

Guilt and Penance: Prospective and retrospective voting in 2002

ANITA M. J. VAN HOOFF, JAN KLEINNIJENHUIS,
DIRK OEGEMA and JAN A. DE RIDDER

Abstract

The 2002 Dutch election campaign – that at first glance seemed to be an extraordinary campaign due to the rise and assassination of Pim Fortuyn – provides an interesting case to answer the questions to what extent and in which way issues play a role in the considerations of voters to choose for a particular party. A representative panel survey study was used to tap prospective issue considerations and retrospective issue considerations of voters. In this study the dynamics of issue considerations will be assessed using a comparison of the impact of prospective and retrospective considerations on the vote intention early on in the campaign and their impact on the actual voting behavior on Election Day. Although a possible shift from prospective to retrospective issue considerations lies in the mind of voters, the basis of such a shift may be a change in media content during a campaign. A content analysis of the news provides the background for the interpretations of the results. Logistic regression analysis was used to assess the dependence of the party preference on prospective and retrospective issue considerations for each of the major parties in the Netherlands.

Our findings suggest that issues, even in this campaign, played an important role in the decision-making process of voters. Furthermore, we find that a news wave on societal and economic conditions may cause a shift from prospective to retrospective considerations.

Keywords: News effects, election campaigns, retrospective voting

Introduction

An ongoing debate in political communication concerns the relevance of policy issues in the thoughts of voters. The first recurring question is whether issues are still relevant at all in the current age of media commercialization, infotainment and personalization. The popular belief is

that today's fast and bizarre shifts in public opinion polls are incompatible with issue voting. Voters seem to be susceptible of media hypes spun around charismatic politicians, who fill the need of less attentive publics for bite-size chunks of political drama. Notwithstanding this popular belief, a vast body of political science research assents that issues do matter for voters (Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989; Westholm, 1997).

A second question is whether the relevant issues matter in a prospective (Downs, 1957) or in a retrospective way (Fiorina, 1981). Prospective voters ask which party best expresses their personal viewpoints, whereas retrospective voters ask whether they are satisfied with the economic and societal conditions shaped by the ruling parties. This article sheds light on the dynamics of prospective and retrospective considerations, as well as on their dependence on media coverage.

The 2002 Dutch election campaign provides an interesting case with which to answer the questions to what extent and in which way issues do play a role in the considerations of voters to choose for a particular party. The Dutch election campaign of 2002, at first instance, seems to support the popular belief that issue voting is no longer of great importance. The campaign was a spectacular and exciting one, dominated – in retrospect – by the rise and assassination of Pim Fortuyn, a newcomer in the political arena. This charismatic politician operated in a very unconventional way and gained, according to the opinion polls, a lot of support. Our findings, however, suggest that issues, even in this campaign, played an important role in the decision-making process of voters. Furthermore, we find that a news wave on societal and economic conditions may cause a shift from prospective to retrospective considerations.

Literature review

As opposed to the popular belief that issues are becoming less important in the decision making process of voters, stands a diversity of results from political science that indicate that issues still play a role in the thoughts of voters. According to the classical agenda setting hypothesis, long-standing media attention for a certain issue is enough to make it important for receivers (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The priming hypothesis adds to this that more attention for an issue in the news implies that this issue will be of greater importance in the voter's final judgment on politicians (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990).

In current literature, various hypotheses are tested in order to answer the question how citizens compare their own opinions with that of political parties. According to the proximity model, citizens have a rather well

established point of view to certain issues. Based on that, they calculate which party offers the solution with the best fit (Downs, 1957). This implicates that parties that operate in the center of the political spectrum have the best chances to win an election. In the directional model (Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989), it is presumed that citizens prefer a party which offers the most extreme solution in a desired direction to the problems. According to the issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) it is not so much the question who shouts most loudly (as suggested by the directional model), or who performs best in attracting the center (as suggested by the proximity model), but who has the best reputation. Groseclose (Groseclose, 2001) found that as long as policy plans do not have a valence advantage, voters seem to choose for the more extreme position; otherwise, they prefer less extreme points of views.

In regard to the support for, or criticism on parties or politicians, from the media themselves, or from societal actors or political opponents according to the media, it is assumed that support will increase the likelihood that newspaper readers and television viewers will vote for the party being supported, whereas criticism will decrease this likelihood. The general hypothesis that positive evaluations are beneficial, whereas negative evaluations are detrimental for the party or politician being evaluated, is at the heart of the ideodynamic model of David Fan, which is supported by dozens of empirical studies (Fan and Tims, 1989; Fan, 1996; Fan and Tims, 1989; Kleinnijenhuis and Fan, 1999). The effects of attributions of successes and failures in the media will be modeled according to the saying 'success breeds success', also known as the bandwagon hypothesis (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948).

Research on the Dutch elections of 1994 (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Ridder, and Bos, 1995) and 1998 (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Ridder, and Ruigrok, 1998) found support for the agenda setting hypothesis, the priming hypothesis and issue-ownership hypothesis in the Dutch case. Moreover, if agenda setting, priming and issue-ownership all pointed to the same direction (were in favor of a specific party), voters became even more likely to support that party (Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, and Oegema, 2001).

However, in spite of the research results on the priming of issues by the media (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990) it is often taken for granted that issue saliencies remain constant during a campaign. Dynamics of issue considerations have not earned much attention in the literature. This brings us to the question whether issues matter in a prospective or retrospective way.

Voters who base their decision on prospective considerations ask themselves which party best expresses their personal viewpoints (Downs,

1957). Conversely, retrospective voters ask themselves whether they are satisfied with the economic and societal conditions shaped by the government parties (Fiorina, 1981). So retrospective voters will punish candidates whom they hold responsible for, for instance, a bad economy by upholding their votes, or reward candidates whom they believe did a good job in the past. Prospective voters as well as retrospective voters combine information on the economic situation (be it in the future or in the past) with information on the performance of political candidates or parties, information they retrieve from the media.

Several recent studies however found that media have at least a partial autonomy in the portrayal of the economic situation (Goidel and Langley, 1995; Nadeau, Niemi, Fan, and Amoto, 1999; Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, and Fibison, 1999). Goidel and Langley (1995) found that media coverage reflects developments in the economy (as measured by economic indicators) to a certain degree, especially when it concerns negative economic news. The news reacts on economical problems by increasing the attention for economical issues (Shah, et al. 1999).

All these studies were conducted in regard to the presidential elections of the United States. They all point to the direction that there is a significant effect of the news on public opinion. Goidel and Langley (1995) found that media have a significant effect on candidates' evaluation, also after controlling for effect of economic conditions. His findings suggest that the media are likely to have their most pronounced effect on public evaluations of the economy when economic signals are mixed and, subsequently, subject to a variety of interpretations. Hetherington (1996) found that the quantity of regular news and campaign news that voters consumed, helped explain variation in their retrospective evaluation of the national economy in 1992 (in the United States). The more news voters consumed and the more closely they followed the campaign through the media, the worse their retrospective assessments of the economy were. Shah et al. (1999) found that media in general provide most attention to the incumbent president, but not always to their benefit. Incumbent presidents in times of economic recession are confronted with much more negative economic news than their opponents are. When the economy is strong, the valence coverage of the incumbent president predicts public opinion, which means that most voters decide on retrospective considerations. In open elections (when there are no candidates who can be judged on retrospective voting), voters may turn to prospective voting. Nadeau et al. (1999) on the other hand found that presidents, when it comes to economy, are more likely to be judged on prospective than on retrospective considerations. Overall these findings suggest that in times of economic distrust, retrospective voting becomes more important. But still there is not much known about how prospective and retro-

spective considerations work in other countries than the US, with other political systems. The research questions addressed in this article can be formulated as follows: To what degree does party preference depend on retrospective versus prospective issues considerations? Does the importance of prospective versus retrospective issue considerations change during an election campaign? Some insight into the characteristics of the news during the Dutch 2002 election campaign is necessary to understand the dynamics in issue considerations of voters. So before we turn to our main question about prospective versus retrospective voting, we give a brief overview of the 2002 Dutch election campaign.

The news context: A brief overview of the 2002 Dutch election campaign

Content analysis data on media coverage of the campaign

This article attempts to show the possibility of a shift from prospective to retrospective issue considerations in the mind of voters, although the basis of such a shift may lie in a shift in media content during a campaign. Therefore a content analysis of the news of the five national newspapers of the Netherlands with a 100.000+ circulation (De Telegraaf, Algemeen Dagblad, de Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, Trouw) and the three television news bulletins of the Netherlands at the time of the campaign (NOS-Journaal, RTL4 Nieuws and SBS6-‘Het Nieuws’) was performed. Each newspaper article with a party name, a politician, or a political issue in its head or lead was analyzed. Items in the television news program, which referred to a party, a politician or an issue, were also included. The head and lead of each news article, as well as the complete television news item, were reduced to nuclear sentences of the type ‘source: subject / predicate / object’ according to the NETWORKanalysis method for content analysis (Kleinnijenhuis, Ridder, and Rietberg, 1997; Ridder, 2001). The content analysis provides the background of the current article and will not be presented here in depth. However, a few outcomes from this content analysis are necessary to provide the background for the expectation in this article that voters may have made a shift from prospective to retrospective considerations. Knowledge about the election campaign and the portrayal of it in the news media can help us to understand and explain the dynamics in prospective and retrospective behavior of voters.

The 2002 Dutch election campaign

In the fall of 2001 the upcoming general elections of May 2002 started to dominate politics as well as the news about politics. Initially most attention was paid to the question on the expected position of the so-

called 'purple cabinet' after the election. The label 'purple cabinet' was used for the coalition government of the social democrats (PvdA), the progressive Liberals (D66) and the right wing Liberals (VVD). In the news, the PvdA and the VVD joined the battle to become the largest party after Election Day. Besides parties already in parliament, a new party *Leefbaar Nederland* joined the campaign and seemed to become a serious competitor after Pim Fortuyn became the party leader in November 2001. In February 2002, however, this Pim Fortuyn was kicked out of his party because of 'extreme right' opinions ('The Islam is a backwards culture'). He created a new party, the LPF (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*). The new party rose quickly in the opinion polls. The news in February 2002 was dominated by Pim Fortuyn's viewpoints on the issue of asylum seekers, immigrants and the Islam in general and on the – largely unsuccessful – attempts of other parties to declare Fortuyn's viewpoints outside the 'region of acceptability' (Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989).

Pim Fortuyn's star rose further as a result of the television debate after the municipal elections in March, of which he was clearly the winner. Instead of a party program, he published a book in which he framed the government policy as 'Paarse Puinhopen' ('Purple Ruins'). In this book he blamed the government coalition for the problems with asylum seekers, crime, health care (waiting lists for medical care) and education. The Dutch media adopted a negative outlook on the prevailing societal and economic conditions (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Ridder, Van Hoof, and Vliegenthart, 2003). Fortuyn dropped in the polls, however, after he lost a second television debate. However, when the Dutch government coalition resigned one month before the elections of May 15th after they took the formal responsibility for the massacre in Srebrenica after the surrender of Dutchbat, and Pim Fortuyn returned from vacation, the LPF rose again in the polls. Ten days before the elections, on May 6th, an extreme animal rights activist assassinated Fortuyn. In spite of this, the LPF gained 26 seats in the 150-seats Parliament, but the Christian Democrats (CDA) won even more; from a predicted 30 seats in the polls they ended up with a total of 43 seats after the election.

An indication of how these events occurred in the news is provided in table 1, where party related issue news is split up by party and issue. For each party-issue combination the table percentage of the total amount of party related issue news is presented, as well as the average party's policy position on a scale ranging from -1 (party opposes high levels of issue) to $+1$ (party promotes high levels of issue).

The bottom row of table 1 indicates that the coalition parties PvdA and VVD attracted most issue news with the LPF of Pim Fortuyn in third place (9.6 percent). For a party not yet in Parliament this is a remarkable share of the issue news. As compared to previous elections,

Table 1. *Issues per party. (n = 6694 nuclear sentences)*

| | PvdA | | VVD | | D66 | | CDA | | LPF | | Total | |
|----------------------------|------|------|-----|------|------|------|-----|------|-----|------|-------|------|
| | % | Mean | % | Mean | % | Mean | % | Mean | % | Mean | % | Mean |
| Crime | 4.4 | -0.8 | 8.3 | -0.6 | 1.0 | -0.3 | 1.6 | -0.8 | 1.2 | -0.2 | 18.1 | -0.6 |
| Rightist issues | 8.5 | -0.2 | 4.4 | 0.3 | 1.6 | -0.3 | 0.8 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.5 | 17.5 | 0.0 |
| Asylum seekers | 2.7 | -0.1 | 1.7 | -0.7 | 1.5 | -0.1 | 1.7 | -0.7 | 3.1 | -0.5 | 11.8 | -0.4 |
| Leftist issues | 2.9 | 0.1 | 2.1 | -0.6 | 0.5 | -0.7 | 0.6 | -0.7 | 0.8 | -0.7 | 7.7 | -0.3 |
| Health care | 0.7 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 3.4 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0.4 | -0.2 | 5.4 | 0.3 |
| Infrastructure | 3.7 | -0.1 | 0.6 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.7 | 0.2 | 0.7 | 0.1 | 0.4 | 5.1 | 0.0 |
| Campaign | 1.3 | 0.2 | 1.7 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.8 | 0.6 | 5.0 | 0.5 |
| Administrative-reforms | 1.8 | -0.2 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.3 | -0.1 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 4.7 | 0.2 |
| Environment | 2.3 | 0.5 | 0.5 | -0.2 | 0.9 | 0.3 | 0.2 | -0.3 | 0.2 | -0.8 | 4.5 | 0.2 |
| Education | 1.4 | 0.1 | 1.1 | 0.2 | 0.9 | -0.6 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.4 | -0.3 | 4.5 | 0.0 |
| EU | 1.4 | 0.2 | 1.6 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.4 | 0.1 | -1.0 | 3.7 | 0.2 |
| International Interference | 0.9 | 0.0 | 1.1 | -0.2 | 0.3 | -0.8 | 0.2 | -0.4 | 0.2 | -0.4 | 3.2 | -0.3 |
| Valence issues | 1.3 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.8 | 0.0 | -0.2 | 0.5 | -0.5 | 3.0 | 0.4 |
| 'New Left' issues | 0.8 | 0.7 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.2 | 3.0 | 0.2 |
| Christian values | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0.8 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 2.3 | 0.6 |
| Terror | 0.1 | -0.5 | 0.2 | -0.7 | 0.0 | -1.0 | 0.0 | -0.3 | 0.0 | -1.0 | 0.6 | -0.4 |
| Total | 34. | -0.1 | 26. | -0.2 | 12.3 | 0.0 | 7.6 | -0.2 | 9.6 | -0.2 | 100. | -0.1 |

leftist issues and issues of the 'New Left' attracted less attention (7.7 percent and 3.0 percent respectively) (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998). The issues of the campaign were crime (18.1 percent), rightist issues (17.5 percent) and 'asylum seekers' (11.8 percent). It should be noted that the label 'asylum seekers' includes issues such as ethnic minorities and immigrants, whereas the label 'rightist issues' includes issues such as reducing government expenditures, lowering taxes and privatization.

According to the issue ownership theory a party does well when their associations with their own issues remain strong. Since only 2.9 percent of party related issue news was devoted to the 'leftist' policy position of

the PvdA on its own leftist issues, the obvious conclusion that the PvdA did not perform well. The other leftist parties, SP (socialist party) and GroenLinks (environmentalists), also performed poorly. Actually the PvdA devoted much more energy (8.5 percent) to its opposition, rightist viewpoints on rightist issues (-0.2).

According to the directional theory of issue voting (Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989) a party should take extreme rather than neutral viewpoints to attract voters. According to this theory, the new right party LPF of Pim Fortuyn overtrumped the traditional right wing party VVD. The LPF was more opposed to leftist views on leftist issues (-0.7) than the VVD (-0.6). The LPF was more in favor of strong rightist positions on rightist issues ($+0.5$) than the VVD ($+0.3$). The LPF attracted more attention for its policy position on asylum seekers (3.1 percent) than the VVD did (1.7 percent). Pim Fortuyn launched extreme viewpoints in the beginning of the campaign (he called the Islam a backwards culture). But when the elections came close he also proposed 'soft' measures, such as a general pardon for illegal immigrants who had been in the Netherlands for a number of years. By this token, Fortuyn prevented that he surpassed the 'boundary of acceptability' in the eyes of the voters, although he had already surpassed this border in the eyes of his political opponents. On average, the position of Fortuyn on asylum seekers was less tough than the position of the VVD (-0.5 versus -0.7). Thus, a traditional analysis of party-issue-associations in the press indicates sufficiently why the PvdA and the VVD would lose the elections. Actually these parties dropped from 45 to 23, and from 38 to 24 seats respectively in the 150-seats Parliament.

The content analysis demonstrates indeed that the asylum seekers issue dominated the news in February. The content analysis data show also that during the 2002 campaign, especially after the publication of Fortuyn's book on the purple ruins in the midst of March, the portrayal of societal and economic conditions in the Netherlands was extremely negative. Whereas in the preceding 1998 campaign the media noted positive developments in respect to consensual issues such as employment (valence issues) and with respect to 'rightist' issues such as business profits, they reported only negative developments in 2002 (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Ridder, Van Hoof, and Vliegenthart, 2003).

So based on theories on agenda setting, priming and issue ownership, it can be expected that the amount of media attention for rightist issues, asylum seekers and crime fighting and the importance given to these issues in the news, would favor rightist parties over leftist parties. Moreover, during the campaign the news took over Pim Fortuyn's definition of the situation, i.e., the societal and economic situation in the Netherlands was characterized as 'purple ruins'. Given that the situation was

defined as a situation of economic distrust, we can expect that retrospective voting becomes more important during the campaign. We now turn to our main question on the dynamics of retrospective versus prospective issues considerations.

Prospective and retrospective voting in 2002

Method: Public opinion data

A representative panel survey study conducted by Blauw Research¹ was used to tap prospective issue considerations (February 22nd–25th, 2002, $n = 924$ respondents) and retrospective issue considerations of voters (March 8th–10th, 2002, $n = 783$ respondents). The dynamics of issue considerations will be assessed in this study by a comparison of the impact of prospective and retrospective considerations on the vote intention in March ($n = 783$ respondents) with their impact on the vote of May 15th 2002 (Panel wave of May 16th–20th 2002, $n = 638$ respondents).

Prospective issue considerations were tapped by asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a specific party on issues, which were subjectively associated with that party. For each party X the first question was “which issue do you think of in the case of X”, followed by a second question to reveal the second issue associated with X. Respondents were asked to make their choice from a list of the 18 issues which were deemed most important in the 2002 campaign. This list was compiled on the basis of the media coverage thus far (see above). Next, for each of the two issues Y associated with each of the parties the question was asked, “Do you agree or disagree with the policy of X regarding Y?” using a five-point rating scale. Prospective agreement of a respondent with a party was operationalized by asking the respondent to either agree or disagree with that party on its two foremost salient issues. Prospective agreement with a party is one of the independent variables in the regression model that will be tested.

Retrospective issue considerations were tapped by asking the respondents for each of eighteen issues who was held guilty for the problems in the issue area. Respondents could blame one of the parties, all parties, the governing parties, or no political actor at all. Retrospective (dis)satisfaction of a respondent with a party was operationalized as the number of issues for which a party was blamed.

Logistic regression analysis was used to assess for each of the major parties in the Netherlands the dependence of the party preference on prospective and retrospective issue considerations. Whether prospective or retrospective considerations are more important can be deduced from

a comparison of the relative magnitude of the impact parameters for prospective and retrospective issue considerations (as indicated by the Wald coefficients²). Whether prospective or retrospective considerations gain importance as the elections approach follows from a comparison of the magnitude of the impact parameters of prospective and retrospective considerations on party preferences in an early phase of the campaign (beginning of March 2002) with the magnitude of the impact parameters of these prospective and retrospective considerations on the final vote (midst of May 2002).

Results

Prospective considerations: Agreement with party views on party related issues

Previous studies have shown that voters compare political parties on a limited amount of viewpoints. In this study prospective issue considerations were tapped by asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a specific party on issues, which were subjectively associated with that party. For each party X the first question was "which issue do you think of in the case of X", followed by a second question to reveal the second issue associated with X. Next, for each of the two issues Y associated with each of the parties the question was asked, "Do you agree or disagree with the policy of X regarding Y?" using a five-point rating scale. In table 2 the results are shown. The assessment of the party's viewpoints is expressed in a report mark (ranging from 0 to 10). A single or double asterisk marks the dynamic in opinions. On most issues, viewers evaluate the parties almost unanimously, while the differences in opinion on a few issues are large (marked by a single asterisk) or very large (marked by a double asterisk). A unanimous report mark 5 is much more annoying for a political party than a controversial 5; in the latter case much more voters will favor the particular party.

Table 2 shows that most parties, from the perspective of the Dutch voters, are associated with a limited number of issues. Voters agree, to a large extent, on which issues are at stake for what party.

The PvdA (social democrats) as a party is associated with issues of social welfare (50 percent), employment (35 percent), and a third purple cabinet (19 percent). For the latter, the PvdA scores a four. In 1998, 42 percent of the voters associated the PvdA with employment; in 2002 this percentage is diminished to 35 percent.

In 1998 the VVD (right wing Liberals) was primarily associated with the issue of asylum seekers (33 percent). In 2002 only 9 percent associated the VVD with this topic. In terms of the issue ownership theory of Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996), this means that the VVD

Table 2. *Percentage voters that associate a party with an issue, mean report mark and dynamics in opinions.*

| | PvdA | | VVD | | D66 | | CDA | | LPF | |
|----------------------------------|------|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| | % | mark | % | mark | % | mark | % | mark | % | mark |
| social welfare | 50 | 6 | 4 | 5 * | 9 | 6 | 10 | 6 | 3 | 6 |
| crime | 7 | 5 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 10 | 6 | 32 | 6 * |
| employment | 35 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 6 |
| health care | 9 | 5 * | 3 | 5 | 15 | 4 * | 10 | 7 | 5 | 8 |
| environment | 2 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 5 |
| government financing | 8 | 5 | 17 | 6 * | 1 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| referendum | 0 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 26 | 6 * | 0 | 6 | 0 | 8 |
| third purple cabinet | 19 | 4 * | 4 | 4 * | 13 | 4 * | 4 | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| part-time work | 2 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 7 | 0 | |
| asylum seekers and foreigners | 4 | 3 | 9 | 6 * | 4 | 3 | 7 | 5 * | 74 | 4 ** |
| family | 2 | 6 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 8 | 38 | 6 * | 0 | 9 |
| norms and values | 2 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 34 | 7 | 15 | 4 ** |
| accessibility (traffic jams etc) | 4 | 3 | 6 | 5 * | 3 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| educational quality | 7 | 6 * | 2 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 8 |
| euthanasia | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 11 | 5 ** | 9 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| nuclear powerplants | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 0 | . | 0 | . |

had lost this issue to the LPF. In 1998, 19 percent of the electorate associated the VVD with crime fighting. In 2002 this percentage has fallen to 10 percent, much lower than the corresponding percentages with the LPF. The VVD presents itself nowadays most strikingly as a party of government financing (17 percent). VVD's opinion on government financing is controversial, but is on average positively evaluated (6).

The D66 (left wing Liberals) is notable for its viewpoint on the referendum (26 percent), but, also on the issues of health care (15 percent), a third purple cabinet (13 percent) and euthanasia (11 percent). D66's list of marks is extremely poor: only sixes and less, except for one occasion.

The CDA (Christian Democrats) is – in the eyes of voters – still the family party (38 percent) and the party of norms and values (34 percent). Compared to 1998, in 2002 CDA's position on norms and values receives a better evaluation: a 6 on average in 1998, now a 7 (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1998: 112). Voters' attention for social issues, for crime fighting, for euthanasia, and for policy on asylum seekers and the multi-cultural society, remains. The CDA-viewpoints on family matters are controversial; the viewpoints on norms and values are not.

The LPF (List Pim Fortuyn) creates a distinct profile of oneself (in the eyes of the voters) as a party with strong viewpoints on asylum seekers (74 percent), on crime fighting (32 percent) and on norms and values (15 percent, although the latter is much less prominent than CDA's viewpoint). Almost everybody associates Pim Fortuyn with the issue of asylum seekers, and Fortuyn's viewpoints are considered to be very controversial.

In general, the government parties were not very successful in putting their issues in the spotlight. This applies most strongly to the VVD, who in fact lost their issue of crime fighting and asylum seeking to the LPF. The problem of the PvdA and the D66 lies in the fact that the voters disagreed with them on their 'owned' issues, the third purple cabinet and health care, while other leftist issues did not receive much attention in the news.

Retrospective considerations: A parties 'guilt' of societal problems

So far we have discussed the issues political parties are associated with, and whether or not voters agree with the parties' viewpoints. But voters also consider how well these viewpoints will work in solving problems. Here we examine the question who is held responsible for the problems in the country. Do voters, as well as Pim Fortuyn see 'purple ruins' all around? These questions were asked in the second panel wave, early march 2002.

For eighteen issues respondents were asked who was to be held responsible for the problems in the issue area. Respondents could blame one of the parties, all parties, the governing parties, or no political actor at all.

According to the constitution, the ministers are responsible for their actions, therefore it is reasonable to expect that the governmental parties will be blamed. However, the data show that politicians are held responsible for many but not all problems. For one problem a specific minister is held responsible, for another problem the government as a whole, for another politics in general, and for some problems no political actor is held responsible at all. Supporters of one particular party blame the government parties, while supporters of other parties think that politicians are not to be blamed at all. The extent to which the parties are blamed for problems, is also affected by the specific topics chosen. Table 3 presents the extent to in which politicians are held responsible for the problems in the country, itemized by party preference.

Table 3 clearly shows that voters do hold the purple coalition parties responsible for several problems. A little more than 50 percent of the supporters of the LPF and the CDA place the blame on the purple coalition. Notably, also a fair amount of the VVD voters holds their 'own' purple coalition responsible for the national problems. Somewhat less than one third of the voters on D66 and PvdA blame the purple

Table 3. *Who is to blame for problems in the country? (Row percentages, itemised by party preference)*

| Voters | Governing parties | An opposition party | All parties | No political actor |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| PvdA | 32% | 11% | 25% | 32% |
| VVD | 43% | 10% | 22% | 25% |
| D66 | 30% | 7% | 38% | 25% |
| CDA | 50% | 5% | 23% | 22% |
| LPF | 50% | 5% | 21% | 24% |
| Do not know | 44% | 5% | 16% | 36% |
| Non voters | 16% | 11% | 17% | 56% |

coalition. The D66 and PvdA-supporters seem to have a stronger identification with the purple cabinet than the VVD supporters.

Supporters of the coalition parties do relatively often hold the opposition responsible for the listed problems (PvdA 11 percent, VVD 10 percent, D66 7 percent). The opinion that all parties are responsible to the same extent for the problems in the country, is heard most often among D66 voters (38 percent). This view is also relatively popular among PvdA voters.

The fifth column shows whether or not voters see the society as malleable by political intervention, that is to say that problems arise through political decision or can be dealt with by policy. One quarter or less of the voters for the LPF, D66 and the VVD do not blame the problems on politicians; i.e., three quarters of the supporters of these parties believe that society can be influenced by political decisions. Against this background it is remarkable that only 32 percent of the rank and file of the PvdA, which is traditionally characterized by a high belief in government involvement, do not blame national problems on political actors.

Voters and non-voters differ on average on the issue of guilt. More than half of the respondents, who do not have the intention to vote, see no political responsibility for the national issues. They seem to have lower expectations in the capacity of politicians to solve problems, than voters do. As a result of that, the act of voting becomes almost useless. The answers of voters who do hold political parties responsible, confirm this idea. Not only is the category for placing the blame on the political parties much smaller, non-voters do not differ from voters in putting the blame on the purple coalition, the opposition or the politics as a whole.

We found a statistical relationship between the respondent's political knowledge, which is measured by factual questions about politicians, and the denial of political responsibility for national problems. The higher the political knowledge, the more often the governmental parties

will be blamed. Pim Fortuyn's supporters score on average lower on political knowledge as compared to the supporters of any of the 'old' political parties in the parliament. This being the case, it is remarkable that so many supporters of Pim Fortuyn believe that the purple coalition is responsible for the problems in the country. Pim Fortuyn obviously attracted voters with little political knowledge who have a – for this group uncharacteristic – belief in a malleable society.

In table 4 the question of guilt for each of the problems is presented in percentages, ordered to the amount in which the 'purple parties' are held responsible. For two out of three voters the 'purple parties' are held responsible for problems in health care (66 percent). And fifty percent or more holds the coalition parties responsible for problems in education (58 percent), in social security (55 percent), in public transportation (53 percent), in problems with asylum seekers and foreigners (52 percent), and for traffic-jams (50 percent). The PvdA, being the most important party in the coalition, is considered to be the largest wrongdoer, with the exception of problems in the health care (this issue is owned by D66). The VVD and the D66 are considered less culpable of the 'purple ruins'. A small proportion of the voters put blame on the opposition party CDA, for causing these problems.

Table 4b presents those problems for which only a minority of the voters holds the purple coalition parties responsible. These problems can be regarded as either issues which did not come up very prominently in the news, or as specific CDA-issues. Among the first category are issues such as the abuse of social security, unemployment, and pollution. The CDA-specific issues are issues like the decline of norms and values, work-related pressure, and problems in families. For most of the voters, these problems are not attributed to political parties.

The order of rank in table 4 does not per se indicate the most important problems in the country according to the voters and therefore cannot directly be compared with the amount of attention paid to the different issues in the news as shown in table 1. However, we have seen that especially after the publication of Fortuyn's book in the midst of March 2002, the news copied Pim Fortuyn's negative portrayal of societal and economic conditions and started to use his label 'purple ruins' to describe the situation in the Netherlands. The issues that emerge in table 4 as the ones caused by the governing parties, are also among the issues which Pim Fortuyn described as problematic issues which were badly dealt with by the government. And the issues where the majority of the voters did not assign the blame on the government parties did not receive as much attention in the news,

Table 4a. *Who is guilty of national problems? (Ordered by percentage voters who hold purple coalition parties responsible)*

| | Problems in health care | Problems in education | Problems in social security | Problems with public transportation | Problems with asylum seekers | Traffic jams | Insecurity in public spaces | National debt | Drugs related nuisance |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Governing parties | 66 | 58 | 55 | 53 | 52 | 50 | 49 | 49 | 48 |
| All governing parties to the same degree | 35 | 38 | 27 | 32 | 29 | 30 | 36 | 29 | 33 |
| PvdA | 7 | 11 | 18 | 11 | 19 | 11 | 10 | 16 | 10 |
| VVD | 7 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| D66 | 17 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Opposition parties | 7 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 16 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 8 |
| CDA | 5 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| LPF | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| All parties | 17 | 19 | 22 | 17 | 21 | 26 | 23 | 22 | 24 |
| No political cause | 11 | 17 | 17 | 26 | 11 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 20 |
| Do not know | 8 | 15 | 13 | 11 | 7 | 12 | 12 | 16 | 13 |
| No political party | 3 | 2 | 4 | 14 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 6 | 7 |

One issue in table 4 – the faith of the Muslims in Srebrenica in 1995 – is of specific interest, because it clearly illustrates the dynamics of news and the consequences it has on voters' opinions. The faith of the Muslims in Srebrenica in 1995 was not classified as a 'black page' in the history of the purple coalition at the time of the questionnaire. For only 29 percent of the respondents, the purple coalition can be held accountable. The issue Srebrenica entered the spotlight in week 15 and 16 as a result of the publication of the NIOD-report³ which lead to the resignation of the government. Therefore the question of guilt was repeated in the fifth panel wave.

News on the position of Dutchbat in Srebrenica was the most important issue news in week nine and ten. In order to analyze the impact of the news on the political preference of voters, the following question is repeated in the panel wave of week ten: "Who is guilty in the first place for leaving the Muslim population in Srebrenica in 1995 to fend for themselves?" (see table 5).

In absolute terms, the percentage of voters that blamed the coalition parties for leaving the Muslim population to fend for themselves

Table 4b. *Who is guilty of national problems? (continued). (Ordered from left to right by percentage voters who hold purple coalition parties responsible)*

| | Fraud and corrup- tion | Abuse of social secur- ity | Un- em- ploy- ment | Envi- ron- men- tal pollu- tion | Decline of norms and values | Fate Mus- lims Srebe- nica in 1995 | High work- ing pres- sure, stress | Family prob- lems | ESF- affair |
|--|---------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|---|--|--|-------------------------|----------------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Governing parties | 48 | 48 | 42 | 42 | 37 | 29 | 28 | 25 | 22 |
| All governing parties to the same degree | 31 | 29 | 28 | 29 | 24 | 23 | 15 | 14 | 13 |
| PvdA | 6 | 15 | 9 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 7 |
| D66 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| VVD | 10 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 1 |
| Opposition parties | 4 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 8 | 2 |
| CDA | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| LPF | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| All parties | 23 | 25 | 24 | 26 | 23 | 18 | 20 | 20 | 11 |
| No political cause | 26 | 21 | 27 | 26 | 30 | 47 | 49 | 47 | 64 |
| Do not know | 17 | 13 | 13 | 19 | 14 | 27 | 24 | 17 | 61 |
| No political party | 8 | 8 | 14 | 7 | 15 | 19 | 25 | 29 | 3 |

increased remarkably from 29 percent to 47 percent. So the possible impact of news is clearly demonstrated by this case. Most of the guilt is attributed to the PvdA (8 percent). Other parties, who according to the NIOD report also played a significant role in the Srebrenica-drama, were held less responsible in week ten than in week five. Although the percentage of voters who blamed the coalition parties increased significantly, this does not mean that the issue as such became a major topic in the ranking of the national problems. In terms of questions of guilt, the Srebrenica-issue is a minor issue; it climbs in rank from the fifteenth to the twelfth position. The Srebrenica drama was not framed in the news as an issue belonging to the 'purple ruins'.

Generally speaking, voters follow the dominant definition of the situation as sketched in the news. This applies more strongly to social or economic problems which affect the daily life of citizens, than for problems that do not concern voters directly as the Srebrenica case shows. The purple coalition was blamed for most of the national problems and from the coalition parties, the PvdA was held most responsible.

Table 5. *Who is guilty in the first place for leaving the Muslim population in Srebrenica in 1995 to fend for themselves?*

| | week 10 % | week 16 % |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| Governing parties are guilty | 29 | 47 |
| All governing parties to the same degree | 23 | 38 |
| PvdA | 3 | 8 |
| D66 | 1 | 0 |
| VVD | 31 | 1 |
| Opposition party is guilty | 5 | 2 |
| CDA | 3 | 2 |
| LPF | 1 | 0 |
| All parties to the same degree | 18 | 34 |
| No political party at all, do not know | 47 | 15 |

Penance: The impact of retrospective issues on the Dutch parliament elections of 2002

In this section we will discuss the extent to which voters ‘get even’ with political parties. Table 6, for example, shows the percentage of the voters that did change their political preferences during the campaign. Compared to the Dutch population, floating voters, non-voters and supporters of the VVD, are underrepresented in our Internet survey panel. A weight factor was used to indicate this.

Following what most of the respondents, who changed their party preference during the campaign, indicated, specific topics in that week’s news played an important role in their change of opinion. Table 6 shows

Table 6. *Party preference in February 2002 and vote on May 15th 2002*

| | Party preference February (%) | Party preference election 15 May 2002 (%) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| PvdA | 15 | 13 |
| VVD | 12 | 13 |
| D66 | 4 | 7 |
| CDA | 14 | 24 |
| LPF (not yet in parliament) | 16 | 15 |
| Other parties | 26 | 25 |
| Do not know | 12 | not applicable |
| No intention to vote / not voted | 2 | 5 |
| | N = 924 | N = 638 |

the tendency that is also found in other opinion polls: the Christian Democrats (CDA) win, the coalition parties (social democrats PvdA, right wing Liberals VVD and left wing Liberals D66) lose.

The results in table 7 show the extent to which voters were influenced by retrospective or prospective issues. To come to these results, we calculated per respondent per party whether one agreed or disagreed with a party's point of view. The second issue was given less weight than the first issue (0.9 to 1). Furthermore, we calculated per respondent the number of problems he or she put blame for on a specific political party. The last issue was transformed into the question whether or not a party was not responsible for the to problems, for the purpose of a plain interpretation of the coefficients in table 7. Both sets of questions were asked in the panel wave of February 2002. If retrospective issues indeed prove to play a larger role during the election campaign, we expect that, for the coalition parties, the impact of retrospective considerations on the actual voting behavior will be stronger than the impact on voting preference in February.

To test this hypothesis, a logistic regression analysis was used. The answer to the question whether either prospective or retrospective considerations are more important will follow from a comparison of the relative magnitude of the impact parameters for prospective and retrospective issue considerations (i. e., the Wald coefficients). The answer to the question whether either prospective or retrospective considerations gain importance as the elections come closer, follows from a comparison of the impact parameters of prospective and retrospective considerations on party preferences in an early phase of the campaign (February 2002) compared to the impact parameters on the final vote (May 15th 2002).

Table 7 shows that the impact of issues on the explanation of the final vote in May 15th 2002, was not as strong as the impact of issues on the explanation of party preference in February 2002 (Nagelkerke's R^2 is lower just after May 15th 2002 than in February 2002). This means that for the final vote, other explanations besides issues are important.

Especially for the LPF Nagelkerke's R^2 is high, meaning that voters supported or not supported this new party because they agreed or disagreed with it's points of view. One could expect that the overwhelming media-attention for Pim Fortuyn as a person (gay, brutal, would be aristocratic, theatrical), enabled him to express his opinions. Nevertheless, policy issues can explain the preference for the LPF. In this respect one should evaluate the LPF as an enrichment of the democratic political landscape.

Secondly, table 7 shows that in absolute terms prospective considerations are more important than retrospective considerations. Retrospective considerations do, however, play a significant role.

Table 7. *Relative impact of prospective and retrospective considerations on voting preferences in February 2002 and actual voting behavior on May 15th 2002.*

| | Impact on voting preference February – Wald coefficient | | | Impact on vote, election May 15th 2002 – Wald coefficient | | |
|-------------|--|---|--------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| | Prospective: agree with point of view? | Retrospec- tive: guilty of problems? | Nagel- kerke R ² | Prospective: agree with point of view? | Retrospec- tive: guilty of problems? | Nagel- kerke R ² |
| PvdA | 68 * | 5 * | 0.31 | 35 * | 8 * | 0.24 |
| VVD | 83 * | 4 * | 0.42 | 48 * | 7 * | 0.28 |
| D66 | 39 * | 4 + | 0.31 | 28 * | 5 * | 0.28 |
| CDA | 76 * | 4 * | 0.31 | 64 * | 0.3 | 0.24 |
| CU | 43 * | 0.5 | 0.59 | 26 * | 0.03 | 0.45 |
| SGP | 13 * | 0.004 | 0.51 | 6 * | 0.00 | 0.60 |
| Groen Links | 55 * | 0.5 | 0.28 | 33 * | 0.03 | 0.27 |
| SP | 45 * | 0.3 | 0.39 | 33 * | 0.05 | 0.26 |
| LPF | 123 * | 0.01 | 0.62 | 64 * | 2 | 0.34 |
| LN | 29 * | 0.1 | 0.15 | 10 * | 2 | 0.13 |

* Significant, $p < .05$ + almost significant, $0.05 < p < 0.10$

To answer our main question, it is important to see whether the importance of retrospective considerations for one of the coalition parties has increased. This indeed seems to be the case. For the PvdA, the Wald coefficient increases from 4 to 8, for the VVD from 4 to 7 and for D66 from 4 (just insignificant at alpha is 5 percent) to 5. Thus, the LPF campaign strategy of focusing on the ‘purple ruins’ has been a very successful strategy. During the campaign, the retrospective question of guilt grew in importance for voters. It is also remarkably that the Christian Democrats (CDA) (a party that had always been in power until 1994), in February 2002 was still held responsible for some ‘old’ problems. But on the final vote at May 15th 2002, the impact of CDA’s guilt had floated away.

Conclusion and discussion

The Dutch elections of 2002 were extraordinary in the sense that a newcomer in the political arena (even after being assassinated) managed to win as much as 26 seats (out of 150). Furthermore, the Christian Democrats (CDA) that had been in the opposition for eight years, won a very surprising 13 extra seats. This study analyzes the extent to which and the way in which these shifts can be explained by issue considerations of voters.

The 2002 Dutch electoral campaign can be characterized by a clear news pattern, that is, news attention was focused on a limited number of

issues (rightist issues, asylum seekers and crime fighting) and the overall evaluation of the news was rather negative. Our study shows that these patterns are reflected in public opinion. So again the agenda setting and priming hypothesis are confirmed in the 2002 Dutch case. Although we did not compare the definition of the news with other societal and economic indicators, it seems obvious that the definition of the situation as given by the news is more inspired by Pim Fortuyn's point of views than by other economic indicators. On the one hand, our results confirm the findings of several recent studies in that media have at least a partial autonomy in the portrayal of the economic situation (Goidel and Langley, 1995; Nadeau, Niemi, Fan, and Amoto, 1999; Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, and Fibison, 1999). On the other hand, media seem to be very susceptible to follow the definition of news sources with a very strong news value profile. In that respect, the autonomy of the news seems to be rather weak.

In terms of issue ownership theory, the government parties lost their 'own' issues. This is most strongly the case for the right wing Liberals (VVD), who lost their issues of crime and asylum seekers to the LPF (List Pim Fortuyn). These issues also dominated the news during the campaign. Such a fast overrun of issue ownership contradicts the classical issue ownership theory, which states that building a reputation requires a long-time investment in order to gain a short-term profit. However, supported by news coverage, the LPF performed extremely well in terms of prospective considerations. The situation was very different for the social democrats (PvdA). In the news, not much attention was paid to leftist issues, so in terms of prospective considerations, it was much harder for the PvdA to gain their voters support.

Our findings suggest that it is very important for politicians and political parties to have a strong impact in the news. The dynamics in the news of the 2002 Dutch election campaign, point to opportunities for political parties and politicians. For political parties a clear and strong issue reputation is very important. But even more important is the attention given to these issues in the news. The rank and file of most salient issues in the news are not very stable. Strong media players can benefit from that, for less strong players this dynamic situation is much more dangerous.

In general, our analysis shows that voters preference for a party relies more on prospective than on retrospective considerations. This means that voters primarily choose the party that best expresses their personal viewpoints, that is, they, first of all, choose a party based on issue considerations. This is in line with the findings of Nadeau et al. (1999). Again this study shows that despite the popular belief, issues still play a role in the thoughts of voters. But we also found that on the final vote, issues

became less important in the decision making process than earlier on in the campaign. Retrospective considerations, i.e., considerations concerning the national problems and who is to be blamed for it, were of more importance in the final vote. In other words, the 'purple ruins' campaign of Pim Fortuyn, which was very strongly reflected in the news, 'primed' the voters in a retrospective way. It primed the voters in their belief that there were 'purple ruins' all around and that the 'purple coalition' was to be blamed for it. Retrospective considerations also proved to be helpful at the end for the Christian Democrats (CDA).

Previous research on prospective versus retrospective voting primarily focused on the impact of economy on public opinion. Our study shows that retrospective voting behavior is not limited to opinions on economy. Other societal problems such as problems around asylum seekers, crime and health care, can also increase the importance of retrospective voting behavior. But in times of distrust, be it economic or societal, retrospective voting becomes more important. Or to put it in the way Goidel and Langley (1995): in mixed situations, subject to a variety of interpretations, retrospective considerations matter more. For problems that do not concern voters directly, as the Srebrenica case indicates, retrospective considerations are not so important. Although even in this case news attention has a distinctive but overall not major impact on the opinion of voters.

Generally speaking, our findings confirm the results from previous American studies on prospective versus retrospective voting in the US. This suggests that not the political system is the main instigator of these processes. The dynamics in public opinion during an election campaign are first and foremost inspired by patterns in the news.

Notes

1. Data from the 8-wave panel survey "Political Issues Monitor 2002" were kindly made available to the authors by Blauw Research BV.
2. In contrast with the logistic regression coefficient b , the Wald statistic is not sensitive to linear transformations of the measurement scale of the independent variable. In this respect the Wald statistic resembles the standardized regression coefficient from ordinary regression. The Wald statistic is computed as the squared estimate of b divided by its squared standard error.
3. NIOD stands for National Institute for War Documentation. The NIOD was contracted by the government to investigate the responsibility for the massacre. On response to the conclusions of the NIOD report, the coalition took formal responsibility and resigned.

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