Issue news and electoral volatility

A comparative analysis of media effects during the 1994 election campaigns in Germany and the Netherlands

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Abstract. This article shows that issue coverage in the media partly explains both the political landslide at the 1994 elections in the Netherlands and the political continuity in the 1994 elections in Germany. Theories of issue voting guided the research. Issue ownership theory maintains that voters will remember which party has the best record of solving problems in emphasized issue areas. Proximity models and directional models suggest that voters’ own issue positions will be compared to the perceived issue positions of parties. A longitudinal content analysis of ten newspapers and five television news programmes was performed to ascertain selective issue emphasis and the issue positions attributed to parties. Election outcomes and weekly opinion polls were used to measure the volatility of the vote.

Introduction

In 1994 national elections were held both in Germany (16 October) and in the Netherlands (3 May). Opinion polls in 1993 had predicted a crushing defeat for the German CDU/CSU of more than 10% of the total number of votes cast as compared to the 1990 elections. As it turned out, however, the Christian Democrats lead by Chancellor Helmut Kohl lost only 2%. The major opposition party (Social Democrats, SPD) gained only 3%. The 1994 elections in the Netherlands produced the strongest political landslide ever. The coalition of Christian Democrats (CDA) and Social Democrats (PvdA) lost its majority in Parliament. The Christian Democrats (CDA) lost 13% of the total number of votes cast as compared to the 1989 elections. The Social Democrats lost 8% as compared to the 1989 elections, but were a remarkable 8% ahead of the 1993 polls. The libertarian liberals (D66) won 7%, thus doubling their share of the vote, but were 3% down on their 1993 polls. The right-wing liberals (VVD) won another 5%. The result was the first-ever coalition government which did not include Christian Democrats.

These strikingly different electoral outcomes in Germany and the Netherlands in 1994 are interesting cases for explanations of vote volatility, since the two countries are most similar both with respect to the parties available
for voters and with respect to voter considerations. Religion and class are still considered to be the dominant cleavage dimensions in both countries (Schmidt 1996; Keman 1996). The same party families dominate the political scene: Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals, with a minor role for the Greens and an outside role for the Extreme Right. The structure of individual vote preference formation is also strikingly similar to other European countries. In both countries the influence of social cleavages (religion, class) on the vote is overarched by a subjective left-right orientation. In both countries party preference is also influenced, to practically the same degree, by party size, the evaluation of government performance and by the perceived issue competences of parties (Oppenhuis 1995: 145–146).

This article investigates whether the nature of the information provided by newspapers and television news in Germany and the Netherlands during the election campaigns of 1994 might have been a contributing factor both to the political stability in Germany as well as to the political landslide in the Netherlands. The principal reason for studying the role of issue portrayal in the media in depth is that they play a relatively autonomous role in the transmission of a party’s issue profile. The news reflects party programmes, but it is not their mirror image (see Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg 1995). The daily news is primarily shaped by campaign tactics, unfolding campaign dynamics and journalistic criteria of newsworthiness. The environmental policy proposals of the Christian Democrats in the Netherlands, for example, attracted almost no media attention, although the word ‘environment’ was in the title of their programme. The policy of the right-wing liberals (VVD) on asylum seekers created a media furore, although only a few sentences in the VVD programme were devoted to asylum seekers. The enormous media attention in 1994 in Germany for alternative coalition governments with the former East German communist PDS could not have been predicted on the basis of party programmes.

Political observers are inclined to attribute short-term voting shifts to prevailing conditions or long-term trends, e.g., to the personal characteristics of party leaders (see Ansolabehere et al. 1991) or to the economic tide (Mueller 1989: 289–294). Certainly, the Germans could demonstrate their loyalty to Helmut Kohl, who had already served for twelve years and had led the country towards reunification. The Dutch had to choose between challengers only, since Ruud Lubbers (CDA), who had also served as prime minister for twelve years, had decided to retire from active politics. When the German elections were held in the autumn of 1994, there were abundant signs of economic growth. In the spring of 1994, by contrast, Dutch unemployment figures were still not showing the effect of economic recovery. Prevailing conditions do not automatically decide an election, however, let alone the weekly shifts