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extended abstract

## Subjective party performance intervenes between media content, internet advices and party preferences

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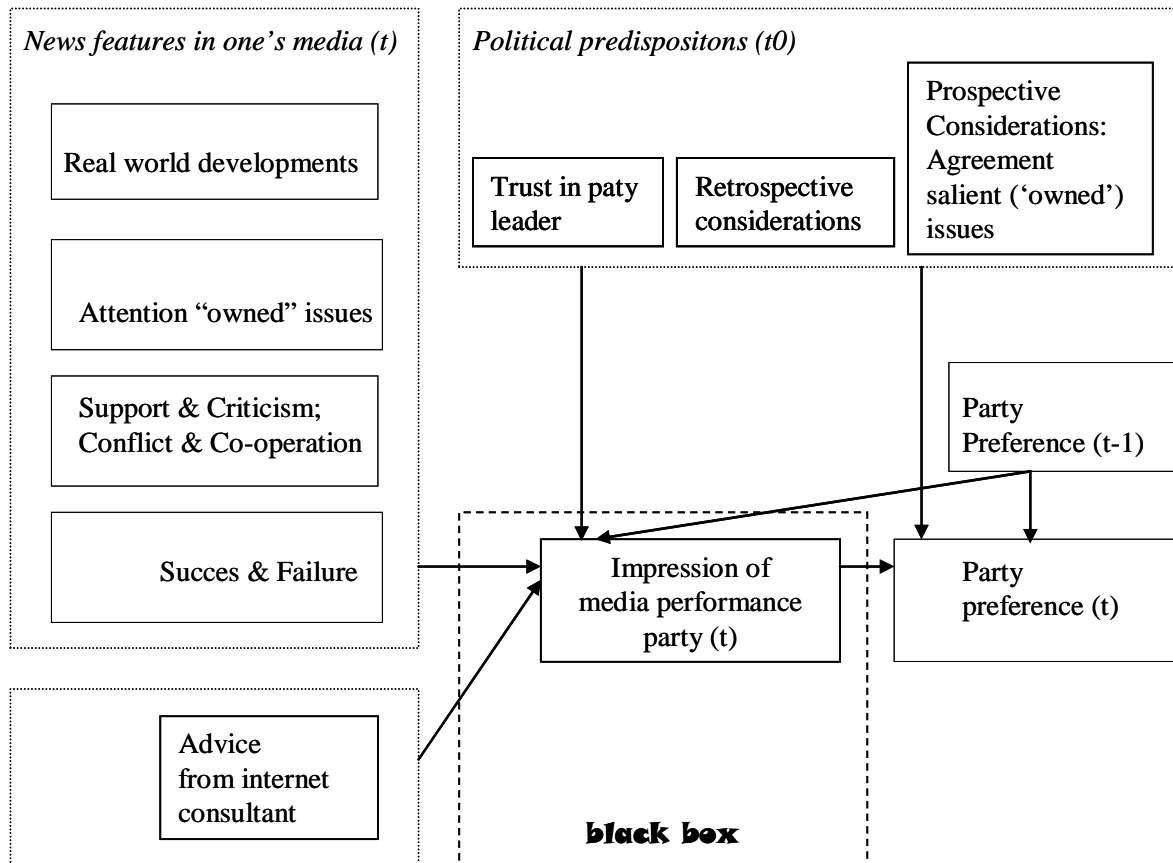
## **Research topic and specific research questions or hypotheses**

The research question to be addressed in this paper is whether the black box between the content of one's media and one's party preference is simply stuffed with one's impression of the performance of the various parties in the latest news offered by one's preferred media outlets.

One's party preference is understood as the party one would vote for when elections were held today. The content of political news in the media is by no means a simple variable, however. Four different aspects of the news will be incorporated in this paper (Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, te verschijnen in 2007). According to the literature on retrospective voting, it is to be expected that the news about the state of the economy, as well as the news about the state of affairs regarding other issues, such as immigration and integration, or military interventions, will affect the tendency to either vote for an opposition party or for a party in office (Johnston & Pattie, 2001). According to the literature on prospective voting it is to be expected that voters judge parties on the basis of the issues addressed in the news (Blais *et al.*, 2004). Roughly the same hypothesis can be derived also from the literature on priming (Sheafer & Weimann, 2005) and issue ownership (Budge & Farlie, 1983). On the basis of balance theory (Heider, 1946), and related theories of cognitive consistency, it is to be expected that the news on political conflict and cooperation – labeled here as news on support and criticism – makes a difference. News on political attacks from political adversaries is expected to reinforce one's former party preference, whereas news on attacks from within a party or from old friends (e.g. labour unions in the case of the Labour Party) is expected to raise doubts. Last but not least, the news on successes and failures of parties is expected to affect public expectations (Irwin & van Holsteijn, 2002). Voters are expected to vote for the party that appears to be strongest and most successful party according to the news, at least when they

face a choice between two or more parties that match their political predispositions. The latter is more often the case in multiparty systems than in two party systems. Attributions of successes or failures in the media may be based on the polls, parliamentary debates or television debates, but what the *base rate* (Kahneman & Tversky, 200) is remains often obscure (e.g. “Olmert slapped down”: after a battle with whom? Losing as compared to another party, as compared to last week’s opinion polls, as compared to previous elections, as compared to a journalist’s expectations??). It should be noted, that only *recent* news in the *media that one follows personally* is expected to affect one’s party preference. Thus, the four news variables distinguished here take different values for each news consumer at each time of interview. Of course, today’s short term influences may accumulate into long term predispositions from the perspective of future points in time.

Understanding the linkage between the news on the one hand and political preferences on the other, has often been left to qualitative studies of news reception (Graber, 1984). In this study the hypothesis will be tested that the impression of the performance of the various parties in the media mediates the relationship between the news and personal preferences (see Figure 1). The impression of a party’s performance in the media is characterized by both a *saliency aspect* and a *directional aspect*. The saliency aspect is that citizens will only alter their ratings of parties that attracted their attention in the latest news. The directional aspect is that citizens are able to tell whether a party or politician who attracted their attention made a poor or a good impression upon them.



**Figure 1: Research Model**

The relationship between the impression of the media performance of a party and one's party preference is presumably *spurious* to a large extent. Usually one's current party preference (at time  $t$ ) is simply an expression of one's former party preference (at  $t-1$ ). Whenever a voter changes his party preference, the next party to be preferred will also be a party that matches one's predispositions (as measured at  $t_0$ ). Voters will switch to another party with a more trusted leader, with a good past record with regard to real world developments (retrospective considerations), and agreeable issue positions (prospective considerations). But one's former party preference and one's political predispositions are expected to result also in a selective perception of the media performance of a party. Former voters for the small orthodox Christian parties in the Netherlands, the SGP and the ChristenUnie, will often selectively turn their eyes to the news on these parties, and will usually rate them positively, for example.

Citizens use the internet evermore. It's infeasible to reconstruct the content of the web pages they visited, with one exception. It is easy to ask whether voters asked advice from a political internet consultant. If they did, it is easy to ask which party they were advised to vote for. In the Netherlands roughly 4.7 million advices were given by the *Stemwijzer*, the most popular internet consultant in the Netherlands, to approximately 3.5 million different voters, from a total of 12.2 million eligible voters). In a multiparty system such as the Netherlands many voters realize that they are unaware of the precise differences between the various parties, even after reading the newspapers, or even the party manifestoes. Due to the appraisal of internet consultants in newspapers and on television, many voters consider an advice from "de Stemwijzer" as an expression of their 'true' issue stances, because they are unaware of the selective nature of the issues addressed in the *Stemwijzer* and of the arbitrary nature of the decision rules that are used to arrive at an overall advice (e.g. compensatory or non-compensatory, weighted or unweighted by issue salience).

## **Method**

Data come from the 2006 election campaign in the Netherlands. A biweekly panel survey conducted by NetPanel Inc. (n=1492) was used to tap one's current party preference and one's impression of the media performance of the various parties. Respondents were asked also which media they attended to during the last two weeks. Furthermore questions regarding internet consultants were asked (see above). In the first wave of the panel survey in depth questions were posed to tap their political predispositions..

A content analysis of political news from August 14<sup>th</sup> (first party manifesto) until November 22<sup>nd</sup> (election day) in six daily newspapers and two television news programs underlies the reconstruction of personal biweekly news content packages for each respondent in the panel survey.

To test the research model, we used Simultaneous Equation Models (AMOS), starting from the data for respondents who used one or more of the media that were included in the content analysis, and who participated in subsequent waves of the panel survey.

## **Results**

The research model stands the test for the 2006 elections in the Netherlands remarkably well. The black box between the news content one attends to and one's current party preference appears to consist indeed of one's impression of the performance of parties in the media.

Political predispositions are the most important predictors, both of one's current party preference, and one's impression of the media performance of parties. Nevertheless, impressions of media performance exert also a non-spurious influence on one's current party preference. One's impression of the media performance of parties is affected by the four news aspects in the expected direction, as well as by the advice given by internet consultants.

Apparently, voters without a profound political knowledge do consider a political advice from internet consultants as an expression of their 'true' preferences indeed. Personally obtained internet advice exerts a direct influence on party preference, at least for voters with a low political awareness, as measured by factual knowledge questions regarding names, functions and party affiliations of politicians.

News on successes and failures exerts a direct influence on party preference also. If the part of the influence of the news on party preference which is mediated by impressions of the performance of parties in the media is considered as 'conscious' influence, then the conclusion is warranted that the news on successes and failures in the media, which is often based on an obscure *base rate*, drags along the voters more often than they consciously know.

## Literature

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