ideal of democracy, the democratic process is supposed to get legitimacy through both citizens and politicians engaging in deliberative discussions about political matters (Habermas, 2006). For discussions to be deliberative they should be inclusive, ensuring that everyone can participate, they should be respectful, and uncoerced, and the participants engaging in it should provide reasons for their arguments (Polletta & Gardner, 2018). These deliberative discussions should preferably take place “in the media, in parliamentary chambers, and in ordinary life” between citizens, between politicians, and between politicians and citizens (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 336). It is important that citizens engage in deliberative discussions, and insist on their representatives doing so, to ensure that decisions that affect everyone are justified (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Ideally, “the deliberative discussions should continue until mutually acceptable decisions are reached, but if that is not possible, they should continue until all factual and moral aspects of an issue have been weighed and considered” (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 336–337). So, although it is impossible to settle all conflicts through deliberative discussions, the aim is that these discussions should foster mutual respect, advance understanding, and expand knowledge. They can help citizens and politicians understand why the opponent makes certain claims and what moral merit they have, as well as help them “develop new views and policies that can more successfully withstand critical scrutiny” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 12).

For deliberative democracy to function well, citizens ought to be politically interested and engaged. They need to be informed about political matters and should be willing to

discuss these matters in a deliberative manner, meaning that they provide arguments for their positions, reflect on each other's viewpoints, and show respect (Friess et al., 2021; Rinke et al., 2013).

Conflict framing can be at odds with deliberative ideals (Rinke et al., 2013). If politicians adopt a conflict frame, their aims might be to attract the attention of voters and maximize political support, rather than fulfilling the prerequisites of deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, the articulation of conflicts can still be conducive to deliberation. Especially when these conflicts are civil and substantive. By presenting different issue positions and the justifications for them, conflict frames fulfil the requirement of deliberative democracy that politicians should exchange their views on different issues rationally and provide reasoned support for their political positions. Moreover, conflict frames help to inform citizens about the range of political alternatives and thereby mobilize them to cast their ballot (Bjarnøe, 2022; Schuck et al., 2016). However, conflict frames can also stand in stark contrast with the ideal of deliberative discussion and could give rise to anti-deliberative tendencies, for instance, when they are uncivil. Conflict frames containing negative and delegitimizing information about opponents could cause intolerance to the opponent's views rather than understanding (Sood & Iyengar, 2016). Since these types of conflicts may be interesting for journalists, as they could spark the interest of their readers, they could also be amplified in the media, fostering a spiral of harsher conflictual language.

Because different types of conflict may affect democracy differently it is crucial to draw distinctions between the types of conflict frames that are employed by political parties. In this dissertation, I identify under what conditions conflict contributes to the ideal of deliberative democracy. I assess how the different dimensions identified in this dissertation benefit or harm democracy and suggest the conditions for deliberatively productive conflict.

Context of the dissertation: Why the Netherlands?

To investigate the content and consequences of conflict framing in a multi-party setting, this dissertation focuses on the Netherlands. The Netherlands provides an exemplary case of a multi-party system with a coalition government (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005). The Dutch electoral system is one of the most proportionally representative systems in the world (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005). Consequently, many different parties compete in elections. Before the 2021 election, parliament consisted of 13 different parties, and after the 2021 election, 17 parties were elected. At the time that the

interviews for this dissertation were conducted, this number had increased even more, and the parliament consisted of 20 parties. Since there are so many different parties, no single party usually gets a majority, and parties need to form a coalition to govern. Therefore, the Netherlands is also known for having a culture centred around consensus and compromise (Lijphart, 1999).

The Dutch setting also lends itself well to examining the effects of *online communication* in particular. Dutch politicians are very active online (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016) and their online presence is important as it influences people's voting preferences (Bene, 2018; Kruikemeier, 2014). Especially because there are so many different parties competing, political parties need to make sure that voters know who they are and what they stand for.

Finally, the large number of parties allows for an examination of the use of conflict frames by political parties with differing ideological positions in politics as well as between government parties and opposition parties. We know from previous research that not all parties are equally likely to resort to negativity (Maier & Nai, 2023). Moreover, the same attack made by two different actors is likely to be perceived differently, because people hold different party preferences, but also because people are more likely to expect certain behaviour from particular parties (Mutz, 2007; Pattie et al., 2011; Toros, 2017). For instance, Toros (2017) found that exposure to a range of negative messages in which parties attack one another can have differing effects on the trust of voters depending on their political affiliation. People who support a government party may experience a decline in trust when exposed to negative messages, possibly because they see these messages as a threat to the existing order. In contrast, those who vote for an opposition party and are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs may have their political trust boosted by negative messages. Relatedly, Mutz (2007) discovered that voters only lower their evaluations of a party that behaves uncivilly when this is an out-group party. Hence, in this dissertation, I consider political preference as an important moderator of the effect of conflict framing on citizens.

Dissertation outline

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first four chapters are empirical studies, Chapter 5 is a conceptual piece. The chapters were written as stand-alone papers and can thus also be read as such. Below, I will explain the specifics of each individual study and explain how the chapters are related (see also Figure 1). This dissertation adopts a multi-method approach, employing a range of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, surveys, content analyses, and experiments (See Figure 2).

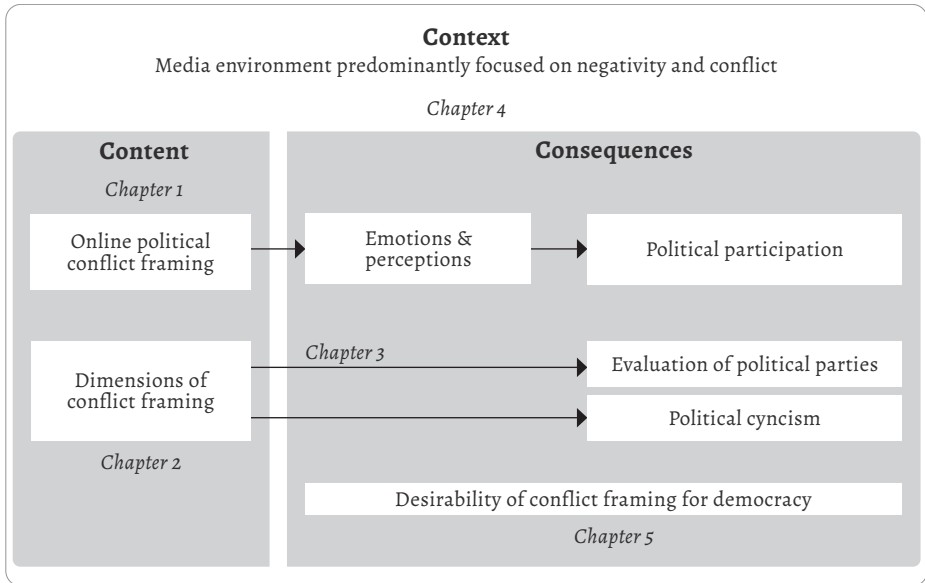


Figure 1. The graphical representation of the dissertation.

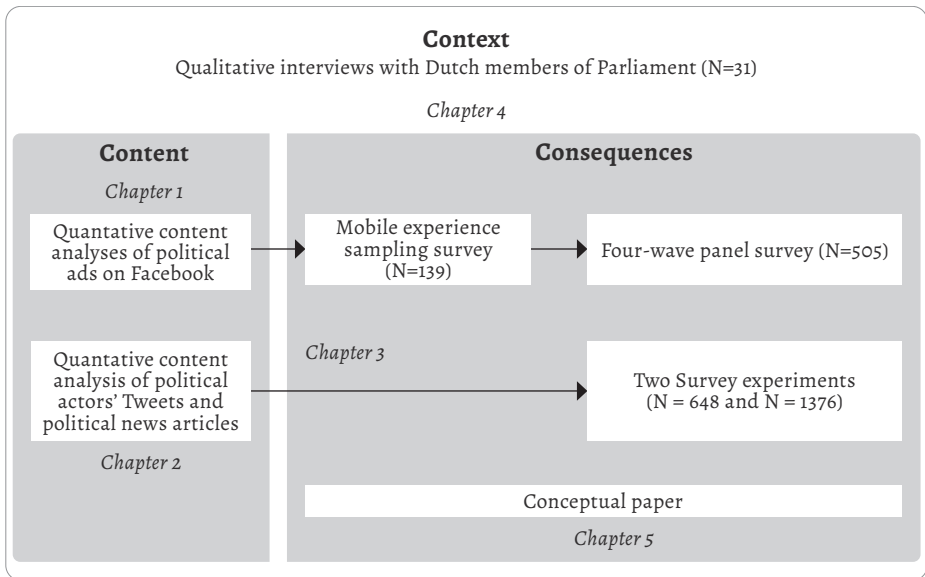


Figure 2. The graphical representation of the methodologies used for the individual chapters.

In **Chapter 1**, we investigate how conflict framing employed by politicians in their campaign advertisements affects citizens' political participation within a multi-party system. Furthermore, we investigate whether citizens see conflict frames from parties they like or dislike, and how seeing conflict ads from parties they (dis)like affect their intention to participate in a range of different types of political activities. Chapter 1 thus answers fundamental questions regarding the potential unintended consequences of conflict framing in a *multi-party setting*. In addition, we seek to understand how citizens perceive conflict in campaign ads (i.e., informative, and entertaining), what type of emotions these ads elicit (anger, fear, and enthusiasm), and if these perceptions and emotions mediate the effect of conflict framing on participation. We pose the following research questions: *How does conflict framing in political campaign ads affect political participation in a multi-party setting? And how is this mediated by perceptions and emotions toward the ad?*

Considering the lack of research on the usage and effects of conflict frames in politicians' communication, we do not yet explore the effects of the different dimensions of conflict framing, but instead, first aim to understand how conflict framing in general in campaign messages relative to other campaign messages impacted voters' participatory intentions. We rely on a unique combination of data collected during the Dutch 2021 general election campaign. We combine (1) a four-wave panel survey, (2) a content analysis of Facebook browser-tracking data, and (3) a mobile experience sampling survey with data donations. The longitudinal panel combined with the content analysis of browser-tracking data enables us to assess whether the number of conflict ads people saw during the elections affected their political participatory intentions over the course of the election. With the mobile experience sampling survey, we zoom in on the mechanism behind the effect of conflict framing on political participation. Participants were asked to upload the political ads they came across during the election and to answer some questions about it, including whether they thought the ad was informative and entertaining, and how the ad made them feel. Since participants had to upload the real ads they saw and also respond to questions about these ads in their natural setting and in real-time, it provides an accurate representation of participants' natural reactions (Van Berkel et al., 2018). Overall, this study offers insight into the real-world consequences of conflict framing and the mechanisms underlying these effects.

Following this, in **Chapter 2**, we seek to understand what different types of conflict can be distinguished. Here, we focus on a non-election period. Since Chapter 1 already considered the usage of conflict framing during an election, we were interested in examining how politicians use conflict framing in non-election periods. Given the

idea that politicians are in a permanent campaign, conflict framing is also expected to play an important role when parties are not competing for votes. We present four conceptual dimensions of political conflicts: (1) civil or uncivil; (2) substantive or personal; (3) deep or ordinary; and (4) factual or normative.

We investigate how these different conflict frames are used in tweets (now known as posts on X)¹ by political actors, as well as in print media. Since the concept of conflict framing originates from studies investigating news framing, we wanted to test to what extent our conceptualization applies to both media as well as elite framing. Furthermore, we consider whether there are differences between political parties in the usage of the dimensions of conflict framing in their online communication (i.e., Tweets). We formulate the following questions: *To what extent are the different conflict frames used in newspaper articles and political tweets? And how do (1) government parties versus opposition parties and (2) populist versus non-populist parties differ in their use of the dimensions of conflict framing in tweets?*

To study this, we conducted a manual content analysis of Dutch political news articles and tweets by MPs and their respective political parties. The research period covers a non-election period (November 2019–September 2020). The tweets (6300) and articles (482) were manually coded for the presence of the different dimensions of conflict frames. The main contribution of this chapter is that we have put forward a multi-dimensional framework of political conflict frames.

In **Chapter 3**, we test the framework of political conflict frames. We assess to what extent the different dimensions of conflict framing identified in Chapter 2 affect citizens' evaluation of the party employing the conflict frame and political cynicism. We ask: *How do different types of political conflict frames impact evaluations of the source and political cynicism? And are the effects moderated by political preferences?*

To assess what effects these dimensions have on citizens, we rely on two experiments in the Netherlands ($N = 648$ and $N = 1376$). Experiments are well suited for our research question as they enable us to identify a causal relationship between conflict framing and citizens' evaluation of political parties and cynicism. Moreover, we have control over the content of political communication and are therefore able to manipulate all the different dimensions of conflict frames. This study offers insight into the effect of different types of conflict.

1. In Chapter 2, we refer to the social media messages of politicians on the platform X as 'tweets'. At the time that the study was conducted, X was still called Twitter, and the posts on Twitter were referred to as tweets.

While the previous chapters focus on the content and consequences of conflict framing, in **Chapter 4**, we shed light on how politicians navigate a media environment that is focused on negativity and conflict and how that influences their decisions to adopt conflict frames. In particular, we seek to understand if politicians emphasize conflict and negativity in their daily work and their online messages as a response to media logic. We pose the question: *How are MPs affected in their daily work by a media environment predominantly focused on negativity and political conflict and do they adapt their communication strategies accordingly?*

The data for Chapter 4 are collected through qualitative interviews. Thirty-one members of the Dutch parliament, representing 14 different parties, were interviewed in person between April 2022 and September 2022. Based on these interviews, we conclude how politicians respond to the media environment that is dominated by conflict and negativity. Chapter 4 contributes to the literature by advancing our understanding of the intentions and motivations behind politicians' use of conflict frames.

In the final conceptual chapter, **Chapter 5**, we theoretically consider the desirability of different types of conflict frames from a deliberative democracy perspective. We ask: *What are the boundary conditions for political conflict frames to be conducive to the ideal of deliberative democracy?* For this conceptual piece, we did not collect empirical data. Instead, we rely on the findings from previous research and this dissertation. We argue that several conditions must be met for conflict to contribute to the ideal of deliberative democracy. The conflict should be civil, there should be some common ground emphasized, and conflicts involving widely established and verifiable facts should be avoided.

To conclude, in the discussion of this dissertation, I will reiterate the main findings of this dissertation, discuss their implications, and propose directions for further research. Figure 1 shows the graphical representation of the different aspects this dissertation investigates. Together the different chapters of this dissertation will provide insight into the context in which politicians adopt conflict frames and how that influences them (Chapter 4), the content of conflict framing in and outside election periods (Chapter 1&2), and finally the consequences of (different types of) conflict framing for political attitudes and behaviour (Chapter, 1,3 & 5).