UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

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

van Heerden, S.C.

Publication date
2014

[Link to publication]

Chapter 6
Conclusion and Discussion

Introduction

This study set out to explore the demonization of Dutch political parties between 1995 and 2011. The first aim was to conceptualize demonization. Next, the study sought to determine the circumstances in which demonization is used, and to what effects.

Examining demonization was considered urgent because demonization was repeatedly discussed in the public debate, but the debate lacked a rigid conceptualization and empirical knowledge. In other words, the public prominence of demonization was high, while the understanding of demonization was low. This dissertation has sought to help scholars and politicians the verify claims that have been so hotly debated (e.g. are parties/politicians really demonized? Who demonizes? Does demonization decrease/increase party support?). Moreover, since several democratic ills have been attributed to a negative political debate, such as a decline in political trust (see Lau et al., 2007), this dissertation also sought to expose potential detrimental side effects of demonization.

In this concluding chapter, I will first briefly summarize the main findings of my thesis, after which I will elaborate on the theoretical implications. Subsequently, I will make suggestions about directions for further research. Finally, I will discuss the societal relevance of the findings.

Summary of the findings

Chapter 1 presented the conceptualization and operationalization of demonization. Based on earlier work by Van Praag (2005) demonization was conceptualized as *portraying an actor as the embodiment of absolute evil*. The concept should be seen as an empty vessel, whose exact operationalization varies, depending on the context in which it takes place. Taking the specific context of this study into consideration (the Dutch political domain between 1995 and 2011), demonization has been defined as follows: *portraying a political actor as the embodiment of Nazism/fascism*. This view is not universal, because in different historical and cultural contexts different images may exist

of what constitutes 'absolute evil', but contextual analysis strongly points to a predominance of the conception that Nazism/fascism is the political regime that represents absolute evil within post-war Netherlands.

Chapter 2 presented descriptive analyses of demonization in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2011 and discussed how data on demonization were collected. Five Dutch national newspapers and three national opinion weeklies were scrutinized for instances of demonization. In total 2512 cases of demonization were found. Descriptive analyses indicated that members of the anti-immigration party family were demonized most. They also showed that members of the social-democratic party family demonized most. Of all parties, the PVV was demonized most (as a total of all demonization between 1995 and 2011, and as a total of demonization during years of existence between 1995 and 2011). However, in terms of the percentage of demonization as a proportion of the overall news coverage about a party during the years the party existed between 1995 and 2011, the CD was demonized about four times more than the PVV (10.3 per cent versus 2.6 per cent). Chapter 1 further demonstrated that, in 50.9 per cent of the cases, no argument was provided for demonization. The single most provided argument was 'views on immigration', followed by 'use of Nazist/fascist discursive terms'. Descriptive analyses also showed that, of the five national newspapers, demonization was covered most by *De Volkskrant* and least by *De Telegraaf*. In the three opinion weeklies demonization was covered most by *Elsevier,* and least by *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Analyses further showed that, compared to the coverage of demonization of other parties, demonization of anti-immigration parties was covered somewhat more in *De Volkskrant* and *De Groene Amsterdammer* and somewhat less in *NRC Handelsblad*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *Vrij Nederland* and *Elsevier.*

Chapter 3 established the circumstances in which parties were most likely to demonize. The period under investigation was January 1995 to December 2011. Two questions guided the analyses. First, does the practice of demonization show the same patterns and regularities as those observed in research on negative campaigning? Second, is the pattern behind the demonization of anti-immigration parties similar to the pattern behind the

demonization of other parties? Analyses indicated that anti-immigration parties were most likely to be demonized by parties that are ideologically distant, by parties that are trailing in the polls, by established parties, and by parties in government. The study further demonstrated that other parties were most likely to be demonized by parties that are ideologically distant, and by parties in opposition. These findings largely deviated from other studies that examined attack behavior in relation to more general forms of negative campaigning in the Netherlands. The findings also showed that the circumstances under which demonization took place considerably differed depending on the target in question. Thus, Chapter 3 demonstrated that demonization has its own unique dynamics compared to the general attack behavior.

Chapter 4 examined the effect of demonization on party support for anti-immigration party PVV. The period under investigation (September 2004 to December 2011) was divided in three separate periods: first, the period in which the PVV emerged as a new party and held no seats in Dutch Parliament; second, the period that the PVV held 9 seats and was a party in opposition; third, the period in which the PVV was the official support party of the minority government formed by VVD-CDA. The results showed that demonization had a negative effect on party support during the first period, while no significant negative effects were found in the second or third period. Thus, demonization had a negative effect on party support *only* when the targeted party emerges. Chapter 4 also analyzed the effect media coverage had on party support. The results indicated that media attention had a positive effect on party support during the first two periods. However, this effect diminished once the PVV became a support partner of the government coalition.

Chapter 5 examined how demonization affected political trust. Previous research suggested that negative campaigning decreases political trust among the electorate. The period under investigation was from October 2002 to February 2006. The research question guiding the chapter was: does demonization of Dutch political parties negatively affect political trust in Dutch Parliament? In contrast to the previous chapter, the demonization of

all Dutch parliamentary parties served as an independent variable. Analyses demonstrated that demonization has a significant negative effect on political trust among the Dutch electorate. The analyses also showed that attention towards populist parties in the media did not affect political trust.

Contribution to existing research

This dissertation adds to different strands of literature in five broader themes. Each contribution is discussed in a separate subsection.

Conceptualization
Several previous scientific studies have examined the concept of demonization (see Alon and Olmer, 2005; De Luca and Buell, 2005; Schafraad et al., 2009; Van Praag, 2005). First of all, this dissertation builds upon the study by Van Praag (2005) by using his definition as a basis for the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 1, and extends Van Praag's work by providing elaborate argumentation for the definition. It also adds to Van Praag (2005) by emphasizing that the exact operationalization of demonization is inherently related to the context in which it is studied.

Furthermore, I fully agree with Schafraad et al., (2009; also see De Luca and Buell, 2005) that due to its normative nature (see Chapter 1), demonization is hard to conceptualize and measure. However, this is the case for every form of negative political communication, like blaming and stigmatization. My study shows that such a normative component does not necessarily prevent making theoretical distinctions between different forms of negative political communication. Building upon work from different disciplines, such as the psychological study of Alon and Omer (2006) and the sociological study of Goffman (1963), demonization is embedded in a more general framework of negative political communication. By making a distinction between stigmatization and demonization on three accounts (range, origin and implication), this dissertation advances the conceptual theory of negative political communication.

Thus, this dissertation synthesized insights from the previous

studies, while also adding new perspectives, providing an adequate conceptualization of demonization. In addition, the theoretical foundation and operationalization of demonization made it possible to systematically collect data measuring this concept, leading to a unique dataset that includes a refined and longitudinal measurement of the concept.

Increase in negative campaigning

This work shows that demonization took off rapidly in 2001, peaked in 2003, and declined somewhat thereafter. However, from 2005 onwards, demonization steadily increased again, mounting to unprecedentedly high levels in 2010. These findings extend the body of literature that argues that negative campaigning, trait attacks specifically, increased in Western Europe (e.g. Farell, 2005; Van Praag, 2005; Van Praag and Brants, 2008; Mughan, 2000; Walter, 2010), while contradicting works that reject the notion that negative campaigning is on the rise (e.g. Buell and Sigelman, 2009; Lau and Pomper, 2004). My findings specifically add to Walter (2012), who studied the degree of negative campaigning in several European countries between 1980 and 2006 and concluded that parties and politicians are no more likely to 'go negative' than approximately 25 years ago. However, an important part of the demonization observed in this dissertation, was beyond the scope of Walter's investigation. Moreover, Walter analyzed officially approved election broadcasts and televised election debates, which –as argued by the author- means that increased negativity in the news may not have been picked up (also see Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010).

This dissertation also suggests that the emergence of anti-immigration parties instigated an adversarial political culture. It shows that demonization has increased ever since anti-immigration parties successfully entered the Dutch political arena. That is, anti-immigration parties such as the LPF and PVV are also considered populist**,** and a defining feature of populism is the emphasis on a sharp juxtaposition between the populist party and the political establishment. Populist rhetoric is further known for being highly confrontational, contentious and provocative (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007; Bos, 2012; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, 2013; Schedler, 1996;

Taggart, 1996). Hence, this dissertation supports the idea that Pim Fortuyn and the LPF encouraged a political culture in the Netherlands that resembles the characteristics of a winner-takes-all system, which hardened the overall tone of the political debate (see Bovens and Wille, 2008; Van der Meer, 2010; Van Praag and Brants, 2008). In this respect, it must be noted that, from 2001, not only the demonization of anti-immigration parties increased, but also the demonization of other parties.

Party competition and attack behavior

This dissertation also contributes to the literature about party competition and attack behavior. Müller and Strøm (1999) state that parties are rational actors that seek three political objectives: votes, governmental status, and policy influence. One possible means of achieving these goals is to engage in negative campaigning. Walter (2012; Walter et al., 2014) advanced the knowledge of negative campaigning by examining it outside the US context and demonstrating that, in multi-party systems, the cost-balance analysis for attack behavior is more complex than in two–party systems (also see Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). This dissertation further adds to this in three ways. First, it deepens the understanding of attack behavior by examining a specific form of negative campaigning in a multi-party system. Findings show that demonization has a distinct pattern of attack behavior. In other words, in contrast to studies about other forms of negative campaigning, this study shows that parties are more likely to demonize parties that are ideologically distant, instead of those that are ideologically close (e.g. Downs, 1957; Haynes and Rhine, 1998; Walter, 2012; Walter et al., 2014). Second, this dissertation refines existing research by analyzing attack behavior targeting different groups of parties; i.e. a distinction is made between the demonization of anti-immigration parties and other kinds of parties. For example, findings here show that parties in opposition are more likely to demonize other kinds of parties. This corresponds with previous studies that demonstrate that opposition parties are more likely to go negative (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Lau and Pomper, 2004; Swint, 1998; Walter, 2012). However, at the same time, findings indicate that government parties are more likely to demonize anti-

immigration parties. These findings contribute to existing research by showing that the target of negative campaigning also influences attack behavior. Third, this dissertation deepens the understanding of attack behavior by exploring the possibility that negative appeals can also be intended as a warning, rather than a political tool to win votes.

Challenging anti-immigration parties
This dissertation extends the literature that analyses how and to what effect anti-immigration parties are combated. Since the rise of anti-immigration parties across Western Europe, political opponents have sought ways to hinder their electoral success. According to Downs (2001; 2002; et al., 2009), opponents can choose between two strategies: to engage or disengage (also see Capoccia, 2004; Husbands, 2002; Kestel and Godmer, 2004; Widfeldt, 2004). Scholars are divided over the question which strategy is most effective. For example, Art (2007) concludes that the successful suppression of *Die Republikaner* in Germany was a result of broad societal and political condemnation, while the Austrian FPÖ flourished under the political attempt to 'tame' the party by cooperation (also see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). However, Downs (2002; et al., 2009; also see Heinisch, 2003) maintains that when anti-immigration parties are granted some governing responsibilities, the parties' successes seem to diminish slightly. Furthermore, when anti-immigration parties are largely ignored, isolated or outlawed, this often has unintended effects. For example, the decision to prosecute Wilders (PVV) for hate speech actually increased support for his party (see Van Spanje and De Vreese, *forthcoming*). Thus, Downs (2002; et al., 2009) concludes that strategies of engagement more effectively hinder anti-immigration parties than strategies of disengagement.

The dissertation allowed empirical testing of the claim made by Downs (2002; et al., 2009), and thus adds further to the 'engagement versus disengagement' debate. Downs et al., (2009) specifically state "that strategies of isolation, ostracism and demonisation prove surprisingly ineffective at rolling back or even containing threats to the democratic order […]". On the one hand, the findings in this dissertation reject this claim, arguing that demonization can be effective, but *only* in the period briefly after the anti-immigration party emerges. On the other hand, the findings support this claim, since demonization has been ineffective ever since the PVV took place in Dutch Parliament. In addition, the findings do not support the notion that over time demonization may become counterproductive (see Downs, 2002; et al. 2009). That is not say that other forms of disengagement are not eventually counterproductive. Van Spanje and De Vreese (*forthcoming*) suggest that the decision to prosecute Wilders contributed to the party's electoral success. The decision to prosecute took place in January 2009, when the PVV was already fairly established. Although demonization did not produce unintended effects during this period, the unintended effect of legal repression does support the proposal that strategies of disengagement are more likely to become counterproductive once a party is more established.

Thus, above all, this dissertation shows that contextual factors such as timing can influence the effect of strategies of disengagement (Art, 2007; Husbands, 2002). It also raises the question of to what extent timing may also be relevant to strategies of engagement. For example, when the LPF was still in its infancy, assuming office proved destructive for the party since it was unready to fulfill such responsibilities (De Lange and Art, 2011). Thus, the effect of strategies of engagement may be stronger when anti-immigration parties are still in an early stage of development, and probably less organized than established anti-immigration parties.

Consequences of negative campaigning for the political system
Many studies have examined the popular claim that a negative tone in the political debate exerts a heavy toll on democracy. The best-known example of such an undesirable effect is that negative campaigning depresses voter turn-out (Lau et al., 2007; e.g. Ansolabehere et al., 1994). However, a meta-analytical reassessment of more than 60 studies indicates that existing research provides no general support for the assumption that negative campaigning depresses voter turn-out (Lau et al., 2007). Nevertheless, general support is found for a decrease in the sense of political efficacy (e.g. Goldstein, 1997), a 'darker' public mood (e.g. Leshner and Thorson, 2000; Rahn and Hirshorn,

1999), and lower political trust (e.g. Brader, 2005; Craig and Kane, 2000). It should be noted, however, that the body of literature about the negative effects on political trust is not extensive, and not all findings point in the same direction.[78] In total 8 studies find support for the hypothesis that negative campaigning diminishes political trust (Brader, 2005; Craig and Kane, 2000; Globetti and Hetherington, 2000; Leshner and Thorson, 2000; Pinkleton et al., 2002; Thorson et al., 2000; Wanta et al., 1999). Still, all these studies examined the relationship between negative campaigning and political trust in US context, and most relied on experimental pre-/post-tests or regression models with observations at a single point of time.

This dissertation specifically adds to this body of literature in two ways. First, it appears to be the only study that suggests that demonization (i.e. an extreme form of negative campaigning) lowers political trust by means of a time series analysis, a method that allows for strong claims on causal relationships (Vliegenthart, 2007). Second, it shows that the largely US-orientated literature on negative campaigning and political trust is also applicable to a Western European context.

Directions for future research

The aim of this dissertation was to provide the first preliminary research on demonization of Dutch parties and politicians. While this aim has been achieved, clearly much more research is needed in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the use of demonization and its consequences. This dissertation provides several directions for future research about demonization in the political domain.

First of all, this dissertation was restricted to analyses of demonization in one specific communication channel: newspapers and opinion weeklies. Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) demonstrated "that the levels of control politicians can exert over how messages are published affects *the degree*, *content* and *target* of negative campaigning. […]" (p. 455). For example, the less control political actors have over the way their message is presented,

the more character traits become a central point, mostly at the expense of issues. It would therefore be of interest to further examine to what extent demonization differs between different communication channels and to what effect. Such additional analyses would provide a more comprehensive picture of demonization. For example, a recent study *War in Parliament* (Piersma et al., *forthcoming*) examined how and to what extent politicians referred to the Second World War during parliamentary debates between 1930 and 1995.[79] The researchers studied the official proceedings of the Dutch Parliament, thus using data that has not been treated by the media. Clearly, this dissertation and *War in Parliament* complement each other, and a comparison is likely to provide new insights.

Second, it may also be interesting to examine demonization in other ways. For example, in-depth interviews conducted with party officials, campaigns strategists, attackers and targets of demonization may provide additional insights into the conceptualization of demonization, as well as the reasons behind it. Another serious limitation of this dissertation is that the effects of demonization are based on the assumption that all respondents are exposed equally to demonization. This is clearly unrealistic. One way to deal with this problem is to examine the effect of demonization by means of controlled experiments. In political communication studies, this is a common method to test effects of negative advertising (e.g. Ansolobehere and Iyengar, 1995, Chang, 2003; Garramone et al., 1990).

A third line of additional research would be to refine analyses. For example, it would be interesting to examine whether effects of demonization differ depending on which kind of actor demonizes (e.g. politician, Dutch public figure, pundit). Such analyses however would require a larger dataset. It would be equally interesting to examine to what extent demonization has different effects on different groups of voters (e.g. male/female, higher-educated/lower-educated). Furthermore, effects probably vary, depending on which party is targeted in combination with the ideological placement of the voter. Another suggestion is to examine the interaction between two parties over time, in order to capture the dynamics of demonization. For example,

---

[78] For example, Lau and Pomper (2004) and Geer (2006) did not find a negative effect on political trust, while Martinez and Delegal (1990) found a positive effect on political trust.

[79] For more information, please see http://www.clarin.nl/node/410

Lau et al. (2007; also see Lau and Pomper, 2004) argue that attacks almost always provoke counter attacks, and that attacks may arise from self-enforcing dynamics in a campaign (Walter, 2012). Consequently, more research is needed to further disentangle the relationship between the demonizer and the demonized.

Finally, this dissertation is a single country case study. Although a single country case study has its merits (see Gerring, 2007), knowledge about demonization would greatly benefit from comparative research. However, examining demonization in different contexts raises important and complex questions about the conceptualization of demonization. Chapter 1 stated that demonization should be regarded as an empty vessel that varies in its exact content dependent on the context in which it is placed. Thus, it is possible that the political regime that represents absolute evil differs between countries. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that demonization cannot be operationalized in certain contexts, because there is no political regime/incident/actor that represents absolute evil. Thus, on a theoretical level, what should be categorized as demonization is determined, but practical conceptualization might not always be straightforward. This may hinder comparative research.

In this respect it would be most feasible to compare demonization in the Netherlands to demonization in other Western European countries, such as Belgium, France, Austria, Germany and/or the United Kingdom. Arguably, in all these countries Hitler can be regarded as the ultimate demonic figure and the Holocaust as the ultimate consequence of absolute evil. For example, the strong legal repression of Nazism/fascism in Western Europe is indicative of such a powerful cultural-historic connection. Pels (2003) also argues that, in all of Western Europe, Nazism/fascism is considered absolute evil, since the horrors originated and took place on their soil and in their political communities.

Provided that demonization can be examined in this comparative setting, it would be interesting to look at the effects of political systems, because it largely determines how many rivals a party can attack without jeopardizing its own interest (Van Spanje, 2010). The cost-benefit analysis that precedes the attack is more complex in multi-party systems where coalition governments are formed. In other words, in contrast to two-party systems, in multi-party system a delicate trade-off has to be made between vote-seeking and office-seeking strategies (Strøm and Müller, 1999; Walter 2012, Walter et al., 2014; also see De Lange, 2012). Also, given that anti-immigration parties are demonized most of all party families in the Netherlands, it would be interesting to study demonization in counties where anti-immigration parties have been relatively unsuccessful (for example in Germany and the United Kingdom).

Comparative research could also address the different 'coping cultures' between countries. Art (2006: 161) states that elite norms against the resurgence of Nazism/fascism are probably more developed and entrenched in some countries than in others. For example, in Germany a critical examination of their Nazi past had led to a 'culture of contrition' among the political establishment and other elite actors, while in Austria decades of "public amnesia about the Nazi period" produced a 'culture of victimization' (Art; 2006: 338). Arguably, in the Netherlands there is a 'culture of vigilance' where actors feel compelled to react to the slightest revival of Nazism (also see Van Donselaar, 1995; Vuijsje, 2008; Zwagerman, 2009). Future research may examine the extent to which these differences in culture influence the degree, content and target of demonization.

Societal relevance

The introduction of this dissertation stated that one reason for examining demonization was to provide the Dutch public clarity about a topic that has been so hotly debated. This dissertation provides rigorous information about which parties have been demonized, by whom, and to what effect. Therefore, it helps the public to reach a better assessment of the contest of power, interests and ideas related to demonization. However, not only is basic information now available, the findings are also relevant to democratic politics. This specifically concerns the finding that demonization lowers political trust in Dutch Parliament. Whether demonization is intended as a warning or as a strategy,

its purpose is to diminish support for the demonized party. This dissertation shows that demonization has no negative effect on party support for the PVV once the party is in parliament. This finding agrees with multiple studies that dismiss the claim that negative campaigning actually works. There is no consistent evidence that negative campaigning achieves the electoral results attackers desire. And although the attacker may benefit from demonization, in general this hypothesis is also rejected (see Lau et al., 2007). Thus, once parties are in parliament, demonization appears to be ineffective for both the attacker and targe (at least, when the target is an anti-immigration party). However, at this point, demonization does lower political trust. Furthermore, there are strong indications that demonization negatively affects the public mood and lessens the sense of political efficacy (for example see Leshner and Thorson, 2000; Pinkleton et al., 2002; Thorson et al., 2000). Thus, even when demonization is intended as a warning and seeks to protect the democratic system, it seems to be only effective when the targeted party is in its infancy. After that, demonization may harm democracy in several ways. In the long run this could prove worrisome, especially because demonization has increased in recent years. This dissertation therefore suggests that campaign strategists, politicians and/or other civil society actors should make a careful cost-benefit analysis before engaging in demonization.