The Divided Electorate:
Effects of the Campaign and Media Use on Political Involvement

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Research on the effects of the media in election campaigns has evolved considerably over the past fifty years. The initial assumption of the direct effects of propaganda that emerged out of the experience of WWII was not supported by empirical research on vote choice in the US presidential elections of the 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet. 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee 1954). These studies concluded that personal influence and social networks were very important for maintaining a party identification that for the most part was inherited at birth, and thus any effect of the media in US elections was seen to be largely confined to reinforcing these preexisting partisan preferences. But as the US party system weakened and the new media became major players in the presidential selection process, a broader view of media effects in US presidential elections emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Patterson & McClure 1976; Patterson 1980; Patterson 1993).

Since then, much research into the effects of the media during and in the period leading up to election campaigns has taken a broader perspective on media influence (for a review see Semetko 1996; and LeDuc, Niemi & Norris 1996). It includes, for example, not only changes in vote choice, but also changes in evaluations of parties, candidates, and the political system (attitudinal effects), and in the decision about whether or not to vote (mobilization effects). This broader perspective on effects also includes changes in: knowledge about the issues, the parties and the candidates (cognitive effects); perceptions of the salience of issues (agenda-setting effects); changes in the standards we use to evaluate our political leaders (priming effects); and influences on the way we think about or conceptualize issues or problems (framing effects).

In the European context, the British case has perhaps the longest history of research into the effects of the media in election campaigns. The earliest studies by Trenaman and McQuail (1961) and Blumler and McQuail (1968), concerning the role of television in British elections, lent support to the reinforcement thesis. David Butler and Donald Stokes (1969) explained these findings in the context of the social psychological theories that emphasized interpersonal communication with family and friends, and this fit within the broader framework of socialization theory in which one inherited one’s partisan loyalty. The later edition of their work emphasized how television in part contributed to the slight erosion partisan loyalties found in Britain in the 1960s (Butler and Stokes 1974), but it did not result in further research on the influence of television and the press in elections until 1987 (Miller 1991).

Since then, some attention has been paid to the influence of the media in the subsequent British campaigns. Based on an analysis of the 1987 and 1992 BES panel data to assess the relationship between newspaper reading habits and vote switching during that period, Curtice and Semetko (1994) found that newspapers did have some influence on voters. Those who regularly read a pro-Labour or pro-Conservative newspaper over the longer period were more likely to remain loyal than those who did not read a paper. Those who stopped reading such a newspaper were also more likely to defect. But these effects were small and were not apparent in the last few weeks of the 1992 campaign. A similar study by Curtice (1997) of panel data between 1992 and 1995 found that Conservatives lost their loyalty bonus, rather than being more likely to defect than those who did not read a newspaper at all. But in both studies, there was little evidence of any effect on the aggregate
outcome of the elections. The pro-Labour papers worked to help Labour just as much as the pro-Conservative papers worked to help the Tories. A later analysis of panel data from 1992 to 1997 including the election lent further support to these conclusions. Despite the Sun’s conversion to Labour, it did not bring the party new recruits. And new voters for new Labour did not switch to reading the Sun. Newspapers served to mobilize their loyal readers by reflecting their partisan preferences (Norris et al. 1999: 155-168). Thus, some 30 years after the first studies of media effects in elections in Britain, the reinforcement effect remains the predominant finding.

Drawing on panel data, the studies by Miller (1991) and Norris et al. (1999) also found little in the way of evidence to support media agenda-setting effects in the 1987 and 1997 campaigns. Despite all the coverage about Europe in the 1997 campaign, open-ended survey questions showed that economic issues remained much more important to voters. Using experiments designed to test the agenda-setting effects of television news, Norris et al. (1999:182-83) also found only modest support for such an effect with respect to an ‘unobtrusive’ issue (the problem of overseas development), but no effect on public issue priorities when it came to issues that were already important to voters, such as employment, health care and education. The study also showed that the short-term impact campaign information on civic engagement was nil; specifically, different patterns of media use and attention were not associated with changes in political learning, trust, efficacy, or turnout.

But the British 1997 election study did reveal a positive and significant relationship between attention to news and higher levels of knowledge and civic engagement, which has also been found in other countries outside of election campaigns and was described as a ‘virtuous circle’ (Norris 2000). The 1997 study also found evidence of modest campaign effects on images of party leaders and parties, that were largely important (in terms of vote cast) only for the smaller Liberal Democrats. Finally, the study of the 1997 election shed new light on the influence of television news on party preferences. Using experiments designed to test the effects of television news, it was found that party preferences were not altered by the amount of time devoted to political parties in the news, or by the visibility of certain issues of importance to parties, but instead by the positive or negative direction of the coverage of parties. Specifically, exposure to positive news about a party had stronger effects on vote choice than exposure to negative news.

The Importance of System Characteristics

In his review of studies of campaign events and their effect on the vote, David Farrell (1996) concluded that because most of “the evidence to support the contention that campaigns matter is from studies of campaigns in single-member, plurality electoral systems . . .” it would be worthwhile to explore “. . . the potential for even greater campaign effects under voting systems that allow more scope for strategic voting.” There are also other institutional particularities of the US context, apart from the presidential system, that do not exist to such an extent in Europe or elsewhere and that lead us to question whether conclusions drawn from US studies would hold in other countries. These American institutional particularities include the extremely sophisticated and targeted campaigning operations, the fact that candidates’ election campaigns are heavily based on private donations, and that the media system is very fragmented, localized, competitive, and commercialized (see Swanson and Mancini 1996 for how this compares with other countries).

The countries on the Continent provide examples of multi-party contexts, with proportional representation electoral systems and coalition governments. Research on the contents and effects of the media in national elections in a number of countries points to the popular importance attributed to the media in these electoral contests, and identifies
relationships between media use and a number of variables, including candidate evaluations, party perceptions, issue salience and vote choice (see Semetko 1996 for an overview).

It has been suggested that the context of campaigning that these consensus systems provide means less negative or attack information from the political parties, based on the idea that they must work later together in coalitions (Van Praag 1992; Van Praag and Van der Eijk 1998). The most recent study of media coverage and the flow of voters in the national elections in Germany and The Netherlands, however, shows that when people do change their vote during a campaign because their preferred party was criticized in the news, they tend to shift to the party that is the closest to their preferred party in terms of policy (Kleinnijenhuis & Fan 1999). The conclusion to be drawn from this evidence by campaign managers in future elections is to “both promote negative news about other parties and adopt their issue positions” (1999: 233).

Summing up, the American and British cases have continually demonstrated the force of partisan identification in explaining vote choices, and emphasized the reinforcing role of election campaigns in this respect. More recently, media coverage has also been found to affect vote choice. Multiparty systems might give more room for campaign effects, especially when strategic voting is considered. But the presence of strategic voting depends also on the particular type of electoral system. Moreover, the prospect of post-election coalition formation in many multiparty systems makes all-out campaigning, including negative or attack campaigns, for the parties much less attractive than in two-party systems, though media effects have been found in some cases.

The Netherlands, as a prototypical multiparty consensus democracy, provides an excellent ‘critical case’ for studying campaign effects. The prospects for any campaign effects in the Dutch political system are relatively bleak since the election campaigns themselves are rather low-key affairs (Van Praag 1992). One obvious reason for the relatively friendly, courteous, and cost-efficient Dutch election campaigns is the importance of the post-election process of coalition building. The country is ruled by majority governments, but since the late 1890s no single party has ever secured a majority of the seats in Parliament. The coalitions have often included four or five political parties; at present, the ruling coalition is consists of three parties.

The Netherlands also provides an excellent case for studying media effects because its media landscape, especially television and radio, has undergone tremendous change over the past decades. While the Dutch case offers some similarities to the US in terms of recent trends, it also stands apart from the US in a number of respects. The widely read national press in the country is supplemented by a strong regional press. The press was de-pillarized relatively early, in the 1960s and 1970s. Several newspapers disappeared, while others abandoned their subcultural ties.

There is a marked difference in the developments in the press on the one hand, and in television and radio on the other hand. A free press had been in existence long before the process of pillarization took off in the early twentieth century. In contrast, radio, and later television, came into the Netherlands in an age when the pillarization process was underway, and both ‘statist’ and commercial initiatives were deeply mistrusted by the subcultural elites (Hiemstra 1997). Consequently, the new media were subjected to heavy regulation.

Television and radio have developed from exclusive, state-controlled cartels of pillarized ‘broadcasting organizations’ into a mixed public-commercial system with a wide variety of channels. In the early 1980s, when community antenna systems were already normal, the two public television channels Nederland 1 and 2 still had a monopoly on broadcasts aimed at the Netherlands. The broadcasting organizations and some general service networks divided the available airtime among themselves mainly according to their
Foreign channels were transmitted in extremely limited numbers: typically, a Dutch household was able to watch two Dutch and three German channels, and depending on the location also a Belgian or British channel. Basically the same situation applied to radio.

Under pressure from the European Union, the Netherlands had to give up this grip on television and radio in the 1980s. The public system had also come under attack from the inside: in the 1970s, new, non-pillarized broadcasting organizations had become relatively the largest. From the late 1980s onwards, Dutch commercial television and radio channels were admitted besides the existing public networks. At present, a typical Dutch household is able to watch three Dutch public service networks (with altogether about seven major broadcasting organizations), four more or less established commercial channels (RTL4, RTL5, Veronica and SBS6), and a wide variety of other commercial, foreign, international, regional, specialized channels, and pay-TV. Radio has developed similarly. Cable penetration in the country is almost 100 percent.

Research Questions

In this paper, we discuss a number of possible campaign effects in the Dutch 1998 national election campaign. Our definition of campaign effects is not limited to turnout and vote choice. We are also interested in whether there were any significant shifts of opinion during the election campaign about the parties and the key political leaders and whether the campaign had any influence on political involvement. Given the developments in the media just outlined, we are also interested in the question of whether media exposure during the campaign had any impact on party and candidate evaluations, or on measures of political involvement and political knowledge.

We address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Is there more opportunity today for campaign effects on the vote than in the past?

We expect the answer to be affirmative, since the de-alignment effects of depillarization appear to have been strong in the past decades (Van der Kolk forthcoming).

**RQ2:** Were there any significant shifts in public evaluations of the top candidates and the parties during the campaign?

There is some evidence that the election campaign – narrowly defined as the political events during the last 35-40 days before election day – has important effects on the evaluations of the Prime Minister and his party in the Netherlands (Van Praag and Van der Eijk 1998).

**RQ3:** Is there any development in political involvement during the election campaign?

We would expect any election campaign to have some mobilizing effect on the electorate, which can be seen in their political involvement. Indeed, in coalition systems such as the Netherlands, mobilizing a party’s electorate might be more important than trying to convince the voters of other parties.

**RQ4:** Is there any underlying structure to media use?

On the basis of the developments in the Dutch mass media discussed above, we explore whether it is possible to distinguish among audiences of the various types of public and commercial channels and of the press.

**RQ5:** What is the relationship between media use and evaluations of the parties and candidates?
We discuss whether exposure to public or commercial television and radio programs, or to quality or sensationalist press, is associated with differential evaluations of political actors.

Two final research questions regarding media use are:

RQ6: What is the relationship between media use and measures of political involvement and political knowledge?

RQ7: Do these relationships vary by level of interest?

Before turning to a discussion of our data and methods, we briefly review the context of the 1998 parliamentary election in the Netherlands. The research questions are then answered in the order of their presentation. We conclude with a discussion about the possible implications of our findings for democracy.

The 1998 Parliamentary Election

The May 6, 1998 parliamentary election in the Netherlands took place after a complete parliamentary term that had been remarkable in several respects. Politically, the 1994-1998 government coalition was the first since the introduction of universal suffrage that did not include Christian-Dsocial Democrats. Instead, the traditional opponents PvdA and VVD had formed an unprecedented coalition together with D66, which had lived through its four years’ term without great difficulties. By the end of the coalition’s term, there were no great conflicts that cut through the coalition. Actually, the most pressing question was whether D66 would or would not be part of the next coalition, given its predicted loss of parliamentary seats according to the polls.

The flourishing economy, combined with a continued moderation of wages, had led to the lowest level of unemployment since the mid-1970s. The state budget appeared to be under control, and the Netherlands qualified without great problems for participation in the European Monetary Union. Labor market participation of women – traditionally a weak spot of the Dutch economy - had increased considerably. Major problems that remained were the large number of persons falling under the provisions of the general disability act and the relatively large number of persons in their fifties and early sixties who had withdrawn from the labor market.

Just like four years earlier, the parliamentary elections of 1998 followed shortly after nationwide elections for municipal councils on March 4. As a consequence, the municipal campaigns were highly ‘nationalized’, and all major parties set up campaigns that integrated the two elections.

The four largest political parties, the social-democrat PvdA, the christian-democrat CDA, the market-oriented liberal VVD and the social-liberal D66, all presented draft election programs in September and October 1997. These draft programs were subsequently discussed in the parties, and sometimes in the press. The four parties held their election conventions in late January and early February 1998. These conventions served three main purposes: the election program was presented, the order of the party candidates on the list was determined, and the party was for at least one day the focus of considerable media attention. For all four major parties, the conventions did not result in any surprises, neither in the election programs nor in the lists of candidates. Only for D66 did the subject of party leadership provoke some debate. Some time before, the Minister for Public Health, Els Borst, had been designated as the successor to the immensely popular party leader Hans van Mierlo. As the elections approached and the polls showed probable huge electoral losses for D66, there was some debate about giving a more prominent position in the campaign to the younger members of
D66 in the Parliament, Roger van Boxtel and Thom de Graaf. Eventually Els Borst kept her position as the first person on the list, but Thom de Graaf took the important position of leader of the parliamentary group of D66. In the three other parties, the positions of Wim Kok (prime minister, PvdA), Frits Bolkestein (parliamentary leader, VVD) and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (parliamentary leader, CDA) were not challenged in the nine month period leading up to the 1998 election.

The formal start of the parliamentary election campaigns was immediately after the municipal elections of March 4. However, the municipal elections were widely regarded as a final test before the parliamentary election of May 6. As a final test for the strength of the parties, the municipal elections pointed to a considerable loss for D66, some loss for CDA (which remained the largest party in the municipal elections), small gains for both PvdA and VVD and a better performance than in 1994 of the Green party GroenLinks. Many seats in the municipal councils were taken by independent local political groups. As a final test for the level of political involvement of the Dutch electorate, the municipal elections showed a record low turnout figure of 59.5 percent, compared with 65.3 percent in 1994.

The parliamentary election campaign of 1998 has been characterized as low-key even by Dutch standards. There were no great themes or issues that provoked deep conflicts between parties. There were of course debates and exchanges in the media and press, but the main coalition parties PvdA and VVD had indicated clearly that they preferred continuation of their broad coalition, if possible including the third partner D66. This made it hard for the main opposition parties, CDA and GroenLinks, to form credible alternative coalitions on issues.

The final stage of the campaign started after the Easter holiday break, in the beginning of April. During these final five weeks before the election no important campaign events took place, except for some quarreling between PvdA and VVD about asylum seekers, tax-deductible mortgage interest, and the privatization of social provisions. The focal points of the campaign were the television debates. On 24 April, Prime Minister and PvdA-leader Wim Kok debated with VVD-leader Frits Bolkestein on the commercial channel RTL5 – a “tame debate . . . mainly a repitition of moves” (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1999: 63). On the eve of the election, on May, 5, the leaders of the five largest parties debated one another on public television. This debate produced “no striking proposals or big mistakes” (NRC Handelsblad, 6 May 1998). The Prime Minister repeated his wish that the government coalition be continued after the election.

The election results were more or less as expected, except for the losses for CDA. PvdA remained the largest party in parliament with 45 seats, a gain of 8 seats. VVD became the second-largest party with 38 seats, an increase of 7. CDA dropped from 34 to 29 seats, D66 from 24 to 14. The left-wing parties GroenLinks and SP both won seats, and GroenLinks with 11 seats was approaching the size of D66. The three small orthodox Calvinist parties won one seat, and several other small parties lost their representation in Parliament.

Data and Methods

The data were collected in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 1998 (DPES 1998).¹ This study has a number of special design features that help us to address our

¹ The Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 1998 was conducted by Kees Aarts, Henk van der Kolk and Marlies Kamp on behalf of the Dutch Electoral Research Foundation (SKON). The study has been made possible by grants from the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdomrelations (BZK), the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (VWS), the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP), the University of Amsterdam and the Department of Public Administration and Public Policy of Twente. Information: www.bsk.utwente.nl/skon.
research questions. The DPES 1998 was designed as a short-term (pre- and post-election) panel survey. Moreover, the pre-election survey was set up as a rolling cross-section study. Strictly limited numbers of gross sample units (persons and addresses) were provided to the interviewers, and through a system of bonuses for the interviewers, to be earned by distributing the interviews (near) uniformly over the five weeks period of fieldwork, each week would result in an approximately equal number of interviews, spread evenly over the cells of the stratification matrix.

Apart from the bonus system, which has worked well, the success of this procedure hinges on the question whether the five weekly sub-samples can be regarded as independent from each other. While the five groups were very similar in most demographic characteristics, there was a marked difference in the average age between respondents interviewed in the first week and the last week: the latter are on the average 8 years younger. This reflects the relative ease with which older persons, especially those who no longer have a regular job, can be interviewed at short notice. In all subsequent analyses, we controlled for age, as well as education, in order to avoid attributing effects to campaign dynamics that were really caused by individual characteristics of the interviewed persons. Moreover, in order to enhance the generalizability of the results, analyses on the pre-election survey are based on data weighted by a week-by-week post-stratification factor. This weight corrects the week-to-week fluctuations in region and degree of urbanization.

**Dependent Variables**

Our dependent variables are of two kinds. Firstly, we focus on thermometer scores on a 0-100 scale indicating the respondent’s sympathy or antipathy towards the main 11 political parties competing in the election, as well as towards the main 9 candidates. These thermometer scores have been collected during the pre-election interviews, so that they might reflect any late-campaign movements. The thermometer scores are also used as dependent measures in the analysis of media effects.

The second group of dependent variables consists of some measures of political involvement. Rather than depicting variation in support for specific political parties or candidates, these measures of political involvement reflect diffuse orientations towards politics. We used the following set of measures of involvement, all based on information obtained in the pre-election interviews:

- **Political interest**: frequency of reading about national news and foreign news in the papers (nearly always – often – now and then – seldom or never – does not read papers), joins in on conversation about politics (joins a conversation – listens with interest – does not listen/no interest), subjective political interest (very – fairly – not interested), and an index score obtained from these four items (0 – 4). The unidimensionality of the index score has been assessed (Loevinger’s H = 0.64).

- **Strength of party adherence**: index score based on a series of questions into party identification (neither adherent nor attracted – attracted – adherent – convinced adherent – very convinced adherent). The direction of adherence is ignored here.

- **Ability to place parties on issues**: the number of valid responses (thus excluding ‘don’t know’ or ‘no answer’) to questions about party positions on 5 issues (euthanasia, income differences, asylum seekers, European unification and ethnic minorities), for 6 parties (PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, GroenLinks and GPV). Range: 0-30.

- **Political knowledge (photo’s)**: the number of correct responses on questions about the name, party, and function of four politicians (Jacques Wallage, Thom de Graaf, Annemarie Jorritsma and Piet Bukman) when their photographs are shown. Range: 0-12. The unidimensionality of this index has been assessed (Loevinger’s H = 0.62).
Political knowledge (coalition): incorrect or correct perception of the composition of the government coalition, based on an open-ended question which parties participate in the government. Range: 0-1.

Political interest is also used as an explanatory variable in the analysis of media effects.

**Explanatory Variables**

We focus on both campaign development and media exposure effects.

Campaign development is operationalized through the rolling cross-section design discussed above. It is measured as the week in which the pre-election interview took place. There were 5 weeks of fieldwork, so that this variable can vary between 14 and 18 (indicating the week number).

Media exposure effects have been collected in the drop-off questionnaires that respondents of the post-election interviews were asked to complete and return by mail. The drop-off questionnaire contains a large set of items asking about the frequency of viewing television shows (never – less than once per week - once or twice per week – three or four times per week – almost always), listening to radio channels (never – less than 1 hour per week – 1-8 hours per week – 8-16 hours per week – more than 16 hours per week), and reading daily newspapers (never – less than 15 minutes per day – 15-30 minutes per day – 30-60 minutes per day – more than 60 minutes per day) and weekly magazines (never – less than 60 minutes per week – 1-2 hours per week – 2-3 hours per week – more than 3 hours per week). The items have been factor analyzed for subsequent analyses (see below).

As controls, we used the age and level of education of the respondent. Moreover, whenever the campaign development variable was used, the data were weighted to correct for stratification bias (see above). In the other analyses, the data were weighted by voting behavior, age group, gender, marital status, degree of urbanization and region. Details on the variables and references for the weighting procedures can be found in Aarts, van der Kolk and Kamp (1999).

**Methods**

In order to assess campaign development and media exposure effects, we mainly relied on linear models, except for the effect of the campaign development on party and candidate evaluations where simple comparisons of means are presented. We applied principal components analysis to structure the media exposure data, and linear regression models to assess causal effects.

**Findings**

We began by asking whether there was more opportunity today for campaign effects on the vote than in previous elections. Table 1 displays the time of vote decision in every national election since 1971. This shows that over the past thirty years, more people are waiting to make this decision until the last days or the last weeks or months before election day. The proportion of those who decided prior to that has dropped from about 69 percent in 1971 to 49 percent in 1998. In 1994 and 1998 elections a full quarter did not decide until the last days, and another 14 to 17 percent decided in the last weeks. Clearly, our first question has to be answered affirmatively: nowadays, more people than before appear to make up their minds how to vote close to the election.

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2 The response of the main part of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study was: pre-election: 2,101 (50 percent of the gross sample); post-election: 1,814 (86 percent of pre-election wave); drop-off questionnaire: 1,199 (66 percent of post-election wave).
Our second question asked whether there were any significant shifts of opinion about the parties and the candidates during the campaign. Table 2 displays the early (i.e. 5 weeks before the election, immediately Easter) and the late (the last week before voting day) evaluations of parties and candidates. There were no significant differences. Opinions about the parties and the candidates remained stable, at the aggregate level, in the final weeks of the campaign. This of course does not rule out change at the individual level, which we would be able to capture only with a panel, but it does suggest that any individual level changes would have cancelled out one another so that there was no change at the aggregate level.

Our third question asked about the relationship between campaign development (measured by the week of interview) and some measures of political involvement, controlling for age and level of education. For most indicators of political involvement, there is no effect of campaign development, as is shown in Table 3. For the political knowledge indicator based on showing photo’s, a small positive effect of the campaign development can be seen. But for two other indicators of involvement, reading about national news and the ability to place parties on issues, the analysis shows slight demobilizing effects, meaning that as the final stage of the campaign proceeded, people tended to read less often about national politics in their newspaper, and were less able to place parties on a number of important issues. The effects are not very impressive, but they are controlled for both age and level of education. In sum, if the development of the campaign during the last five weeks before the election had any effects on political orientations and evaluations, apart from familiarizing the faces of politicians it appears to have been to discourage newspaper readership, and diminish abilities to identify where the parties stand on the issues.

Our fourth question concerned whether there is any underlying structure to media use. Three principal components analyses were performed. The first used an extensive list of media exposure to 20 different television programs, each broadcast at least 4 times per week. The second used the battery of exposure measures for 11 different radio channels. And the third used the battery of exposure measures for 7 daily newspapers and 10 weekly magazines. The main results are shown in Table 4.

Three factors explaining television viewing behavior are identified. The first is a public television news factor. This includes news programs from NOS, the Dutch public service broadcaster responsible for the main news programs and political and current affairs magazine type programs such as NOVA-Den Haag Vandaag, which is shown at 10.30 and 11pm every weekday evening, and Netwerk, which is shown immediately after the widely watched 8pm NOS news. The second factor is a commercial TV news factor. This includes news on the commercial channel RTL5, and the news programs on SBS6. Apart from the RTL5 Journaal which was not the subject of previous research, the other news programs are more sensationalist and contain much less political coverage than news on NOS (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). A third factor includes entertainment programming such as the major early evening soap operas on the commercial channel RTL4 in which that channel’s main evening news program is also found. Although RTL4 news has been found to be more similar
to than different from NOS news in its coverage of politics and elections (Van Praag & Van der Eijk 1998; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000) in our study RTL4 news viewers were somewhere in between the more serious political news viewers for public television, and the more sensationalist news viewers on RTL5 and SBS6.

For radio listening, three factors are identified as well. The first of these highlights pop and rock music, the second includes news and classical music, and the third regional and family oriented programs. In contrast with television shows, public and commercial radio channels are not sharply contrasted in this analysis. The nationwide public radio channels Radio 1-5 are found in each of the three components.

Finally, there are also three distinct factors in reading behavior. One is sensationalist or gossip magazines and one daily newspaper, which we describe as pulp. A second is quality press or political oriented news magazines and newspapers that are largely national, liberal and widely read. A third is women’s magazines.

There appears to be a clear structure in the media exposure data. Although the results of the principal components analysis may be vulnerable to the often very skewed distributions of responses, and although more components than those just described may be extracted from the data, the nine components together describe a wide variety of media exposure.3

The factor analysis and subsequent regression analyses have also been performed using maximum likelihood estimation instead of least squares for extracting the factor solution. The results are basically the same for the two methods. Given the properties of maximum likelihood estimation, the similarity of results is taken as evidence for the robustness of the solution.

Table 4 about here

Our fifth question concerned the relationship between media exposure and evaluations of parties and candidates. Table 5 shows that there are some significant predictors of party and candidate evaluations among these nine media groups. The most important conclusion to be drawn from Table 5 is the distinction between public and private in television and radio. Controlling for age and level of education, the strongest and most frequent predictors of evaluations of the parties and candidates is viewing public TV, listening to the news on radio, and reading the quality press. Although there are indications that commercial outlets are not entirely unimportant, they are less important in explaining variation in evaluations.

That said, Table 5 also shows some interesting differences among the various parties and candidates. Of the parties, the left-of-center PvdA, D66 and GL appear to be most liked by frequent viewers of public television news whereas the VVD benefits more from the commercial television news viewers. Listeners to classic and news radio tend to have high opinions of the orthodox Calvinist parties RPF and especially GPV and SGP. This is not entirely surprising since among the churches supported by GPV and SGP, television has for a very long time been regarded as “the eye of the devil.” From this perspective, the pattern of effects in Table 5 makes perfect sense.

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3 The eigenvalues of the components discussed in the text are all above 1.00. The analysis of television shows a marked drop between the second and the third eigenvalue, but the first 6 eigenvalues exceed 1.00. The analysis of radio channels shows only three eigenvalues larger than 1.00. The analysis of press exposure shows 6 eigenvalues exceeding 1.00, but the last three are relatively close to one.

A second order factor analysis of the nine factors did not lead to new insights in the structure of media exposure. Television, radio and press exposure appear to show lower inter-medium than intra-medium correlations.
This pattern was reconfirmed with respect to our last research question, concerning the relationship between political interest, media exposure, and a number of dependent variables measuring involvement and political knowledge. Table 6 displays the results of regression equations for five dependent variables. Of these, four have also been used in the analysis of campaign development in Table 3. The fifth variable is whether the respondent voted or not in the parliamentary election, according to the post-election interviews.

Political interest, which was also used as a measure of political involvement in Table 3, now takes a different position in the causal scheme. Since media exposure is usually seen as a result rather than a cause of political interest, the index score of political interest is now used as a predictor for the other types of involvement. For each of the five dependent variables, we present two regression equations. The first equation includes interest, age and level of education as predictors (results for age and education are not shown in the Table). The second equation then adds the nine exposure factors to that.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from Table 6 is the pattern of positive and significant influence that public television news viewing has on all five dependent variables, and the negative and significant influence that commercial television viewing has on these variables. Public television news and current affairs viewing has by far the strongest and most consistent positive influence on these measures of political involvement and knowledge, and this is when controlling for interest, age and level of education, whereas viewing news on the commercial channels or light entertainment on the commercial channels has a consistently negative influence. Reading the quality press, and listening to news and regional radio, has a positive influence whereas reading the gossip and women’s magazines, or listening to pop and rock radio has a negative influence on involvement and knowledge.

The independent impact of media exposure on these measures of political involvement varies, but is nowhere negligible. The change in adjusted $R^2$ between the model with only interest, age and level of education as predictors is smallest for the strength of party adherence (+0.02) and largest for the two measures of political knowledge (+0.12 and +0.11).

The patterns identified in Table 6 do not change when the analysis is performed for two subgroups (low and high political interest), with one exception. The singular exception is for those respondents in the high interest group who are also fans of rock and pop radio. Listening to rock and pop radio is positively and significantly associated with voting, whereas when it is otherwise significant, it is negatively associated with measures of political involvement or knowledge. Table 7 displays the entire sub-group analysis for those in the low and high interest groups, and confirms that the patterns shown in Table 6 held for all respondents, despite their level of political interest.

Discussion

In the 1998 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, more people than ever before waited to make their decision about how to cast their vote. The percentage deciding how to vote in the last days or weeks before the elections has risen from around 20 percent in the 1970s to almost 40 percent in the 1990s. This development is paralleled by a diminishing
impact of socio-economic characteristics on the vote, and would appear to broaden the scope for campaign effects beyond the reinforcement of existing tendencies. That said, we found no significant shifts in the evaluations of parties and candidates during the final five weeks of the campaign. But our findings point to a more disturbing trend over the course of the campaign: insofar as there was any development in political involvement during the final phase of the campaign, it was to weaken political involvement. Specifically, we found that over the course of the campaign people began to read newspapers less often, and they became less able to distinguish the positions of the political parties. At the same time, however, more people were able to recognize political leaders based on photographs, so there was some positive effect of the campaign.

Our study sought to identify any underlying structure to media use in the increasingly commercialized media market. Media use, conceived as the frequency of watching a variety of TV programs, listening to various radio channels and reading differently styled daily and weekly papers and magazines, appears to be structured (a) according to the media type: television, radio and press and (b) according to a limited number of exposure patterns. For television, the three most important patterns were public television news, commercial television news, and soap or entertainment series. For radio, they were pop and rock music stations, classical music and news stations, and family and regional radio. For the press, the main patterns were pulp magazines, quality press, and woman’s magazines.

Our study showed that media use in some instances was related to the evaluation of political parties and candidates. For example, exposure to public television news shows appears to have had a positive impact on the evaluation of the main center-left parties, PvdA, D66 and GroenLinks and their leaders, whereas watching commercial television news positively influenced the evaluation of the VVD and its leader. Although the relationships were not particularly strong, they remained significant after controlling for education and age.

Our study established that media use can be clearly linked to political involvement, but the relationship is more complex than is often assumed. To take the example of television exposure, watching public television news positively influenced a variety of political involvement measures including turning out to vote. By contrast, watching commercial television news had a negative impact on political involvement, as did watching soaps, reading pulp press, and listening to pop/rock radio stations. Listening to regional and family radio stations and reading quality press positively influenced political involvement. All of these relationships remained significant when controlled for political interest, age and level of education.

Before discussing the wider implications of our findings for the ongoing debates about the role of media in democracy, it is worthwhile to compare our results with other studies of the 1994 and 1998 Dutch elections. In contrast to our findings, direct effects of campaign development on the evaluations of parties have been claimed to exist by Couvret, Van der Eijk and Van Praag (1995) for the 1994 campaign and by Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (forthcoming) for the 1998 campaign. They concluded that, in general, evaluations (measured as the probability of future vote) tend to become more favorable during the election campaign. For the 1994 campaign, Couvret et al. (1995) claimed to find a decreasing evaluation only for the CDA. We suggest that the findings of Couvret et al. (1995) and Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (forthcoming) may be affected by their study design and time frame. Both studies are based on individual panel data obtained in a so-called Telepanel.\footnote{A Telepanel is a sample of persons who are given a home computer connected to the fieldwork organization, in exchange for cooperating regularly in surveys on a variety of topics. Respondents complete the questionnaires by themselves, in a limited time frame, and send the results to the fieldwork organization.}
Individual panel data appear to be not very well suited for tracking evaluations because they are potentially affected by stimulus or Hawthorne effects: people develop political attitudes as a result of being interviewed. Whether such effects exist in electoral research, is still a largely unanswered question, but strong indications have been found in a companion research to the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study of 1998 (Aarts and van der Kolk 1999; Voogt and Van Kempen 1999). Our findings are based on a series of five independent sub-samples of the electorate, interviewed personally, and show that the campaign development had no impact on evaluations in 1998. Moreover, the time frame of both studies extends from almost four months (Couvret et al. 1995) to over seven months (Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 1998), which in both cases is considerably longer than our time frame of five weeks. It can be disputed which time frame is the most appropriate for studying campaign effects, but certainly any narrow definition of the election campaign does not extend to a period of more than one or two months.

It has been claimed that the campaign contents of news is not very different on public (NOS) and commercial (RTL4) television (Meurs, van Praag and Brants 1995); and Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (forthcoming) find no impact of watching public versus commercial news shows on trust in politicians or on the probability to vote for various parties. But we found unambiguous effects of the public-commercial divide on evaluations as well as on political involvement.

An obvious cause of this divergence in findings lies in the data used. Meurs et al. (1995) and Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (forthcoming) base their assertions on a comparison of only two news programs: the NOS Journaal and RTL4 Nieuws. Although these are undoubtedly the most widely watched news programs, there are a variety of other news and current affairs programs on Dutch TV reporting about politics. Our survey data include measures of use of the full variety of news programs and on a number of other frequent and widely watched television programs, together with comparable measures of radio and press use. This enables us to have more reliable insight into the use of media than merely the frequency of watching the two main evening competing news bulletins. It may not the political content of the news shows that marks the difference between public and commercial, but there are differences in style and focus (Van Praag and Brants 1999) that apparently contribute to the differential impact on evaluations and involvement.

Finally, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, de Ridder and Ruigrok (1998: 146) claim that “the news [i.e., campaign and political news in five nationwide newspapers and in NOS and RTL4 news shows; K.A./H.S.] is responsible for a considerable part of the changes in political preferences”, not just on the medium term, but also on the short term. Kleinnijenhuis et al. base their claim on connecting a content analysis of political and campaign news with polls among the Dutch electorate. Their argument is thus based on the indirect evidence provided by comparing developments in and contents of the news, with changes in political preferences among the voters. Although they distinguish among newspaper readers and television viewers among the supporters of the various parties, they do not control for media use or political preference (1998: 128). Thus, their evidence remains highly circumstantial. In contrast, while we do not use content analysis data for the campaign, our media use data enable us to analyze the relationship between media use and political preference directly.

Our findings for media effects on political involvement in the Dutch case are in line with recent results for Britain reported by Newton (1999). Newton sets out by asking whether media exposure leads to mobilization or malaise, and whether it is the form (TV versus newspapers) or the contents (TV news versus general TV, and broadsheets versus tabloids) of the media that matters in this respect. Drawing on data from the 1996 British Social Attitudes survey, he concludes that it is the contents, not the form of the media that matters, and that
depending on those contents the effects of media use are either mobilizing or demobilizing. The results of our analysis of Dutch data (in Table 6) suggest that the British and the Dutch cases are in this respect similar. There is, however, an important difference in the precision of the measurement of media use: the BSA survey contains only general questions into the frequency of watching TV news and general TV, respectively, and reading broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, whereas the DPES study contains detailed lists of different news programs and other TV programs.

Our analysis of media use and its effects on political involvement also gives us the opportunity to pause and reflect upon what may be the beginning of a more serious development in Dutch democracy, one which may also threaten other European countries that have experienced increasing commercialization in their media systems: an electorate divided between the involved and the uninvolved because of their media choices. When controlling for age, education and political interest, exposure to commercial television news in any form exerted a consistently negative influence on political involvement and political knowledge, whereas exposure to public news exerted a consistently positive influence. This suggests that the ‘virtuous circle’, as described by Norris (2000), may only be a virtuous one for those who rely largely on public television for their news, which has become an increasingly smaller number as competition for audiences increases. At the same time, commercial news viewing in the Dutch context, if not ultimately contributing to what Capella and Jamieson (1997) have dubbed a ‘spiral of cynicism’, then is at least diminishing political involvement.

References


