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What did you just call me? A study on the demonization of political parties in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2011

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INTRODUCTION

In many Western European countries, the relationship between anti-immigration parties and the political establishment has been strained for years. In the public debate, members of the establishment often refer to anti-immigration parties as dangerous political outcasts (Fennema and Maussen, 2005), while anti-immigration parties depict members of the establishment as a group of self-serving elitists who fail to adequately deal with issues of immigration and integration (Schedler, 1996). In response to the rise of these anti-immigration parties, the political establishment in several Western European countries has pursued strategies of exclusion and de-legitimation (e.g. Downs, 2001; Husbands, 2002; Widfeldt, 2004), causing anti-immigration parties to contend that the political establishment is conspiring to destroy them (e.g. Golsan, 2003; Happold, 2000; Tributsch, 1994; Verbeeck, 2003).

In the context of how anti-immigration parties have been treated by the establishment, Golsan (2003: 137) speaks of the the ‘demonization’ of French anti-immigration politician Le Pen, which “had long been the privileged strategy deployed to limit [Le Pen’s] impact and, hopefully, eliminate him from the political scene”. Along the same line, Mouffe (2005) argues that the battle to win back votes from Austrian anti-immigration politician Haider was characterized by “a strident moral condemnation of Haider’s xenophobia, and by his demonization as ‘Nazi’” (p. 73). The term demonization has also occasionally been used in other studies to describe the friction between Western European anti-immigration parties and the political establishment, the media, the state and civil society (e.g. Downs et al., 2009; Schafraad et al., 2009; Van Praag, 2005; Van Praag and Walter, 2013; Walter and Van Holsteyn, 2006). However, while demonization is sometimes referred to as a political concept in the scientific literature, it has rarely been empirically studied, nor has it been adequately conceptualized.

In 2002 demonization undeniably became part of Dutch public

vocabulary. The politician Pim Fortuyn was the first to popularize the term. Early that year, his newly established anti-immigration party *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) was doing very well in the opinion polls, and won around 26 seats (out of 150) in the Dutch House of Representatives. Fortuyn stood out with his eccentric political style, which included provocative statements and personalized political attacks (Rooduijn, 2013). While the LPF gathered popular support, his rise also provoked strong resistance from established parties and political commentators. For example, Fortuyn was described as “a man with the intelligence of Hitler and the charisma of Heinrich Himmler”, and he was also compared to Mussolini.¹ In a reaction, Fortuyn declared that the political establishment was demonizing him.² Opponents argued that this claim was either false or, at the very least exaggerated.³ Some political commentators argued that the demonization was nothing more than a clever discursive tool being used by Fortuyn to win sympathy among the electorate by playing the victim. In their view, parties and politicians are never *really* demonized; they merely claim to be demonized for their own benefit. In other words, they argue that, in order to attract voters, anti-immigration parties deliberately choose the role of the victim.⁴

The discussion about Fortuyn’s claim heated up after he was fatally shot by a political activist on May 6th 2002, several days before the general elections took place. The political murder sent a shockwave through the country. Some political commentators argued that the demonization of Fortuyn had contributed to a climate in which he was likely to be killed.⁵ While it is practically impossible to prove (or disprove) this, it shows that demonization cannot be seen as harmless.

Since that date, the debate about demonization of political parties and politicians never really ceased in the Netherlands. But despite public and political attention, there has been little comprehensive scholarly work about demonization. This dissertation seeks to fill that gap, first seeking to provide a clear conceptualization of demonization, then seeking a better understanding

1 See ‘Pim en Frank’ *Trouw*, 22-12-2001 and see ‘De nieuwe Duce’ *De Volkskrant*, 30-01-2002.

2 For example see: ‘Persconferentie Pim Fortuyn bizarre gebeurtenis’ *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 15-03-2002.

3 For example see: ‘Borst: Fortuyn moet maar leren incasseren’ *Trouw*, 16-03-2002.

4 For example see ‘Schandaal’ *NRC Handelsblad*, 21-12-2013.

5 For example see ‘Fatsoen begrenst vrije meningsuiting’ *De Volkskrant*, 06-10-2004, also see Spong, G. and Hammerstein, O. (2003).

of the practice of demonization, the circumstances under which politicians decide to demonize, as well as the consequences of this practice. Until now, the practice, its causes and its consequences have largely been topics of public speculation, and I contend that the academic and democratic debate are better served by empirical research that enables verification of the claims that are so hotly debated. Consequently, rather than contributing to normative and ethical debates about the legitimacy of accusing political parties of demonic intentions, this study focuses on empirical questions. Moreover, since several democratic ills, such as a decline in political trust (see Lau et al., 2007), have been attributed to a negative political debate, this dissertation further seeks to analyze potential detrimental side effects of demonization.

While demonization is not a typically ‘Dutch’ practice, this study focuses on the demonization of Dutch political parties and politicians between 1995 and 2011, a period during which several anti-immigration parties entered the Dutch political arena and made claims that they were being demonized. Since this topic has also been extensively discussed, the Netherlands can be considered as an excellent case for empirical study of demonization. Although demonization might be expected to be strongly related to the rise of anti-immigration parties, this study assumes that other kinds of parties might also be demonized. There are both advantages and disadvantages to studying the case of demonization in the Netherlands. The main advantage is that it allows for an in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation, and a disadvantage is that the phenomenon is not studied in different national contexts. While that disadvantage makes testing of the generalizability of the findings impossible, the dissertation is set up so that it provides a useful framework for further comparative analysis.

When this research project began, it was unclear to what extent political parties and politicians were demonized, and it was even debated whether demonization occurred at all. Some authors therefore placed the term demonization between quotation marks.⁶ However, the results of this dissertation demonstrate that demonization does occur quite frequently, and that the concept entails more than a false cry for sympathy. Although

6 For example see ‘Duizendmaal Fortuyn, maar geen demon’ *De Volkskrant*, 18-05-2002.

that some actors falsely claim to be demonized is certainly not ruled out, the concept itself is scientifically as well as societally meaningful, and can be distinguished both conceptually and empirically from other forms of verbal attacks on political opponents. The analyses presented in this dissertation show that demonization has observable consequences.

Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is a monograph containing five chapters and a concluding chapter.

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical foundation for the remainder of this work. It begins with a conceptualization of demonization, defining and embedding it in relevant theory about negative communication. The definition in relation to the specific context under investigation is further unraveled, and two main motives for demonization are distinguished: demonization as a strategy and demonization as a warning. Finally, the limitations of the conceptualization are discussed.

In Chapter 2 the operationalization of the concept is developed, after which several descriptive findings are presented. This chapter shows developments over time, and indicates which parties and party families are demonized most, as well as which actors demonize more than others. It further demonstrates the reasons actors give for demonization, and the extent to which coverage of demonization differs between Dutch written media.

Chapter 3 focuses on the question which kind of parties demonize most and when. The chapter builds primarily on theories about negative campaigning. Two questions are of particular interest. First, are the circumstances under which demonization takes place similar to the factors that explain why political actors resort to other forms of negative campaigning? Putting it differently: can we explain demonization with the same model that was applied in previous research to explain negative campaigning? Second, is the pattern behind the demonization of anti-immigration parties the same as the pattern behind the demonization of other parties?

Chapter 4 explores the consequences of demonization on the electoral

support of anti-immigration parties, specifically looking into the effect of demonization on the support for the Dutch anti-immigration party *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) since its formation in 2004. In the public discussion some Dutch political commentators have predicted a decrease in party support for the PVV, while others have predicted an increase in party support. Both expectations are supported by theoretical arguments and tested empirically.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the extent to which demonization of Dutch political parties erodes trust in parliament among the electorate. By its very nature, demonization represents a political culture of strong personal attacks, political contestation and polarization, so it is expected to contribute to the negative tone in the political debate. Since scholars have generally found that negative campaigning decreases political trust, this chapter empirically tests whether demonization leads to lower levels of political trust in Dutch Parliament.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the research, shows how this dissertation adds to existing research, and discusses the societal relevance of the findings and directions for future research.