

# **Shaping the vote? Populism and politics in the media**

A view from Finland,  
France and the Netherlands

**This publication is part of the project series  
'Nurturing populism? The impact of the media  
on the growth of populist right-wing parties in  
Netherlands, France and Finland', supported  
by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation and  
Stichting Democratie en Media.**

**Translations by:** Melissa Absil (Dutch),  
Jiska Engelbert (Dutch), Elina Eskola (Finnish)  
and Valantia Heracles (French).

This book is available to download and re-use under a by-nc-sa  
Creative Commons license ported to UK law. This means that you  
are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work, and make  
derivative works, in a non-commercial context, as long as you credit  
Counterpoint and the authors and share the resulting works under an  
equivalent license.

See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/uk/>

# Contents

---

Introduction	
<i>Lila Caballero</i>	4
<hr/>	
1. A battle in the middle-ground? The Finnish case	
Collective complicity: lessons learned by editorial offices	
<i>Tuomas Muraja</i>	8
On the Crest of the Euroscepticism Wave.	
The Rise of Finnish Populism from 2007 to 2011	
<i>Erkka Railo</i>	22
<hr/>	
2. A self-established agenda: The French case	
Can social experience play into the hands of the Front National?	
<i>Jean-Laurent Cassely</i>	51
National Front themes and the agenda of the French press (2006-2013)	
<i>Alexandre Hobeika and Gaël Villeneuve</i>	55
<hr/>	
3. Politicians in the spotlight: The Dutch case	
Behind a collective safety net	
<i>Yvonne Zonderop</i>	89
Healthy scepticism or destructive cynicism?	
Media and populist sentiments in The Netherlands, 2006-2012	
<i>Jiska Engelbert &amp; Esther Audier</i>	94

# Introduction

---

## Politics and the media: A marriage of convenience?

By Lila Caballero

Since the early stages of Counterpoint's project 'Recapturing Europe's Reluctant Radicals', we knew that the rise of populist parties is closely linked to the new role played by the media in western societies. Citizens are constantly exposed to large amounts of information and their view of the political world is significantly shaped by what they read in newspapers or watch on TV. But this relationship varies from one country to another, as it is heavily shaped by what Counterpoint terms as 'the hidden wiring' of cultures: the institutions, myths and narratives that underpin societies.<sup>1</sup>

In order to investigate the way this hidden wiring shapes this crucial relationship, Counterpoint led a comparative research project (between December 2013 and May 2014) with researchers from Finland, France and Netherlands, to explore whether and how the media in these three countries might have helped populist parties attract more supporters. Dr Erkka Railo (University of Turku), Dr Jiska Engelbert, (Erasmus University of Rotterdam) and Dr Gael Villeneuve (Laboratoire Communication et Politique), with the support of Esther Audier for the Dutch case and Alexandre Hobeika for France, analysed newspaper articles published in the run up to the most recent national elections in each country.

We chose these cases because all three have strong populist right-wing parties that campaign on similar issues –anti-immigration, Euroscepticism and anti-élitism. In their own way, the Dutch PVV, the French Front National and the Finnish (then, True) Finns challenge established parties and call for a break with current politics and for a return to what they see as a political past vastly more palatable than the present. However, they have had different levels of electoral success, depending possibly on whether or not they have been severely and/or effectively stigmatized by the media and by the rest of the political class; But also depending on their capacity to voice radical views.

---

1. Fieschi, Morris & Caballero 2013

The project complemented Counterpoint's pan-European research on the reluctant radicals – the uncommitted supporters of populist parties. And we wanted to explore how the more recently acquired, and perhaps uncommitted, supporters of populist parties had become increasingly exposed to these parties' arguments and viewpoints. In order to do this, we decided to analyse the relationship between the media and politics so as to understand the interplay between political journalism and the rise of populism over the last five elections in each country (This would also help us to account for the varying levels of success of the PVV, the FN and the True Finns (TF) in the national elections of 2010, 2012 and 2011 respectively and how it related to media coverage). Our study's comparative perspective is key: produced in the run up to the European Parliament elections of 2014 – in which populist parties won a considerable amount of seats –, our results ought to help make critical editorial decisions that might well have a major impact on the outcome of the European crisis and the shape of the post-electoral European public sphere. Populist parties now play a disproportionate role in shaping policies and public reactions in the face of a European crisis and in the run up to national elections across Europe in 2015.

Our findings show that editorial offices and journalists in Finland and the Netherlands have unintentionally opened up a wide and prominent space for populist politicians to come across as refreshing, siding with the ordinary citizens and critical of those in power. Erkka Railo's research on Finland (in Section 1 of this volume) confirms our hypothesis that Timo Soini (leader of the True Finns) was given a different, more lenient treatment by the press compared to the leaders of the parties in power. Timo Soini was able to benefit from the fact that the Finnish press was extremely critical of the European Union's handling of the financial crisis. His 'charming', jargon-free and critical comments on how Finland's governing elites were leading the country down a harmful path by accepting (alongside other EU members) to help finance bailouts for Southern European countries were given a huge amount of attention. He was rarely questioned or quizzed as to what other viable solutions he would implement were he to be in the driver's seat. And by printing and reprinting his uncontested views, the media appears to have (albeit unintentionally) influenced the electorate's expectations on what the political and economic agenda should prioritise – and this, quite in line with Soini's Eurosceptic views.

Jiska Engelbert's and Esther Audier's piece on the Netherlands (in Section 3 of this volume) shows a different, yet equally concerning trend. Dutch media outlets and journalists place more value on debates and clashes between politicians and policy makers than on actual issues and priorities on the national agenda. In other words, the governing elite is more often judged in the press by how they perform (literally) when they discuss economic and political issues, rather than by the facts, figures and results they are presenting to their interlocutors or the audience. This opens a window of opportunity for populist politicians like Geert Wilders (leader of the PVV), who are generally engaging, not above resorting to clichés that resonate well with large audiences, speak in simple – and often simplistic – terms and make a spectacle of siding with 'ordinary people' by criticising the elites. In addition, by shifting the attention away from substance and towards form, the media reduces the quantity and quality of information that voters have to make an informed decision on voting day – this also impacts electoral outcomes.

Gael Villeneuve and Alexandre Hobeika's work on France (in section 2) yields a rather different, and far less clear picture of how the media could be benefiting the Front National. The French press and French politics have historically been closely entwined; however, the authors found that the issues and trends dominating the press around elections – even if they are favourable to the FN's campaign – are much more aligned with the country's usual concerns and much less influenced or triggered by the FN's growing visibility. For instance, as a country with a strong colonial past, and close ties with North Africa, immigration and religious tensions has always been a hot topic. So the media's focus on these issues cannot be traced exclusively to coverage of the FN. Nor can coverage of these issues be tied exclusively to the rise of the FN.

The media's role is to provide the public with sufficient and reliable information on current affairs, in part so as to empower citizens to make electoral decisions, participate in political life and be able to accomplish that basic democratic task: to select and evaluate their leaders that allow them to remain sovereign as a people. If they are to continue fulfilling this simple yet crucial objective, it is important for journalists and editorial offices to engage in a critical self-reflection.

To help begin this critical exercise and explore the likelihood of its success, we asked three prominent journalists to reflect on each of our country studies. Yvonne Zonderop, Dutch freelance journalist and a former deputy editor at the *Volkskrant*; Tuomas Muraja, writer and former journalist at the *Turun Sanomat* in Finland; and Jean-Laurent Cassely, journalist at the French publication *Slate*. fr, each provided brief comments as ‘media insiders’ on the complexity of the relationship between the media and politics. All three contributions are included in this volume and precede each of our country analyses. As the reader will observe, editorial decisions on what stories to publish respond to numerous circumstances and aim for a delicate balance between objectivity on the one hand, and commercial appeal on the other.

Making the right decisions in turbulent political and economic circumstances such as those facing Europe in the near future will, in our view, become increasingly difficult, particularly when information is easily and readily available through the internet and social media. So newspapers must take responsibility for providing reliable and comprehensive information for voters to make informed choices at the ballot box. As our research findings show, this requires treating populist leaders as critically as mainstream politicians in order to help citizens keep their governments to account on the basis of results – not on how well or how badly politicians argue amongst themselves. We hope this volume can be the starting point of a series of critical reflections among the journalistic profession.

## **References**

Fieschi, C., Morris, M., & Caballero, L. (2013) *Populist Fantasies: European Revolts in Context*, Counterpoint, London.

# 1. A battle in the middle-ground? The Finnish case

---

## Collective complicity: lessons learned by editorial offices

Tuomas Muraja. Journalist and author

When I returned to the *Turun Sanomat* newspaper editorial staff in the summer of 2011, after nearly four years as a Brussels correspondent, I was struck by how different the environment was after the spring parliamentary election. It was clearly visible in terms of work and leisure for a journalist who had lived abroad for several years.

At the Turku Market Square in Finland, I was stopped by a stranger who was annoyed by the fact that I was speaking in French on my mobile phone. There was a 'new order' operating in Finland, I was told.

The situation in the editorial office also seemed strange, to say the least. Although the Finns Party was expected to gain a significant electoral victory, the sheer size of the 'big bomb' was still a surprise for many.

At least for a moment, the media was paralyzed. Various reasons for the development of the situation have been offered.

For instance, it has been proved that the Eurozone crisis and especially the aid packages led to the media strongly criticising the EU. This gave credibility to the Finns Party's criticism of the EU and laid the foundations for the big bomb. One could say, therefore, that the 'big bomb' was the unintended consequence of the EU criticism all over the media.

According to reports published after the election, the Finns Party's electoral victory was aided by the fact that its party leader, Timo Soini, got a place in the chairmen's campaign debate based on poll results. Soini was seen as a skilled speaker with easily understandable opinions. Veteran politicians from many traditional parties were heard saying during the coverage of election night that they needed to change the style of their language to be more popular.

The crisis of the media business happened during the same time as the rise of the Finns Party. Soini's wisecracks brought welcome clicks and it was not deemed necessary to filter or fact-check his opinions and false statements. Each of Soini's statements was a potential number one story for the day – when measured in clicks – so it was worth repeating the statements in online news as often as possible.

One reason for the journalists' lack of criticality was their knowledge gap on the EU – which once again became obvious in the run up to the 2014 European elections. Like many politicians, the media has kept repeating false statements about the EU without checking the facts.

Another way in which the media helped the Finns Party was their failure to thoroughly and knowledgeably report on the fascist nature of Suomen Sisu's – an organisation inside the Finns Party – platform. They also failed to cover the racist nature of the Finns Party's so-called 'Dull Electoral Manifesto'.

Many of my colleagues later regretted not having seen their significance when the hard right winds started to rise. The journalists were very aware of racism on the net but were not able to predict that the Finns Party would start to attract racists and therefore gain support.

In every editorial office the problem was not a question of hushing but rather the fact that the media underestimated the potential of the phenomenon. The journalists recognised the subject but did not see any reason to feed it. Our news editor told me that it seemed wiser to stay quiet about xenophobia because they thought the phenomenon would 'vanish into thin air'.

From the beginning, it was essential for the big picture that Soini be profiled in the media as a sort of man of the people, the official voice of the 'whole people' – just as he wanted. The Finns Party politicians have been riding on this and repeating the idea that condemning the party equals condemning and ridiculing the common people, as well as unfoundedly persecuting or oppressing the white, meat-eating, heterosexual male.

Many journalists have publicly admitted that they are afraid of the aggressive reactions of the far-right True Finns supporters towards articles criticising the

party and have refrained from writing about the matter and not facing the angry flood. Female journalists have been threatened with rape and the deaths of their loved ones.

As a writer for the *Turun Sanomat* newspaper, I wrote thousands of stories. Only four of them were, to some extent, about the Finns Party and the operations of the party's hard right wing line. The number of hate messages was enormous compared to how much the readers commented on my other stories. Apparently even the editor-in-chief got his share of the groundswell of feedback, and he finally asked me to 'take a break from writing'.

Aggression, ridicule and slander have become commonplace in politics. It is acceptable and presentable even at the parliament's plenary sessions where the MPs discuss immigration, equal marriage law and the standing of the Swedish language in bilingual Finland. The parliament's moderators have rarely interfered in the vulgar and insulting addresses.

Editorial offices were not able to see the rise of the Finns Party as a significant phenomenon. The party's subsequent slip into the realm of what is acceptable was perhaps partly due to the collective shame which emerged when this rising phenomenon was not foreseen.

Following the change in political language, the media's language has also changed. Many journalists see politics merely as an entertaining game between the parties – matters that are deeply societal, historical, human, moral and economic. Populism has rooted itself in journalism, as it has in politics. The expectation is that the readers want entertainment politics when discussing the explosive growth in the importance of social media. This too distorts our view of managing common affairs.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the media has strongly affected the rise of the support for the Finns Party. Next, I shall examine the above-mentioned themes more closely. This is a subjective view based on my observations in everyday journalistic work.

## **From being a joke to a channel for the underclasses**

In the early 2000s, the Finns Party was seen as a mere joke, a group sitting in the back row, blurting out all kinds of things but rarely saying anything constructive.

Timo Soini's star started to rise after the 2003 election when his entertainment value grew quickly. Few thought of him as a statesman or even as a politician to be reckoned with and was rather a joker who spoke a different language than the other politicians. Since his only agenda seemed to be putting spokes in the wheels, he was not considered very dangerous to the other parties.

Even the xenophobia of the party started out as a joke. The ex-boxer turned MP, Tony Halme, was the tough guys' favourite who gained thousands of votes with his racist jokes. The view was that that there was enough room in the world for everyone's voice.

Prior to the 2011 election, the support for the Finns Party in the polls increased quickly. Many journalists' interpretation of the figures was that the support would melt away before the election. The party would gain more seats but not as many as the polls predicted. The party was still not taken seriously, and it continued to be labelled as a 'joke'. It was a group that provided a good laugh every now and then. It was thought that the people would ultimately be too rational to vote for the loonies. But the people surprised everyone.

Many do not believe that Soini's original aim was to get the far right into the parliament. It was more a question of the Finns Party scraping together all the people they could before the election. The roster included many who identified themselves as 'immigration critics'. Soini did not reject them and actually found them useful for the party.

We also have to remember that the Finns Party still provides a channel for the underprivileged. Finland contains a large group of people whose true nature is politically incorrect to describe: bitter, uneducated people who risk marginalisation. The Finns Party says that these people, too, are valuable, and in that, the party is right. The media is just having a hard time accepting that the underprivileged may be able to make decisions that are just as good as the ones we, the well-off, would like to think we are making.

## **Soini will not be challenged**

The Finns Party leader, Timo Soini, is often given more leeway in interviews compared to other party leaders. He is allowed to subject the government members and other top politicians to ridicule and name-calling. His quips provide great scoops.

One has to wonder why Soini is elevated by the media into the position of a bully and a political commentator. In my opinion, the other party leaders are mostly asked about their party matters or general factual matters in politics.

Few people have heard Soini talk about improving the national economy, about how to increase entrepreneurialism, employment and wealth. These kinds of politicians have generally not been regarded as amusing but rather dangerous, a certain type of bully in public politics, the likes of whom stop populism from achieving anything but complaints and the bad-mouthing of others.

Soini is never asked difficult questions. In a way, we are afraid that he will not be able to answer, that despite his long career he would fail at tackling substantial questions. This becomes obvious around EU politics, even when Soini has been a Member of the European Parliament.

When comparing the way the EU debt crisis was discussed in Finland to elsewhere in Europe, it felt like a whole different crisis. In Finland, we harped on about securities when elsewhere in Europe the discussion revolved around ways of working together to resolve the crisis.

The Finns Party leader Timo Soini was unable to offer any solutions for the crisis although there would have been demand for the opposition's alternative. Instead of constructive suggestions, Soini resorted to half-hearted witticisms. Few journalists challenged Soini, and even fewer checked or corrected his false statements about the EU.

I wrote the following dementing piece when the parliament returned from its summer holidays for a historic plenary session in 2012:

‘There will be new aid packages because the Southern European countries cannot cope with the Euro. If there is a 25 per cent unemployment rate in Spain, is the Euro working?’ asks Soini, forgetting that there was a 25 per cent unemployment rate in Spain also during the times of the Peseta.

If the Spanish get no joy out of the Euro, one should ask instead why is it that they want to stick with it. Would the economic situation in Europe be better if the currencies were floating? Great Britain has a floating currency and its rates are much worse than the average rates in the Eurozone. The truth of is that the economic balance is improving in all crisis countries. To talk about anything else is equal to changing horses while crossing the river.

‘The aid package for Spain is a bluff because the decision supports the banks and not the Spanish state’, Soini argued.

But the support does not necessarily have to go to the state. The future banking union will enable the Europeans to get their money back if a bank collapses. The loss for the tax-payer when a bank collapses will be minimal, because in return for banking support, we get shares. With the support, the stability of the Eurozone increases.

‘The crisis decisions made by the EU make the union a federal state which takes away our self- determination. We have witnessed experiments on centralised power very close to home’, Soini says.

The ‘Euroviet Union’ card was played back in 1994. The Estonians, who know a thing or two about both the Soviet Union and the EU, decided to break away from the former and join the latter.

Soini defends the nation state because, according to him, democracy came to be a part of modern society through nation states. ‘Dictatorships, monarchies and oligarchies were around before democracy, and democracies have generally been nation states.’

However, nation states also brought Europe two world wars and several dictatorships. The EU has brought unparalleled welfare and the longest period of peace in European history. Democracy dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century but the

nation state dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The United States is a democracy but it has never been a ‘nation state’.

‘What is wrong with exploring the possibilities of breaking away from the Euro? Where are the calculations that prove that the price of breaking away would be high?’ Soini asked.

The price of breaking away from the Euro would not even be definite through analyses. Rocking the boat right now is unlikely to be helpful.

Soini thinks that ‘the people were not given the opportunity to have their say about the monetary union, as were the Swedes and the Danes, which is why there is a lot of resentment around this subject.’

The Finnish people are in favour of sticking with the Euro, but Soini seems unable to pick a view for himself. If the Euro is not working, why is he not openly demanding for us to break away from it?

### **The man of the people is still fought using light gloves**

The Finns Party has been treated rather uncritically, a good example of which is the attempt to make the rise of the party disappear by staying quiet about it.

We still fight Soini with light gloves because of his self-crafted persona of ‘man of the people’. The media has bought the character and now treats Soini with too much respect, in fear of receiving a flood of hate mail from xenophobes and other internet bullies. The concepts of ‘the people’ or ‘the man of the people’ are not easily deconstructed, not even when Soini’s long-term populist strategy is widely known.

Soini and his followers often appeal to their freedom of speech, as if all forms of criticism were restricting this freedom. If the Finns Party was able to stand by its statements, its politicians would provide support for their arguments instead of immediately playing the martyr card.

When representatives of the far right gained an influential role in the Finns Party, it was difficult to get journalists from the big media outlets to write about racism.

Interestingly, the Finns Party has been treated worse than other parties in that their actions are sensationalised more easily; but at the same time this is an advantage. In my opinion, the party's popularity relies heavily on 'the myth of the oppressed, white, heterosexual male', which is surely somewhat inherited from the Suomen Sisu organisation, of which some of the Finns Party MPs are members.

Lately, one of the biggest concerns for the EU has been the rise of extreme nationalism, which is why the rejection of fascism is recorded in the treaty for the European Union. The whole community was created in order to root out Nazism and wars in Europe.

There is a clear and active far right movement in Finland: the Suomen Sisu organisation's public platform is, according to official evaluations, fascist and racist, yet many MPs are committed to the platform.

The radicalisation of the extremist online element has already led to harsh actions in Europe. Officials who have investigated the subject think that it is only a matter of time before someone fulfils the violent fantasies of some online writer who considers himself moderate. This side of racism is a new phenomenon in Finland.

Soini opened the parliament doors to the far right on purpose. In addition to anti-immigrant attitudes, other actions against human rights have reared their ugly heads in a whole new way, including homophobia, misogyny, mocking the disabled, slandering the Swedish-speaking Finns and, more recently, the admiration for Russia.

The fascism within the platform of the Suomen Sisu organisation (which operates inside the Finns Party), and the racism in the 'Dull Electoral Manifesto' were neither thoroughly nor expertly covered by the media before the Finns Party's electoral victory.

The Suomen Sisu platform is an edited version of Finnish, German and Italian fascist party platforms from the 1930s and 1940s, and the Dull Electoral Manifesto encourages racism.

The Finns Party leader, Timo Soini, who has dissociated himself from racism, at a certain moment took the decision of bringing Suomen Sisu into the party, conscious of the nature of the organisation.

Finnish public discourse lacks expertise on fascism and racism, which has allowed the alliance between Soini and Suomen Sisu to be established. In Finland, many believe that the 1930s could never happen again but, for instance, this is what happened in South America during the whole post- World War II period, all the way until democracy slowly started to become established. Democracy can crumble very easily.

Suomen Sisu denies being a fascist organisation, but if one thinks that not all people are equal and accepts violence as a tool for executing the policies stemming from this thought, one is defined as a fascist. The organisation should honestly admit this, because it is indeed an openly zealous national movement which defines human value based on nationality, race and culture. Racism and fascism as ideologies are not illegal.

One reason for the Finnish media not being able to openly state Suomen Sisu's fascist nature is, in addition to a lack of historical knowledge, the fact that the Soviet Union and its allies such as the Finnish Taistoists falsely used the concept of fascism to describe the right wing in general. This is also a current issue in the speeches of those defending Russia's present-day military operations.

There certainly has been racism and fascism in other parties beside the Finns Party, but the actions have not been as visible and active. In other parties, similar activities usually get you fired.

### **The middle-of-the-road fallacy**

In a television studio, the counter-balance for a right-wing extremist is to have a left-wing activist, or a person who has extensively studied the far right phenome-

non sat next to a Suomen Sisu MP. That brings a dose of good tension but no answers. After this we are told that the viewer is free to choose his own beliefs. This is the middle-of-the-road fallacy rooted in the media, which wants to polarise topics and themes. A weighed argument and a slandering quip are made equal.

The journalists position themselves between the debaters and do not take a stand as they strive for objectivity. This false balance phenomenon should also be more actively discussed in Finland.

As organised extremist movements grow in Europe, we should be careful when classifying nationalists, xenophobes, neo-fascists and perhaps even EU critics. There is so much contradiction and overlap that it is easy to just paint them all the same colour.

### **Language matters**

The language of the people has been misunderstood on purpose. Slander has become an accepted form of politics and it has also rubbed off on other politicians. This phenomenon is now starting to be the norm in the media too.

There is an unwritten rule in the parliament: you are not allowed to call your colleague a liar. This ban is handy for concealing the falsities in an ambiguous and manipulative political message. A politician's lies are for some reason referred to as 'alterations of the truth', which leads to politicians deceptively arguing about the meaning of words, inventing substitute terms, and not discussing the matter at hand.

Political language needs to be full of unclear language because politicians need the support of mutually disagreeing groups. The strategic vagueness of political rhetoric is a central part of politics because turning changing one's tune and taking one's words back when necessary would not be possible without there being room for interpretation.

A politician who has been talking bunkum can easily claim that the journalists are distorting his claims and cutting corners when they translate the political language into standard language.

Many new MPs who campaigned with honesty before the “big bomb”, have quickly assumed this intentionally unclear and dishonest rhetoric even though semantic claptrap has been one reason why so many have been disappointed with politics.

The politicians sweepingly talk about ‘us’, ‘the people’ and ‘the Finns’ without defining who ‘we’, ‘the people’ or ‘the Finns’ are. In the ethnicised Eurozone crisis debate, the Greeks were deemed liars and the Portuguese lazy, even though ‘Greekness’ in itself does not make anyone a liar and ‘Portugueseness’ does not make anyone lazy. Xenophobia, on the other hand, has been veiled as ‘immigration criticism’.

The Finns Party leader Timo Soini has even assumed the far right’s mocking term ‘the tolerants’ (‘the chattering classes’). He has written in his blog that ‘in Finland, the tolerants’ fascism and Darwinism are in boom’, although the tolerants – unlike fascists – support democracy and oppose the authoritarianism, extreme nationalism and corporatism driven by the fascists.

Soini thus finally exposed his intolerance while forgetting that methodological fascism is in boom in the public platform of the Suomen Sisu organisation – which operates inside his own party. The platform bans the mixing of different nationalities and threatens freedom of speech by saying that ‘opinion leaders must be punished’.

Yet Soini cannot honestly admit the organisation’s racist and fascist nature because this would provide the other parties with a reason to shut the Finns Party out of political co-operation. This is why he has to pretend and offer his party’s fascist’ and racist opinions to the media bit by bit, as if the bits did not form a whole.

The Finns Party MPs have brushed off their rubbish as jokes, whether they are about ending all support for ‘pretentious postmodern art’, demanding tanks to be sent into the streets of Athens, or paraphrasing the old nazi quote: ‘every time I hear the word parliamentarism I release the safety on my pistol.’

The target of these elite-mocking jokes is unclear since the joking Finns Party representatives are members of the elite as MPs.

However, altering the truth is more dangerous than joking or lying.

Lying is an intentional false statement where the speaker has to know what the truth is. Otherwise he would not be lying. He who lies and he who tells the truth are playing the same game. A speaker of altered truth can completely ignore these requirements. He is neither rejecting the authority of truth nor opposing it like a liar – he is completely ignoring it.

The media has unfortunately often given politicians the chance to speak vaguely, i.e. against truth or at least against openness. We do not have to tolerate the politicians’ bunkum. The language-user must explain his choices and not convey his intentions. Sincerity benefits all. This is why the media has to continue its work and reveal how an intentionally ambiguous politician is not clearly bringing out his motives, which is fishy subliminal indoctrination.

### **The media has made a freak show out of politics**

The media and our current rulers have turned politicians into circus clowns, which is eating away citizens’ trust in the political system. The great hall of the parliament house is seen even in public question time broadcasts as a hostelry where people laugh in groups, shout and make noise. Doors are slammed and people run around, fiddle with their phones and act like a classroom full of unruly children.

The ever decreasing interest in politics is to a great extent the media’s fault. Journalists have, for years, unfairly ridiculed politics and politicians.

Populism has rooted itself in journalism, as it has in politics. The expectation is that the readers want entertainment politics when discussing the explosive growth in the importance of social media. This too distorts our view of managing common affairs.

Statements are blurred out using children's language, and they renew, repeat and maintain myths and the tall poppy syndrome.

Journalism would benefit more from new tools for analysing and explaining the ever growing flood of stories. Those who still read print papers want increasingly intelligent and challenging pieces.

We have to construct stronger pedestals and higher ivory towers. More elitism!

Elitism is knowing a little more than others. Elitism is a term connected to people such as researchers and politicians who inevitably know more than others about certain subjects. I do not mean the kind of elitist who uses his membership in special clubs to his advantage. I mean that it is important that each field be governed by the elite, i.e. elitistically managed. This means the same as the fact that buildings are designed by architects and engineers and operations performed by surgeons. All kinds of skills form the basis for a functioning society, which is always to some extent the elite's concern. Those who mock it as an 'ism' are sceptics and pretenders to power misusing their status.

Today, however, a journalist is populistically free to decide that the headlines should no longer fulfil their original purpose, i.e. state what the story is about. On the contrary, amidst all the sensations, the journalist asks the readers how things are. Facts become opinions when the journalist does not do his actual journalistic work, which is researching topics and reporting the results to the reader.

Since it started to become evident that the Finns Party was headed for success, it would have been desirable for political journalists to start treating the other parties as critically as the racist wing of the Finns Party, but the gauge was calibrated in such a way that the Finns Party gained appeal and the right to be treated as slackly as the other parties.

However, the Finns Party has done many things so skilfully that it has been difficult to get a grip on them. The party's jester contingent has caused all the commotion and in a way acted as a buffer against true criticism; talking about real questions has started to seem like a witch-hunt.

I naturally do not believe that this was a result of Soini's intentional strategy. The Finns Party is let off easy because political journalism in general in Finland is very loose.

The media still feels a burden of guilt because it was not able to foresee the rise of the Finns Party, which is why the media often fails in covering the party. 'The voice of the working classes' was highly emphasised during the 2011 electoral campaign when stories from 'within the people' started to emerge, but the reaction at the time was forced and too late. The shame brought on by the shock has not been thoroughly dealt with either in editorial offices or publicly in the media. In addition, the fear of the far right's reactions, the hardening of the political rhetoric, politics becoming more and more entertaining, the language of the media becoming more childish, the rise of click-bait journalism and the middle-of-the-road fallacy have together created an excellent opportunity for populism to become appealing. In order for the situation to change, journalism has to change. In order to survive the crisis and get over the current transition phase, journalism needs more elitism to explain to the entertainment editors how society works.

# On the Crest of the Euroscepticism Wave. The Rise of Finnish Populism from 2007 to 2011

---

Erkka Railo

## Introduction

This study addresses the question of how media coverage may have affected the rise in support for the populist Finns Party (previously known as the True Finns, in Finnish *Perussuomalaiset* r.p.) between 2007 and 2011. It examines the political news published in three Finnish newspapers – *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Aamulehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* – during the month leading to the 2007 national parliamentary elections, the 2008 municipal elections, the 2009 European parliament elections and the 2011 national parliamentary elections.

The period 2007 - 2011 has seen the most significant increase in support for the Finns Party. In 2007, the Finns Party saw a support of slightly over 4 per cent, and just one year later, in the 2008 municipal election, it reached 5.4 per cent. One year after that, at the European Parliament election, Timo Soini received a huge landslide of 130,000 votes. The total percentage of votes received by the Finns Party candidates was 9.8 per cent. In the national parliamentary election of 2011, the Finns Party reached 19.05 per cent of votes – an achievement famously known as “*jytky*” (the big bomb).

The rise in support for the Finns Party has been researched extensively in Finland, even when the “big bomb” took place less than three years ago. The book *Populismi – kriittinen arvio* (“Populism – A Critical Evaluation”), explains the success of the Finns Party as a consequence of a structural change in the Finnish industry and links it to the fact that the Finns Party was the only party in Finland that was openly critical towards the EU.<sup>2</sup> In turn, the book *Muutosvaalit 2011* (“Elections of Change 2011”) took a more general look at the changes in power relations in the latest national parliamentary election, and concluded that people’s discontent with EU politics and especially with the economic support of debt-ridden nations was expressed by means of a protest vote for the Finns Party.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Toivonen 2011; Raunio 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Borg 2011, 245-248.

The success of the Finns Party has also been studied from the viewpoint of media research. The book *Jytky – Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus* (“The Big Bomb – Media Publicity of the 2011 Parliamentary Elections”<sup>4</sup>) analyses the media coverage of Finnish politics over the three months leading to the parliamentary election and states that the international financial crisis and the EU’s financial stabilization packages were dominating the news. The message of the Finns Party – openly critical of the EU- appeared as particularly credible in a situation where a few of the EU member states did not seem to be able to recover from their financial troubles. The end result was the unexpected electoral victory of the Finns Party. In addition to these reasons, the success of the Finns Party has also been explained through the party’s opposition to immigration,<sup>5</sup> Timo Soini’s skilful media appearances,<sup>6</sup> and an exceptionally vigorous approach towards local election work.<sup>7</sup>

This study applies media research methods to examine the success of the Finns Party over a slightly longer period of time, from 2007 to 2011. The study is part of an international comparative research project called Nurturing populism? The impact of the media on the growth of populist right-wing parties in Netherlands, France and Finland, which examines the possible effects of political news coverage on the moderate voters with changeable minds in Finland, the Netherlands, France and Great Britain. For the case of Finland, this study aims to clarify which factors in the political news agenda made some voters change parties between 2007 and 2011.

This study is based on the so-called agenda-setting theory, according to which the media have an essential effect on which issues stand out as important to people at a certain point in time and the reasons behind decisions in elections. The agenda-setting theory in itself does not explain how people regard various issues, but it does show which issues generate opinions.<sup>8</sup> (By examining the elections held between 2007 to 2011, it is possible to identify the issues that shaped people’s election decisions during these years, in other words, on which issues people based their voting decisions. At the same time, I aim to evaluate which issues were probably not crucial. As stated, earlier studies have attributed the success of the Finns Party to the party’s opposition to the EU, a structural change in the Finnish economy, and criticism towards immigration. The aim of

---

<sup>4</sup> Pernaa & Railo 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Mickelsson 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Niemi 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Arter 2011

<sup>8</sup> McCombs & Shaw 1977; McCombs 2004.

this study is to paint a clearer picture of which of these issues influenced the strong rise in support for the Finns Party. The answers are clarified further by placing them in a wider Finnish societal context, i.e. the study answers the question of why the voters reacted to the news the way they did. The analysis offers a chance to evaluate how the new voters that switched their support to the Finns Party are likely to react in the future to changes in the political news agenda.

This text uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis compares the frequency of certain key words during the month leading to the elections in *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Aamulehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. The qualitative analysis applies Robert Entman's ideas on framing analysis. I search the texts for answers to the following questions: Who have been defined as central active parties in the news items? What kinds of roles have been given to each active party? Which issues are presented as problems, and what kinds of solutions are proposed? I also ask who are seen as causing the problems and who are presented as problem solvers.<sup>9</sup> As for the 2011 elections, my analysis is based on the book *Jytky – Eduskuntavaalian 2011 mediajulkisuus* (“The Big Bomb – Media Publicity of the 2011 Parliamentary Elections”), edited by Ville Pernaa and Erkka Railo, which examines in great detail the political publicity during the 2011 national parliamentary elections.

The research material for this study consists of three major Finnish newspapers: *Helsingin Sanomat*, which is the largest daily newspaper in Finland, *Aamulehti*, which is the largest regional newspaper in Finland, and *Ilta-Sanomat*, one of Finland's two daily tabloids. The articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti* have been gathered from the original papers. The stories published in *Ilta-Sanomat* have been gathered from the Sanoma groups' internet archives. In the case of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat*, the stories were counted through the word search of the Sanoma group's internet archives, and in the case of *Aamulehti* we counted the stories by hand. The numbers of articles in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat*, on the one hand, and, on the other, *Aamulehti*, are thus not comparable. However, the change in the number of articles gives an idea of how the focus of news themes in each medium changed from one election to another. Additionally, a group of articles from each paper was selected for qualitative analysis. The most important political news items in the three chosen papers have been analysed by examining relevant

---

<sup>9</sup> Entman 1993.

articles published prior to the selected elections. The articles are mentioned in the references.

This text proceeds in a loosely chronological order so that the first chapter examines the 2007 national parliamentary elections. Next, the most prominent themes of the elections from 2008 to 2011 are examined by analysing the quantitative and qualitative development of the news stories. The grouping is based on an observation made during the research: the 2007 parliamentary elections represented an earlier era that should be examined separately. This study gives special attention to the question of which news themes received significantly more or significantly less attention during the years in question, when the support for the Finns Party grew significantly. Based on this premise, each chapter includes an evaluation of which news themes could have affected the increase in support for the Finns Party and which probably did not. This piece ends with a concluding section which summarises the main findings and attempts a final answer to the main question guiding this research, namely: which news themes prompted voters to support the Finns Party and how this process may develop in the future.

### **The Era of Old Power**

On the eve of the 2007 parliamentary elections, Finland had been governed for four years by a coalition government of the centre-right Centre Party and the Social Democratic Party, led by Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen from the Centre Party. The largest party in the opposition was the right-wing conservative National Coalition Party, and for Jyrki Katainen, the young chairman of the party, the parliamentary elections was the most significant challenge in his career. The election result was a particular victory for Katainen, whose party rose to second place surpassing the Social Democrats. However, the Centre Party kept its position as the largest party, which resulted in Matti Vanhanen continuing as prime minister for a second term. Due to their electoral defeat, the Social Democrats were moved into opposition. The changes in the number of votes for the major parties were minor, less than 100,000, which was a sign of a superficially stable situation. At that time, few noticed that the Finns Party almost doubled their votes compared to the 2003 elections.<sup>10</sup>

---

10 Borg & Paloheimo 2009.

The 2007 parliamentary election took place during a period where the national economy seemed incoherent. The previous years had seen a strong growth, the increase of which politicians anticipated. This gave the parties a chance to talk about the “share margin”, i.e. the “extra” income provided by increased economic growth and how it should be distributed in order to address various needs or concerns. The situation, however, gave the media a reason to criticize the parties for jumping ahead by sharing money that was not actually available yet.<sup>11</sup> The attitude of the media was justified in the sense that there actually were several problems with the Finnish economy and international economic development also showed signs of slowing down.<sup>12</sup> In Finland, editorial writers paid attention to the fact that the number of poor and those who had been unemployed for a long period of time remained very high in spite of the economic growth.<sup>13</sup> According to the media, politicians and authorities seemed unable to find ways to provide jobs for those having been unemployed for a long time.<sup>14</sup>

Although this was not visible in 2007, these were the last elections before the end of an era. According to Ville Pernaa, from 1987 to 2011 Finland was living a special era in party politics when the party lines regarding economic policy were exceptionally close to one another. For over two decades, all parties except the Finns Party had participated in government, and the so-called three major parties had tried every possible coalition. The era started in 1987, when the Social Democratic Party and the National Coalition formed the so-called “red-and-blue government”. This meant that the traditional left-right division dwindled down to next to nothing. Later on, even the party of the reformed communists - the Left Alliance - also participated in coalition governments with the National Coalition Party. The political consensus of the Finnish parties was based on two central factors. Firstly, the Social Democrats accepted the idea of an open national economy which is a concept at the heart of today’s increasingly globalized world economy. This economic policy was related to the fact that the Social Democratic Party was not in favour of depending on traditional or primary industries or sectors. The right-wing parties - the National Coalition and the Centre Party - on the other hand, committed to maintaining and developing the

---

11 AL 8 March 2007: “Dangerous speed blindness in the fields.”

12 HS 15 March 2007: “The problem mortgages of the US pressed down the markets all over the world.”; Bank of Finland 1/2008.

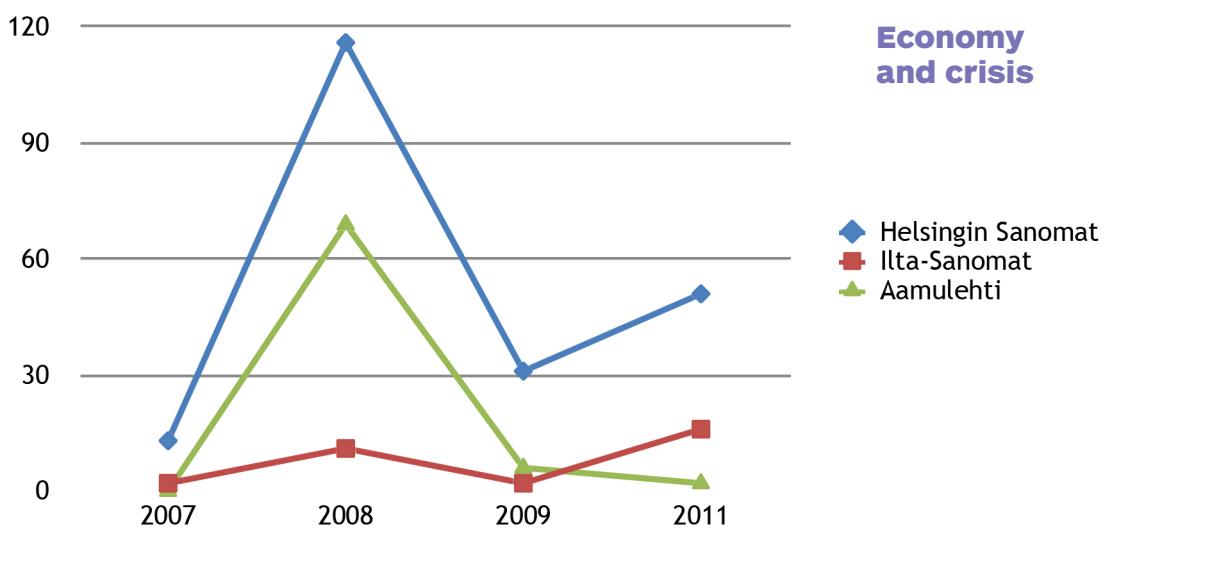
13 AL 11 March 2007: “Smart weapons against poverty.” (editorial); HS 15 March 2007: “There are still too many long-term unemployed.” (editorial)

14 HS 23 February 2007: “The candidates of the Centre Party and the Social Democrats disagree on handling employment Denmark style.”; AL 17 March 2007: “The Ministry of Work in need of a good airing” The worsening labour shortage is a sign of the fact that the employment appropriations have not been allocated right.

welfare state. The inevitable result of the consensus and multi-party governments was a situation where the various governments started to resemble one another.

The economic downturn, which started in 2008, slowly began to disintegrate the consensus of the parties, and the electoral victory of the Finns Party in 2011 hindered it further. On the eve of the 2007 elections, the slow downturn of the economic growth was not clearly visible, but from 2008 onwards the talk about an economic depression or recession started to dominate political news. This is shown in Figure 1 which examines the frequency of the words “economy” and “crisis” appearing together in the newspapers we researched. The figure shows that in 2008, the financial crisis was covered almost ten times more than in 2007. In 2009, the crisis situation eased slightly, but only to pick up again in 2011, after the Portuguese government collapsed. One could state that from 2008 to 2011 the various financial crises before the elections have dominated political publicity.

Figure 1: The occurrence of the words “economy” and “crisis” in the studied papers.



The consensus of the largest three “old” parties – the National Coalition Party, the Centre Party and the Social Democratic Party – regarding economic policy could be seen in political news in the fact that there was no clear juxtaposition between different parties during elections. The media criticized the parties for being too similar and for the lack of alternatives.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in February 2007

15 AL 1 March 2007: “Poster hassle started.” In a blind test, every other recognised the party behind the outdoor poster.”; AL 28 February 2007: “Competitiveness rose above politics.” (op-ed by Sami Moisio).

the editor-in-chief of *Helsingin Sanomat*, Janne Virkkunen, asked how the elections might gain more significance: “Finnish domestic policy is characterised by a peculiar stability in the European context. The differences in support for the large and middle-sized parties are relatively small, and significant power shifts during elections are rare.”<sup>16</sup> When there were no issue-based differences between the parties, the media paid attention to the parties’ electoral campaigns. In 2008, 2009 and 2011, when the economic recession hit Finland, the campaign ads were significantly less covered in the media.<sup>17</sup>

The 2007 elections are particularly memorable for SAK’s (the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions) attempt to create an electoral campaign based on political satire, picturing a “bourgeois pig” gorging at a huge dinner table. The leaked campaign ad was widely censured before it was even broadcast, which resulted in it being quickly shelved.<sup>18</sup> *Aamulehti* named the Social Democrats’ campaign a “grudge campaign” and declared that it had turned against itself.<sup>19</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat* also judged politicians’ attempts to polish their own image and ignore political issues.<sup>20</sup> In the end, even the citizens grew tired of publicly dissecting campaign ads.<sup>21</sup> It came as no surprise that the 2007 parliamentary election saw the biggest abstention records since the Second World War.

Although the media highlighted the similarities between the “old” parties particularly during the 2007 elections, the idea that the National Coalition, the Centre Party, and the Social Democratic Party resembled each other dominated other elections as well. Before the municipal elections in 2008, both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti* critically evaluated the parties’ “image campaigns” which, according to the papers, were an attempt to polish their images without any real content. *Helsingin Sanomat*’s criticisms included statements like the following: “The parties should take a look in the mirror. Their task is to bring

---

16 HS 25 February 2007: “How to liven up the elections?” (column by Janne Virkkunen); see also HS 14 March 2007: “The unbearable lightness of electoral campaigns.” (column by Erkki Pennanen)

17 For 2007, the search terms “ad” & “politics” give a total of 21 hits in *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Helsingin Sanomat*. For 2008, only 12 hits, for 2009, 13 hits and for 2011 only 7 hits.

18 Mykkänen 2007, 87; Pitkänen 2007, 37,223.

19 AL 5 March 2007: “the grudge campaign turned against itself.” (editorial); AL 5 March 2007: “Wasting food is not funny even in a commercial.”

20 HS 16 March 2007: “Politics is not fiction, the style and image are not enough.”; AL 13 March 2007: “Everyone has to draw the line themselves in the publicity game.”

21 HS 16 March 2007: “The people: Too much talk about electoral ads during the campaigns.”

different alternatives and solution models into societal discussion in order to mobilise voters into supporting them.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, *Aamulehti* pointed out that there was no real difference between the parties and criticized - with experts’ help - the party platforms for containing empty jargon.<sup>23</sup> One of the reasons for these “empty” campaigns was thought to be the economic situation which, according to the media, did not offer the parties any significant room for manoeuvre.<sup>24</sup>

The period of political consensus from 1987 to 2011 can be understood through the thoughts of the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. According to Mouffe, after the cold war ended, a mutual understanding slowly grew among the parties on what was sensible and possible in politics. This consensus is seen as self-evident and politically neutral information about what is best for the whole society. Actually, this kind of consensus only serves a limited part of the society. The unchallenged status of the consensus as a self-evident truth excludes certain opinions and people who feel that no political party represents their opinions or promotes their interests.<sup>25</sup> In Finland, from 1987 to 2011, the political parties slowly started to resemble each other, which resulted in a difficulty of telling the parties apart in political publicity. The lack of political tension was even clearer when the parties’ different views were not examined on the level of ideas or issues, but when their electoral campaigns were evaluated instead. At the same time, this similarity benefited the only party that had not participated in the coalition governments after the 1990s, the Finns Party.

Interestingly enough, in the minds of journalists this emptiness and similarity meant that the Finns Party or populist parties in general could bring some life to the stale political discussion: “The value of populist parties in democracy lies in the fact that they refresh the political discussion and are able to reach even the voters who are otherwise not interested in parties, and at best to make them use their voices.”<sup>26</sup> *Aamulehti* on the other hand, encouraged other parties to take heed of the challenge presented by the Finns Party, led by Timo Soini, and not to brand the party as “mere populists”.<sup>27</sup> From 2007 to 2009, the publicity gained by the Finns Party emphasized the idea that citizens’ protest against the “major

---

22 HS 6 October 2008: “Voting in election should really matter.” (editorial); HS 8 October 2008: “Leif Salmén: Parties running image campaign are digging their own graves.”

23 AL 3 October 2008: “Only posters differ.” (editorial); AL 24 October 2008: “‘Jargon without any sense’, the blind test jury evaluated the election platforms.”

24 HS 12 October 2008: “Politics as a guest invited by the economy.” (op-ed)

25 Mouffe 2005.

26 HS 9 October 2008: “Populism is the spice of politics.” (op-ed by Erkki Pennanen)

27 AL 8 October 2008: “Fear in the major parties.”

parties” was understandable, even useful for the political system. This view was one way of reacting to the strong rise in support for the Finns Party in 2011, although critical statements gained the most attention at the time, pointedly criticising the Finns Party’s platform and viewpoints.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Financial Crisis Becomes the Most Prominent New Story**

By the fall of 2008, the economic situation had significantly worsened and news coverage certainly portrayed this, as shown in Figure 1. The figure presents the occurrence of the words “economy” and “crisis” in *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Aamulehti*, and *Ilta-Sanomat* from 2007 to 2011. Prior to the 2008 municipal elections, *Helsingin Sanomat* used these words together nearly ten times more (13 vs 116) than in 2007. Based on this finding, one can conclude that it is more common to cover the financial crisis when the weakened economic situation is a new phenomenon. Later, when the economic recession has been going on for some time, there is less talk about the financial crisis, but the situation is still more widely publicised than when positive economic development prevails.

Before the 2008 municipal elections, the international economic recession and the financial crisis dominated the headlines. Almost every day, the papers published pressing news about the deteriorating economic situation. Words such as “panic” and “crisis”, as in “economic crisis”, “financial crisis”, and “bank crisis” were repeated in the headlines. The most extreme headline was possibly in *Aamulehti*, describing the collapse of stock prices using the term “dooms-day”.<sup>29</sup> The situation was special in that the concrete consequences of the economic recession had not yet reached Finland. For instance, unemployment did not skyrocket immediately but was “expected to explode”.<sup>30</sup> These kinds of extreme headlines may have caused anxiety among voters, but the feeling of uncertainty was heightened by the fact that the political decision-makers did not seem to understand the situation. “Bad times caught the party leaders by surprise”, wrote *Helsingin Sanomat* just weeks before the elections.<sup>31</sup>

---

28 Hatakka 2012.

29 HS 23 October 2008: “The financial crisis may speed up the ratification of the EU constitution.”; HS 25 October 2008: “International financial crisis flattened the municipal elections campaigns.” (editorial); HS 25 October 2008: “Panic Friday.”; HS 30 September 2008: “The contagious crisis caused panic in Europe.”; HS 1 October 2008: “Katainen believes that the financial crisis will hit the Finnish economy through businesses.”; HS 2 October 2008: “The financial crisis may shake the footing of the euro system.” AL 13 October 2008: “This is the doomsday in stock exchanges around the world.”  
30 HS 18 October 2008: “Unemployment anticipated to explode.”; HS 24.9.2008: “The Bank of Finland agreed on forecast on decreasing economic growth.”

31 HS 23 October 2008: “Bad times surprised the party leaders.”

When covering the international crisis, the media focused on the European Union which, according to the news, did not seem to be able to close its ranks. According to the news, the financial crisis first “scared the flock of EU countries apart” like a startled flock of sheep, after which “the EU tried to reunite its front, which had disbanded in the crisis”.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the European Union, the European Central Bank, according to the news headlines, also seemed powerless under the pressures of the financial crisis.<sup>33</sup> Later in the autumn, news regarding Europe took a more positive turn. The leaders of the European Union were shown publicly as demanding discipline for the banks and presenting plans for saving the debt-ridden banks.<sup>34</sup> The media coverage portrayed a situation that seemed to change from week to week. Even if the news published in mid-October showed the actions as having some effect,<sup>35</sup> by the end of the month *Helsingin Sanomat* stated: “The fear of a credit crunch and recession is back on the market in full force.”<sup>36</sup> At the same time, both *Aamulehti* and *Helsingin Sanomat* pointed out that Finland would need to cover a part of the bailout loans planned by the European Union, even though the price could not be estimated. *Aamulehti* called the situation “open tab solidarity”.<sup>37</sup>

The number of stories covering the economic situation decreased significantly in all three newspapers from 2008 to 2009. This was the case despite the fact that Finland’s economic situation was in fact significantly worse in 2009 than in 2008,<sup>38</sup> which was also apparent in the news. As previously stated, in the autumn of 2008, there was little proof of the consequences of the economic recession even though the media talked about various threats. In the summer of 2009, however, the situation had changed. Headlines announced that unemployment

---

32 HS 7 October 2008: “The financial crisis scares the flock of EU countries apart.”; HS 7 October 2008: “EU tried to gather its front, disbanded in the crisis.”

33 HS 10 October 2008: “ECB’s tough measures did not immediately bring relief to the money market.” AL 3 October 2008: “Central banks not controlling Euribors anymore.”; AL 12 October 2008: “Even the new reduction of interest does not relieve the financial crisis spreading panic.”

34 HS 2 October 2008: “The EU Commission wants to limit loaning between banks.”; HS 11 October 2008: “The European money market needs centralised control.”; HS 12 October 2008: “A collective bank rescue plan to be developed for Europe.”; HS 13 October 2008: “Eurozone countries promised to finance banks in trouble.”; HS 14 October 2008: “The EU leaders found each other and a good mode of operation.”; HS 14 October 2008: “European bailout loans getting hold of the financial crisis.”; HS 14 October 2008: “Preventing a bank crisis began at a gallop in the major EU countries.”

35 AL 14 October 2008: “Stock prices rose and interests fell with the glimmer of hope.”

36 HS 25 October 2008: “The fear of a credit crunch and recession is back on the market on full force.”

37 AL 14 October 2008: “Open tap solidarity.”; HS 14 October 2008: “There is no price yet for Finland bank bailout package.”; AL 14 October 2008: “Finland commits to heavy support measures.”

38 ”Euro & talous”, 2/2010. Bank of Finland.

was on the rise and production on the wane.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, there is an interesting difference between political news in the municipal elections of autumn 2008 and the European election of summer 2009. In the autumn of 2008, the European Union was presented as seeking a solution for the international financial crisis, but in the summer of 2009, the EU was largely absent from the financial news. One could have thought that the European Parliamentary election would have led to public discussion about what the European Union could do to ease the economic recession. However, this was not the case.

On the contrary, news coverage for the 2009 European election is - interestingly - comparable to that of the 2007 national parliamentary election. The two periods shared the fact that coverage was lacking a clear juxtaposition between different parties or ideas. This resulted in the newspapers not covering the differences between the parties or examining current issues but instead following the electoral campaign on a general level. For instance, it was publicly discussed whether the candidates prioritized national benefit or the EU's benefit<sup>40</sup> and what was the general relation between national decision-making and the Members of the European Parliament.<sup>41</sup> The media also scrutinised the parties' campaigns for the European Parliament in terms of who was funding them.<sup>42</sup> Considering the developments after the election, when the European Union had to take responsibility for saving the debt-ridden European Countries from a financial crisis, it is surprising to find that the EU was hardly mentioned in the finance and economics sections of the news.<sup>43</sup> Even in 2009, *Aamulehti* could easily publish provocative headlines such as "How are the matters of far-away Spain any business of Finland's?"<sup>44</sup> It is hard to imagine anyone asking this in 2010 when the financial crisis of the Southern European countries started to dominate the headlines. In *Aamulehti*, the issues related to the European

---

39 AL 16 May 2009: "The freefall of the Finnish economy continued in March."; AL 17 May 2009: "The cost of income support to skyrocket in municipalities."; HS 14 May 2009: "Salary cuts to come."; HS 3 June 2009: "The unemployment situation heated up the parliament."

40 AL 10 May 2009: "Is the European Union promoting the interest of Finland or the common good?"; AL 13 May 2009: "Before we bowed down to Moscow, now to Brussels."

41 AL 9 May 2009: "EU's fault: too much democracy."; AL 26 May 2009: "The MEPs do not have to be tied to the governments apron strings."; HS 9 May 2009: "The EU parliamentarians: The government does not know how to maintain good relations to the MEPs."; HS 19 May 2009: "Even the most extreme Finnish MEP would not faze in the EU parliament."; HS 20 May 2009: "Would an election by list fit the EU elections?"

42 AL 12 May 2009: "The support of businesses and associations to the parties to be published."; HS 12 May 2009: "The leader products of the Europe Day were EU playing cards and candy bowls."; HS 4 June 2009: "Outdoor advertising of the EU candidates has multiplied."

43 There is one exception in Helsingin Sanomat. HS 4 June 2009: "EU to open up the money tabs in order to find fobs for the unemployed."

44 AL 14 May 2009: "How are the matters of far-away Spain any business of Finland's?"

election were, for instance, the protection of the Baltic Sea, vehicle taxes, structural fund aids, the rights of bus passengers, and farming subsidies, but not the economic situation.<sup>45</sup> Both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti* were concerned that the parties had only recruited celebrities with no prior political experience. As a consequence, the Parliament would probably include people who would not be able promote the interest of the EU or Finland.<sup>46</sup> Finally, both papers launched an appeal for the voters to participate in the election: "Only by voting can we choose European wielders of power."<sup>47</sup> From the political news covering the European election one can draw the conclusion that similarities between parties lead to political publicity emphasizing the electoral campaign itself and not, in the case of the European election, introducing the actual institution. The media appears to have been unable to determine the general significance of the European Parliament and the European Union. This aspect of the situation was about to change.

Based on the coverage of the financial crisis, however, it does not appear that the strong growth in the number of news stories covering the recession would have directly caused the Finns Party to win the elections. Even though the recession continued to worsen after 2008, the number of stories covering it actually started to decrease. Earlier studies, however, have observed a correlation between the structural change of Finland's economy and the increase in support for the Finns Party. In industrial towns where structural change led to higher unemployment rates, support for the Finns Party grew the most significantly between the 2007 parliamentary elections and the 2011 elections. At the same time it should be noted that support for the Finns Party really started to increase in 2010 when the stories covering the economic recession were already past their peak. This supports the idea that the economic recession created a basis for dissatisfaction with the "old" parties but as such was not enough for the voters to start supporting the Finns Party.

---

45 AL 8 May 2009: "The Baltic Sea to be cleaned and vehicle taxes unified in the EU."; AL 20 May 2009: "Finland's over 1.7 billion euro structural fund aids stuck."; AL 22 May 2009: "A Finnish MEP should take care of the environment."; HS 9 May 2009: "Majority of the European Elections candidates: No unified immigration policy." ; HS 9 May 2009: "Finland to turn back hundreds of Iraqis in the coming years back to their home country."; HS 8 May 2009: "Finland still wants to refine the EU proposal on the bus passenger rights."; AL 26 May 2009: "Agriculture should be decided on domestically."

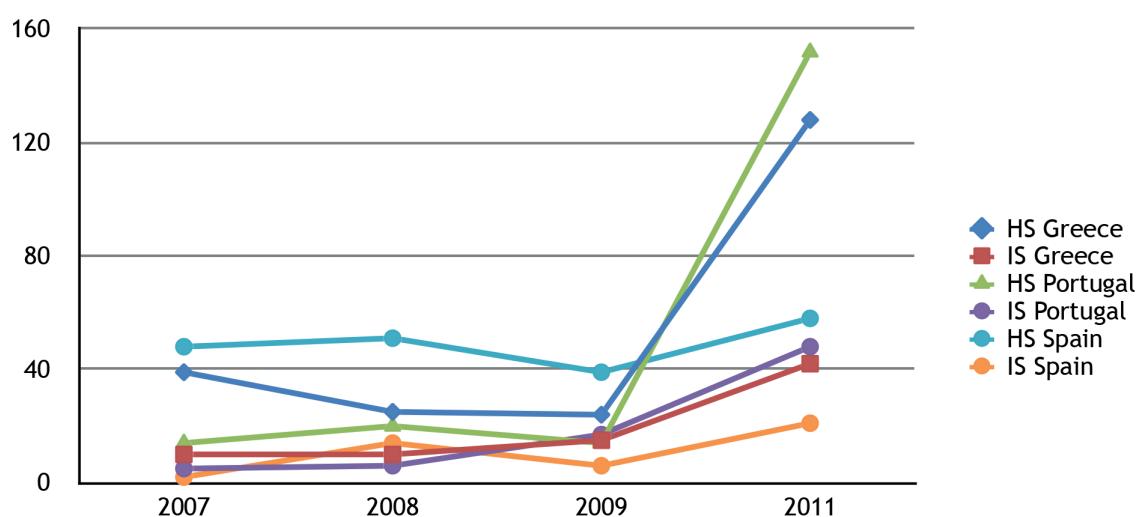
46 HS 19 May 2009: "Triviality threatens the EU."; HS 15 May 2009: "The most capable candidates should be selected to the European Parliament."

47 HS 21 May 2009: "Only by voting we are able to select European forces."; AL 30 May 2009: "Voting is extremely important."

## European Stabilisation Packages

Between 2009 and 2010, coverage of the economic recession changed content-wise. As previously shown, it decreased between 2009 and 2011. Additionally, its focus shifted towards the debt-ridden Eurozone countries. Figure 2 shows how much the three countries that suffered the most in the financial crisis were present in Finnish political news and when their coverage started. The figure shows that Portugal and Spain started to appear in the coverage of the financial crisis between 2009 and 2011, probably in the summer of 2010 when the discussion started, especially regarding the rescue packages for Greece. The rescue packages received significantly more coverage in *Helsingin Sanomat*, which probably resulted from the paper having the in-house resources to cover foreign affairs. On the other hand, the regional and afternoon papers had to rely on joint national editorial boards, which resulted in their focusing on the national viewpoint.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the events abroad raised considerable interest in Finland. As the study concerning coverage of the 2011 parliamentary election showed, news around Portugal's economic situation multiplied when the Portuguese government failed to pass the bill regarding spending cuts. The same thing happened when the Greek financial crisis culminated in the summer of 2010.<sup>49</sup>

Figure 2: Occurrence of the crisis countries in the papers.



48 Harjuniemi & Herkman 2013, 19, 37.

49 Harjuniemi & Herkman 2013, 19.

In other words, from the viewpoint of political news, the strong increase in support for the Finns Party from 2010 to 2011 correlated first and foremost with the culmination of the Portuguese and Greek financial crises and the increase in national news following the crises.

Timo Harjuniemi and Juha Herkman have stated that the news stories in the Finnish media blamed three parties for the international financial crisis: Firstly, the debt-ridden states that had taken unreasonably large loans, secondly, the Euro system itself and thirdly, the national economic policy.<sup>50</sup> It should be added that from 2008 to 2011 the European Union did not at any stage of the economic recession appear as an institution which could have helped Finland in one way or another to cope with its problems. Prior to the economic recession, the European Union, according to the news, seems to have concentrated on entirely secondary or, from Finland's perspective, even harmful issues. For instance, the news reported that the European Union threatened Finnish companies with fines if they did not abide by EU legislation.<sup>51</sup> In the autumn of 2008, the news strongly highlighted how the EU in its own work focused particularly on preventing climate change, when at the same time the Finnish media was horrified about the international economic recession reaching Finland. Other member states also started to have other priorities.<sup>52</sup> In addition to climate protection, the EU strived to decrease sulphur emissions from ships. Finland was concerned that the planned sulphur emissions would bring costs of 800 million euros for Finnish industries.<sup>53</sup> In preventing climate change, it was suspected that there would be an element of overkill in the restrictions, unnecessarily disturbing motoring or hindering industries.<sup>54</sup> A few times the news referred to the EU's plan to ban incandescent light bulbs in order to slow down climate change. The media let out a figurative sigh of relief when the light bulbs were not banned after all.<sup>55</sup> Thus coverage of the European Union in 2009 was in line with earlier research results, according to which the national media tends to present the European Union as a rival or an adversary to the state. Reporting focused on the

---

50 Harjuniemi & Herkman 2013, 33.

51 AL 19 February 2007: "EU threatens Kone with over billion euro fines."

52 HS 16 October 2008: "The financial crisis started to undermine the EU countries' commitment to the climate package." ; HS 17 October 2008: "Discordant notes from the EU countries undermined but did not overturn the climate objectives." ; HS 24 October 2008: "Need for the climate package increases, likewise the difficulty of packaging." ; HS 17 October 2008: "The financial crisis starting to effect the EU's directing line."

53 HS 6 October 2008: "The new sulphur limits for ships may cost Finland over 800 million euros." ; AL 13 October 2008: "Sulphur challenges the transport system."

54 HS 18 October 2008: "Will the lights go off, industry run and motoring be banned?"

55 AL 3 March 2007: "Light bulbs allowed to glow in Finland."

question of what we might gain or lose with joining the EU instead of seeing the collective benefits or pros of EU membership.<sup>56</sup>

In Finland, the media's critical stance towards the European Union, the euro system and domestic politicians created a favourable configuration for the strong growth in support for the Finns Party. As the study examining the 2011 parliamentary elections showed, the Finns Party and its chairman Timo Soini received unintentional public support from the media. The media's critical position towards the management of the international financial crisis and especially the euro's acute problems in 2010 and 2011 gave credibility to Timo Soini who had consistently appeared as opposing the European Union and the euro system ever since the Finns Party was founded in 1995. The Finns Party differed significantly from other parties which had either a positive attitude towards the European Union or had participated in governments which had strived for positive policies regarding the latter. The severe financial problems of Greece and Portugal created a public confrontation between the Finns Party and other parties. As early as 2007 *Aamulehti* reported that, according to the leaders of the major parties, Finland's place was at the heart of European integration.<sup>57</sup> This confrontation offered the Finns Party leader Timo Soini an opportunity to say that the other parties were misleading the public in EU issues.<sup>58</sup> When *Eurozone* seemed to tumble into insuperable trouble between 2010 and 2011, the situation gave Soini exceptional credibility.

### **Increase in Immigration-Related Discussion**

In addition to news stories covering the economic recession and the debt-ridden European countries, there was another theme which became more prominent from 2007 to 2011: immigration. As shown in Figure 3, discussions on immigration and refugee policy quadrupled in *Helsingin Sanomat* from 2008 to 2011. In *Aamulehti*, the number of stories approximately doubled and in *Ilta-Sanomat* the number increased significantly during that time period, although the total number of stories seems small when compared to *Helsingin Sanomat*.

---

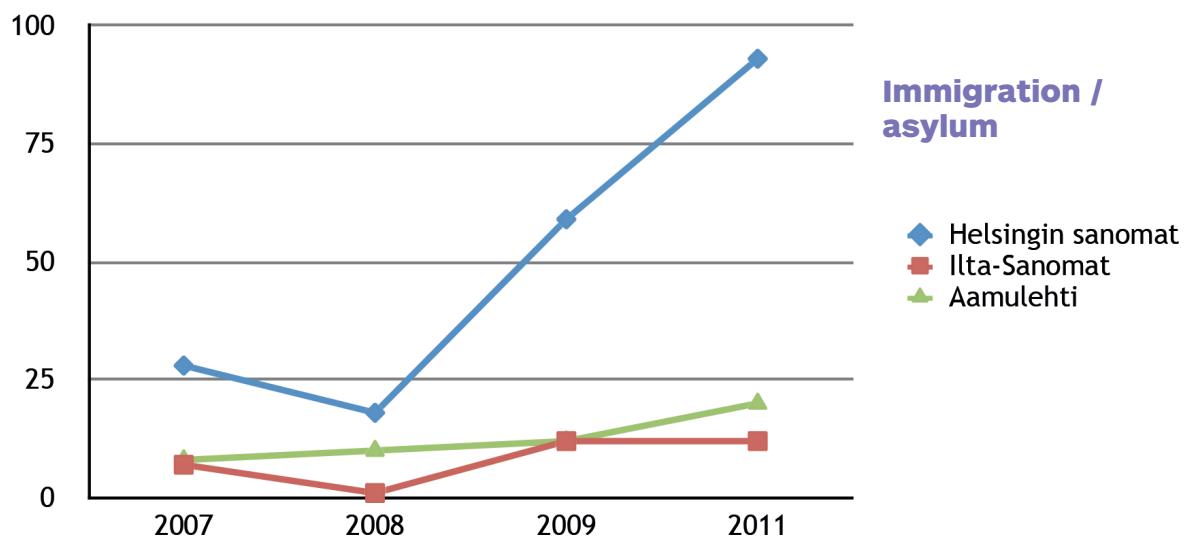
56 Vliegenthart, R., Schuck, A. R., Boomgaarden, H. G., & De Vreese, C. H. 2008.

57 AL 2 March 2007: "Prime minister candidates to stay at the centre of the EU."

58 HS 27 February 2007: "Timo Soini: Major parties hide EU issues on purpose."

According to the book *Jytky – Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, immigration was the fifth most common political news subject in the months prior to the 2011 parliamentary election.<sup>59</sup>

Figure 3: Discussion on immigration policy.



The turn in public discussion in Finland on immigration, - which happened at the end of the first decade of the 2000s - is significant because immigration and refugee policies in the country had previously been extremely scarce. The 21st century Finnish immigration political discussion had only begun a few years earlier when Matti Vanhanen's government suggested immigration as one solution for the problems caused by Finland's increasing dependency ratio. When the baby-boomers retired in the 2010s, the ratio of people in the labour force and those not in the labour force threatened to develop in a significantly unfavourable direction, and increasing immigration was thought to offer a solution for this. The scale of public discussion, however, remained fairly small until towards the end of the 2000s, when the media started to focus more on the subject. Research director Pentti Raittila has suggested that the increase of immigration-related news and public discussion is the result of three factors. Firstly, the economic recession sparked a criticism towards the thought that there should be more immigrants in Finland in order to correct the dependency ratio. People were more worried that, as Finland's employment situation worsened, there

59 Railo & Välimäki 2012, 36.

would not be enough jobs for the original population. Secondly, the Finns Party started to loudly criticise the Finnish immigration policy as early as the early 2000s. At first, this did not have a significant effect on the work of other parties and politicians, but the steadily growing support for the Finns Party forced other parties to take a stand on immigration issues as well. The third explanation for the increase in immigration discussions, according to Raitila, is the increased effect of social media on the news published by traditional media. Immigration-critical opinions had long been present on online discussion forums without being visible in the coverage produced by the mainstream media. Over the last decade, traditional media have started to pick news themes from blogs and discussion forums, which caused immigration-critical statements to receive more visibility in the media.<sup>60</sup> In addition to these factors, it is worth noting that the proportion of immigrants among the people living in Finland has increased steadily, which probably has affected the amount of public discussion.

A closer examination of the news regarding immigration and refugees shows that from 2007 to 2011 the tone of immigration discussion significantly changed. In 2007, the focus of immigration discussion was on the anticipated labour shortage and work-related immigration: “Immigrants relieve labour shortage.”<sup>61</sup> Publicly, the Right and the Left argued about whether the Finnish immigration policy should emphasise humanitarian reasons or pursue new, educated workers. The left-wing parties wanted to select immigrants to Finland for humanitarian reasons whereas the non-socialist parties would rather have welcomed more labour force into Finland. The greens strove for freer immigration in general.<sup>62</sup>

After the upswing had ended and the economic situation had turned towards recession, the focus of public immigration discussion in Finland quickly turned from work-related immigration to refugees and asylum seekers. Finnish immigration policy was then politically labelled as “too liberal by international standards”, and refugees would take advantage of the situation. As a result of this, there could be “too many” refugees coming to Finland. Thus, Matti Vanhanen’s government decided to start tightening the Finnish refugee and asylum policy in 2009.<sup>63</sup>

---

60 Raittila 2009, 67–72. I’m not a racist but... Of immigration, multiculturalism, and critique. Suvi Keksinen, Anna Rastas & Salla Tuori (toim.) Vastapaino & Nuorisotutkimusverkosto, Tampere 2009.

61 AL 9 March 2007: “Immigrants relieve labour shortage.”

62 HS 26 February 2007: “The Social Democrats and the Lefts most unexcited about work-related immigration.”; AL 10 March 2007: “Hautala from the Greens wants quotas for immigrants.”

63 Keskinen 2009, 35–36.

Finnish immigration policy was a topic of discussion also in the European Parliament election of 2009. The candidates opposed a collective immigration policy for the EU, fearing that Finland would lose its opportunity to restrict people from outside of Europe coming to Finland.<sup>64</sup> Yet, in 2008 the media discussed whether Finland should try to recruit workers to Finland from other EU countries.<sup>65</sup> In 2009, this discussion had disappeared, when the economic recession had really hit Finland and the worry for an increase in unemployment started to grow. Another factor was that in 2009, large numbers of Roma had entered Finland from Romania and Bulgaria, and their begging was causing public irritation.<sup>66</sup> Publicly, especially the Finns Party MPs were profiled as hard-liners in Finnish immigration policy. Naturally, the Finns Party chairman Timo Soini, and Jussi Halla-Aho, who had received a huge landslide of votes in the 2009 municipal election and gotten a place on the city council, clearly rejected any allegations of racism.<sup>67</sup> A paradox observed in earlier studies, however, is that at the same time this kind of coverage feeds the notion that the Finns Party is the most anti- immigration party.<sup>68</sup>

### **Themes that Did Not Contribute to the Success of the Finns Party**

In addition to the economic recession, there are a few distinct themes in the political news published between 2007 and 2011, which have the common trait of portraying a miserable picture of the state of Finnish society. However, they did not contribute much (or not at all) to the increase in support for the Finns Party, because the number of stories covering these subjects was very small when compared to the news regarding the economic recession. Such themes included poverty and differences in living standards, deficiencies in the welfare state's services, and climate change. All these themes were very prominent in the Finns Party's 2011 platform. In the "Most Fitting for the Finns" platform, the Finns Party blamed other parties for growing apart from the ordinary public. This "ordinary public", according to the Finns Party, had to tolerate the

---

64 HS 3 June 2009: "The government is preparing restrictions to refugee policy."; HS 9 May 2009: "Majority of the European Elections candidates: No unified immigration policy."

65 AL 19 October 2008: "Finland should recruit people from the EU pressed by the financial crisis."

66 HS 16 May 2009: "Begging has become more and more brazen."

67 AL 21 October 2008: "Timo Soini and Jussi Halla-aho resent racism allegations."

68 AL 17 May 2009: "The Finns Party raised its thumb for Timo Soini and Jussi Halla-aho."; Välimäki 2011, 279–287.

deterioration of living standards and services of the welfare state. Additionally, the party platform blamed the tightened environmental taxation for the fact the Finnish jobs were moving to third world countries. The Finns Party thought that the prevention of climate change in particular had resulted in the downfall of the competitiveness of Finnish industry.

It is worth noting that none of these themes was really prominent in the media from 2007 to 2011. Climate change is an exception, but the number of news stories mentioning it decreased sharply during the observed time period. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, climate change was mentioned before the 2007 elections circa 100 times and before the 2011 elections only 40 times. In *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Aamulehti*, the number of news stories covering climate change decreased to isolated references during the 2011 elections.

The deficiencies in and deterioration of the welfare state's services was a theme that interested the media from one year and election to another. According to the media, in large towns emergency departments were congested and class sizes in schools were increasing.<sup>69</sup> One element in the deterioration of services was that in remote areas the situation was especially poor: the number of village shops decreased, the college and university network was thinning and it was difficult to recruit doctors for health centres.<sup>70</sup> The state of elderly care was a particular concern for the media,<sup>71</sup> which gave the smaller parties, including the Finns Party, room and credibility to challenge the three major parties.<sup>72</sup> It is interesting, however, that the amount of public discussion did not seem to correlate clearly with the economic situation. Elderly care and health services were mentioned in 2007 more often than in 2009 or 2011, although the economic situation in 2007 was, on the face of it, good and Finland was living the last years of a long period of economic boom.

---

69 AL 14 March 2007: "Health clinics threatened by a severe crisis.>"; AL 28 May 2009: "Ten hours' waiting time in the emergency department."; HS 5 October 2008: "The Minister promised a law on student care."; AL 28 May 2009: "The city board has to consider the congestion at Acuta."

70 AL 28 February 2007: "In Western Finland every other municipality is lacking a village shop."; HS 19 February 2007: "Thinning the university network starts"; HS 25 February 2007: "Caregivers should be aided."; HS 21 February 2007: "Salaries in health care must be corrected in the collective agreement.""; AL 1 March 2007 "Doctors avoiding small health clinics."; AL 3 March 2007: "There is no formula for the doctor shortage."; AL 13 March 2007: "Most parties would set a time limit for receiving specialist services in time."; HS 10 May 2009: "The Tammisaari maternity ward threatened by closing again."

71 HS 21 February 2007: "Care for the elderly is not unimportant work."; AL 2 March 2007: "Children and the elderly must be cared for first."; AL 14 March 2007: "Emergency department in chaos due to shortages in continuing care for the elderly."; HS 3 June 2009: "The health board saved the elderly's hospital beds and compromised in home care."

72 AL 16 March 2007: "Räsänen, Soini and Korhonen strong in elderly care. Vanhanen, Heinäluoma and Katainen on the run."

Research on the 2011 national parliamentary election has shown that the welfare state's services or their deficiencies did not reach the top ten most prominent news themes.<sup>73</sup>

Equally, public discussion on themes such as poverty and unemployment does not seem to have had a clear connection to the rise in support for the Finns Party. The number of news articles covering poverty certainly started to increase in 2011 when the economic recession had lasted for a couple of years, but prior to that *Aamulehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* had hardly covered the subject at all, and in *Helsingin Sanomat* the number of stories had decreased between 2007 and 2009. Social problems generally did not have a very prominent position in political news in 2011. The challenge for stories covering the shortcomings of the welfare state, such as unemployment and the vulnerable, seems to be that these problems remain by and large the same year after year. There is no drama or interest brought by unexpected events connected to these themes, which would really increase the number of news and therefore would significantly affect the election results.

## Conclusions

In this study, I examined the political news agenda of four elections within the period 2007 to 2011. I have answered the question on which themes were the most prominent and in which ways they were framed in *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Aamulehti* one month prior to the 2007 national parliamentary election, the 2008 municipal election, the 2009 European election and the 2011 national parliamentary election. This research looked for themes that correlated with the strong growth in support for the Finns Party and therefore might have been a reason for the rise in the party's popularity. On the other hand, this study has also showed which themes did not correlate with the success of the Finns Party and therefore were not likely to affect it.

The most significant observation in this study was that the news coverage regarding the elections from 2008 to 2011 was dominated from 2008 onwards by the international financial crisis, some signs of which were already visible before the 2007 elections. The amount of news on the financial crisis, however, started

---

<sup>73</sup> Railo & Välimäki 2012, 36, 54.

to decrease between the years 2009 and 2011 and was replaced by news articles covering the debt-ridden countries in the European Union. The number of stories regarding Portugal, Greece and Spain increased heavily during 2009 to 2011. For instance, Portugal was mentioned before the 2011 elections in *Helsingin Sanomat* ten times more than before the 2009 elections.

This study also found that the number of news articles covering immigration increased significantly from 2007 to 2011. This gives reason to presume that public discussions regarding immigration was another important factor affecting support for the Finns Party. It is worth noting that the number of news stories covering immigration varied significantly between various media in 2011 when the peak in the number of stories covering the theme was reached. Earlier research has shown that papers in the capital region covered immigration significantly more than other regional papers.<sup>74</sup> News on immigration seems to generally concentrate on the areas where there is the most immigration. On the other hand, in many media immigration was covered very little, which gives reason to assume that coverage of immigration increases as the number of immigrants increases.<sup>75</sup>

It is equally interesting to note the themes which did not correlate with the rise in support for the Finns Party and therefore did probably not affect the strong increase in the support. These themes included the deterioration of the welfare state's services, poverty and unemployment, and climate change. According to this study, it seems unlikely that the electoral victory of the Finns Party would have been a counter reaction to the shortcomings or deterioration of public services. It seems equally unlikely that the electoral victory of the Finns Party would have signified a protest against unemployment or environmental values. Although unemployment started to become more widely publicised in 2008 and 2009, the amount of discussion normalized or even decreased by 2011. The situation was the same for public discussion on environmental problems and especially climate change. News articles covering climate change had to make room for articles on the economic recession, and therefore cannot explain the success of the Finns Party.

Julianne Stewart, Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Bruce Horsfield have defined four

---

74 Railo & Välimäki 2012, 47.

75 Railo & Välimäki 2012, 40-50.

phases in the relationship between the media and populist parties. The first phase is called ground-laying. During this phase, the media pay a lot of attention to a certain societal problem and strongly criticise the politicians for their inability to solve the problem in question. This critique indirectly supports the populists as it deteriorates the credibility and legitimacy of the established parties. As a result, the support for the populist parties slowly starts to increase, although the media are not yet paying any significant attention to them.<sup>76</sup>

The second phase is called the insurgent phase. During this phase, the media observe the increased support for the populist parties and start to pay a lot of attention to it. The attention can be positive or not, but the essential thing is that it is significant. Quality papers and electronic media may have a strongly hostile attitude towards the populists, as it happened in Finland in the spring of 2011. However, it is essential that the people receive an abundance of information about the populists and their goals. At the same time, the media emphasise the juxtaposition between the populists and other parties, which may further strengthen the support for the populist parties.

The third phase is called the established phase. Support for the populist party has been established at a certain level, and the party has lost a significant amount of its novelty value, as a result of which the media are no longer that interested in covering it. The social evil noted in the first phase may have been corrected or disappeared on its own, and the media are focusing their attention elsewhere. At the same time, support for the populist party slowly starts to decrease. The support has been more out of protest over a certain societal issue or anxiety. While the populist party might have gained credibility for addressing that particular concern, it is not able to offer any credible political solutions for other problems.

The fourth phase is called the decline phase. During this phase, the populist party almost completely loses its credibility as a political movement. The societal problem around which the party shaped itself and grew has been solved or has otherwise disappeared and the party has not been able to come up with an alternative, credible agenda. The party has possibly disintegrated into several competing groups and is shown in the media only through various feuding persons. It is worth noting, though, that not all populist parties reach this last phase.

---

<sup>76</sup> Stewart, Mazzoleni, Horsfield 2003, 217–237.

The phases presented by Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield are clearly visible in the electoral publicity between 2007 and 2011. In 2007, the Finns Party had not yet received a lot of attention from the media. Finland's economic situation seemed superficially stable and there was no reason for significant criticisms. The media mainly criticised the "old" parties for resembling each other, which gave the Finns Party the opportunity to present itself as a counterforce to other parties. The situation seemed to follow Chantal Mouffe's idea that the parties' consensus on what was sensible and possible in politics had excluded some social groups from politics. Thus, the Finns Party offered a channel for protest, primed by the media by highlighting the similarities between the "old" parties.<sup>77</sup>

The financial crisis that had begun in 2008 gave new vigour to the political criticisms in the media. The media felt that the "old" parties had failed in their economic policy. The financial crisis that had begun between 2007 and 2008 was clearly an international problem from the beginning, which is why the European Union was presented as a significant force in news articles covering the crisis. However, coverage was not kind towards the EU. In political news, the EU did not appear as an institution which could have been able to solve the international financial crisis, but, on the contrary, as a weak and powerless organisation. Strangely enough, economic policies had not been discussed, despite the international economic recession having become evident in the Finnish economy during 2009. Furthermore, in the autumn of 2008, the EU had been in a prominent public role when solutions for the crisis were discussed. Instead, the electoral coverage revolved around what the European Union does in general, what the European Parliament is for and what the relationship of this international institution is with regard to domestic decision-makers. Coverage lacked a clear juxtaposition which would have provided content for political discussion. The European Union was often not portrayed as a relevant or useful institutional actor for addressing key issues in political news pieces in the fall 2008 and summer 2009.

The media's critical views on how the financial crisis was handled and the European Union continued to harvest more support for the Finnish populist party that started in 2007. The Finns Party was put in a prime position in the media because of the financial crisis and the inability of the European Union and the "old" parties to solve the problems linked to it. But this was only the

---

77 Mouffe 2005.

beginning. The peak in media coverage of the financial crisis had been reached during the first stages of the financial crisis, in 2008, when it was a novel phenomenon and therefore made huge headlines. After this, the total number of articles regarding the financial crisis started to decrease but the number of news stories covering the situation of the debt-ridden EU countries multiplied. The media turned their attention towards the efforts of Portugal, Greece and Spain as they tried to cope with their debts, and especially towards the European Union's plans to create a stabilizing fund to help them. Only at this stage, did the support for the Finns Party double to 19 per cent, marking the record "big bomb" of the national parliamentary election of 2011. This leads to the conclusion that the second phase in the Finns Party's media attention, described by Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield, was reached only when the European Union started to draft the so-called stabilization packages to save the debt-ridden countries in the European Union.

Research on the coverage of the 2011 parliamentary election showed that the EU stabilization packages produced a juxtaposition where the National Coalition party clearly supported and the Finns Party equally clearly opposed the stabilization packages. The Centre Party and the Social Democrats were somewhere between these two ends. The juxtaposition clearly benefited the Finns Party because the chairman Timo Soini, who opposed the stabilization packages, was equally prominent or even more prominent in the media than Jutta Urpilainen – the opposition party's chairman. Thus, the most significant reason for the Finns Party's electoral victory in 2011 was that the party offered a credible anti-EU alternative compared to the other parties. Credibility was the result of several different factors. Firstly, the Finns Party had consistently opposed the EU when the other parties had either supported it or participated in pro-EU governments throughout the 16 years of Finland's membership in the EU. Secondly, the party's credibility was a result heightened by news coverage during the financial crisis, when the economic policy of the "old" parties and the EU's inability to solve the financial crisis were harshly criticised. The financial crisis as such would probably not have been enough for the strong rise in the support for the Finns Party but the EU aid packages for Portugal and Greece were what mobilised Eurosceptic voters to support the Finns Party.

On the other hand, the media analysis of pieces around the 2011 national parliamentary election showed that the Finns Party's media attention strongly increased before the election as the levels of support figures reached new

heights. It would be incorrect to say that the electoral success of the Finns Party was only the result of media publicity. Another reason is that a majority of the media had an extremely critical attitude towards the Finns Party in the spring of 2011.<sup>78</sup> Therefore one can conclude that the electoral victory of the Finns Party in 2011 was the combination of two factors: on one hand, the media's critical attitude towards the political decision-makers and especially the European Union, which mobilised Finnish Eurosceptic voters to support the Finns Party, and on the other hand, the Finns Party's strong electoral campaign and consistent critical stance towards the European Union.

In addition to the financial crisis and the stabilization packages for the debt-ridden European countries, immigration was another public issue that clearly correlated with the rise in the support for the Finns Party. The amount of discussion on immigration increased at the same time as the support for the Finns Party rose. The period 2007 to 2011 also included a change in the content of the immigration-related discussion. Before the economic recession, the topic was work-related immigration; whether Finland should try to improve the dependence ratio by receiving workers from abroad. After the recession had begun, the immigration discussion focused on refugees, beggars, and humanitarian immigration in general, which emphasised the negative aspects of immigration. Perhaps due to the emphasis on these negative sides, before the 2011 parliamentary election, politicians mainly tried to avoid discussing immigration. Nonetheless, the Finns Party presented itself as a party that opposed immigration.

The main conclusion of this study is that the Finns Party was able to mobilise the voters with changeable minds into supporting the party by assuming a critical stance *vis-a-vis* the EU and opposing immigration. The media inadvertently supported the rise of the support for the Finns Party as it started to cover both of these subjects more between 2008 and 2011. Earlier research has noted that in the coverage around the European Union, the organization is typically presented as being to blame for national problems. Furthermore, analyses on immigration-related news have found that immigration is generally covered in a problem-based and critical way. To some extent, the rise of the support for the Finns Party reflects the media's ways of covering the European Union and immigration, and therefore journalists have the power to affect the quality of news cove-

---

<sup>78</sup> Hatakka 2012.

rage if they wish to do so. The Finns Party has been able to attract voters in Finland who have felt that immigration and/or the EU are problems for which the “old” parties are not offering credible solutions but the Finns Party is. However, this could also lead to the conclusion that the Finns Party is unlikely to reach similar support in the near future as it did during the 2011 national parliamentary election. It is unlikely that the Finns Party will disappear or to shrink to a small party in the near future, but for the time being the peak of support has probably been reached.

At the moment, in the spring of 2014, the Finns Party is in the third phase of the pattern described by Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield. The groundwork for its support was laid between 2007 and 2009, when the news on the financial crisis gave credibility to the party. Before the 2011 national parliamentary election, the party moved to the second phase when the media noticed the strong growth in the support for the Finns Party and started to intensively follow the political definitions and work of Timo Soini and his fellow party men. Now the interest towards the Finns Party has normalized and Soini is not free to enjoy undivided media attention anymore.

The change, however, is not the result of just media dynamics but equally of more wide-reaching phenomena. The international economic situation has slowly started to show signs of positive development, and the situation of the debt-ridden European countries is not as acute as it was in 2010 and 2011. The study on the 2011 national parliamentary election showed that the Finns Party had public credibility and visibility in opposing the EU and immigration but not really in other themes. If the EU is able to renew itself and the economic situation in Europe improves, the Finns Party will not be able to mobilise Eurosceptics any longer. On the other hand, immigration to Finland has been constantly increasing, which will probably lead to an intensified media coverage of the phenomenon and possibly a rise in the number of people who feel that immigration is a problem. It is likely that the change will cause the Finns Party to emphasise their opposition to immigration at the expense of Euroscepticism. Yet this course of action is likely to bring about critical responses from the media and is in conflict with the aim of making the party more moderate so as to be admitted to government. The Finns Party has got hard choices to make.

## References

Arter, David. 2013. How the True Finns won a seat in Etelä-Savo in April 2011 – and why it is important to know. *Politiikka* 55 (4): 207-222.

Berg, Laura & Mari K. Niemi. 2009. *Kenen kuntavaalit?* Kunnallisalan kehittämässäätiö: Sastamala.

Borg, Sami. 2012. Tärkeimmät asiakysymykset ja vakavimmat ongelmat. Teoksessa *Muutosvaalit 2011*, toim. Sami Borg. Oikeusministeriön julkaisut 16/2012. Saatavilla sähköisesti: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-259-172-2>.

Borg, Sami & Paloheimo, Heikki. 2009. Johdanto. Teoksessa *Vaalit yleisödemokratiassa. Eduskuntavaalitutkimus 2007*, toim. Sami Borg & Heikki Paloheimo. Tampere: Tampereen yliopistopaino – Juvenes Print.

Entman, Robert M. 1993. Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm". *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51-58.

Harjuniemi, Timo & Herkman, Juha. 2013. *Eurokriisi suomalaisissa sanomalehdissä 2010 – 2012*. Helsinki: Viestinnän tutkimuskeskus CRC, Sosiaalitieteiden laitos, Helsingin yliopisto.

Hatakka, Niko. 2012. Perussuomalaisuuden kuva kolumni- ja pääkirjoitusjulkisuudessa. Teoksessa *Jytky: Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, toim. Ville Pernaa & Erkka Railo. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Kalela, Jorma. 2008. Politiikkattomuus hallitusten politiikkana. Teoksessa Suomen Eduskunta 100 vuotta, osa 12. Suomen ja kansanvallan haasteet. Helsinki: Edita.

Kantola, Anu. 2006. Suomea trimmaamassa: suomalaisen kilpailuvaltion sanastot. Teoksessa *Uusi jako. Miten Suomesta tuli kilpailukyky-yhteiskunta*, toim. Risto Heiskala & Eeva Luhtakallio. Helsinki. Gaudeamus.

Keskinen, Suvi. 2009. Pelkkiä ongelmia? Maahanmuutto poliittisen keskustelun kohteena. Teoksessa *En ole rasisti, mutta... – Maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja kriitikistä*, toim. Suvi Keskinen, Anna Rastas & Salla Tuori. Tampere: Vastapaino & Nuorisotutkimusverkosto.

McCombs, Maxwell & Shaw, Donald. 1977. *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda Setting Function of the Press*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing.

McCombs, Maxwell. 2004. *Setting the Agenda. The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mickelsson, Rauli. 2011. Suomalaisen nationalistipopulistien ideologiat, *Populismi. Kriittinen arvio*. toim. by Matti Wiberg Helsinki: Edita. Suomalaisen nationalistipopulistien ideologiat. Teoksessa *Populismi: kriittinen arvio* toim. Matti Wiberg. Helsinki: Edita.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the political*. New York: Routledge.

Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Mykkänen, Juri. 2007. Eduskuntavaalien televisiomainokset ja populaarikulttuuri. Teoksessa *Mielikuvavaalit. Kevään 2007 eduskuntavaalien medialmiöt*, toim. Ville Pernaa, Mari K. Niemi & Ville Pitkänen. Kirja-aurora: Turku.

Niemi, Mari K. 2012. Timo Soini Perussuomalaisen identiteetin isäntänä. Teoksessa *Jytky: Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, toim. Ville Pernaa & Erkka Railo. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Pernaa, Ville. 2013. Kohti kolmen keskisuuren hallitusta: Puolueiden voimasuhteiden muutos johtaa hallituskaavan muuttumiseen. Teoksessa *Politiikan sekahaku. Mitkä asiat yhdistävät ja erottavat puolueita*. EVA:n raportti 25.9.2013.

Pitkänen, Ville. 2007. Television vaaliutusointi – tarinoita politiikasta. Teoksessa *Mielikuvavaalit. Kevään 2007 eduskuntavaalien medialmiöt*, toim. Ville Pernaa, Mari K. Niemi & Ville Pitkänen. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Railo, Erkka. 2012. Euroopan unionin talouskriisin julkisuus – kritiikistä konsensukseen. Teoksessa *Jytky: Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, toim. Ville Pernaa & Erkka Railo. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Railo, Erkka & Välimäki, Matti. 2012. Vaalikevään media-agenda. Teoksessa *Jytky: Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, toim. Ville Pernaa & Erkka Railo. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Railo, Erkka & Välimäki, Matti. 2012b. Kamppailu julkisuuden hallinnasta. Teoksessa *Jytky: Eduskuntavaalien 2011 mediajulkisuus*, toim. Ville Pernaa & Erkka Railo. Turku: Kirja-aurora.

Raittila, Pentti. 2009. Journalismin maahanmuuttokeskustelu: hymistelyä, kriittisyyttä vai rasismi tukemista? Teoksessa *En ole rasisti, mutta... Maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja kritiikistä*, toim. Suvi Keksinen, Anna Rastas & Salla Tuori. Tampere: Vastapaino & Nuorisotutkimusverkosto.

Rannanpää, Sari. 2010. Finland. Teoksessa *The 2009 Elections to the European Parliament – Country Reports*, toim. Wojciech Gagatek. European University Institute: Firenze.

Raunio, Tapio. 2011. Missä EU, siellä ongelma: populistinen Eurooppa-vastaisuus Suomessa. Teoksessa *Populismi: kriittinen arvio* toim. Matti Wiberg. Helsinki: Edita.

Stewart, Julianne, Mazzoleni Gianpietro & Horsfield, Bruce. 2003. Conclusion: Power to the Media Managers. Teoksessa *The Media and Neo-Populism. A Contemporary Comparative analysis*, toim. Julianne Stewart, Gianpietro Mazzoleni & Bruce Horsfield. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Suomen Pankki 1/2008 -> Suomen Pankki. 1/2008. *Euro & talous. Talouden näkymät erikoisnumero*. Helsinki: Suomen pankki.

Suomen Pankki. 2/2010. *Euro & talous. Helsinki: Suomen Pankki.* ([http://www.suomenpankki.fi/fi/julkaisut/euro\\_ja\\_talous/euro\\_ja\\_talous\\_vanhat/pages/et\\_2\\_2010.aspx](http://www.suomenpankki.fi/fi/julkaisut/euro_ja_talous/euro_ja_talous_vanhat/pages/et_2_2010.aspx)) vai

Toivonen, Timo: 2011. Perussuomalaisen nousun taustoista. Teoksessa *Populismi: kriittinen arvio* toim. Matti Wiberg. Helsinki: Edita.

Vliegenhart, R., Schuck, A. R., Boomgaarden, H.G. & De Vreese, C.H. (2008). News coverage and support for European integration, 1990-2006. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20(4), 415-439.

## **2. A self-established agenda: The French case**

---

### **Can social experience play into the hands of the Front National?**

Jean-Laurent Cassely

This article discusses a study based on “agenda-setting”- or the attempt to accord some themes top priority on the media agenda, which is often dictated by policymakers with electoral aims. One must question whether the sources on which the articles of the press regarding politics and social issues – as well as top stories – are based are primarily influenced by the themes that party leaders wish to propagate in the media.

The researchers question whether the French daily press truly controls its own agenda, their findings revealing a dual logic at work: in some cases developments such as factory closures prompt knee-jerk reactions in terms of what is published in the papers (especially if the factory affected is located within the daily’s region of circulation). While these incidents are not necessarily imposed on the print media, neither do they form part of a political strategy devised by policy-makers, who tend to merely react to events.

However, it has been identified that in other cases, reference to a particular issue by leading political figures leads to a surge in corresponding articles in the papers. This was the case with Nicolas Sarkozy’s initiation of the debate on national identity in 2009, close analysis of which exposes a resulting upsurge of Muslim and Islam-related articles (as the two are explicitly interlinked).

The section summaries of the study partly validate the hypothesis of weak editorial autonomy from the main concerns of political party leadership. The rhetoric of the executive and especially that of the President is accorded high salience and borrowed by the papers (even if their sole aim is to distance themselves from this discourse). The press is a sector that is heavily reliant on state funding, which may also account for this arrangement.

## **Agenda themes do not emerge ex nihilo**

Personally, I would suggest a slightly different approach to the issues raised in the study in question, by considering a higher level in the information production chain: journalists surely depend on the agenda choices of politicians, but what drives the latter? Do politicians have a monopoly over the issues that could agitate society? The answer tends to be in the negative.

Part of the critique of the media invokes the success of Marine Le Pen's party, which, it is highlighted, has power to put its own version of social developments at the centre of political debate. Rather than to mock, criticism suggests that the popularity of the Front National at the polls is a consequence of the public's excessive exposure to the 8 o'clock news on TF1, the first privately owned TV channel with liberal-conservative political inclinations. According to this interpretation, the media, by means of sensationalism, allocates vast amounts of airtime to alarming topics and this oversimplified and tainted reality subsequently accompanies voters to the polls, nudging them to vote for dissenting parties and especially the far right. In this way, the media is said to "play into the hands of the Front National".

From an economic viewpoint, I disagree with the theory that supply generates its own demand. Like any other less extremist party, the Front National exists within the context of the society in which it evolves and in fact faces more pressure from the electorate than vice-versa. It hardly appears with an agenda-setting strategy at hand in a desert of reality where those who shout the loudest win the attention of the papers. Thus, the contribution of politics can only be examined against the backdrop of the electoral demand and influence that co-created the situation in the first place.

But what constitutes voter demand? Without one necessarily causing the other, the relationship between immigration and support for the Front National on the one hand and insecurity and support for the FN on the other, are two key considerations that have been thoroughly examined and debated. Some researchers regard the relationship between support for the Front National and immigration to be negligible, since municipalities with high FN support have low levels of immigration. However, the reality of low immigration in these areas and the fact that Front National strongholds tend to be within proximity of each

other (known as the ‘halo effect’) proves that votes are cast with a footprint, as regions with high immigration tend to be deserted by voters. As for the renowned problem of insecurity, often cited as evidence for irrational voting behavior based on fear, the researchers perceive its role as highly debatable. Regarding the most recent party issues of unemployment and precariousness, figures reveal a correlation between regional levels of economic inequality and support for the Front National.

I completely agree with the conclusion of the researchers that long and short term hikes of journalistic interest in immigration, insecurity and unemployment are best illustrated in the variance curves for each of these phenomena. However, it seems that a positive reaction to the agenda-setting choices of conservative figures by the media and the public can only be expected if there is a pre-existing understanding which precedes any political manoeuvres that these topics are worthy of attention and debate. Along this line of thought, the hikes in interest observed may merely reflect latent interest in these issues, which, when suddenly brought to light, provide the media with a window of opportunity to delve into the discussion, thus creating a plethora of related articles which may not be necessarily attributable to the immediate social reality.

### **Attempts to avoid playing into the hands of the Front National may have the opposite effect**

The media may be an excellent echo chamber to voice certain problems, but citizens have other points of reference prior to being exposed to the papers and televised news (such as personal experience or the experience of their entourage including neighbors and colleagues). The efforts of the media to satisfy public hunger by basing their stories on themes heralded by the Front National may serve to legitimize the party’s rhetoric- despite the fact that journalists intend the opposite through their articles – but acting inversely could have comparable if not worse consequences. To elaborate, there is a risk of giving Front National supporters and the general electorate the impression that their personal experience and view of social reality to which they accord high value are being overlooked by a media that is denying the very existence of this experience.

As summarized by Alain Mergier,<sup>79</sup> who has studied the growing convergence between the working class experience and Front National rhetoric:

‘It seems to me that the main problem lies in the fact that the daily life of a major part of the French population is not fully recognized and more precisely cannot be fully recognized by the logic supplied by so-called governmental parties.

A part of the lower classes is simultaneously suffering from economic and symbolic ostracism. Their personal narratives cannot be considered as politically acceptable.’

Like many other authors, he reflects on the shift from a vote of protest (which primarily seeks to communicate anger to other parties) to one of support – more so for statements than proposals. An extremely thought-provoking conclusion is that the everyday life experience of part of the population “is playing into the hands of the Front National”. Thus, the largest risk is no longer the influence of politicians, but the detachment from their discourse, on the premise that political agitation does not merit attention.

The ‘game’ repeatedly condemned by the Front National as well as the media has several rules but only one winner: the desire to play with, play against or even play without the Front National can have curiously similar consequences. To avoid game playing altogether, the best approach is to adhere to the basics of the job, without *a priori* considering facts, expressions of discontent or ideas as unacceptable – it is no longer for journalists to enforce censorship for fear of becoming the foolish tools of Marine Le Pen. Therefore, one should always question the political motivation of topics being addressed, but never tie factors such as reporting choices or the handling of certain themes to the question of who benefits.

## References

Mergier, A. (2011) The Front National Vote is no longer a vote of approval, a conversation with online readers of *Le Monde*. *Le Monde* [online] 22 April. Available at: [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/04/22/le-succes-de-marie-le-pen-est-lie-a-la-degradation-des-conditions-de-vie-des-milieux-populaires\\_1511732\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/04/22/le-succes-de-marie-le-pen-est-lie-a-la-degradation-des-conditions-de-vie-des-milieux-populaires_1511732_823448.html)

# **National Front themes and the agenda of the French press (2006-2013)**

Alexandre Hobeika and Gaël Villeneuve

## **About this text**

This is a study of the presence of far right themes in several French daily newspapers between 2006 and 2013, as part of Counterpoint's wider comparative research project.

## **The National Front in France: context**

The official establishment of the National Front on October 5th 1972 empowered the far right to engage in electoral competition. It is widely considered that the actions of its leaders has brought about the 'lepenisation' of public debate, or the validation of far right ideas through the discourse of political figures of the left and right.

In the newspapers studied, dated 2006 to 2013, there is substantial evidence of an increased emphasis on far-right political themes. This is above all attributable to the fact that the UMP leadership and president Sarkozy introduced these themes to their political agenda during successive campaigns. Generally, National Front discourse has increasingly influenced the direction of party political programs over the last twenty years. **But what effect has the party had on French public policy debate? How can this be assessed, and has the press succeeded in preserving its editorial objectivity in relation to party doctrines?**

## **The Counterpoint project approach**

In light of the "agenda-setting" principle as set out in the Counterpoint project, we question the relationship between party leaders and newsrooms. In this respect, our study strives to assess **whether the media and more specifically the written press contribute to the normalization of National Front ideology.**

This study marks the French contribution to Counterpoint's pan-European project entitled *Nurturing populism? The impact of the media on the growth of populist right-wing parties in Netherlands, France and Finland*, which compares press coverage of far right issues in France, the Netherlands and Finland over the past five elections and exposes the significant role attributable to journalists in the normalization of far right battles, to which they are often oblivious.

The National Front has enjoyed visibly rising popularity in elections, without having to rely too much on its activists. This leads us to question whether media coverage of social problems contributes to the portrayal of the National Front as the best solution for many voters. Such a hypothesis is based on the assumption that National Front voters are hardly far right activists, but merely *Reluctant Radicals*, or disaffected citizens supporting the party that seems best equipped to respond to the problems of the day as defined by political organizations. Following this logic, despite the fact that the press is allegedly non-partisan, the focus on issues such as immigration, Islam and safety is expected to further encourage the Far right vote among its readership.

To study press coverage of far right issues we have focused on the content of three papers: *Le Monde*, a daily national of Catholic and elitist inclination, renowned for its moral stance against xenophobia and its pro-Europeanism.

Secondly, *Nice-Matin*, a daily paper in one of the greatest National Front strongholds in France and finally, *Le Télégramme de Brest*, from a conventionally leftist region. The coverage of far right topics such as immigration, Islam, safety and unemployment has been compared for these papers for the period 2006 to 2013, primarily in a quantitative manner coupled with a detailed analysis of the specifics.

Thus, our aim is to determine the relationship between far right rhetoric, party agendas and the editorial priorities of papers. We must point out however, that the Counterpoint project hypothesis that considers the press a sharp critic of policy-makers and thus a promoter of previously unelected figures, cannot be applied to the case of France. This is due to the fact that for cultural as well as economic reasons, France does not have aggressive tabloids akin to the English Sun or German *Bild*, and tends to discuss elected figures with deference. It is only exceptional scandals, which occur less than once a year, that elicit subtle criticism of the elected, all within the constraints of the Republican Protocol.

The relationship between the French press and the far right is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the press attacks the party's ideas, but simultaneously features many of them such as **insecurity, Islam, immigration and political weakness** in its pages. To study the influence of National Front ideology on citizens' perception of public issue priorities, we must quantitatively and qualitatively determine whether these ideas are prioritized on press agendas in the first place. Furthermore, given that the severe critique of politicians does not constitute the ethos of the French press, existing cases where politicians suspected of dishonesty are called into question must be examined in a more qualitative manner.

As we are trying to explore press coverage of National Front topics we shall use the 'framing'<sup>80</sup> theory that suggests the more a topic is featured in the media, the greater its perceived importance among readers. Although it is impossible to quantify the direct effect of media coverage on voting outcomes, this theory allows us to measure two factors for the newspapers we studied: the success of policy-makers' attempts to make public issue priorities of safety, Islam, immigration and political weakness on the one hand and the tendency of papers to habitually make headlines of this content on the other.

This is a very important issue for both politics and journalism. Today, French political life is built on the party system, which is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy resulting from the weakness of its grassroots as well its elitist nature. This crisis of legitimacy has seen increased abstention rates in elections as well as the protest vote for parties such as the National Front. In this context, newspapers are aware of their power to qualify party discourse centered on the problems of France. However, this is a precarious task, as the dependence of the French press on policy-makers as guardians of the public policy agenda is deeply and institutionally entrenched. Thus, reporting is limited to mere discussions of political parties and figures enjoying democratic legitimacy. This raises the issue of journalistic dependence on predefined political agendas and how these are framed.

### **How this study was effectuated**

**To what extent do press frameworks correspond to those of National Front discourse?** We have chosen to tackle this question in a quantitative manner

---

80 See Combs, 2014

complemented by a more detailed verification of data from articles. To discover whether newspapers borrow the ideas of the National Front, as effectuated by parties of the right -and rarely those of the left- the number of instances of articles containing words associated with National Front themes has been recorded.

**We focus on newspapers circulating between January 1st 2006 and 26th November 2013**, and search the digitized databases of *Le Monde*, *Nice-Matin*, and *Télégramme de Brest*, facilitated by a program of our design which enables the quantification of articles containing our set of key words. The data is translated into frequency curves on which we have included markers corresponding to key political events for this period.

Colour of marker (vertical line)	Corresponding event
Red	Presidential elections (22nd April and 6th may 2007, 22nd April and 6th may 2012)
Blue	Municipal elections (9th and 16th may 2008)
Maroon	European elections (7th June 2009)
Black	Debate on national identity (2nd November 2009-31st January 2010)
Yellow	Regional elections (14th and 21st march 2010)
Grey	Grenoble speech (30th July 2010)
Green	Cantonal (district) elections (20-27th march 2011)

**Which terms employed by these papers have we examined?** We have identified the number of articles comprising the terms “relocation”, “immigration”, “insecurity”, “Islam”, “dismissal” “Muslim” and “Roma”. These words potentially correspond to four fundamental themes of National Front rhetoric: **Islam, immigration, unemployment and petty crime**. For each of these themes, we have provided two corresponding key words to facilitate specification, with only one key word for “petty crime” and “immigration”.

Themes studied	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Unemployment</b>	<b>Petty crime</b>	<b>Immigration</b>
Corresponding key words used in search	“Islam” “muslim”	“relocation” “dismissal”	“insecurity”	“Roma”

This technique allows us to consider three variables: the national or regional nature of the paper, the political orientation of its readers and the concurrence of coverage with political events sparked by parties or by elections. We can also examine the way in which specific debates are covered in the papers.

This study shall firstly address the upsurge of articles and terms related to the public debate on **Islam**, followed by **unemployment** and finally **immigration** and **insecurity**.

### **Press focus on Islam - between imposition of parties and imposition of events**

#### **Method**

When analyzing the number of articles containing the terms “Islam” and “muslim” in *Le Monde* and *Le Télégramme de Brest* we made special note of peaks in frequency indicative of periods when Muslims and Islam are discussed more often than usual as these denote instances of editorial prioritization of right wing and far right parties that tend to be driven by such issues.

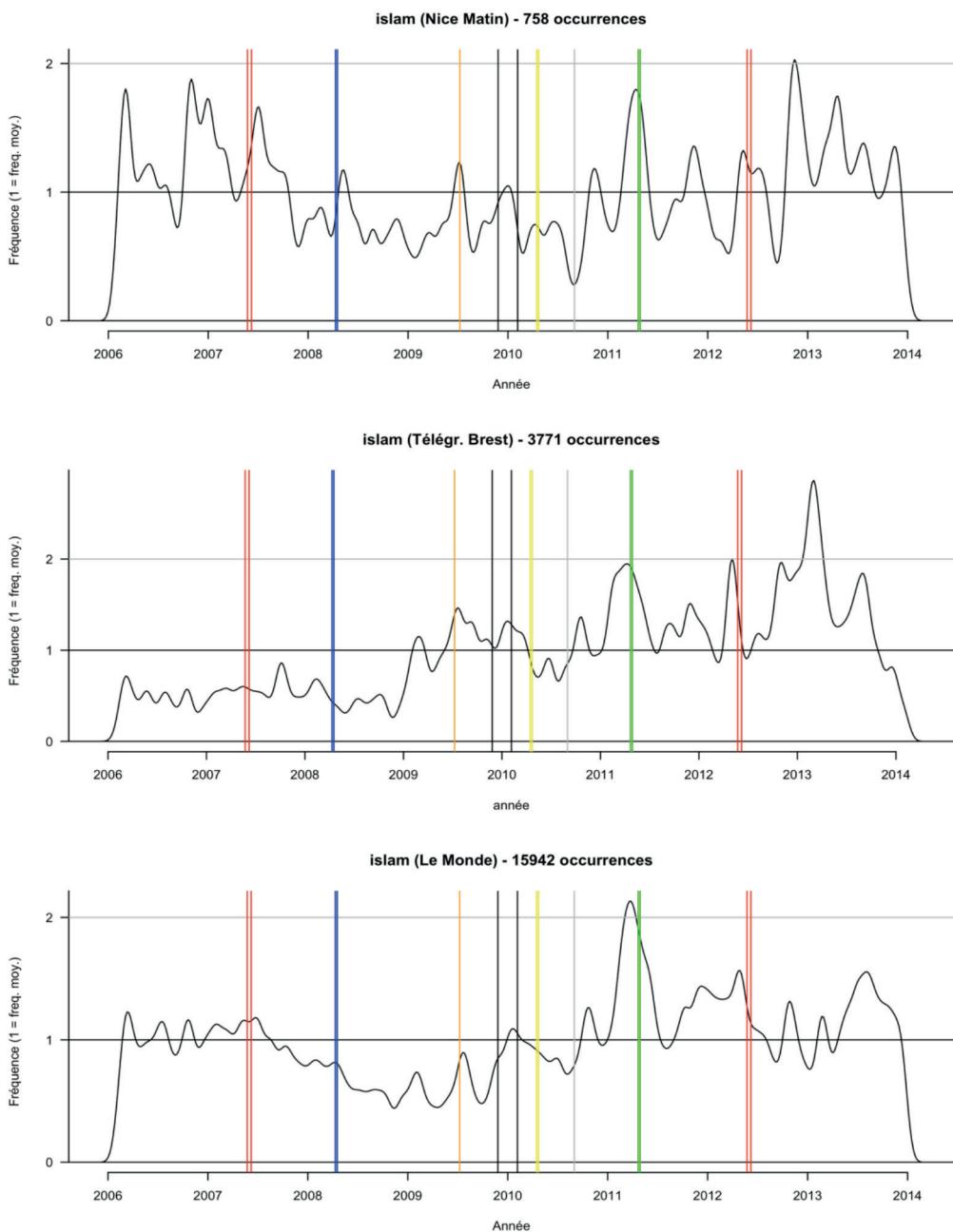
We have subsequently questioned the significance of these peaks. In order to compare the two papers, it must be taken into account that *Le Monde* is much more voluminous. Thus, while a peak in *Le Monde* represents 150 to 300 articles devoted to Muslims and Islam within a month, a peak observed in *Nice-Matin* or *Télégramme de Brest* indicates twenty to forty articles within the same time period.

**The table below indicates the number of articles containing the word “Islam” and “Muslim” in our three papers between 2006 and 2013.**

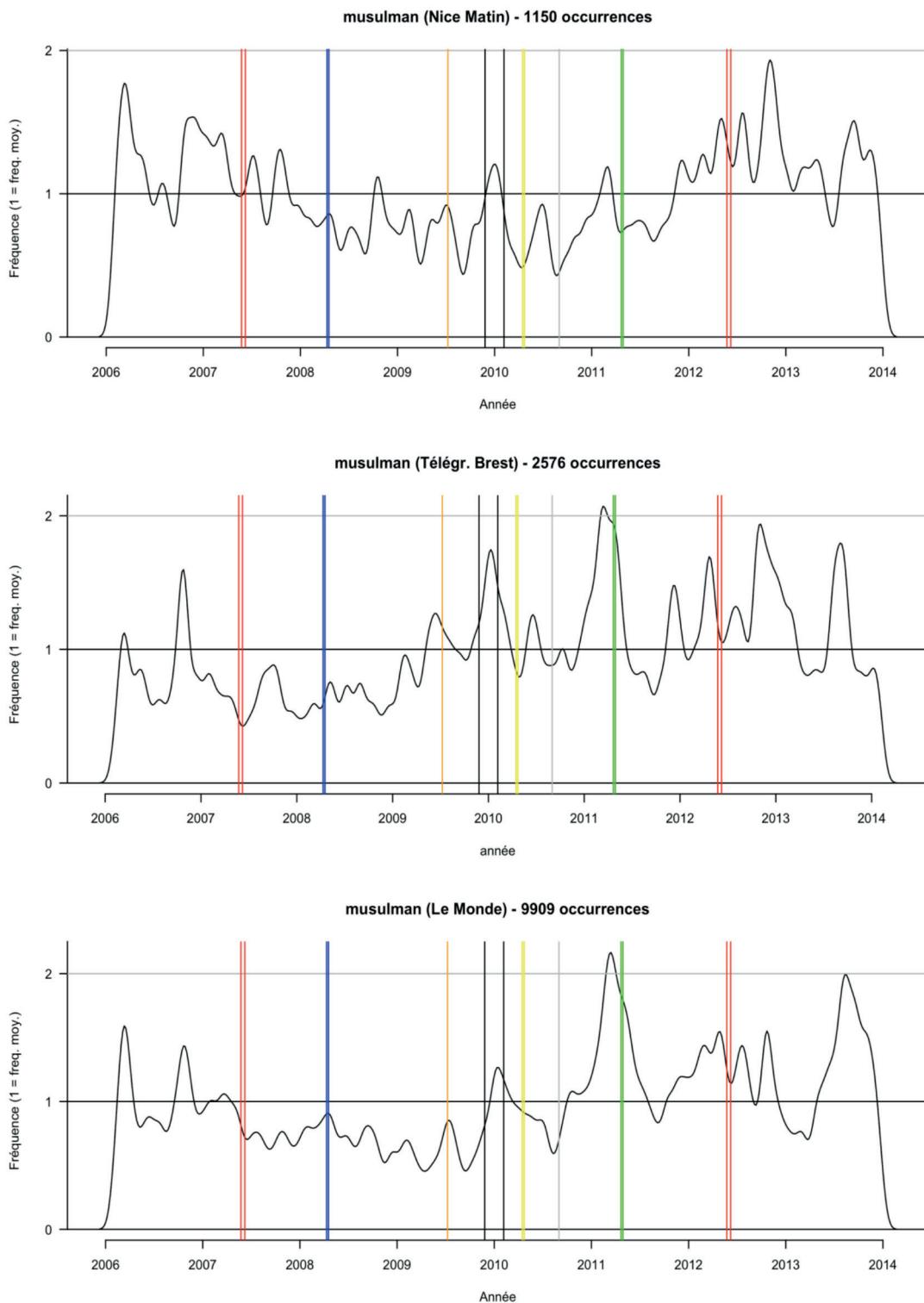
	<b><i>Le Monde</i></b>	<b><i>Télégramme de Brest</i></b>	<b><i>Nice-Matin</i></b>
Number of articles containing the word “Islam”	15942	3771	758
Number of articles containing the word “muslim”	9909	2567	1150

It must be noted that *Le Monde*, *Le Télégramme de Brest* and *Nice-Matin* all approach the topic differently. While *Le Monde* and *Le Télégramme de Brest* focus on Islam in terms of the religion, its principles and its standing in international news, *Nice-Matin* centres on the practicing “Muslim”. However, the frequency curves of the newspapers do display some convergence of peaks (see graph).

**Development of the number of articles containing the word “Islam” in *Le Télégramme de Brest*, *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde* between 2006 and 2013.**



**Development of the number of articles containing the word  
“Muslim” in *Le Télégramme de Brest*, *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde*  
between 2006 and 2013.**



## How must these graphs be interpreted?

Each point on the graph corresponds to a fifteen-day period, representing articles published the preceding week and the week beginning. It must be noted that the frequency curves on our graphs do not correspond to the “number of articles published” but to variations from the mean number of articles published on the subject between 2006 and the end of 2013 (the mean is labeled point 1 on the y axis). This technique allows us to compare newspapers of differing volumes, which nevertheless vary in their prioritization of the topics we are studying. For instance, while *Le monde* publishes articles on Islam on a daily basis (mainly on the role of Islam in Muslim countries), *Nice-Matin* only publishes three or four articles a week, with *Le Télégramme de Brest* falling somewhere between the two.

We have identified two circumstances where the appearance of “Islam” and “muslim”-oriented articles escalate: at time of Islam-related scandals outside the political arena, and when policy-makers intentionally introduce Islam to their discourse.

## Islamism, designated enemy of the Republic: Redeker, cartoons, Mali

Between 2006 and 2013, several scandals related to Islam erupt in the public arena. There are talks of the “Redeker affair”, the “Mohammed cartoons” and the French intervention in Mali in 2013.

During this period our newspapers cover developments in which political figures in office do play a role, but the origins of which reside beyond the political sphere. Thus, when President François Hollande announces the intervention of France in Mali in early 2013, it certainly attracts renewed press interest in the conflict tearing this African nation apart. However neither Hollande nor his political opponents were directly responsible for the conflict in central Africa, where Islamist groups played a key role. Similarly, when the “Mohammed cartoons” published by a Danish newspaper in late 2005 lead to violent protests in several Arab countries in early 2006, followed by a trial in 2007 between the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and several Muslim associations, French politicians abstain from involvement, remaining unanimously on the need to respect freedom of expression.

**The death knell for Robert Redeker.** On the 19th September 2006, the writer and professor of philosophy Robert Redeker publishes an article in *Le Figaro* entitled “What should the free world do while facing Islamist intimidation?”. This harsh article generally targets Islam and its prophet Muhammad: the distinction is necessary to understand the international impact of the publication. On its publication, the article is condemned by the governments of Muslim countries (which prohibit the circulation of the offending issue of *Le Figaro*) as well as by extremist websites linked to Al – Qaeda who brandish death threats at the author. These threats are taken seriously by the French police and lead to several rallies of support, as well as to a vibrant debate about the threat these types of incidents pose to freedom of expression-the cornerstone of the French Republic. The affair explains the upsurge of corresponding articles as displayed on the *Nice-Matin* and *Télégramme de Brest* curves, but the effect is much less visible for *Le Monde*, as it generally deals with Islam more than the regional papers. It also elicits prolonged press interest in the most intolerant features of Islam and leads to provocative publications attacking the symbols and manifestations of Islam, an interest awakened after the stir in the Muslim community in early 2006 following the emergence of the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed.

The “Mohammed cartoons” affair. On September 30th 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands - Posten* publishes twelve drawings caricaturing the Prophet of Islam. French newspapers are particularly vocal about the story from early 2006, when political leaders of Arab countries first condemned the publication of the cartoons -demanding the punishment of the authors. 8th February 2006, the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* publishes the cartoons. Following this publication, *Charlie Hebdo* is prosecuted by the Grand Mosque of Paris , the Union of Islamic Organisations of France and the Muslim World League . The trial is held at the Court of first instance in Paris from February 7th-8th 2007 - resulting in an acquittal, granted March 22 2007 . This sequence of events explains the surge in Islam-oriented articles in our three newspapers for the first quarter of 2006. However, this interest dwindles by the time of the *Charlie Hebdo* trial in February–March 2007.

**French military intervention in Mali.** This former French colony’s desert region in the North becomes a refuge for armed Islamist groups AQIM , Ansar Dine and Mujao , which commit numerous atrocities there in the name of Sharia.

Thus, January 11th 2013 sees the French President François Hollande's initiation of the military operation *Serval* aimed at preventing Islamist progression further south towards the capital Bamako. Between January 16th and 19th, an Islamist terrorist group raids an Algerian gas production site situated within proximity of the conflict attracting Algerian special forces to the site. The war in which French soldiers take part necessitates a regular army chiefly targetting "Islamists" - this accounts for the increased number of articles related to Islam and Muslims by early 2013 in our three papers.

The three scenarios discussed here paint a somewhat paradoxical picture. While the press seems to be framing them objectively, including details of names, they simultaneously propagate an overall impression of "Islam: enemy of the Republic." However, this impression may result from terminological ambiguities - "Islamist terrorist group" could simply be a qualification of a military situation rather than a moral or religious slur. Due to time constraints journalists may not be as cautious as necessary with the terminology employed on the subject, and often confuse "Islamic" with "Islamist", thus inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes.

### **Islam, an electoral issue: debates on secularism and national identity**

We shall now move on to the rise in articles related to "Islam" and "Muslim" associated with developments in politics. These include two key events in our data: the debate on national identity and the UMP discussion of secularism

Surprisingly, Islam is not predominantly featured in our sources of data during the elections of 2007 and 2012. This is applicable to *Nice-Matin* as well as *Le Monde* and *Télégramme de Brest*, despite the efforts of Sarkozy and the UMP leadership to make Islam a national consideration during the five-year term and ensuing electoral contest.

**The Government debate on national identity.** Initiated by the Minister Eric Besson on November 2nd 2009, the debate on national identity becomes the essence of Nicolas Sarkozy's electoral campaign. By January 31st, 227 local debates led by prefects and parliamentarians are arranged, complemented by a website for those who cannot attend. A lexical analysis carried out by the com-

pany TNS-Sofres of 26,000 contributions to this site reveals that 27% of contributions relate to immigration – a theme closely linked to Islam. In all newspapers studied there is a clear increase in the number of articles about Islam and Muslims as illustrated by the black markers on our graph indicating the initiation and culmination of the debate.

**The UMP debate on secularism.** February 16th 2011 sees the inception of a debate on secularism in France, under the direction of Jean- Francois Copé, Secretary General of the UMP. The discussion essentially questions the compatibility of the Organization of Islam in France with the secular laws of the Republic. It must be noted that Jean- Francois Copé was the initiator of the ban on full-body Islamic veils in public places (the burqa ban), which came into effect July 13th 2010. Surprisingly, it is the debate on secularism and not the burqa ban that sparks deliberations in the papers.

These deliberations are most apparent in *le Télégramme de Brest*. Adopting an antagonistic stance to François Copé’s initiative, articles on the matter seem factual in tone as in the example of March 3rd: “Canteens and pools ... the debate will address these issues” and “can Coca-Cola still keep its secret?”, “Islam in France... Copé makes solid promises.” Although some articles do display a distinctly disapproving tone (“Towards the stigmatization of Islam?”, “The exploitation of the Chirac camp”, “A ‘dangerous debate’ according to “Islam and the city ... the biased debate” by Patrick Devedjian<sup>81</sup>).

*Nice-Matin* also joins the discussion, a little later, from the beginning of March, adopting less of a moral stance but focusing, rather, on the political consequences of the debate. The paper notes Christian Estrosi’s choice not to participate in the debate and François Fillon’s contemplation of regulatory changes to improve oversight of religious cults (in 73 words). Most importantly, the paper lays out the details of an incident in Nice that saw the dismissal of Nicolas Sarkozy’s adviser Abderrahmane Dahmane, capturing the adviser’s bitterness at the heat of the moment.

*Le Monde*’s opposing stance is evident, and this is reflected in its prioritization of articles and interviews against the ban in its “debates” section. Alongside neutral articles communicating some aspects of the pro-ban rationale , are harsh

---

<sup>81</sup> This article is an interview with the elected UMP member in “*le journal du Dimanche*” which *le Télégramme de Brest* summarises in 172 words compared to 65 words employed by *Nice-Matin*

criticisms of the initiative, with headlines including: “The electoral pie”, “Islam, a debate too many”, (in an interview with the politician and UMP affiliate Yazid Sabeg): “The National Front has ended up dictating media and policy agendas”, “the UMP debate on Islam drags on” and “panic on the right”. In this way the editorial team amplify external as well as internal criticism (from UMP members) of Jean- Francois Copé’s strategy. One of the last articles presented - “The fear of Islam thrives throughout Europe” - attempts to contemplate the controversy in the light of a general Western uneasiness with Islam.

### **Section One Conclusion**

Quantitative analysis of the number articles including the words “Islam” and “Muslim” clearly reveals moments of upsurge in journalistic interest. But what do these peaks signify? They may on the one hand be moments of Islam-related scandals stemming from beyond the political sphere or alternatively when politicians intentionally include Islam on their agenda.

Examination of these peak periods has allowed us to conclude that journalists rarely adopt a stance on the Islam debate. When they do, it is often to warn against the stigmatization of Muslims. *Le Monde* distinguishes itself by putting islamophobia into perspective, referring to events in the Maghreb region (the “Arab revolutions”), the ideological warfare of religious leaders from the Gulf, and to xenophobic trends in Europe.

As for the regional newspapers, their coverage lies somewhere between pedagogical - as Islam is not considered to be a familiar topic among readers – especially during the month of Ramadan, and rare sensationalism on Muslim extremism and its manifestations including the Burqa. Although regional dailies are more inclined to concentrate on the banal manifestations of the Muslim faith such as the life of the Muslim community in France (the financing of places of worship, Muslim scouts marches, Eid , etc.).

There is little evidence of an openly Islamophobic article in our data sources. The Redeker story - named after the philosopher pamphleteer whose text published in *Le Figaro* caused a scandal - proved counterproductive, with the chief

editor of the paper at the time admitting that the publication was an error on his behalf.<sup>82</sup> The main question that arises here is that of the capacity of journalists to avoid issues prioritized in party agendas, such as Islam. In other words, do papers have the power to exclude topics already propagated as a “national causes” by politicians, as was the case with Islam between 2007 and 2012? The sociology of journalism has thus far demonstrated the difficulty of such an undertaking, especially since the President, who forms the epicenter of national life, imposes the agenda. But is this applicable to initiatives stemming from the general secretary of the UMP, Jean-Francois Copé? With the cantonal elections fast approaching, the internal squabbles of a party enjoying a majority in assembly attract the attention of our papers. Journalists covering Islam naturally realize and attack the electioneering element of the dispute. In any case, the topic is covered by the press, which boosts its perceived salience.

The second part of our investigation reveals that for our designated time period and country, the legitimization of political agendas is closely linked to the way far right issues are covered by the press.

### **Unemployment: between crises and political agendas**

The economic rhetoric of the National Front has long opposed state intervention. Jean- Marie Le Pen began his political career as part of the Poujadist movement seeking to defend the interests of small traders and artisans against big business and tax authorities. Until the 1990’s the economic program of the National Front was undeveloped, as it was still a protest party hardly destined to govern. Since then, the party has become more proactive and its 2007 program of 79 pages outlines six major policies including a Poujadist fight against large corporations (through prevention of subsidies to large groups), the protection of low earners during crises (through state management of tax contributions of earners on less than 1.4 of the minimum wage), Le Pen style liberalism (through cutting business tax rates and repealing the 35 hour week) coupled with nationalist protectionism (through the creation of French pensions and selective protectionism).

This program still remains ambiguous, as it has not been thoroughly debated. Is it an attempt to test the electorate? Probably not. Interestingly, the same melo-

dy plays throughout the economic discourse of National Front propaganda. It is the tune of betrayal by an incompetent governing elite and the threat of being replaced by the ‘foreign other’ that cannot be contained by the frontiers of France and Europe. One must not however be misled by the technical veneer of National front rhetoric acquired over the years: its economic program is protectionism against a foreign enemy and his culpable accomplices, who are part of a ruling class to which the National Front does not belong. In this way National Front economic policy resides on criticism of the ruling class and the welfare state for its economic failures.

How can the press abstain from becoming an unsuspecting accomplice in the critique of political impotence regarding the economy? This question can only be answered thorough a qualitative analysis of stories in the papers. Meanwhile, quantitative research provides an idea of the importance accorded to negative economic developments in articles. Even though these articles do not openly challenge politicians, the discussion of an issue that both left and right has been incapable of resolving in the last forty years, provides empirical evidence of reproach from parties of the left such as the Communist party and above all from the National Front.

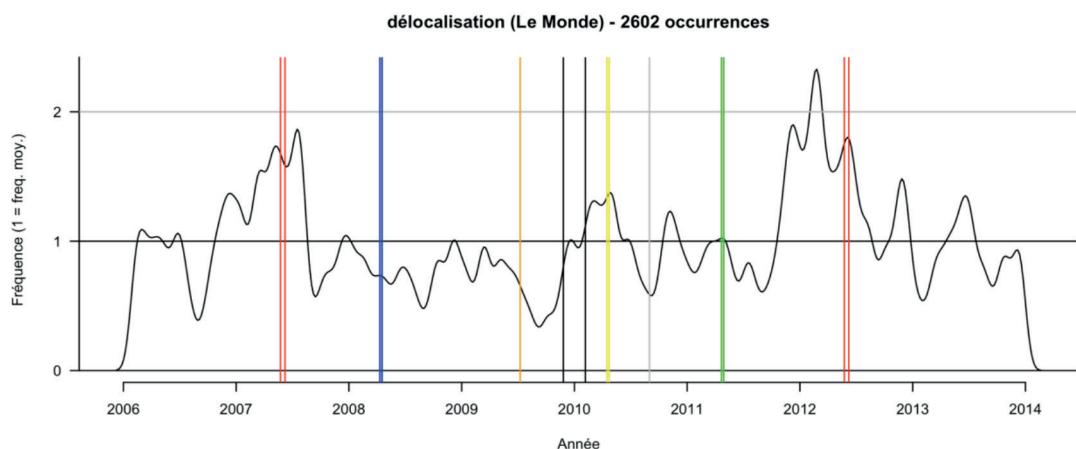
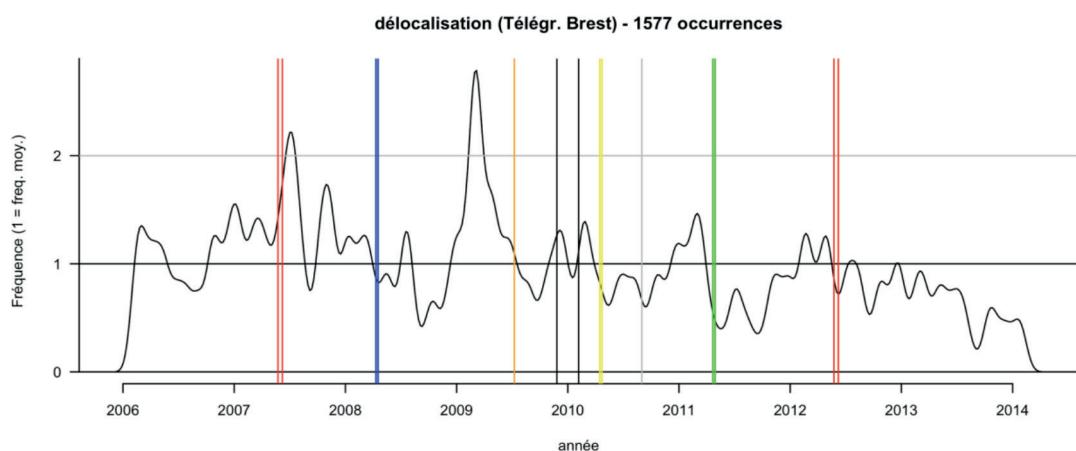
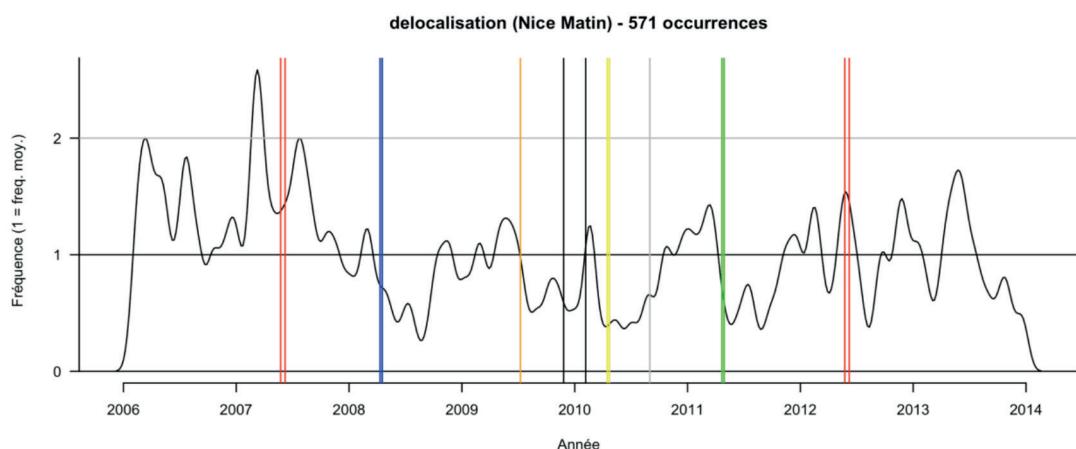
In order to discover whether media coverage of the economy encourages the protest vote for far right parties, we must firstly examine its alarmist nature, with its weekly lists of relocations and dismissals. But at least it shows that politicians are discussing something different. 2006-2013 marks a critical period for unemployment in France, with a net reduction from 2008. Coverage of this topic has evolved, with the press increasingly attacking the political strategy of manipulating scandals to divert attention from unfulfilled promises on employment.

## Method

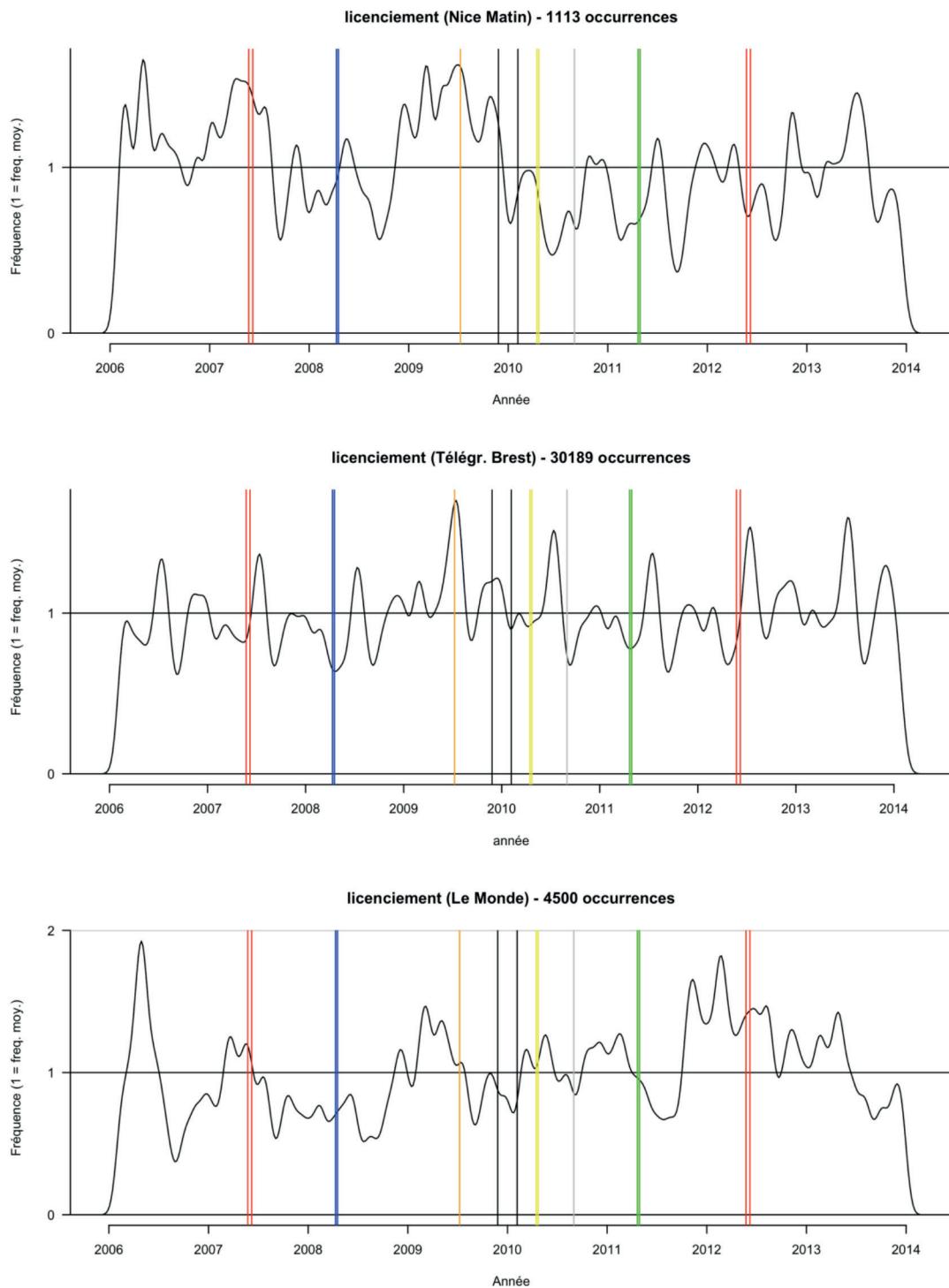
As in the previous section, we have identified key words that we believe best encapsulate economic difficulty in France and government weakness regarding the issue. Rather than using broad terms such a “unemployment” or “crisis” we have employed more specific words corresponding to events such as “dismissal” and “relocation” because they are not a priori expected to have multiple meanings (polysemy).

One disadvantage however lies in the fact that the terms “relocation” and “dismissal” in *Nice-Matin* and *le Télégramme de Brest* have in fact proven polysemic and hence unreliable, with search results often relating to the “relocation” of sporting or cultural events and “dismissals” from sports clubs, despite our attempts to solely deal with articles on job opportunities and industrial closures. Thus, the graphs related to these terms are not useful for the purpose of our study.

### Development of the number of articles containing the word “relocation” in *Le Télégramme de Brest*, *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde* between 2006 and 2013



**Development of the number of articles containing the word  
“dismisal” in *Le Télégramme de Brest*, *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde*  
between 2006 and 2013**



## How many articles contain these terms within our designated period?

	<b><i>Télégramme de Brest</i></b>	<b><i>Nice-Matin</i></b>	<b><i>Le Monde</i></b>
“dismissal”	30189	1113	4500
“relocation”	1577	571	2602

Considering the multiple meanings of these terms as well as the possibility of coding errors during the article search, the variations in the frequency of occurrence of the words “dismissal” and “relocation” must be handled with more caution than for “Islam” and “Muslim”. This should not however prevent us from directing our attention to the great discrepancy in frequencies between newspapers.

Why does the use of key words vary so much between the national and regional press? While regional papers reflect on local issues, national papers discuss the wider political context. We shall firstly identify instances where national and regional papers cover these issues, before analyzing how their coverage differs.

### Opposition to the “First Employment Contract”

The main rise in articles containing the word “dismissal” in *Le Monde* coincides with the introduction of the First Employment Contract affecting employees and aimed at simplifying dismissal procedures. The mobilization of the left and of unions (of students) against this reform sparks national debate. At the time, coverage by *Le Monde* differs vividly from that of *le Télégramme de Brest* and *Nice-Matin*: while the former focuses on the national debate, the latter captures the scene of local protests, often giving employers and trade unionists the opportunity to voice their reactions.

### The Presidential campaigns

During the crisis, employment constitutes a major preoccupation for both presidential campaigns, and holds an important place in our data sources. During the 2012 campaign, despite renewed interest in relation to previous weeks, *Nice-*

*Matin* displays less interest in this problem than *Le Monde*. The salience of the issue does however increase in the first quarter of 2012, plagued by bleak unemployment figures and rising job cuts in late 2011, and coinciding with the decisive phase of the presidential campaign. Given that presidential elections in France are moments of intense political debate, and regional newspapers have limited capacity to include national news, it is likely that *Nice-Matin* and *Le Télégramme de Brest* prioritize other topics. However, an analysis of headlines at the time suggests that these papers do in fact address national economic affairs (Lejaby) alongside regional ones (the postal sorting center of Nice in *Nice-Matin*, candidate visits to Armor-Lux - "An economic model" - in *Le Télégramme de Brest*).

### **The “jobs summit”- an opportunity to discuss the crisis**

The first quarter of 2009 sees a sharp increase in dismissals both globally and in France following the financial crisis of 2008 sparked by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September. The impact of job cuts is reflected in our data, and has attracted our attention because the curves emergent from the data display similar trends, illustrating that the number of articles containing the word “dismissal” is higher than average for this period. Additionally, this is a time when Nicolas Sarkozy communicates a series of commitments to social partners to assist those affected by job cuts. As captured in *Le Monde*: “Nicolas Sarkozy confirmed on TV on Wednesday, February 18th, measures he plans to implement in response to the economic and social crisis” amounting to €2.6 billion for the state, far greater than the \$1.4 billion estimated on February 5th, then considered ‘grossly inadequate’ by the unions. In February and March, the paper lays out the details of the negotiations held between social partners to find a solution. It also refers to the calls of the Socialist Party - then in opposition - for the regulation of job cuts. During this first quarter, announcements of social plans in *Le Monde* appear almost daily (more so because the newspaper proposes an international debate). Headlines include: January 31st: “unemployment rate at 8.3% in December”, February 4th: “Macy’s US axes 7000 posts”, February 10th: “First losses for Ghosn at Nissan: 20,000 jobs lost”, February 13th: “UK: Unemployment rises, wages fall”, “3 Suisses axe 674 jobs to boost revenues via net”, February 15th: “The crisis-to discuss or not to discuss?”, February 17th: “SOS unemployment”, and so on.

Regional papers, in tune with this news, turn to woes of local industries. *Nice-Matin* highlights Texas Instruments' plans to axe 341 posts by January 2009. The discussion in the paper is understandably fervent, as the company dedicated to technology is located in the niçois industrialist site of Sophia Antipolis. As for *le Télégramme de Brest*, one of its articles dated February 4th 2009, begins as follows: "7pm at the SBFM canteen.<sup>83</sup> A teary-eyed Pierre Ménahès general secretary of CTG announces his verdict to employees. 237 job cuts planned..." This type of news circulates systematically during this period and the word "dismissal" even appears in less conventional contexts- for example, *le Télégramme de Brest* questions on February 12th: "will the crisis ever hit star-studded chefs and other top tables of Lorient?" followed by an investigation of sackings in award-winning restaurants. "Sackings announced at the casino" appears on March 27th, 2009 with *Nice-Matin* citing seven dealers and two valets of the casino concerned. The crisis becomes a kind of prism through which French society can be viewed in all its diversity. The fanfare de-escalates from the summer of 2009, and re-emerges by September. Notably, the number of articles containing the words "dismissal" and "relocation" decreases substantially in the months of November and December 2009, which sees the advent of the debate on national identity.

**Considering our initial hypothesis:** the political agenda of daily papers is determined by external events, within or beyond the political domain. When unemployment and the global economic situation deteriorate, papers are obliged to report on it, through publishing job losses or monthly unemployment figures. How do top government officials respond? They may incorporate the news into their action plan and announce measures to show that they are tackling the problems, as effectuated by Nicolas Sarkozy in early 2009. Thus, the information press has no difficulty in coming up with stories in line with policy concerns – the sociology of journalism has long described the phenomenon of "competitive cooperation" between politicians and the press<sup>84</sup> – knowing that unemployment figures always attract readers.<sup>85</sup>

How do editorial boards respond when political protagonists shift their focus to questions of a social nature such as values and religion? The matter is chal-

---

83 Metallic Manufacturing Company (SBFM) associated with Renault group and an important employer in the region.

84 Nicholas Kacif has written extensively on this subject: Kacif, 2013

85 Unemployment forms a principal preoccupation for French citizens in opinion polls that are widely consulted by the press

ging as journalists operate in a very constrained environment. However, in November 2009 the press does not completely abandon the question of unemployment in favour of governmental priorities, although articles on Muslims do exceed those on dismissals. Evidently, the press cannot overlook the fact that Islam forms a major concern for the executive. As a result, the papers attempt to give voice to both sides of the debate to display a wealth of opinion and objectivity, whilst remaining within the confines of executive preferences.

## **Section Two Conclusion**

In strictly quantitative terms, from November 2009, the newspapers we studied contain more articles on Muslims than dismissals. Following the theory of agenda-setting, the emphasis on Islam and the place of Muslims in France in the press can increase the perceived salience of these issues among its readership. Following this logic, the prioritization of such issues in the press (as well as in televised media working from the same sources) can serve to legitimize political discourse that tends to focus on the same issues.

However, one must be wary of evaluating the reduction of articles on unemployment and upsurge in articles devoted to Islam and Muslims too mechanically. The news is in fact a kaleidoscopic undertaking, based on an array of subjects. For instance, the final quarter of 2009 sees wide coverage of a possible outbreak of the influenza A epidemic. With this in mind, we shall move on to the cases of articles containing words related to crime and immigration on which the government adopted a hard line during its five-year term.

## **Crime, Immigration: an overview of party agendas**

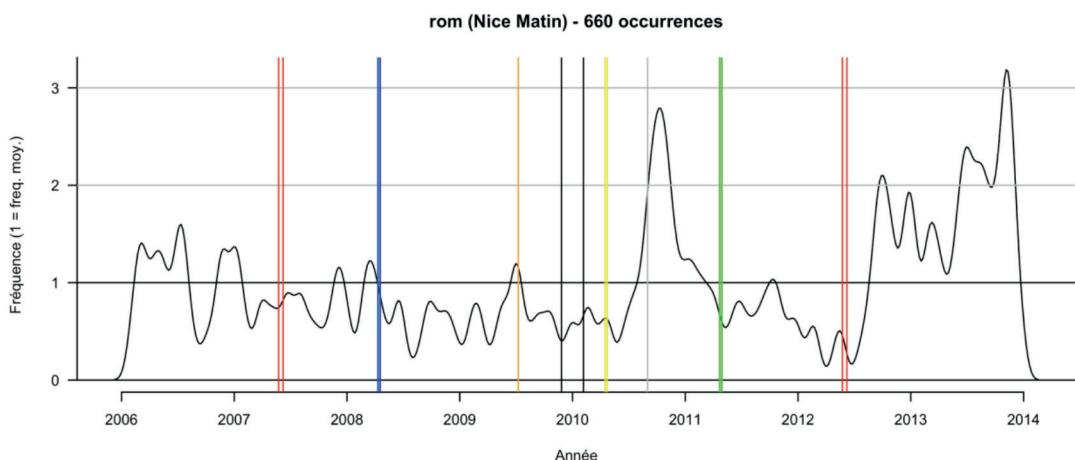
### **Method**

We have saved the most prevalent preoccupations of the far right, that of delinquency and immigration, for this third section. It must be noted that “insecurity” and “Roma” are the key words associated with these themes in public discourse circulating within our designated period. Unlike the key words discussed thus far, these are bound by two common features relevant to our study.

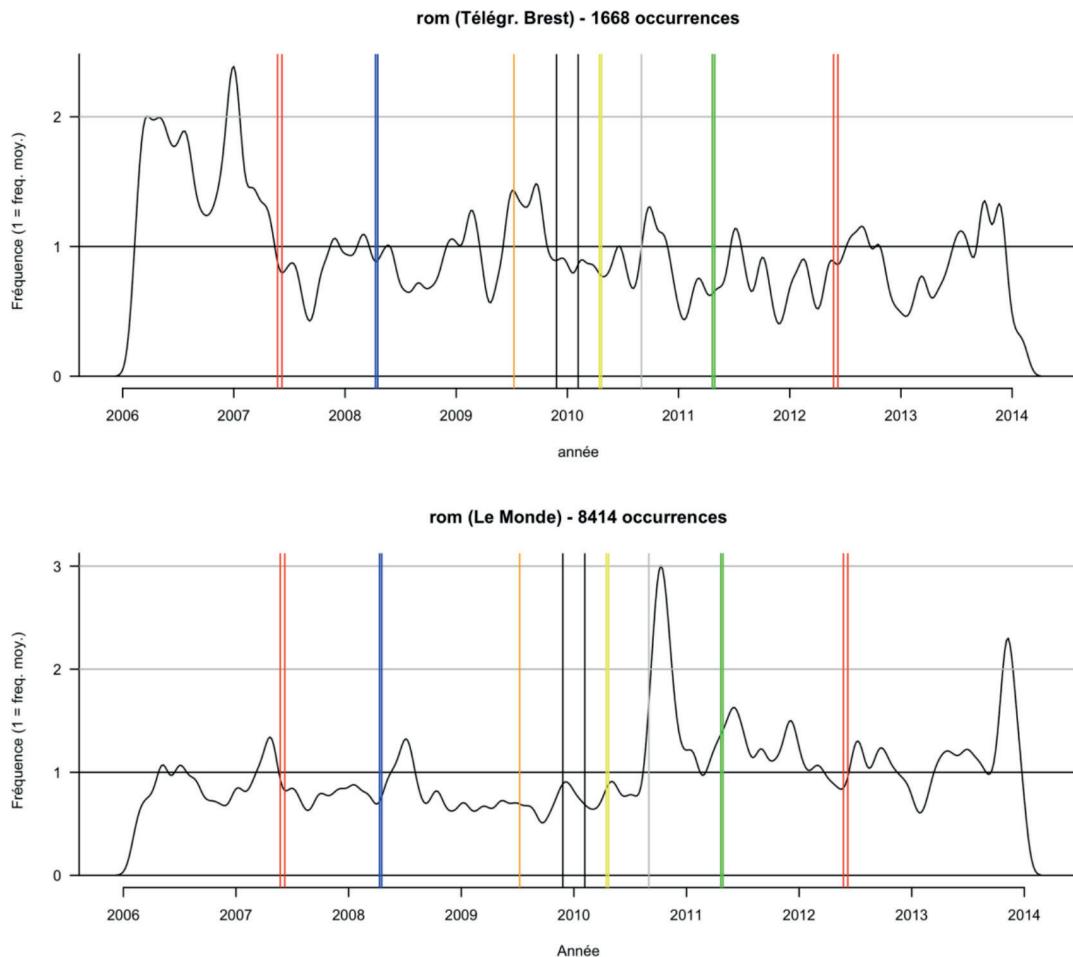
Firstly, these keywords do not designate specific events, which may explain their use: France has not faced acute insecurity or crime between 2006 and 2013, the presence of 17,000 Roma in the country forming only a minor concern in the context of stable immigration for the past twenty years. Thus, when these issues do appear in the media, it is a result of disputes within the world of politics or of intentional editorial choices. The question of crime and immigration thus allows us to determine more clearly than for the Islam debate, the independency of papers from party agendas and editorial policies.

The second feature is the relative likeness of the frequency curves of our papers, all illustrating the effects of three political events: the 2007 presidential campaign, President Sarkozy's Grenoble speech on July 30th 2010 and the 2012 presidential campaign.

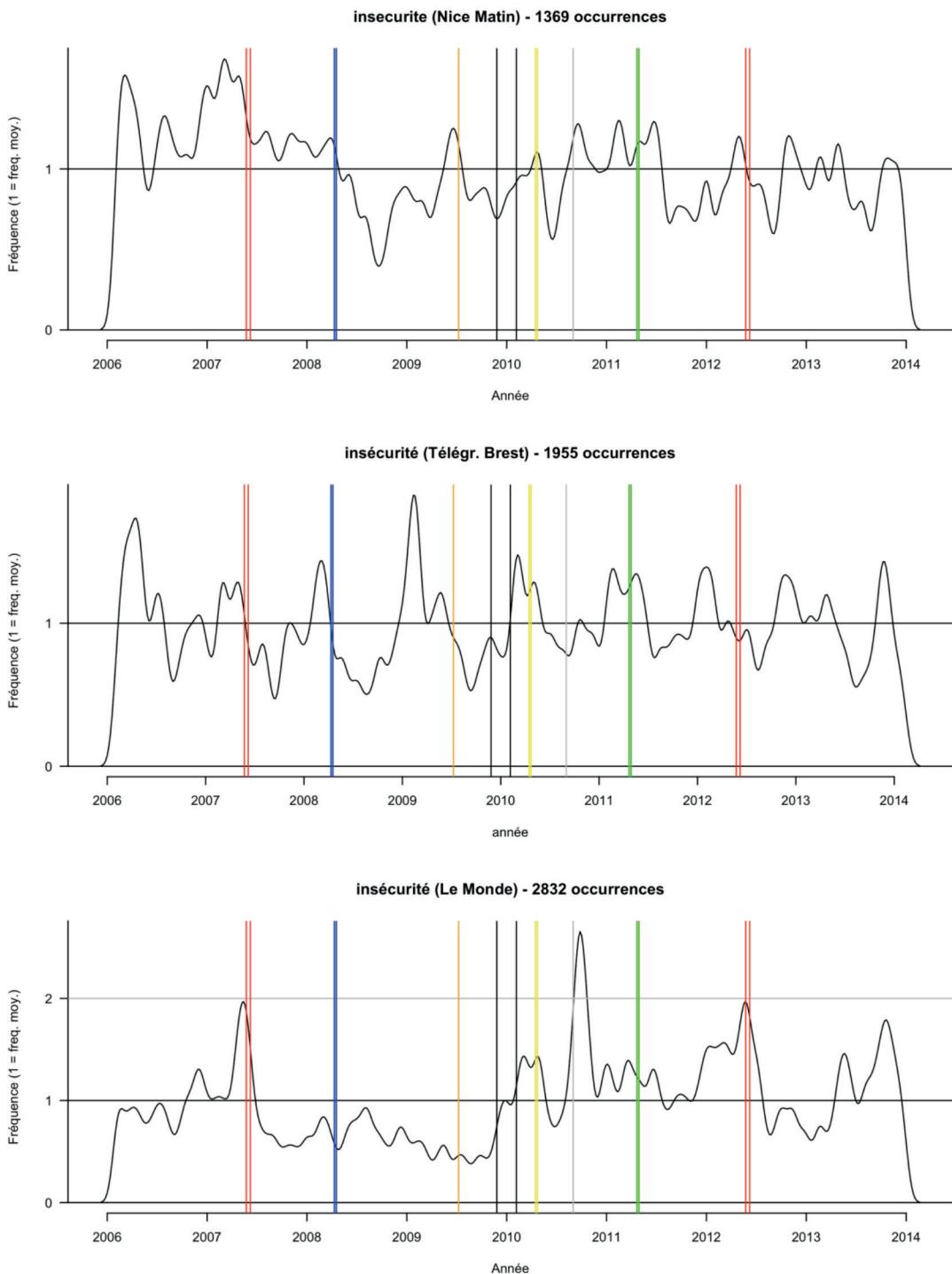
### Development of the number of articles containing the word “Roma” in Nice-Matin between 2006 and 2013



**Development of the number of articles containing the word “Roma” in  
Le Télégramme de Brest and Le Monde between 2006 and 2013**



**Development of the number of articles containing the word “insecurity” in *Le Télégramme de Brest*, *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde* between 2006 and 2013**



## News items and regional papers

The number of articles touching upon these themes varies greatly between *Le Monde* on the one hand and *Le Télégramme de Brest* and *Nice-Matin* on the other. Regional papers contain more headlines with the words “insecurity” and “petty crime” than *Le Monde*, despite the fact that the latter is more voluminous. This reveals how reporting duties are shared between the regional and national press—the former dealing with crime and the latter with global issues such as immigration.

	<b>Le Monde</b>	<b>Télégramme de Brest</b>	<b>Nice-Matin</b>
Insecurity	2832	1955	1369
petty crime	4292	5262	1797
Roma	Missing data	1668	660
Immigration	11038	2537	1226

Due to data collection difficulties, it proved impossible for us to distinguish between articles in *Le Monde* featuring the word Roma and Rome – the Italian capital. The search engine for *Le Monde* allows a margin of one letter, which is an appreciable margin in the case of the collection of articles dealing with petty crime for instance, but which yields a rather egregious result. Thus, *Rom* yields more than 8000 results for the period in question, with more than half pertaining to Italy. We have, however, kept our corresponding data curve as, despite its flaws, it clearly reveals the striking increase in Roma-related articles during the “Grenoble speech.”

## The Grenoble speech: suddenly discussing the Roma

Nicolas Sarkozy’s 30-minute address at the inauguration of the new prefect of Isere was widely reported by the press. The speech narrates various incidences in the region in July – an exchange of shots between criminals and the police following a robbery and subsequent protests, a dispute between members of the traveller community and the police- as well as safety, education and citizenship. Sarkozy promises speedier punishment of offenders, stripping of citizenship for

foreigners who threaten the life of a member of the police force – assuming that foreigners form a large enough majority of serious offenders to justify such a law – and the dismantling of illegal Roma settlements within three months. Many commentators characterize this speech as a reaction against the achievements of the National Front in the 2010 regional elections. The incident is marked in grey on our graph, and causes spikes in the curves of *Le Monde*, *Nice-Matin* and to a lesser extent *le Télégramme de Brest*. It must be noted that since “insecurity” and “petty crime” are covered more often by the regional papers, the effects of the incident on the frequency curves for these papers are much less visible than for the national paper *Le Monde*. However, the effect of the Grenoble speech on regional papers is more apparent for the graphs relating to the use of the term “Roma”.

*Le Monde*’s reaction to the Roma polemic is criticism of the government. August 1st sees a synthesis of AFP and Reuters reports by Philippe Jaqué, communicating indignation against Sarkozy’s ‘Roma and safety’ speech. Concerns are elaborated the following day in the editor Arnaud Leparmentier’s extensive article entitled “Nicolas Sarkozy is stripping the republican right of its values”. The Grenoble speech and Roma issues are further discussed in an article dated August 4th by the essayist Bernard-Henri Lévy entitled “Sarkozy’s three mistakes”. Contrastingly, the silver lining to the Grenoble speech is suggested by Samuel Laurent on August 6th in his article “Security: the end of partisan divisions?” in which he points out that at least the speech shed light on the plight of the Roma: “look at them! We have been warning of their suffering for years but it takes a serious incident to spark a debate.” Furthermore, the anthropologist Martin Olivera attempts to put the xenophobic elements of the Grenoble speech into perspective in “Denouncing anti-Romanyism without attacking its roots?” (August 10th). Sarkozy is also attacked from within his own political camp in the article “the Roma: a ‘shocking’ and ‘ineffective’ policy” from a pro-Villepin MP. The same day, a brief report evokes “Roma of Hanul in Saint-Denis district scatter along *Passage-Dupont*”. *Le Monde*’s antagonistic stance is so strong that it provokes complaints from home secretary Brice Hortefeux, voiced in an extensive interview with the paper itself, published August 21st entitled “you’re blinded by self-righteousness”.

The regional paper *le Télégramme de Brest* handles the Roma issue with a more area-specific and incident-based public policy approach, narrating stories

unique to Western France as in the article dated 19th august 2010: “Roma integration, the example of Nantes” where the author describes: “France expelled almost a hundred Roma to Bucharest on Thursday – the first repatriations since Sarkozy’s July speech. Nantes, on the other hand, home to a strong Roma community, has adopted a strategy of integration.” The paper also mentions the protest of a priest in Northern France (far from the paper’s regional base): “in defense of the Roma community father Arthur of Lille returns his medal of the French order of Merit to the home secretary and criticizes the head of state before resuming his discussion”. News agencies rush to cover the story, with *Nice-Matin* publishing “Roma expulsions: the Church speaks up” that very day, with a subheading recounting: “a priest sends back his medal of the order of Merit. The pope calls for integration. The controversy deepens”.

*Télégramme de Brest* and *Nice-Matin* adopt different stances on the issue. The former emphasizes arguments against government protectionism (with two articles identifying Roma policy as the main cause of protest), and tells the tale of a young man travelling without a ticket on the Quimper-Rennes train, accused of the trafficking of Roma, gently reminding readers in this way that humanitarianism and the tolerance of immigration could potentially pave the way for criminal activity. *Nice-Matin* is much more vocal about this danger, publishing a number of articles associating Roma with crime. Dated July 30th, one reads: “Crime: more offenders in traveller communities?” followed by “500kg of copper found in car boot. At times of crisis, some metals are worth gold” (dated August 17th). Other associations of the Roma with crime include: August 19th “worrying rise of burglaries on the coast. 60% up from last summer!”. An interview with Lionel Luca, MP for the Maritime Alps of Roma origin dated august 26th suggests that the Roma cannot be assimilated into French society – “Romania, not France, must be held accountable”. The MP is adamant: “We cannot integrate two million travellers from Romania. This might only be possible for the mere 5 to 10% who are job-seekers. As for the 300 euros, I know French families who’d be happy to pocket it for the new school year”.

Clearly the President’s Grenoble speech is by far the most divisive topic dealt with so far in the newspapers on which our study is based. We shall subsequently see that the question of “insecurity” equally polarizes press opinion during the presidential campaigns of 2007 and 2012.

## 2007 presidential campaign – a question of security

On 29 March 2007, the home secretary and UMP candidate Nicolas Sarkozy declares in an interview in Paris that he “seeks to woo supporters of the National Front.” The candidness of this statement must not seem surprising, as it only confirms that throughout his campaign Sarkozy attempts to keep in tune with the rhetoric of Jean-Marie Le Pen, especially on the issue of security. How does the press react?

Coverage of security in *Le Monde* lies between a rational justification of Sarkozy’s attempts to woo National Front voters and an emotive account of the French desire for safety. Hence, Piotr Smolar reminds readers on March 22nd that “Sarkozy left the Home office with poor results” and that the “candidate of security” is also bound by home office commitments, reiterated in some articles such as that of March 24th (by Luc Bronner): “In Marseille, mothers want order”, “The eruption of urban violence in Paris” (April 1st 2007 analysis by Piotr Smolar). Luc Bronner endeavors to comprehend the emerging “security” dimension driving voting behavior in his publication “Fear and humiliation: breeding ground for Le Pen”. The article ends with the observation of Sarkozy’s attempts to target those most affected. Is this why the Socialists have been losing presidential elections since 1988 ? Nathaniel Herzberg and Cécile Prieur highlight the strategic importance of “security” for these campaigns in their article (April 20th) “Lionel Jospin and the ‘safety’ trap” – where it is claimed that the socialists lost the last presidential elections over the issue of “security”.

The number of articles on regional safety in *Nice-Matin* rises from March 31st, after the paper perceives its resurgence on the campaign agenda. Surprising but revelatory. From two or three articles a week the paper begins publishing several articles a day. That very day, the paper’s “Corse” edition headlines: “Île Rousse – € 5,000 – worth equipment stolen from brewery.” That of Cannes highlights (April 2nd): « Petit-Juas district terrified for its safety» while the “Corsica” edition reiterates: “Safety: confessions of a couple assaulted at Calvi” and finally the “Nice” edition reads “insecurity and squalor denounced by Pasteur locals.” Two days later, *Nice-Matin* reports an encounter with readers entitled “Reputation: when incivility strikes, the whole town suffers.” The protagonists are described as “Saïd, Yolande, Marie-Gabrielle, Thérèse, Josephine Simone, Manolo and Phuc, residents of working-class districts who are all furious. Some days ago

around fifty people marched to our offices and expressed hope that one day things will change". The hunger for petty crime stories eventually irritates locally- elected officials, leading to the April 10th publication: "Point du Jour squalor: to each his own opinion..." accompanied by the explanation: "Following our double spread on the danger, squalor and isolation of council blocks in the Point du Jour district (in our April 4th issue), several figures-notably MP Lionel Luca, president of CANCA, Jacques Peyrat, and city councilor Marc Orsatti, top candidate for next year's municipal elections" – protested and requested that our publications related to safety should be considered as testimonies rather than objective problems, for which – it is nevertheless inferred-local leaders are responsible.

Contrastingly, *Télégramme de Brest* deals far less with security. A publication on march 31st 2007 beginning "in the name of the law" speculates that the leading issues of the presidential campaign include safety, crime and preservation of public order..." But safety is not the main concern for this region, as the following headline confirms: "police records – is crime dwindling?" (21st March 2007). In the following months alcohol and road accidents are identified as the main safety threats in the region: "Road safety: two new radars in Finistère" (3rd April 2007) is ensued by numerous articles on road safety. Safety as understood by the National Front however does intrigue *le Télégramme de Brest* and in the backdrop of elections, the paper curiously explores the contrasting opinions of fellow countrymen. In a long report (1569 words, dated April 14th) the paper infiltrates «the National Front strongholds of Brittany» and quizzes: « As in 2002. Can Jean- Marie Le Pen repeat her finest Brittany results achieved five years ago?» The reporter reflects on the bourgeois cities of the Gulf of Morbihan from where the far right leader originates. The summer provides an opportunity for the paper to discuss safety in terms of alcoholism and teknivals (street parties) set up in the Morbihan region in the articles "Teknoz . Land of strife" (June 27) and "traditional markets under seige" (June 23 ), referring to the effects of night-life in St-Brieuc.

## **2012 Presidential campaign**

In tough economic times, Sarkozy seeks another mandate from the people of France and re- employs the issue of security as advised by the political analyst

Patrick Buisson, forcing each newspaper to re-visit the issue in contrasting ways.

**“Insecurity” in *Le Monde*.** Insecurity appears in the 2012 campaign after Mohammed Merah’s shooting rampage and subsequent escape. The campaign is suspended for a period of mourning, and hereafter becomes stigmatized by the incident. *Le Monde* attempts to explore the social dimension of security, pointing out that increased Muslim representation in the army” has not received the coverage it merits since the press tends to solely represent this community in the context of violence and protests. Thus, the inverse picture is also painted by warning against the stigmatization of young Muslims.

This openly critical style that questions the xenophobic association of muslims with threat is characteristic of the article dated 31st march 2012 – “Mothers’ revolt against the crisis in Saint-Denis” – based on the testimony of Helene Zeiton, a worker in the region since 2002 for which the 17th march marked her first experience of organizing a protest. The local explains: “There is a lot of talk of danger from petty crimes in this region, but nobody talks about the psychosocial threats”. She is referring to insecurity stemming from poor living standards rather than from dangerous foreigners. The paper doesn’t omit xenophobic parties either. An article by *Le Monde*’s special correspondent Henin-Beaumont narrates: “in Henin-Beaumont, Marine Le Pen talks to ordinary people”. Discussions on “education, safety, disability, corruption, expiring mandates, pensions, fuel, senior unemployment and even relocations and health” are also included, similarly presenting the social dimension of elections.

As witnessed five years earlier, *Nice-Matin* reintroduces the theme of security, mirroring the political agenda. On April 10th the politician Harlem Désir is featured alongside an explanation that placing safety on the agenda is a risky affair: “whether we like it or not, fear and the news bring the question of safety to the heart of every presidential debate. 2012 is no exception.” However, the newspaper does not actively pursue such stories. A survey published on April 13th vaunts that in fact the main concern of voters is “primarily honesty!”, with “security” forming only a minor concern. One reader voices hopes that the new President can introduce deterrent penalties, but admits, “I do not expect the new president to do anything spectacular; just to limit the damage – especially when it comes to safety”. Personally, I don’t feel unsafe, but when you realize people are scared to go to the bakery to get bread, you begin to wonder”. Thus, citizens are aware of safety problems, but these do not engender the same anxiety as five years earlier, as confirmed by the example of the reader who “doesn’t really feel unsafe”.

Consequently, *Nice-Matin* deals with the more abstract repercussions of insecurity such as the rising popularity of the National Front in the region. The 24th April issue headlines “Now even immigrants in Carros are voting Le Pen!” and instead of testimonies from National Front supporters, one finds stories of supportive imams under the heading “migrant communities react” with Dr. Mohamed Djadi, the imam of Grasse clarifying: “We mustn’t confuse local elections with national polls – where the National Front has never attained such scores”, citing the “impressive Highland polls” for the party: “31.91 % in Amirat, 31.61% in Andon, 33.14% in Escragnolles and up to 44.34% in Mas. On Sunday the highlands of Grasse blessed Le Pen with an overall majority. She took the lead in nine communes of the region”. This is complimented by a sociological analysis of the phenomenon: “each vote for Le Pen in the Pugets area of Saint-Laurent-du-Var is a cry of despair”. Tower blocks. Social mix. A cocktail on the verge of explosion in a commercial wasteland. Life in Pugets lies between relative calm and contained incivility, between subtle greetings and doors that close in a hurry...”. In this article, the reporter links perceived insecurity with the vote for Le Pen and with social issues, via an artistic subtlety, without painting the problems too vividly.

While in 2012 *Nice-Matin* and *Le Monde* distance themselves from the issue of security adopted five years earlier, *Le Télégramme de Brest* publishes two successive articles on crime, safety and Brittany. Entitled “On the safety Front” this extensive article (936 words) dated March 27th begins with one resident’s observation: “cities are being controlled, but not by the cops...” The same region forms the subject of a second report a few days later – “Tension at the foot of blocks” (April 3rd) depicting the situation: “for several weeks, the tension is palpable in the district of La Croix-Lambert. Threats, rudeness, verbal or physical abuse. And from now on arson. Some residents are on edge.” These two reports are unique in their allusion to the classic problem of neighborhood safety in working class areas.<sup>86</sup> The only other example is that of the visit of judo champion and former Minister David Douillet, interviewed in an article published April 19th “Cities that have invested in sport experience less safety problems than elsewhere”.

---

86 Cf. Berthaut, 2013.

In all remaining cases, insecurity is linked to diverse topics such as stress at work: “A senior manager reflects on her suffering” (5th April 2012). “Recounting her experience is a way for Marie to cement her decision. ‘I’ll never work at the post office again,’ she concludes”. We also witness the paper’s familiar tactic of linking problems of security with teenage binge-drinking and roads. Ironically, in “Le Pen – in search of respectability” the paper’s editors also touch on the reality that generations of National Front leaders have no solid ties with Brittany. This is reiterated in the article of April 10th: “final days of January we invite Le Pen for lunch at a restaurant on Avenue Niel, Paris , and she turns up in tears.” followed by the mocking of her tears – “In search of respectability, Le Pen tries to renew the image of the National Front, without touching on its fundamentals, having the fight against illegal immigration in mind all along.”

But the newspaper acknowledges that although Le Pen isn’t matching her results in Provence, “The National Front vote is rising in the west and in rural areas” (23rd April 2012). Can the noticeable difference in the coverage of insecurity by *le Télégramme de Brest* be attributed to this progress?

### **Section Three Conclusion**

The influence of presidential discourse on French journalistic agendas has its origins in the constitution of the Fifth Republic, the political regime around which France has evolved since 1958. Under this regime, the President is traditionally considered the “cornerstone” of French institutions: his speeches are contemplated, his decisions are widely anticipated, and the various bodies that form the political life of France are very concerned with the stylistic evolution of his discourse. This explains why Sarkozy’s speeches on safety and immigration were so widely discussed and criticized in 2010 and 2012. The increased number of related articles circulating in the press is simply evidence that a debate has taken place.

However, the focus on these questions during the 2007 presidential election can neither be attributed to the former president, who did not run for elections nor uniquely to Sarkozy, although his very authoritative stance on immigration did attract the press. Safety may have been framed as a major electoral issue as a result of the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal’s commitment (which went far beyond her party’s) to the matter.

## General Conclusion

The three parts of our study predominantly aimed to expose the effects of public policy on the agenda of the daily press. In stages, we have explored which far right themes featured in the newspapers studied are the most attributable to government or party stimuli. Far right rhetoric on security has invaded discussions on immigration and security, and drives the actions of policy-makers and leaders. In a context of relative safety and stable immigration, minor incidences are dramatized, and the ensuing role of the press in providing criticism and commentary serves to obliquely confirm the salience of these issues, thus justifying their place on the agenda. Therefore, the question that arises here is how much control does the French press command over its own agenda?

The socioeconomic dependence of the French press on political institutions is widely known, and in February 2013 the Court of Auditors estimated that public subsidies for the industry amounted to more than 5 billion euros (\$6.5 billion) in 2009-2011. Judges were severely critical of this aid and called for radical reform, claiming that it neither serves to boost sales, nor to adapt the sector to ongoing changes through diversification via the Internet for instance. Most importantly, this aid fails to liberate journalists from the yoke of institutional discourse that is particularly tight in France. The burden is not only national – our readers have surely noticed the contrasting coverage of far right themes by *Nice-Matin* and *le Télégramme de Brest*. In Nice, land of the right, and Brest, territory of the left, papers provide platforms for partisan speeches and the commentary of elected figures, which naturally taints the papers in question politically.

So who is reading these papers? Without necessarily adopting the alarmist headline “Daily information press: the chronicle of a death foretold?”<sup>87</sup> it must be emphasized that since the 1970’s the press has suffered an increasing detachment from its audiences. According to wan-press.org, quoted by Jean-Marie Charon,<sup>88</sup> the problem is international: daily newspaper circulation fell by 5.18% in the U.S., by 5.83% in Europe and 2.52% in Japan between 2003 and 2007. The figures for French national publications are bleak: according to 2010 figures from EPIQ,<sup>89</sup> only 16.4% of French citizens read a national paper every day – around one in seven. *Le Monde* is still one of the most widely read dailies, but suffers finan-

---

<sup>87</sup> de Broissia, 2007

<sup>88</sup> Charon, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> TNS, EPIQ.

cial difficulties, is reliant on State aid and its journalists no longer hold the power to veto the use of its finances.

The picture is more varied for the regional press: according to the same source, one in three French citizens read a regional article each day. This figure conceals great disparities between regions: 56% Bretons read a regional story every day, compared to 33% for the Provence ('PACA') region. *Nice-Matin* is much less popular than *le Télégramme de Brest* and the financial problems faced by the niçois paper are well known. This must be taken into account in order to comprehend the paper's brevity, its focus on general news and its ties with elected figures, often considered as possible sources of financial aid.

Of course, the debate on safety and immigration in French newspapers cannot simply be reduced to a power struggle between journalists and politicians of the right. The word "insecurity", which can be attributed multiple meanings encapsulates all that is contrary to conventional notions of "security" (in fact "stability") in France guaranteed by a protective and powerful state. Diverse policy developments in France regarding this field are covered in our data sources: "insecurity" associated with alcohol and road accidents which precautionary measures have supposedly controlled, insecurity in terms of the threat to allegedly secure public sector jobs (as in the example of the postal worker facing stress and intimidation cited in *le Télégramme de Brest*) and finally insecurity regarding burglaries and petty crimes.

It is therefore difficult in this context to draw concrete conclusions on the connection between "insecurity" and the diverse outcomes and components of migration (such as tensions with the Roma community and the flamboyance of some Muslims). We can only state the obvious: stability offered by the protective welfare state is built around an imaginary universal citizen regardless of their ethnicity, gender and religion. Yet, the unraveling of the welfare state over the past thirty years has been coupled with an outbreak of public debate on "society"<sup>90</sup> that could generally be understood as an assessment of the legitimacy of some French citizens' claims of an alleged separateness from the 'universal citizen' around which laws are currently built. The shadow of the foreign immigrant haunting public life reveals that citizens feel betrayed by a social contract that has proved incapable of protecting them.<sup>91</sup>

---

90 Cf. Villeneuve, 2013.

91 Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999.

How much do these concerns affect the French, who do not seem to be avid readers? A survey by CSA -Orange- Terrafemina effectuated in the last presidential elections reiterates that television is still, and has been for many years, the most popular source of political information in France. But today the internet ranks second, ahead of the radio and the press. What can be deduced from this? Firstly, that the structure of daily papers such as those we have considered is still affecting French citizens indirectly. The press and televised media have similar agendas as journalists have acquired the same rules of the industry. The Internet however is dismantling the traditional model of the press since the French are increasingly using the internet to inform themselves of social debates and developments. Online news consumption today is rapidly expanding, especially due to mobile phone connectivity. French news sources online are being supported directly – through state investment in online governmental gateways ('service public d'information'), the Orange web portal and through broadcasting regulator's 'CSA' ambitions to regulate online material<sup>92</sup> – as well as indirectly through investment in the press – which is nevertheless the provider of most online content. Therefore, mainstream information available on the French web is not fundamentally different from material found in other formats.

## References

Berthaut, Jerome, *Suburb of "20 hours" Ethnography of the production of a journalistic commonplace [La Banlieue du 20 heures]*, Marseille, Agone, 2013.

Boltanski, Luc & Chiapello Eve, *The new spirit of Capitalism [Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme]*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

Charon, Jean Marie, "From the written to digitised press [De la presse imprimée à la presse numérique]" Réseaux 2010, no.160-161, pp.255-281.

Combs, Maxwell, *Setting the Agenda: Mass media and Public Opinion*, Oxford, Polity Press, 2014.

De Broissia, M. Louis, Senatorial Report no. 13 (2007-2008), Cultural affairs Commission, submitted October 4th 2007.

Kacif, Nicholas, *Political pages. A history of political journalism in the French press [Les Pages Politique. Une histoire politique de la presse française]* (1945-2006), Rennes, Rennes University Press, 2013.

Rousselin, Pierre, interviewed on Al-Jazeera TV, 21/9/2006.

TNS, EPIQ – "Étude de la presse d'information quotidienne" – "study of daily information press"

Villeneuve, Gael, *Televised debates in 36 questions [Les débats télévisés en 36 questions-réponses]*, Grenoble, Grenoble University Press, 2013.

---

<sup>92</sup> For more on this topic, consult the "France" report of the project Mapping Digital Media: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/projects/mapping-digital-media>

### **3. Politicians in the spotlight: The Dutch case**

---

#### **Behind a collective safety net**

Yvonne Zonderop

For most people it is easier to criticise others than to receive criticism themselves. Journalists are no exception. On the contrary, I would say. When held to account, journalists often shy away from acknowledging the effects of their reporting on people or organisations. This is not because they are insensitive, but because they feel the need to protect their independence. To consider the consequences of their work might enfeeble them in their difficult task of finding out unwelcome truths - at least, that's what many secretly fear. This explains - in part - why journalists find it so hard to accept the criticism they so easily give. Allowing criticism leaves them feeling exposed.

So I would be curious to hear their reaction to the study that Jiska Engelbert and Esther Audier recently produced. The piece quite convincingly shows that the rise of populism in the Netherlands was not just a matter of talented politicians managing to convince some voters that they had been neglected, but also involved a facilitating press, eager to report what these voters might think and feel. By adopting a particular language and by reflecting the populist perspective they empowered the populist story - probably unwittingly so, but still. Political journalists may think of themselves as impartial bystanders. The study shows it is not that simple at all.

Consider the similarities in newspaper reporting by three different newspapers on three different cases in the last eight years. Most articles ooze disdain for politicians. They are portrayed as seeming to care far more about their own interests than about the voters. Politicians are presented as short-sighted and opportunistic, hardly capable of making the right decisions for our common future. By writing in this frame, Engelbert and Audier conclude, newspapers have reinforced the populist idea that politicians are not to be trusted. They have invited a mind-set of populist resentment, according to Engelbert and Audier.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that journalists from three different newspapers have shown this behaviour. This mirrors Dutch media culture. Contrary to what the press does in other countries – like the UK –, the Dutch press often chooses similar approaches to the news. Differences between newspapers can be identified around style, perceived innate knowledge, depth of reporting or cultural background. But one will often find the same items covered in most newspapers - as in the national news on TV. The Dutch press reflects Dutch society: a community of many slightly differing parties. A look at the Dutch parliament confirms this: it contains fourteen political fractions, the largest party uniting not even 25 percent of the electorate. The biggest Dutch newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, has recently chosen a more radical populist and commanding position, comparable to British or German tabloid press and deliberately turning away from the middle-ground. This move has certainly gained them political clout but it hasn't helped circulation; recently, *De Telegraaf* has been losing one fourth of its readership.

Still, one can imagine the power of a message when all - or almost all - of the media choose the same perspective. This is an important finding of Engelbert's and Audier's study. Without probably meaning to, journalists reinforce one another. Reading several newspapers, one would easily get the impression that all people in the Netherlands think alike and everyone agrees that politicians are not very capable of looking after the voters' best interests.

Of course, this is not just a recent Dutch hang up. British journalist John Lloyd brought exactly the same issue to our attention in 2003, more than ten years ago. In his book 'What the media are doing to our politics' he criticised the British press for being overly critical of politicians. By emphasising their mistakes and hardly reporting in their successes, journalists diminish public support for democracy, Lloyd argued. Alas, his brave stance was not sufficiently recognised for its prophetic value - at a time when populism had just started to develop in the Netherlands. Lloyd's complaint was not well received by his colleagues, who, for the reasons mentioned, were and still are not very open to criticism.

But it would not be fair to only blame journalist's behaviour for the deterioration of the public's trust in politicians. Politicians themselves have played a major role, at least recently so in the Netherlands. Instead of countering the populist approach, many have embraced it, trying to win over the media and the

public by speaking in an increasingly populist language. Engelbert and Audier do not dwell on this, as they have restricted their study to newspaper articles. But I would be interested to read a scientific account on the change in politician's behaviour in the last few years. Twenty years ago politicians would have tried to convince the public of their political convictions; but today many try to convince the public that they will listen to what the public wants. Thereby they appear to confirm this idea that politicians, when left to their own devices, are not fit to make the right decisions.

Dutch television has also played an important role. In the last ten years, talk shows on TV have become a major force in Dutch political debate. Politicians have been eager to appear on popular late night shows that can attract more than one million viewers - far more than any newspaper could reach. Talk show producers often negotiate for the most important politicians to appear, and to make sure that these politicians make their most newsworthy statements while on their show. But the cosy setting of a talk show changed the nature of the political debate. It became more personal and less factual. Politicians scored best when they performed as sympathetic, funny or smart talk show guests. Talking amidst other guests with often different backgrounds, political debate often makes way for personal discussions. Politicians can sometimes be almost indistinguishable from actors, athletes, or pop stars – they are part of a celebrity culture.

One could argue that journalists and politicians find themselves in the same bag. Newspaper journalists have been losing readers and therefore importance for many years now, first to television and now also to the internet. Social media like Facebook or Twitter have become very influential, changing the character of political debate along the way. Images have become more important, and so have short, clear statements that leave little room for nuance. Newspaper journalists report on these developments and are obviously influenced by it. How to react to this competition? There is no easy answer.

Subsequently, politicians notice voters are losing interest in politics. Electoral turnout has been diminishing for years in the Netherlands. Voters are not as true to their parties as they used to be. The so-called 'swing vote' has become a major force. Two weeks before Election Day, half of the electorate still is not sure who to vote for. Pollsters find it difficult to predict the right outcome. Elections have come to resemble contests. How can we understand the voters?

Given these uncertainties, journalists tend to react in a predictable way: they look to each other for guidance. They follow each other closely and are eager to copy interesting, successful moves by any competitor. This is why newspapers change a lot and still manage to look alike. Engelbert and Audier assume that journalists are driven by commercial interests to try and please a populist audience, but in my experience it is far more complicated than that. The example of *De Telegraaf* shows, for instance, that a populist approach does not necessarily breed commercial success. Still, the newspaper has only become more influential since it has started to bluntly campaign for certain views. Recently, *De Telegraaf* made a big deal of criticizing the leader of the social democratic party Diederik Samsom because he lost his temper during an interview. This ‘news’ filled the first three pages of the newspaper. Their report was copied and spread immediately by almost all other Dutch media, even though it obviously was not a big deal. I would argue that journalists have become very insecure about what their readers expect. They try to counter these insecurities by replicating what seems to be working well for others. And in doing so, they reinforce each other. This explains the overarching populist framing Engelbert and Audier have found. The recent example of *De Telegraaf* bashing Diederik Samsom only shows that politics has become an easy victim to these practices. But instead of fighting it, most politicians just try to deal with it and often try to use it to their own benefit, thereby reinforcing a *danse macabre* full of hypes.

Actually, it might not be a bad idea if journalists were to consider commercial interests more often. It would be helpful if they were to speak to their own audiences, to learn what their readers value. This may sound like common sense, but journalists find it difficult. Even reporters writing for web based magazines cling to the old idea that journalists themselves must decide how to write and what to write on. As one of their staff recently told me, even when data unmistakably shows that readers prefer stories containing information to help solve problems, journalists prefer writing stories that describe stubborn societal problems, without giving clues to solutions. The truth is that many readers will never really read them.

By trying to understand what motivates readers to read their newspaper or watch their news programme, journalists should produce better material for their readers. That would also end the strange current setting wherein many write about the same subjects in a similar way. Instead of reinforcing a populist

sentiment that harms our democracies, they would reveal an array of existing political views, thereby serving democracy. I would hope that journalists' listening to their readers – instead of copying each other – would stimulate their self-confidence. Journalists still have an important role to play in society, regardless of the digital changes.

# Healthy scepticism or destructive cynicism? Media and populist sentiments in the Netherlands, 2006-2012

Jiska Engelbert & Esther Audier

As the results of the local elections in the Netherlands on March 19, 2014 show, the Dutch seem 'averse' to the established political order of 'The Hague', the city where both parliament and senate are based. Cultural and academic commentators, who try to make sense of this **political resentment**, often point towards 'the media' and 'populism'. Through the frames used in news reports in newspapers and on television, the media would seemingly contribute to turning 'healthy' scepticism into '**destructive**' **cynicism** (Capella & Jamieson, 1996<sup>93</sup>). Moreover, populist parties, an intrinsic part of the Dutch political landscape since Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s, would actively cultivate people's aversion of the political 'pluche'. Academic research on the relationship *between* media and populism therefore often aims to find out how news frames feed negative feelings and cynicism about themes that are often 'owned' or claimed by populist parties, such as Europe, immigration or the social security system.

This was, initially, also the approach of this report. It documents research that has been conducted within the international Counterpoint project *Nurturing Populism*, which compares the relationship between media and populism in Finland, France and The Netherlands. Within the broad parameters of the project, this report was further guided by the specific empirical data and the local elections' outcome. This resulted in a particular research focus on the widespread aversion against the political 'establishment'. Understanding it as more than a narrow indicator of the success of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, this report considers political resentment as a more mainstream **mentality** that relates to politics and media in quite a complex manner. This relationship is difficult to disentangle because it is not easy to identify who or what is to blame for the distrust of citizens. Is it 'politics' in the Netherlands and the fact that the past eleven years have seen five national cabinets collapse due to internal conflict? Or is it 'the media', who are looking to score easy points with juicy and sensational news? Our analysis of media materials, which we present in this report, shows that **citizens' distrust with regards to political actors, processes and decision-making certainly (also) is a "problem of media representation"**.

We draw this conclusion on the basis of an analysis of more than **300 news reports** from **three Dutch newspapers**, which appeared during the last three national **parliamentary elections** of **2006, 2010** and **2012**. We look at the period just before the elections, because national news is then (mostly) pre-occupied with national politics. The election periods thus enable us to observe (without a magnifying glass) the relationship between media and political resentment. We focus our analysis on newspaper reports, not because we think that newspapers have a big *effect* on their readers (that is doubtful), but mostly because 'news' in newspapers is emblematic of the *newsworthiness* that is allocated to specific events or news themes. Additionally, newspaper discourse offers important insights into broader cultural 'repertoires' of how 'society' typically discusses certain topics.

**Our research shows that the newsworthiness of newspaper articles is much more important than the news theme itself.** Therefore, we could move beyond investigating what newspapers report about important 'populist' issues. Instead, we chose three issues which were dominant news themes in all three election periods – social security, Europe and political scandal- and examined which elements or ingredients of the news reports became newsworthy. In other words, what was so special or important about the story?

Contemporary newsworthiness cannot be separated from the commercial production conditions of media. Especially at a time when newspapers and media outlets in the Netherlands have to compete with digital news production and when internal competition is high, assigning newsworthiness can offer us insights into what kind of news is valued in newspapers' efforts to survive in a difficult market. Therefore, we focus on three very different national newspapers: ***De Volkskrant*** (a left-wing broadsheet), ***De Telegraaf*** (a right-wing tabloid) and the ***Algemeen Dagblad*** (a right-from-centre national newspaper). Unlike many other kinds of research which aim to detect extreme differences between three newspapers, this project selected these three different outlets to reconstruct the journalistic practices of the 'broad' newspaper field.

Moreover, the emphasis on newsworthiness allows us to examine how news about the three issues enables journalism **to judge** the acts, performances and self-conscience of politicians and political institutions. A message about 'Europe' in Dutch newspapers is rarely about the structure of EU decision-making, but

generally more about its problems. Likewise, messages about the ‘no-claim’ scheme in the new Health Care Law are rarely about the content of the new legislative framework, but rather about the ‘flip-flopping’ of politicians in their position on the regulation. If we want to investigate whether and how media play a role in political resentment, then we must look at how this mentality is **encouraged** by the kind of newsworthiness that is assigned to a range of themes.

We initially selected messages that were published in the two months run-up to the national elections, discussing what we previously identified as being ‘important’ news themes for both journalism and politics between 2006 and 2012. These were: ‘Europe’, ‘immigration’, ‘tax issues’, ‘social security’ and ‘political scandal’. Our three research periods were: 22 September – 22 November 2006, 9 April – 9 June 2010, and 12 July – 12 September 2012. We then focused on those three news themes that were dominant in all three election periods. As mentioned before those are ‘social security’, ‘Europe’ and ‘political scandal’. We therefore do not focus our analysis on ‘immigration’ and ‘tax issues’, because these issues were not dominant news themes that recurred in 2006, 2010 as well as in 2012.

The articles collected were archived during the initial global analysis on the basis of: **title** (what is the news story?), **news value** (what is the news element for the reader?), **news theme** (about which subject is the article written?), **frame** (in which form has the story been presented?), and **mentality** (what action or reaction is the reader invited to have?).

An overview of the sources studied is included. Further specifications are, of course, available on request.

The following three empirical chapters show how coverage of each of the three themes (social security, Europe and political scandal) is made newsworthy. This **qualitative analysis** illustrates the identified patterns of the assignment and production of newsworthiness with examples from all three papers and from all three election years. Each chapter ends with a conclusion, where we indicate what repercussions the assigned journalistic news value might have for national politics – in terms of action, performance and conscience. In Chapter 5, the conclusion of our investigation, we summarize our findings, and we reflect on the significance of our conclusion that political resentment in any case is a problem of (media) representation.

## **Chapter 2. Worries about health care: Competition and distrust**

### **Introduction**

This chapter documents the analysis of those messages from the dataset that thematically focus on the social security system, and especially on the consequences of the ageing population for the organization and financing of the health care system. The analysis reconstructs the way in which this was made a newsworthy issue in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012, and shows the crucial role of particular critical responses that were generated by and for the news stories. We conclude this chapter with a reflection on what this journalistic practice means for how Dutch politics and politicians are (to be) regarded and treated.

### **Alienation through conflict**

This chapter documents the analysis of those messages from the dataset that thematically focus on the social security system, and especially on the consequences of the ageing population for the organization and financing of the health care system. The analysis reconstructs the way in which this was made a newsworthy issue in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012, and shows the crucial role of particular critical responses that were generated by and for the news stories. We conclude this chapter with a reflection on what this journalistic practice means for how Dutch politics and politicians are (to be) regarded and treated. In 2006 a new law was enacted in The Netherlands, which replaced the traditional distinction between private health care insurance and insurance with corporate health care programmes. Since this enactment, Dutch citizens are required by law to acquire a basic health care insurance from a health insurance provider. That basic insurance can then be further modified and extended. Additionally, from 2006 the national government increasingly delegates responsibilities for pensions and specific benefits to pension funds and organizations in municipalities. These developments embody the increasingly accepted (neoliberal) idea among politicians that the quality and financing of health care and pensions are improved when citizens themselves interact with commercial,

local providers. The Dutch government sees this market logic as an important instrument in the fight against the problems of an ageing population, which would 'overload' the social security system.

Coverage of the social security system in the three newspapers in 2006 explicitly concerns this new legal framework and other political attempts to defy the financial consequences of an ageing population. The supposed newsworthiness of this reporting has an important similarity: the three newspapers typically report about what *others* - ranging from citizens, (former) politicians, researchers and industry associations to the Central Planning Bureau and the Central Bureau of Statistics - identify as the worrying consequences of legal changes and new political plans. The negative reactions are selected for news coverage because they are embedded in political acts (such as parliamentary questions, a letter from a minister to parliament), in research (reader survey) or a report (published by for example the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy or the Ombudsman). Just as often, however, these reactions are generated by and for the purpose of the new story itself.

An important news story in the period leading up to the parliamentary elections in 2006 is the conflict among the different political parties about the so-called 'no-claim system', a system that permits people to claim a portion of paid premiums back when their actual health care costs remain below a set minimum. A majority of parliament wants to abolish the scheme, arguing that it leads to people being so conscious about costs that they may not seek sufficient health care. The CDA (Christian-Democrats) and the VVD (Liberals), the latter the party of the incumbent health minister, Hans Hoogervorst, initially want to continue the no-claim system.

When reporting this news story, it is striking that all three newspapers imply that the debate between parliament and government is inherently a conflict between specific parties. For example, on September 26, 2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*, reports about a letter Minister Hoogervorst wrote to parliament as an explicit *reaction* to the position of (Social-Democrats) PvdA:

Dropping the no-claim means, according to Hoogervorst, the creation of a shortage of 2 billion euros in the healthcare budget. Moreover, Hoogervorst **fears** that the cost of care will further increase. ... In addition Hoogervorst

**warns** that dropping the no-claim in 2007, **which PvdA wants**, will lead to **chaos** for health insurers.

(‘Afschaffen no-claim in zorg dupeert miljoenen mensen’, 26/9/2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*).

The newspaper seems to merely summarize the letter, but does so by using words such as ‘fear’ and ‘warns’, which are not necessarily used in the letter itself. Due to this journalistic translation and by presenting the letter as part of a conflict, the newspaper constructs not only a dispute, but also the framework of that dispute.

The next day, on September 27, 2006, we see that newsworthiness shifts to the **reaction** of PvdA to the **allegations** made by Minister Hoogervorst and Maxime Verhagen, the Chairman of the CDA faction in parliament, against PvdA. *De Telegraaf* writes:

The CDA uses of “**outrageous lies**” in its attack on the PvdA’s plans for the health insurance premium. So says PvdA MP. Frank Heemskerk ... With his **attack** on PvdA, Verhagen tried to **distract** the public from CDA cuts to health care and the struggle of the Christian Democrats with the no-claim, according to Heemskerk.

(‘Welles-nietes over zorgpremie’, 27/9/2006, *De Telegraaf*).

*De Telegraaf* uses a journalistic convention that we often see in the leads of the analysed newspaper articles: only in the second instance is the source of a bold statement revealed. This convention places the emphasis on the expression itself, turning it into the newsworthy ‘event’. For this specific news story, this convention has an important consequence: the initial event – the fact that parliament wants to use its powers to initiate laws – is marginalized in favour of a story about, as *De Telegraaf* captures it in the article’s title, a childish electoral ‘yes-no’ dispute between political parties.

However, the idea that essential issues – such as the future of ‘our’ health care or the amount of ‘our’ health care premiums – are not acknowledged and recognised by feuding politicians, is not only emphasized by right-wing newspapers. *De Volkskrant* also actively contributes to this discourse, even in a regular fea-

ture in which the paper deals with economic issues by answering five questions (composed by the newspaper itself). On September 29, 2006, when the conflict between the CDA and PvdA reaches its climax, the newspaper explains the regulation in ‘Five questions about the no- claims discount’ as follows:

(1) What does the no-claim discount mean? ... By way of a form of personal contribution those insured are less likely to make unnecessary use of health care, **so it was thought**. The cabinet opted, **after much haggling**, for a reverse personal contribution, the no-claim discount ... It has **scarcely been proven** that people make more conscientious use of health care. The Central Planning Bureau estimates the reduction of healthcare spending at **only** 150 million euros ... Insurance companies consider the arrangement to be an **‘administrative monstrosity’**.

(‘*No-claimregeling treft chronisch zieken onevenredig*’, 29/9/2006, *De Volkskrant*).

By using colloquial and evaluative language (‘so it was thought’), a major political decision – introducing the no-claim measurement – is presented as the product of an *opinion*, rather than a well considered *vision*. This image of superficial, electoral and non-visionary politics is further supported by a description of decision-making by that same cabinet as ‘haggling’ as well as by strong negative responses from others, such as the Central Planning Bureau and health care insurers. Through its ‘actual’ answer to a ‘factual’ question, *De Volkskrant* thus reinforces a contrast between the approach and considerations of politicians (whose actions are informed by whims and electoral attractiveness rather than by facts and calculations) and the consequences of this kind of politics for citizens and institutions.

Showing the contrast between what the preoccupation of politicians seems to be and what their responsibilities *ought* to be, is a scheme commonly used in journalism. However, the use of this scheme is particularly pervasive when the analysed newspapers report on the statistical calculations made by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB), which checks the viability of claims and promises made by political parties in election manifestos. In recent years, the publication of CPB figures has become a particularly newsworthy event. Media outlets as well as political adversaries often use verdicts by the CPB, especially when the figures allegedly do not add up, to accuse political parties of unreliability.

For example, on October 27, 2006, the day after the calculations of the electoral programmes by the CPB were made public, *De Telegraaf* writes:

The PvdA does not succeed, **to the great schadenfreude** of CDA and VVD, in relieving the costs of the ageing population by intervening in the state pension scheme. ... The statisticians [of the CPB] claim that with the exception of D66, no political party will ensure that in the long term the treasury can cope with the 'grey' wave [of the ageing population], but the PvdA **tops everything**. "Despite the tax increase for the elderly, PvdA does absolutely nothing for the sustainability of public finances", concluded CDA minister Joop Wijn. And VVD minister Zalm added: "PvdA **achieves nothing here** despite the annoying measure".

(‘*PvdA minst in staat vergrijzing te betalen*’, 27/10/2005, *De Telegraaf*)

Despite citing various and different sources, such as the CPB and politicians, the newspaper does not supply any actual journalistic evidence for two essential negative qualifications: (1) for the claim that the CPB made a statement as to which party 'tops everything' with regard to the unreliability of the election programmes, and (2) for the claim that both CDA and VVD would experience malicious pleasure from PvdA's error.

This strategy – in which an 'objective arbitrator' like the CPB is used to present politics in The Hague as principally a playground for unreliable and non-altruistic politicians – is also visible when *De Volkskrant*, more than three weeks after the official publication, refers to the CPB figures:

The Central Planning Bureau (CPB) **makes quick work** of all the election promises about billion euro cuts to keep health care insurance premiums affordable. **VVD makes the most cuts in health care**. A total of 1 billion euros, according to the calculations of the CPB. ... **The champion of the free market** in health care, according to the CPB, is not VVD, but CDA.

(‘*Geen rem op kostenstijging zorg*’, 14/11/2006, *De Volkskrant*).

Based on the examples discussed here, the question emerges whether newspapers are re-presenting an actual gap between the world of politics and the lived experiences of citizens, or whether newspapers are also actively constructing or upholding this gap through the ways in which they report about political events. We explore this question below in an analysis of news coverage of the social security system in the election years 2010 and 2012.

### **Altruistic self-interest**

On February 20, 2010 the ‘Balkenende cabinet’, named after the prime-minister who led the coalition between CDA, PvdA and *Christen Unie*, collapsed. The cabinet continued as a resigning government until the next elections. The latter meant an awkward situation for CDA and PvdA, the two largest coalition parties. How to actively campaign, while formally still being part of a government with limited powers (CDA), or while possibly being held responsible for the collapse of the cabinet (PvdA)? In our discussion of the materials of 2006, it became clear that these two same parties were allegedly engaged in what *De Telegraaf* called a childish ‘yes-no’ game.

On the one hand, the reality of the cycle of resigned cabinets in the Netherlands leads to the political realization that elections will not necessarily occur only every four years and thus to politicians ‘permanently’ campaigning. On the other hand, it leads to less harsh or pronounced rhetoric during elections. The most severe political opponents at election time, after all, can just as easily be your coalition partner, and it would be tactless to attack each other while still being member of a – albeit resigning – cabinet (for example, CDA and PvdA in 2006). Moreover, due to the high speed with which cabinets succeed each other, political parties can develop poor ‘track-records’ not only through entering into coalitions with surprising partners (for example, CDA and VVD with Geert Wilders’ PVV in 2010) – often against the wishes of their grassroots –, but more so by retrospectively speaking ill of this partner during the elections (for example, CDA and VVD in 2012).

Of course, we cannot claim any causal relationship between this political reality and news coverage, but it is striking that the three newspapers in their coverage of the social security system in 2010 and 2012 no longer associate a lack

of political vision with political vanity and electoral hypersensitivity. Instead, the news coverage we analysed very often attributes a lack of political vision to politicians' alleged fundamental inability to anticipate and respond to the complexity of the issue of an ageing population. In 2006, reporting on the future and funding of the social security system was 'limited' to ageing of the population and the introduction of a new health care system; in 2010 the coverage presents ageing as a rapidly approaching tidal wave that politicians in the Hague should have seen coming.

All three newspapers allow this diagnosis to be made by specific 'experts'. These are top executives of organisations, ranging from the OECD to industry organisations, pension funds and health care insurance companies. Despite their obvious stake in certain specific measures, the three papers present these parties as sources of authority to evaluate both the political issue (ageing) and political action (such as government measures, legislation and different parties' solutions). In both 2010 and 2012, this practice is particularly visible in news coverage of the proposal – supported by some political parties – to gradually increase the retirement age from 65 to 67. This measurement will see people contribute more to collective retirement pensions because they work for longer.

For example, on May 28 2010, *Algemeen Dagblad* gives Aart de Geus, top executive of the OECD, an opportunity to reflect on this political proposal:

Deputy Secretary-General Aart de Geus of the OECD, the organization of 31 countries that work together on economic issues, **fears** that the Netherlands is too late in raising its pension age. "The **threat** is that we only take action for the **next generation**, and that it **only** comes into effect after the next cabinet period," said [De Geus] yesterday. A rapid increase, according to De Geus, is needed to manage the costs of an ageing population.

(*'Erder stoppen met werk blijft straks mogelijk'*, 28/06/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

The involvement of De Geus at the OECD is explicitly presented as something that confirms –rather than possibly compromises— his legitimacy as a commentator. Moreover, the remainder of the article provides no further reading or interpretation of De Geus' comments. This uncontested authority warrants the

validity of De Geus' claims about the threat of ageing as well as his diagnosis that the greatest threat is caused by delayed political decision-making.

The idea that politicians either do not respond adequately or do not display vision or expertise in their political proposals is also articulated in another *Algemeen Dagblad* article, which appeared on May 31, 2010. The article on the front page of the newspaper is in its entirety dedicated to the opinions of Ad Poppelaars, director of the CG Council (an association for chronically ill patients and disabled persons) and Jan Coolen, Director of the patient federation NPCF, on how politics envisions reducing the costs of the health care system:

According to Ad Poppelaars ... during tv debates the party leaders present their health care plans more favourable than they really are. Patient associations are collectively preparing an alternative plan that they will offer to the *informateur*<sup>94</sup> of the new cabinet after June 9. "Because if you see the common thread of all electoral manifestos, it offers **little hope** for what will be in the coalition agreement," said Jan Coolen of NPCF. ... "That [cuts on medication reimbursements] **is the easiest manner of cuts**," says Poppelaars. Coolen: "Yes, savings need to be made. But as long as **billions are wasted** in hospitals, the bill should not be exclusively presented to the patients".

(‘Zorg wordt na verkiezingen veel duurder’, 31/05/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*).

Just as we could see in newspapers coverage of the proposed abolition of the no-claim arrangement in 2006, we see again that newsworthiness is not defined by an explicitly political act (such as a bill or a political position) but by negative reactions of *others* to them. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, this **reactive** form of coverage in 2010 and 2012 is used to imply the inability of politicians to work from a long-term and viable vision (rather than from ad-hoc responses). Particularly interesting in this is that the external 'experts', such as Poppelaars and Coolen, are given the journalistic authority to make negative statements about the current state of care and the effectiveness of current political functioning.

---

<sup>94</sup> Informateur: an individual, politician, who is hired to explore formation possibilities and to assist in negotiations between political parties in the formation of a new cabinet

This negative assessment of politicians' skills and competences can also be found in the other two examined newspapers. A clear example of this is the feature article – of 1,679 words – that *De Telegraaf* writes on July 28, 2012 about how Roger van Boxtel, senator as well as chairman of commercial health care insurance company Menzis, sees the future of health care. In the article Van Boxtel, just like as Poppelaars and Coolen did, draws on the language of fear and danger to describe an ageing population and the political anticipation thereof. Additionally, he too disqualifies political proposals as archaic:

To keep health care accessible and affordable, indeed in the future it will not be possible, **something must now really change. Fast...** We must redesign care aimed at curing. Namely: less reasoning from the viewpoint of the institution, the hospital, the clinic, and increasingly from the real health care needs of the patient. The EMEA [Exceptional Medical Expenses Act] must be repealed to what it was intended to be. So **get rid of the excessive madness** where grandparents are paid as part of their benefits for taking care of the grandchildren! Friend and foe alike call this ridiculous, **but we have let it come to this.**

(‘Zorg totaal ontspoord’, 28/07/2012, *De Telegraaf*)

This type of coverage, in which actors with specific interests in a future health care system are presented as impartial commentators who do have a thought-out and altruistic vision of that system, implies a stark contrast with actual politicians, who are once more presented as passive. This contrast is confirmed by how *De Volkskrant*, especially in 2012, reports on health care. In that year, the newspaper remarkably often reports on interviews with proclaimers of authoritative dissent, as for instance on July 13, 2012 in an organized roundtable discussion in which ‘three experts’, including, once again, a top executive, mainly describe the government politics as cowardly:

They [the experts] are **in complete agreement** what it should be about in these elections. **“That stronghold is to be demolished.”** ... Right now annually 25 billion goes to the EMEA. What **absolutely needs to be done different**, gentlemen? Bekker ... “To start, this topic should finally get priority. People pretend, in politics or in the health care sector itself. But it’s

just not the case. **No decisions are made.** The EMEA is the most beautiful example of indecision, only adding up tasks and expenses”.

(‘Beperk AWBZ tot waar die voor was bedoeld’, 13/07/2012, *De Volkskrant*).

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the attributed newsworthiness of articles about the social care system in *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf* in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012. Crucial in this attribution, as we have seen, is the role of negative and critical comments, as expressed by, but *especially asked* of a specific group of non or semi-political actors. In 2006, this journalistic practice resulted in the presentation of the political *metier* as being so focused on self- seeking competition and electoral gain, that it simply cannot be united with the interests and concerns of citizens. In 2010 and 2012, this type of coverage led to an image of political decision- making as so grounded in short-term, ad-hoc, thoughtless and ‘cowardly’ acts, that the most basis level of politics is unfit to recognise and face genuine challenges. This mode of representation warrants the idea that political actors and their activities ‘deserve’ electoral distrust.

## Chapter 3. The Netherlands and Europe: Inability and dishonesty

### Introduction

This chapter documents the analysis of those articles from the three examined newspapers that are thematically focused on Europe, especially on the enlargement of the European Union, the ‘debt crisis’ in Greece, and the Netherlands’ relation with ‘Europe’. The analysis reconstructs how this theme was made newsworthy in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012. It particularly focuses on how specific journalistic frameworks, namely those which assume contrasts between different ‘realities’, features in the attribution of newsworthiness. The chapter ends with a conclusion, in which the consequences of these frameworks are discussed.

## Imbalances in Europe

In 2006, the coalition government ‘Balkenende II’ collapsed after D66 (Democrats) left the coalition it had formed with CDA and VVD. D66 argued that the government should have committed to acting upon the criticism of the actions of VVD Minister for Immigration and Integration Verdonk *vis-à-vis* VVD MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Verdonk would have forced Hirsi Ali to sign a declaration in which she admits to having created confusion among her political colleagues about her surname and thereby about the manner in which she tried to obtain asylum in the Netherlands. By forcing Hirsi Ali to sign under pressure, Verdonk would have mainly tried to clear her moral conscience and her own tough stance towards Hirsi Ali.

Although there was considerable political criticism of Verdonk, the popularity of her harsh integration politics and views indicated broad public support for her ‘hard-line’ immigration and integration policies. This ‘assertive’ form of politics thrives in the Netherlands in 2006. Following the publication of an influential essay by Paul Scheffer in 2000 and the political assassinations of the biggest critics of multiculturalism, Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, the idea of the ‘death of multiculturalism’ increasingly receives approval in the broad political field.

This new mentality can be seen specifically in national integration politics, but also in relation to the European integration project, particularly *vis-à-vis* the (possible) enlargement of the European Union with the Central and Eastern European countries Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. In the run-up to the 2006 elections, most of the reporting on Europe in all three newspapers is about this planned expansion. The way the newspapers present this news story exhibits, despite an expected difference in tone between the papers, an interesting similarity: coverage on EU expansion in all three papers implies an inherent cultural incompatibility between candidate member states and ‘Europe’, and depicts politicians involved in ‘Europe’ and ‘The Hague’ (the city where the Dutch parliament is based) as actors who stubbornly refuse to recognize this incompatibility.

The conceptualisation of Romania and Bulgaria as culturally incompatible with Europe is most explicit in De Telegraaf. An editorial in the newspaper on September 29, 2006 argues:

In October, the 25 current EU countries ... will make a decision. According to Brussels a year's delay is ineffective, because both countries will experience it as a slight discouragement. ... At the same time, however, it is a **public secret** that both are **not yet ready** for full membership. Both Bulgaria and Romania ..., which will become by far the poorest EU Member States, ... struggle with **corruption and organized crime**.

(‘Bulgarije en Roemenië EU-lid onder curatele’, 26/09/2006, *De Telegraaf*)

The contrast between the seriousness of the situation in both countries and the attitude of ‘Brussels’ as not wanting to discourage Bulgaria and Romania, is enhanced by describing knowledge about the two countries as a ‘public secret’. This implies that ‘Europe’ is making a decision about the enlargement of Europe, which is *not* actually based on empirical or independent assessment.

The three newspapers also refers to this lacking political competence to make (basic) sound judgment when ‘Europe’ itself pretends to be ‘strict’; for example, by placing new member states under supervision. *Algemeen Dagblad* writes on September 27, 2006:

Romania and Bulgaria will join the European family on the 1st of January, **but it will take years before they are full members**. Brussels places newcomers under considerable scrutiny with regards to a large number of fields. ... Other measures aim to prevent that European agricultural and other subsidies **fall into the wrong pockets** or that food security is **taken for a ride**.

(‘Nieuwe leden EU nog op proef’, 27/09/2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

The message of the article is that Europe is politically irresponsible by permitting countries that are not yet ‘ready’ for EU membership to join. Thereby Europe may be causing trouble for countries that have ‘full membership’.

Characterizations like ‘falling into the wrong pockets’ and ‘taken for a ride’ imply difference between candidate member states and the establishment.

Although especially news coverage about enlargement in *De Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad* emphasises alleged essential cultural differences, *De Volkskrant* also actively contributes to the idea that Bulgaria and Romania are not on the same par with European countries. The newspaper does so mainly – as we could also see in the coverage of the social security system in 2006 – by allowing others to make disqualifying statements. For example, on September 27, 2006, the news value of an article in *De Volkskrant* is determined by the reactions of two MEPs:

In the European Parliament pockets of criticism could be found of the decision to allow Bulgaria, despite all its shortcomings, to obtain membership simultaneously with Romania. “A **conditional sale** like this should never happen in the future,” said Joost Lagendijk (GroenLinks). His VVD colleague Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert feels that neither country is ready. “This does the already fragile image of the EU **no good.**”

(‘Bulgarije en Roemenië in 2007 lid EU’, 27/09/2006, *De Volkskrant*).

Through connecting the newsworthiness of the report to the concerns of the two Dutch MEPs, the suggestion is made that politicians who supposedly can make so-called no-nonsense and basic considerations, are ignored in ‘Brussels’.

Coverage about Europe in 2006 thus particularly attends to disqualifying the competences of the European political apparatus. This is also visible in how the three examined newspapers report on negotiations between prominent national and European politicians and candidate-member state Turkey. The lack of decisiveness, courage and sense of reality in Brussels vis-a-vis Turkey is mainly insinuated (as was the case for Bulgaria and Romania) by an inverted pyramid, in which not Europe, but the new member state holds sway. This dominant news framework is illustrated by the following reports from the three different newspapers:

The European Commission will give Turkey an extra month to recognize the Republic of Cyprus and open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot

ships and airplanes. This will provisionally avert a crisis in relations. **Normally** today Brussels would have had to publish an eighty page progress report, in which the main conclusion would be that to date Turkey has not made '**any form of progress**' in order to prepare for European membership.

(‘Europa geeft traag Turkije even uitstel’, 08/11/2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

While Balkenende patted himself on the back, claiming this entailed an implicit acknowledgment of Cyprus, Erdogan was already in Ankara. There in an open double-decker he received a hero’s welcome, **because he was relentless** ... The question that must be asked is how long the EU **will allow itself to be kicked around?**

(‘Eind aan Turks gesol’, 09/11/2006, *De Telegraaf*)

What punishment should Turkey be given for not implementing the lagging reforms, which are necessary for EU membership? The Commissioners **dare not burn their fingers.**

(‘Het recept voor een treinbotsing’, 08/11/2006, *De Volkskrant*)

The news coverage of Europe in 2006 thus attributes news value to analyses or comments that draw attention to the incompetence of (European) politicians to recognize both cultural incompatibility and political arrogance *and* to defy it. The question here is whether the newspapers are merely re-presenting this, or are they, by way of their reporting, producing it? We will research this question further below by analysing the news coverage of Europe in the election years 2010 and 2012.

### **The dramatic spiral**

In 2010, during the election campaign, news reporting on Europe focuses mostly on the ‘Greek debt crisis’. Partly due to the pressure exerted on the existing political field by the rapid increase in popularity of Geert Wilders’ Party for

Freedom (PVV), a populist politics and journalistic discourse unfolded in which the European consequences of the financial crisis can best be explained by a so-called 'ideological square'. This means that both politicians and journalism generally frame the financial difficulties faced by countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy as the individual country's responsibility. Within this ideological square a 'bad' or 'irresponsible' actor can only exist in relation to a 'good' or 'responsible' actor. The latter role within the populist discourse in the Netherlands is played by European bodies such as the European Union, the World Bank and the IMF, but more specifically it is played by those who basically make this 'rescue' possible: the Dutch taxpayer.

This 'us v. them' dichotomy and the subsequent role division between responsible and irresponsible actors is a dominant frame that all three examined newspapers in 2010 use in their coverage of the Greek debt. A further striking similarity between the three newspapers is that news value is very often assigned to events in which it appears that it is not 'the Greeks', but politicians and their decision-making in The Netherlands that are responsible for the 'financial sacrifice' that the Dutch taxpayer must continue to make. This 'exposé journalism' in all three newspapers is focused commonly on two kinds of events.

In the first kind of event, the newsworthiness of a story is formed by implying an extreme opposition between how politicians *themselves* describe the share paid by the Dutch in solving the Greek debt crisis and how independent 'experts' describe this. An example of this journalistic practice is an article in *Algemeen Dagblad* on May 4, 2010:

Is the Dutch taxpayer responsible for the Greek government deficit? No, says Finance Minister Jan Kees de Jager. The money going to the Greeks is a loan which will be repaid. (...) **Actually the Dutch taxpayer will take responsibility** for the Greek deficit, argues Finance Professor Jaap Koelewijn. The Greeks now pay thirteen percent of the market for a loan. We give them the money for five percent. **So we subsidize them for seven percent.**

('Lening aan Griekenland kan zo een strop van twee miljard opleveren', 04/05/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*).

In our analysis of the coverage of the social security system, we also saw that newspapers use expert advice in order to demonstrate that the (veracity of) visions, statements and promises of politicians should be questioned. This would especially indicate a fundamental lack of skills among politicians to estimate situations well, realistically and, above all, in the long run. This too happens in the above excerpt from invited contributor Koelewijn.

The second kind of event or situation that is made newsworthy is ‘evidence’ that the debt crisis is part of a *dramatic cascade* that is caused and maintained by politics. For example, the role of the Netherlands in the Greek *bail-out* is often presented as a consequence of the previous political decision to join the Euro, as an editorial in the *Algemeen Dagblad* on May 3, 2010 asserts:

A few weeks ago The Hague **still** told us that not a penny would go to the Greeks ... it is becoming painfully obvious that with the introduction of the Euro **we have put our heads on the chopping board**. The euro has brought us many benefits. But for years the drawbacks were **dismissed** by successive governments. **Wrongly, as it now turns out.**

(‘*De belastingbetalen met rug tegen de muur door leugenachtige Grieken*’, 03/05/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

This news story perspective (‘because-of-initial-and-poorly-judged-political-decisions-the-Dutch-taxpayer-endures-misery’) is also used when the three newspapers report on the ‘domino effect’ that the Greek crisis has on the financial situation in other European countries. Interestingly, because they ‘respond’ to financial situations in countries by reducing investments, ‘markets’ are presented as actors that cause this effect. However, even when reacting to reports markets can play an active role in this domino effect, they are not held responsible for the situation. The below example from *De Telegraaf* on April 10, 2010 clearly shows how, rather, principal responsibility is often attributed to faulty political assessments:

In recent weeks European leaders have **clearly done too little**. They thought that with the bail-out of Greece (with a loan of 80 billion euros from the Euro countries and another 30 billion from the IMF) **their job was done.**

**But the markets smelled blood.** Indeed, besides Greece, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Italy are in no better financial shape.

(‘D-day euro; erop of eronder voor de beurzen’, 10/04/2010, *De Telegraaf*)

The journalistic *frame* of the dramatic cascade results in an image where Dutch citizens are placed in a position where further suffering can only be limited through continuously footing an unfair ‘bill’. The three analysed newspapers often bolster statements and comments – especially of politicians involved – which confirm this logic, as we see for example in *De Volkskrant* on April 8, 2010:

**Not lending money is not an option**, says [Finance Minister] De Jager.

**“There is a threat of a country crisis**, while the ghost of the credit crisis has not yet vanished.” The vast majority of parties shared this view.

**“Saying no is a sure way to ensure our pensions will go wrong,”** argued Frans Weekers (VVD).

(‘De enige keus is bij te springen’, 08/04/2010, *De Volkskrant*)

Similar to the news coverage of Europe in 2006, articles in the election year of 2010 attribute news value to analyses or comments that imply incompetence of politicians, because they are the ones who would make false political judgments and they are the ones who have put citizens in an impossible “Catch-22” situation. In the final section of this chapter, we examine the three newspapers report on Europe in the 2012 election year.

### **The Netherlands with(out) Europe**

In the run-up to the 2012 elections, the main Europe-related issue discussed by newspapers is the future role of the Netherlands in ‘Europe’. The Greek debt crisis, together with growing criticism of the European political role in the crisis and the sustainability of a European community, fuelled populist visions for a future of the Netherlands in Europe *outside* the framework of EU membership and the Euro-zone. For example, Geert Wilders’ party, the PVV, commissioned a study by a prestigious British agency in March 2012. This research claimed to demonstrate that with a return to the old national currency, the Dutch Guilder,

the Netherlands would be better off. Given the guaranteed sensationalism and spectacle, journalists pay considerable attention to these alternative visions of the Netherlands in Europe, such as those of Wilders.

In 2012, all three newspapers examined provide an important platform for these alternative and populist ideas about Europe. Just as in 2006 and 2010, the three newspapers' reports very often paint a picture of Dutch politicians involved in the EU's existing apparatus as incompetent and, above all, as *unreliable*. Interestingly enough, in the 2012 election campaign, Diederik Samson and his PvdA peers emphasized that an 'honest' story needs to be told about Europe. The sharp contrast between election rhetoric and observations of 'actual' practices was particularly newsworthy in all three newspapers.

*De Telegraaf* reinforces this news value by using the most explicitly populist discourse, for example in its article entitled 'The honest story' published on September 1, 2012:

Politicians feel they should tell the honest story, but what stands out while reading through the election programmes is that **by far most fail to mention the possible financial consequences of our involvement in the rescue of weak euro countries.** ... No party speaks of this **financial sword of Damocles.**

(*'Het eerlijke verhaal'*, 01/09/2012, *De Telegraaf*)

This re-contextualization of the election rhetoric about honesty – here most strongly enforced by the ironic reference to the servant of the Greek tyrant Dionysius – shows that the term 'honesty' is semantically very flexible. This flexibility, which marks the contrast between rhetoric and reality so well, is also used by the newspapers to imply that Dutch politicians wrongly hide behind 'the failure' of Europe, without acknowledging that they, *themselves*, are Europe. For example, the newsworthiness of an article in the *Algemeen Dagblad* on September 4, 2012 is determined by such an accusation voiced by Ben Bot, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs:

"For the past ten years, it has mainly been about the fact that we are the largest net contributor. That is an easy pitch for the public to distract attention."

tion ... The image that Dutch politicians paint of Brussels is wrong. **There is not a Brussels that decides everything.** For Pete's sake, it is our own politicians in The Hague who give Brussels the space they think it requires."

(‘Nederland zonder Brussel’, 04/09/2012, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

This idea is confirmed in the same article by Gijs de Vries, Member of the European Court of Auditors. He said that the Dutch politicians are ‘not honest’ with voters about Europe, in order to win votes:

I abhor the easy way in which **politicians of VVD, CDA and PvdA also demonize Europe.** Wilders started and they all contribute a little, because they fear losing voters. These are politicians who, out of self-interest, want to be re-elected, and therefore **deliberately tell voters false stories.** The global competition is growing harder every day and our politicians dare to deny that.

(‘Nederland zonder Brussel’, 04/09/2012, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

The image of politicians as not trustworthy is also emphasised in *De Volkskrant*. The newspaper even calls Prime Minister Rutte in an article on September 8, 2012 ‘*bribable*’ because he wants to keep the euro zone together at all cost out of fear that it will collapse. In the same article, a high degree of news value is assigned to an ‘expert authority’, economist Bas Jacobs, who is often quoted by this newspaper, when he argues that Dutch politicians wrongly ‘hide’ behind ‘Europe’:

In other words: the parties **are not honest** with voters about the cost of their policy proposals. **Implicitly Dutch politics thus also hide behind the ECB**, because money from the printing press in Frankfurt is free. **The bill is footed** by European citizens who see their pensions and savings evaporate and whose purchasing power is eroded by high inflation.

(‘De gevraaglijke verleidingen van Draghi’s koopwoede’, 08/09/2012, *De Volkskrant*).

The coverage of Europe in 2012 therefore assigns newsworthiness – as in the coverage of 2006 and 2010 – to analyses or comments that imply the incompe-

tence of politicians, because they, in contrast to their proposed election rhetoric about honesty, do not take responsibility for their share in European events and decision-making.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the newsworthiness of reporting on Europe is constructed and assigned in *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf* in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012. The analysis has shown the essential role of journalistic frames that emphasise contrasts between different parties (citizens, politicians, countries) in Europe. In 2006, such frames present politicians as inherently unable to recognise and acknowledge problems with candidate member states due to their own political vanity. In 2010, this means that again the inability of politicians is presupposed, because they are not capable of making the correct judgments, and because they, therefore, wrongly place final political responsibility for the debt crisis on (tax-paying) citizens. Finally, these frames in 2012 contribute to a view of national politicians as actors who shift responsibility onto others, and who also falsely boast about their own honesty. The most important consequence of this mode of representation is that, as already shown in the previous analysis of the coverage of the social security system, political actors and their activities 'deserve' to be met with scepticism and suspicion.

## Chapter 4. Flip-floppers and deal breakers: opportunism and dishonesty

### Introduction

The two previous chapters have shown that social security and Europe are prominent news themes in the coverage leading up to the parliamentary elections of 2006, 2010 and 2012. Moreover, they offer journalistic opportunities to problematize the behaviour of politicians. In this chapter, we focus on a third news theme that receives ample attention from the three examined newspapers: poli-

tical scandal. Here we use a very specific definition of 'political scandal'. We are not so much focussed on explicit forms of political fraud and affairs, but rather on reports of behaviour or dispositions by politicians that can be described as 'outrageous' - or 'vile' and 'unreliable'. This kind of coverage seems to have become a sub-genre in reporting *about* the political *profession* since 2006.

Interestingly, as the analysis below will show, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify whether the newspapers are reporting about actual political acts, or if the coverage itself actively contributes to the construction of political behaviour as fundamentally untrustworthy and scandalous.

### **'Flip-floppers' and conflict**

The 2006 elections revolve to a large degree around conflicts and scandals, whereby newspapers commonly make use of a *conflict frame* and create the impression that the reliability and competences of politicians are highly questionable. This tone of political dishonesty and deception is mainly used after outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA) called Wouter Bos (leader of PvdA) a 'flip-flopper'. This happened in a public service radio election debate in which Bos claimed, despite earlier commitments, that he did not want to explore options to relax the law governing dismissal by employers. This 'media moment' has two important consequences. First, the accusation against Bos is often considered to be an explanation for the 'defeat' of the PvdA in 2006, when the CDA held on to its position as the largest party in the Netherlands. Moreover, the accusation seems to have brought into being a practice in which politicians mainly label each other as being 'flip-floppers' and politically inconsistent.

However, the analysis of news reports from all three newspapers on political scandal in 2006 shows that newsworthiness, through the ways in which the newspapers frame their reporting, is mainly attributed to conflict. This is visible in articles from *Algemeen Dagblad*, in which more attention is paid to the subjective accusations Bos and Balkenende make against each other during the debate than to the content of the discussion about the economy and health care. In particular, more attention is paid to the form in which the debate was conducted:

Balkenende and Bos **were at each other's throats** during the first major election debate on Radio 1. ... Balkenende and Bos **also clashed over the law governing dismissal** ... “**You're flip-flopping**” Balkenende said ... During the debate, Bos **again came under attack** about the age of retirement ... Bos said after the debate that Balkenende had **‘unmasked’** himself.

(‘*Harde toon in eerste debat – Balkenende beticht Bos van oneerlijkheid en gedraai*’, 30/10/2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

By opting for wording such as ‘at each other’s throats’, ‘clashing’ and ‘unmasking’, *Algemeen Dagblad* chooses to portray a political debate (where political opponents have to enter into discussions to explain their positions to the voters) as a personal conflict between the two ministers. Instead of the coverage focussing on the substantive positions of the parties with respect to the law governing dismissal and the retirement age issue, a form of *sensational news coverage* is chosen; one that focuses more on scandals in politics than on the substantive issues that come up during the election.

In *De Volkskrant*, substantive discussions between Bos and Balkenende about health care and the economy are also reduced to lies and conflicts. In response to the yearly parliamentary debate following the publication of the year’s budget, the newspaper published its report on the debate, which was bogged down in childish ‘yes-no games’ about figures and ‘altercations’ between the ministers Bos and Balkenende:

The debate was inconclusive, Balkenende said of his challenger Bos. “I think the result is zero- zero.” Any other outcome is hard to imagine. Especially given how the Prime Minister **has put his teeth into his tale of pure optimism** (‘Let us be glad! Let’s be optimistic! Dynamic!’) and Bos is **determined to spoil the party** (‘I am fascinated by the conceitiveness of this Prime Minister’).

(‘*Bos versus Balkenende: nul-nul; de voorspelde titantenstrijd verzandt veelal in welles-nietsspelletjes*’, 16/11/2006, *De Volkskrant*)

By emphasizing that Balkenende has ‘bitten’ into a ‘purely optimistic story’, it is suggested that Balkenende is far removed from the reality or lived experience of the voter. Then, by portraying the reaction of Bos as an attempt to

‘spoil the party’, the substantive arguments that were put forward during the debate are dismissed in favour of personal attacks of Minister Bos on Prime Minister Balkenende.

In turn, *De Telegraaf*, on reporting about the news that Prime Minister Balkenende called Bos a ‘flip-flopper’, labels it the ‘most remarkable event’ of the election. In the article ‘Voor Balkenende 1-0’ (translation: Balkenende scores 1-0), published on October 31, 2006, the newspaper allows readers to give their reaction to this event as self-appointed ‘panel members’. The article is then definitely not about their response to the substantive discussion, but rather their response to Balkenende’s accusation against Bos.

This panel put together by the newspaper includes a 20-year old student who liked that Balkenende called Bos out; a 41-year-old housewife who rallied behind Balkenende because she ‘loves honesty’; and a 34-year-old account manager at Fortis Bank who says, ‘Balkenende is honest, you can see it in his appearance. But I don’t see that in Rutte and Bos.’ On the basis of this subjective judgment of a lay panel, the paper concludes in the title of the article that Prime Minister Balkenende is ahead of his political opponents. This implies that voting during elections should be determined by answering the question of ‘who speaks the truth’ in the media debate.

In all three papers, the emphasis on the conflict between Prime Minister Balkenende and Minister Bos around the election campaign is (prematurely) reduced by the media to a struggle between the leaders of two parties. It should really have been portrayed as a debate between the political parties. In response to the accusation of ‘flip-flopping’, Bos then tries to appear in the media as assertive by indicating that he does not want to be part of a coalition with Balkenende or his party (CDA) in the future. For newspapers, this fuels the fire of the *conflict frame*, which furthermore could be used to predict possible government coalitions. *Algemeen Dagblad* immediately reports after the first election debate, two weeks before the election, about the two-man battle:

Despite the sharp tone of the debate Balkenende and Bos **didn’t rule out** a coalition of CDA and PvdA. Bos did say that he will not take on the role of deputy prime minister in a cabinet in which the CDA holds the majority.

(‘Harde toon in eerste debat’, 29/10/2006, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

Remarkably, the newspaper immediately suggests that the ‘harsh tone’ in the debate of the two opponents would logically preclude that they would be in government together. The next day, *De Telegraaf* published an article with the title ‘Bos will not serve under Balkenende’ (*Bos wil niet dienen onder Balkenende*). Here, newsworthiness is awarded to Bos who would refuse to participate as deputy prime minister in a cabinet led by Balkenende. *De Volkskrant* also devotes a lot of attention to the possible conclusions of what media themselves have framed and labelled as ‘a cockfight between the two ministers’. In the article ‘Bos and Balkenende have their tail feather up; PvdA party leader: left government is ‘perfectly normal option’ and collaboration with CDA increasingly impossible’ (16/11/2006), the newspaper concludes, following the statements by Wouter Bos, that a cabinet in which PvdA and CDA are both members will be a highly unlikely combination.

After the election result, a cabinet is formed between CDA, PvdA and Christian Union. While during the entire campaign period the media highlighted the ‘mudslinging’ between Bos and Balkenende and the question of which of the two is more ‘honest’, these supposedly major news moments do not seem to play a role at the cabinet formation table. The idea that campaign rhetoric is flawed and only implies political opportunism is suggested in all of the three analysed newspapers from 2006 onwards, as the results below show.

### **Tough rhetoric and deal breakers**

Because the media –in the run up to the 2006 elections— paid considerable attention to the ‘flip-flop discourse’ of politicians, in 2010, after the fifth premature fall of a government, political distrust finds itself on fertile soil. In the run-up to these elections it can be seen that substantive discussions between politicians, on, for example tax issues, are used by the three examined newspapers to instead tell a story about political opportunism.

An important example of this is the discussion about the mortgage tax rebate. In the reporting on this topic, the three newspapers focus specifically on the alleged *conflict* between political parties when discussing the potential elimination of this tax measure. To convince voters of their positions, the rhetoric of politicians in this period becomes harsher. The manner in which politicians do

this is by formulating ‘deal breakers’. In the run-up to 2010 as many as three parties (CDA, PVV and D66) formulate deal breakers in the debate, while in a democratic, multi-party and coalition system like the Netherlands hardly any consequences can be attached to these.

By paying considerable attention to the concept of ‘deal breakers’, the media divert attention in the news story from the substantive impact of the abolition of mortgage tax rebate, to a news story about the reliability of politicians and political promises. An example of this is the article published on April 22, 2014, in which the newspaper openly questions the credibility of a statement made by the minister to call the mortgage tax rebate a deal breaker:

Of course, parties may change their views ... But with an issue like the mortgage tax rebate, which so many people will feel financially, **as a party you cannot suddenly change your position after the elections.**

Confidence in politics among citizens is already low. Balkenende took on a big responsibility yesterday. If the new government (in which CDA will most probably participate) **still fidgets** with the rebate, the dissatisfaction with our leaders will only increase. **Promises simply create guilt, especially such a hard one.**

(‘Balkenende moet zich nu ook echt aan zijn belofte houden’, 22/04/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

In the article journalist Peter Young refers to the conflict between Prime Minister Balkenende and Bos in 2006, in which Prime Minister Balkenende called the state pension age a deal breaker. Since that promise was not fulfilled during their joint term of government, his new promises are therefore interpreted by the paper as ‘voter fraud’. By applying phrases like ‘suddenly change your position’ and ‘fidget with’ to the negotiation process of the formation, the newspaper provides a frame from which the reader is to draw the conclusion that politicians are not really involved in essential issues which concern them (including the mortgage tax rebate). Politicians clearly ‘only’ represent political opportunism.

*De Telegraaf* claims that only parties who are weak in the campaign period formulate deal breakers. In an article published on June 1, 2010, the news-

paper tries to ‘prove’ that the deal breakers that were formulated by, amongst others, CDA and D66 about the mortgage tax rebate, are a sign of misleading the electorate:

The deal breaker of the CDA, the first of its kind, seems the most **opportunistic** of all. A few weeks ago, the now fallen spin doctor Jack de Vries still proclaimed the CDA wisdom that before elections all options must be kept open. **The party recognizes that the mortgage position is more about propaganda than content.**

(‘Breekpunt lijmt geen campagne’, 01/06/2010, *De Telegraaf*)

In addition to the doubts expressed about the harshness of the ‘deal breakers’, the newspaper feeds this distrust of politics, by stating that CDA itself ‘recognizes’ (without mentioning names) that the mortgage position is utilised for ‘propaganda’ rather than for ‘content’. In *De Volkskrant* there is also a reference to the election campaign of 2006 in order to negate the reliability of the ‘deal breakers’ of political parties in 2010. This is most specifically illustrated in an article published on June 9, 2010, when the up-coming elections are compared with (fictitious) talent show ‘Holland seeks leader’ that is ‘saturated with number fetishism and bravado about deal breakers’.

Although a ‘deadly one-liner’, like the one pronounced in 2006 by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (‘you are flip-flopping and you are not honest’), was missing during this election according to the journalists, this debate was also interpreted as one filled with transparent political ‘games’:

The outgoing prime minister really set the tone in the first debate on Radio 1 by calling the mortgage tax rebate a deal breaker. It was a **ploy** to corner VVD leader Mark Rutte, who is winning seats at the expense of CDA. However, the ploy exploded in his face. **Rutte immediately shrugged off the breaking point as ‘misplaced bravado’.** The leadership of CDA already then openly doubted Balkenende’s strategy.

(‘Van premiers, cijfers en breekpunten; verkiezingen vooral opgeëist door ‘grotens’’, 09/06/2010, *De Volkskrant*)

In the article, a lot of attention is paid to the informal behaviour of the politicians, who with jokes and frivolous television appearances try to win over voters and succeed in ‘juggling’ with numbers. The news value is related to the personal accusations that are made over and over and does not have any relation to the content of the political issues at play.

Regardless of whether political parties have formulated ‘deal breakers’, the positions (for and against) of the parties on the mortgage tax rebate are often presented as a form of political opportunism by newspapers. In the original discussion the implications of whether or not to abolish the rebate (what during the campaign came to be called the ‘H-word’, for the Dutch word for mortgage, *hypotheek*) are mentioned, but is overshadowed in the news coverage about the (unreliable) political game in which those views are formulated.

It is notable that the phrase invented by right-wing political parties, ‘fidgeting with the mortgage tax rebate’, is taken up in the journalistic discourse in all three newspapers when this topic is discussed. This term was originally coined by right-wing politicians, in order to convince voters (by way of tough rhetoric) that they will at all costs preserve this rebate. This is illustrated by the statement made by VVD MP Brigitte van der Burg in *De Telegraaf*, which highlights the dangers of abolishing the mortgage tax rebate for the housing market:

Many homeowners are waiting. **The fidgeting with the mortgage tax rebate will have disastrous consequences. Therefore hands off the interest reduction.**

(‘Huizenzoekers huren massaal’, 07/06/2010, *De Telegraaf*)

Interestingly, this discourse is used by newspapers to articulate the positions of other parties, like democratic and progressive party D66, who favoured the abolition of mortgage tax rebate:

The **deal breaker** of D66 for the housing market, namely **the demand to fiddle with the mortgage tax rebate**, is a bizarre move. Political insiders see the action **as proof** that **blind panic** has erupted in the party of Alexander Pechtold now that only 9 of the 19 seats from last year remain according to the polls.

(‘Breekpunt lijmt geen campagne’, 01/06/2010, *De Telegraaf*).

The use of the term ‘fiddle with’, coupled with speculation that the position of D66 on the mortgage tax rebate refers to ‘blind panic’ for fear of losing votes, suggests that this subject is presented as *sensationalist news*. Additionally, it suggests that political parties do not take a substantiated position in the debate, but are motivated by fear of losing seats, and therefore ‘just’ take a stand. This type of sensational reporting on the debate surrounding the mortgage tax rebate is not only visible in *De Telegraaf* as *tabloid*, but also in the other two papers examined. The first example is the article in quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* dated April 10, 2010, in which the rhetoric of ‘fidgeting with’ is used to indicate that the abolition of the rebate will most probably take place:

With the presentation of the VVD election manifesto on Friday, nearly all political parties have now announced which positions they are taking in the parliamentary elections of June 9. ... **It is striking that tinkering with the mortgage tax rebate seems less sacrosanct.** It is no longer **electoral suicide** to bring this up, because research has shown that the majority of the population agrees that the system is too expensive and too unfair.

(‘Naar de kiezer’, 10/04/2010, *De Volkskrant*)

The second example of this is in the *Algemeen Dagblad* of 22 April 2010, in which the newspaper reports on the position of the CDA against abolition of mortgage tax rebate as follows:

CDA leader Jan Peter Balkenende made it clear yesterday that after the elections he wants to work with VVD. He did so by naming **fidgeting with the mortgage tax rebate** as a **deal breaker** in negotiating a new cabinet. ... **If the new cabinet (in which CDA will most in probably participate) still fidgets with the rebate**, then it will only further fuel the dissatisfaction with our leaders.

(‘Balkenende moet zich nu ook echt aan zijn belofte houden’, 22/04/2010, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

The analysis of coverage about political scandal in the run-up to the 2010 elections thus shows that politicians on the one hand define deal breakers to appear assertive and tough and give a political performance, but on the other hand the ‘deal breaking discourse’ is actively (re)used by newspapers to determine newsworthiness of political ‘events’. In the brief discussion below of news coverage in the run-up to the 2012 elections, this ‘interaction’ between politics and the media is also evident.

### **From opportunism to dishonesty**

In 2012, the election year noted for the fact that as many as six cabinets have not served their full tenure, the three newspapers focus in their reporting on the actions of politicians on an apparent contrast between election rhetoric and ‘actual’ facts. Where we saw in the data analysis in 2006 that this contrast was mainly used to imply *political opportunism*, in 2012 it serves mainly to indicate actual *political dishonesty*. Again, it is thereby difficult to determine whether this orientation is motivated by political behaviour itself, or if it is mainly or also (re)produced by the media.

This difficulty is mainly determined by the explicit overlap between the discourse used by politicians in the elections and dominant journalistic frames used to report on political behaviour. Diederik Samsom, leader of PvdA, hit the jackpot when during an election debate on national television he suggested that outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte was not being honest – presumably inspired by Ronald Reagan’s famous ‘There you go again’ mantra – in order to say that Rutte was lying again. Simultaneously, a trend that had been initiated in 2010 by other media outlets continued when national newspapers and news programmes on television started utilising so called ‘*fact checks*’ on statements and the election promises of politicians.

Coverage of political acts in the three analysed newspapers is categorically assigned news value by determining discrepancies between election promises and political realities. Supported by the way in which – by using the discussed frame of the dramatic cascade— the performance of Dutch politicians in the European debt crisis is reported, all three newspapers suggest unmasking and dishonesty.

De Volkskrant does that at the end of August and beginning of September 2012 by verifying through a ‘truth meter’ the statements made by politicians (‘Rutte en Samsom in een duel om de waarheid’, 01/09/2012, *De Volkskrant*), but also by supplying systematic commentary that explicitly states that *lying* – an accusation which is not usually found to be diplomatic when made against politicians – is indeed the ‘bread and butter’ of politicians in The Hague. This populist discourse is most explicit in two columns of PvdA politician Marcel van Dam and author Bert Wagendorp:

Reagan told us: ‘I am not smart enough to lie’. **Rutte does not feel that limitation.** To win a debate, he will **lie through his teeth** without batting an eyelash.

(‘Liegen als communicatiestrategie’, Marcel van Dam, 30/08/2012, *De Volkskrant*)

You may say that your opponent ‘speaks untruth’, or that he is ‘stretching the truth’; civilized descriptions of lying. But you cannot call him a liar. **There are no liars in politics** ... [But] I’m a supporter of national sports, and ‘exposing lies’ seems an enrichment of what is on offer. Let us expose the lying **and if they cannot do it themselves call the lying politician as a liar.**

(‘Leugenaars Column’, Bert Wagendorp, 30/08/2012, *De Volkskrant*)

Despite their profiles, *Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf* refer to honesty in a less populist manner. Instead, they imply a stark contrast between the criteria with which politicians assess themselves and the criteria used to establish the (economic) well-being of the Netherlands. Both newspapers do this most explicitly on August 28, 2012, when the important ‘calculations’ of the CPB, discussed earlier in Chapter 2, are published:

Shoulder patting has begun now that the CPB has completed its calculations of the election platforms: VVD is the jobs champion, the champion purchasing power is SP [Socialist Party], PVV is the growth champion.

**But disillusionment dominates the bottom line.** No party gets rid of the deficits, no party gets rid of the high public debt ... In the Netherlands, a country where the last six cabinets did not make it to the end of their

tenure, the problems are now so serious that they can no longer be resolved in four years.

(‘Iedereen waant zich kampioen’, 28/08/2012, *Algemeen Dagblad*)

Less care or less child benefits, more or less taxes: **all parties promise** voters substantial measures to lower the deficit and a greener economy with minimal unemployed. **But** however the budget puzzles are laid, in the long term will none of the parties can get deficit to the dreamed of zero. The VVD though **does get closest**.

(‘0 procent?’ Dat lukt nooit’, 29/08/2012, *De Telegraaf*)

These examples show that in the 2012 coverage of the acts (and conscience) of politicians, newsworthiness was especially attributed to reports suggesting that the truth was at best ‘approached’ by politicians. The analysis has shown that this discourse is on the one hand used by politicians to endorse their own morality (operationally), and on the other hand that this is actively (re)used by newspapers to determine newsworthiness of political news.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined how newsworthiness was derived in the coverage of the political acts in the *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf* in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012. It can be concluded that especially communication of and between politicians is considered newsworthy when it reinforces the idea that politicians do not attach actual consequences to conflicts during elections; that they do not fulfil their bold statements about deal breakers, and when coverage confirms that politicians boast about their own truth in a craft that is saturated with lies. The analysis has also shown that the distinction between what would be political cause for this type of coverage and what dominant frames or discourses journalism is actively (re)using, is increasingly difficult to maintain. The conclusion of this report, in the next chapter, discusses these complex interactions.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

This report presents the results of a qualitative analysis of 300 articles that were published in the election years 2006, 2010 and 2012 by three national newspapers (*De Volkskrant*, *Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*) about three dominant new themes (social security, Europe, political scandal). Each of the three chapters which presented our results shows what and how news value is assigned to reporting on these topics. This final chapter presents the most important conclusions of the chapters' results and reflects on their implications. Chapter 2, '**Worries about health care: competition and mistrust**', examined how newsworthiness of reports on the social care system is produced. This study demonstrated the crucial role of negative and critical comments, as expressed by, but *especially asked* of a specific group of non- and semi-political actors. This journalistic practice meant that in 2006, the political *metier* was presented as being so focused on self-seeking competition and electoral gain, that it simply could not be united with the interests and concerns of citizens. In 2010 and 2012, this type of coverage lead to an image of political decision-making as so grounded in short-term, ad-hoc, thoughtless and 'cowardly' acts, that politics at the elementary level becomes unfit to face real challenges. The main consequence of this mode of representation is that political actors and their activities 'deserve' to be met with suspicion and distrust.

The second results chapter, '**The Netherlands and Europe: Inability and dishonesty**', focused on the newsworthiness of news coverage about 'Europe'. The analysis in this chapter showed the essential role of journalistic frames that emphasise contrasts between different parties (citizens, politicians, countries) in Europe. In 2006, such frames presented politicians as inherently unable to recognise and acknowledge problems with candidate member states due to their own political vanity. In 2010, this means that again the inability of politicians was presupposed, because they are not capable of making the correct judgments, and because they, therefore, wrongly place final political responsibility for the debt crisis on (tax-paying) citizens. Finally, these frames in 2012 contributed to a view of national politicians as actors who shift responsibility onto others, and who also falsely boast about their own honesty. The most important consequence of this mode of representation is that, as similarly found for the analysis of coverage of the social security system, it warrants the idea that political actors and their activities should inherently be approached cynically.

Finally, Chapter 4, '**Flip-floppers and deal breakers: Opportunism and dishonesty**', examined coverage of scandalous political acts or harrowing elements of the political *metier* and how it becomes newsworthy. The chapter concluded that especially communication of and between politicians is considered newsworthy when it presents the idea that politicians do not attach actual consequences to conflicts during election times; that they do not follow through with their bold statements about breaking points, and when it confirms that politicians boast about their own truth in a manner soaked with lies.

The main conclusion of this study is thus **that the relationship between media and political resentment is extremely complex in the Netherlands**. This report has shown how **aversion and distrust** of politicians, because of their perceived political **opportunism, incompetence and dishonesty**, are not necessarily existing psychological moods of citizens that are 'merely' re-presented by the media. Rather, this populist resentment is a **mentality or reader's position**, which is explicitly invited by the **newsworthiness** that the analysed newspapers in the researched election years assign to news from or about politics.

This conclusion is remarkable. Generally, if we want to understand why people are averse to 'Europe', why they fear immigration or why they fear for their pensions, we explore how media explicitly cover these topics. What this study has shown, however, is that we have to focus on what coverage *about* such dominant new themes especially imply about **acts, performances and (moral) consciences of politicians and political institutions**. It would be the political incapacity, dishonesty and opportunism that get in the way of effective protection and measures against the dangers and uncertainties *vis-à-vis* Europe, immigration, pensions, taxes, etc. The problem, for example, 'is' therefore not so much Europe, but rather - according to the news discourse - the actions, behaviour and conscience of politicians and political institutions regarding Europe.

This brings us, finally, to an extremely difficult problem. Are newspapers not simply representing the factual and actual misconduct of politicians? Are they not thereby essentially fulfilling their watchdog role? Yes, and no. Of course, nothing should stand in the way of journalists exposing abuses of power, in monitoring meticulous and transparent democracy. And, of course, there is ample evidence of abuse of political power, also in the Netherlands.

The question is, however, to what extent the mission of national journalism, and media in the broadest sense, are not particularly formed by external competition, mutual competition, and an overriding commercial logic? Thus, we return to the distinction described in the introduction to this paper between '**healthy scepticism**' and '**destructive cynicism**'. The research reported here specifically implicates the role of media in facilitating and inviting destructive cynicism. Widespread populist resentment and sentiment are most probably a problem for politics, but definitely also an issue of media representation. **It would be a major, but also wonderful challenge for the field of journalism to develop a form of representation that: 1) invites critical attitudes and action, rather than passive and cynical indifference; and 2) indeed appears compatible with the justifiable journalistic concern to be commercially sustainable and remain distinctive.**

## References

Cappella, J., & Jamieson, K.H. (2006). 'News frames, political cynicism and media cynicism', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546: 71-84.