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Small winners and big losers: strategic party behaviour in the 2017 Dutch general election

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

van Ditmars M.M., Maggini N., van Spanje J. (2020). Small winners and big losers: strategic party behaviour in the 2017 Dutch general election. WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS, 43(3), 543-564 [10.1080/01402382.2019.1655959].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/968903> since: 2024-06-16

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1655959>

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Small Winners and Big Losers. Strategic Party Behaviour in the 2017

Dutch General Election¹

Mathilde M. van Ditmars

Department of Political Science, University of Lucerne, Lucerne, Switzerland

Nicola Maggini

Department of Legal Sciences, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Joost van Spanje

Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: Nicola Maggini, Department of Legal Sciences, University of Florence, Via delle Pandette 32, 50127 Florence, Italy. E-mail: nicola.maggini@unifi.it
Mobile: +393382150215

¹ Accepted manuscript for publication: post-print version. The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in West European Politics, 17 October 2019, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402382.2019.1655959>

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses party strategies during the campaign for the Dutch general election of March 2017, making use of issue yield theory. We investigate whether parties strategically emphasize high-yield issues, by juxtaposing the issue opportunities provided by voters with parties' issue emphasis during the campaign. More specifically, we ask whether parties strategically emphasized issues that were expected to reward them electorally. Analysing voter preferences and party campaign data, we find that voters and parties show high ideological consistency, that parties emphasize mostly positional issues and thus choose a conflict-mobilizing strategy, and that most parties emphasize high-yield issues rather than following the general political agenda. Four small parties that won considerably behaved strategically while the social democrats — who severely lost— hardly did. Our findings imply that the issue yield framework can help to explain the election result in the fragmented Dutch multi-party context.

Keywords: 2017 Dutch general election; issue yield theory; party competition; issue competition; party strategy

The Dutch general election held on 15 March 2017 came with a few large shifts, which resulted in the party system being more fragmented than ever. The Labour Party (PvdA) suffered an unprecedented loss, from 25 to 6 per cent of votes. Its liberal right-wing coalition partner, People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), remained the largest party (21.3%) despite losing some support, and managed to limit the success in the polls of the right-wing populist Freedom Party (PVV), which ranked second (13.1%). At the same time, the Christian Democrats (CDA) recovered from previous large losses (now 12.5%). Several small parties did remarkably well, like the new right-wing challenger party Forum for Democracy (FvD) that gained representation, and the 50Plus party. The party that in absolute terms made the largest gain was the Green Left (GL), which obtained a historically high support of 9.1%, followed by Democrats 66 (D66), which got 12.2%.

In this article, we study party strategies during the 2017 electoral campaign, through the lens of issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014). Issue yield theory expects parties to behave strategically, emphasizing only certain policy issues that give a party a competitive advantage. In a successful election campaign, a party is thus hypothesized to emphasize issues that offer comparative advantages and to avoid disadvantageous issues. In this article we test empirically to what extent parties behaved accordingly in the campaign leading up to the 2017 Dutch general election, applying issue yield theory to an archetypical multiparty context.

We do so by addressing three research questions, which constitute the overarching analytic framework of this special issue (see De Sio and Lachat in this issue). First, we compare the configuration of issue positions among party constituencies and the issues emphasized by parties to investigate whether parties' issue opportunities reflect a state of *low ideological consistency*, challenging traditional notions of ideological alignment, and whether parties have exploited such new issue opportunities through novel campaign strategies (RQ1). Secondly, we ask what types of issues –positional or valence– parties emphasize during the campaign, to investigate whether parties followed a conflict-mobilizing or rather a problem-solving strategy (RQ2). Finally, we provide a general test of the fit of the issue yield theory (RQ3): namely, whether parties have behaved strategically, by emphasising those issues on which they had a competitive advantage (De Sio and Weber 2014), or simply mirrored the issue priorities of the electorate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

This article is structured as follows: we firstly elaborate on the issue yield framework and apply it to the Dutch party system; and theorize what type of party behaviour we expect to observe during the 2017 campaign. After describing our research design, which combines voter survey data and Twitter campaign analysis, we present results from descriptive and regression analyses. A concluding section follows, elaborating on the findings regarding parties' strategic behaviour and their electoral performance, and suggesting how the issue

yield framework can be integrated with non-issue policy explanations to adequately interpret party electoral performances.

Issue Yield Theory applied to Dutch Politics

In this article we aim to explain *party behaviour*, rather than *individual vote choice*, by focusing on the *effectiveness of party strategy* in exploiting their issue opportunities. We therefore observe not only party strategies but also voters' preferences, as they provide such opportunities. For these purposes, we adopt a theoretical framework based on issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014; De Sio *et al.* 2018), which considers contemporary party competition best understood in terms of issue competition (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Green-Pedersen 2007). The theory is particularly profitable as it is expressly developed to cope with both positional and valence issues (Stokes 1963). In short, positional issues are those on which two rival goals are desired by only parts of the electorate (i.e. welfare vs. low taxes), while valence issues relate to goals shared by the whole electorate (i.e. fight against terrorism). As stressed by D'Alimonte *et al.* (in this issue), according to the issue yield framework *political goals* present two basic properties, which allow a symmetric, parsimonious and comprehensive conceptualization of positional and valence issues. These properties of political goals are:

- 1) *Level of support.* This is the fundamental property that determines the highest potential of any goal in the mobilization of political support for a party. In case of a positional issue, one of the two rival goals defined over the issue represents a profitable electoral opportunity for a party if it is supported by a vast majority of both party's constituency and the whole population. In the extreme case of a "pure" valence issue, that polity recognizes only one meaningful goal on that issue, which – by definition – is fully shared. If a party can claim a positive association

(see below) with this kind of goal, that will give it the possibility of reaching out to the entire electoral population.

- 2) *Party-goal association.* This relates to a party's credibility to achieve the given goal, related to Stokes' (1963) conceptualization of valence issues, where a key role in the strategic importance of a shared goal is assigned to its *association* with a particular party. When splitting positional issues into pairs of rival goals, for each goal we can easily empirically assess which party is perceived as the most credible to achieve that policy goal.

Once these two properties are identified, each (vote-maximizing) party typically identifies those goals that present optimal combinations of both properties (expressed by a summary *issue yield* (IY) index, see next section), allowing a win-win strategy combining electoral expansion with the preservation of its usual electoral constituency. As a result, in their campaign parties can be expected to mostly emphasize those goals with the highest values of the issue yield index, in order to maximize their electoral returns (De Sio and Weber 2014).

A high-yield goal can theoretically provide a bridge between existing and new voters, when its support extends further than the party constituency and a party is considered very credible to achieve the goal. In this sense, the theory does not make assumptions about ideological consistency of voter attitudes and party platforms, in order to accurately model the (potential) pragmatic strategies pursued by contemporary political parties to reach out to new voters, by exploiting all available issue opportunities.

We believe the Dutch case provides promising opportunities to subject the issue yield framework to a rigorous and challenging test. The party system of the Netherlands is highly fragmented, and after the 2017 elections more so than ever: 13 parties share the 150 seats in Parliament. Since the politicization of the immigration issue and multiculturalism in the 2002

elections (Pellikaan *et al.* 2007; 2018), the party system is two-dimensional with a socioeconomic (left-right) and sociocultural (libertarian-authoritarian) dimension, as many other West-European democracies (Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). In particular, within the cultural dimension issues related to the monocultural-multicultural contrast became primary (Pellikaan *et al.* 2007; 2018). In this new context, competition between a high number of parties mostly takes place *within* ideological blocks as most voters do not change blocks, but decreasingly stay true to a single party (Van der Meer *et al.* 2015). Therefore, the Netherlands forms a least likely case for the application of issue yield theory, as 1) yield on an issue is not limited to the own party constituency, but in this multiparty setting not all parties target all voters; and 2) the relative position of the yield vis-à-vis other parties is crucial. With this multitude of parties, a party exploiting a high-yield issue might actually advantage another similar party with a similar (or higher) yield on the issue. Should the issue yield index not be able to accurately capture the nuances of such inter-party competition dynamics, it should definitely fail in the Netherlands.

Issue yield theory can help explain how parties act strategically to attract voters outside their constituencies, opening up new opportunities for strategic political entrepreneurs. In theory, parties are free to form innovative combinations of issue positions, potentially forming ideologically heterogeneous packages even beyond orthogonal positions on the two dimensions of the party space, as long as this increases their electoral appeal. PVV follows such a strategy taking ideologically non-consistent positions *within* the socioeconomic dimension and the cultural dimension (Pellikaan *et al.* 2018). Similarly, the Socialist Party (SP) takes mixed positions on cultural issues (e.g. anti-EU, unclear stances on immigration, pro-gay rights, against extension of euthanasia laws). As this behaviour can be perceived as a new type of party strategic behaviour, we ask (RQ1) to what extent in the Netherlands a) the issue opportunities that stem from the distributions of preferences among

party *supporters* reflect a state of *low ideological consistency* within the two dimensions of the political space (demand-side); and, if so, b) whether these cross-ideological issue opportunities are exploited by parties through their campaign strategies (supply-side).

In many European countries this process of citizen de-ideologization was first exploited, from the 1980s on, by *mainstream* parties wishing to deploy catch-all appeals relying on their claimed superior a-ideological competence in solving shared, valence goals (Clarke *et al.* 2009). However, recent years have seen the rise of niche and challenger parties, like the PVV, focusing on *conflictual* issues such as immigration (Mudde 2011), whose position in favour of cultural demarcation (Kriesi *et al.* 2006) is increasingly shared by citizens across ideological boundaries. As issue yield theory incorporates both valence and positional issues it is worth exploring (RQ2) to what extent Dutch parties, in accordance with their issue opportunities, adopt strategies that are prevalently related to a problem-solving reputation (emphasizing valence issues) or instead to a conflict mobilisation potential (focusing on positional issues). In the archetypical Dutch multiparty setting in light of increased polarization (Dalton 2008), we expect parties to focus mostly on positional issues, trying to distinguish themselves from each other. Moreover, ‘valence politics’ is based on the perceived government-handling ability of parties (Stokes 1963), but this ‘competence’ question is less relevant to small niche and challenger parties without experience in office (Van der Brug 2017). Therefore, niche parties are expected to campaign mostly on positional issues, following a conflict-mobilizing strategy (Van de Wardt *et al.* 2014). Conversely, we expect the mainstream *and* incumbent parties VVD and PvdA to put relatively more emphasis on valence issues compared to their competitors. We specifically expect them to underline economic valence issues, as during the 2012-2017 government coalition of PvdA and VVD the country came out of the economic crisis, with lower levels of unemployment and higher economic growth.

While the issue yield approach aims to provide a model for the *strategic* component of parties' issue emphasis, it is unrealistic to expect that parties will *only* respond to such incentives. In general, parties can be reasonably expected to follow the overall issue priority agenda of the general public, also known as a *riding-the-wave* approach, where parties are expected to campaign on issues generally perceived as most salient (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Wagner and Meyer 2014).¹ Therefore, we ask (RQ3) whether parties emphasize issues that provide them with the highest strategic opportunities – in line with issue yield theory, or whether they simply stress issues that are high on the political agenda (we name this systemic salience, see next section for operationalization). Building on issue yield theory, we hypothesize that parties strategically place most of their emphasis during the campaign on high-yield issues, rather than mirroring issue priorities of the public.

Research Design and Method

As our research questions focus both on the demand side (public opinion, to calculate issue yield for each issue) and the supply side (party campaigns, to assess parties' strategic behaviour according to issue yield), our research design is based on a dual data collection effort. We have administered a voter survey, to capture issue opportunities for parties; and performed coding of Twitter content from political parties and leaders, to capture party strategy in terms of issue emphasis.

Voter Survey

A Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) survey was fielded before the elections (27 February-7 March 2017)² among a quota sample of 1,000 Dutch citizens over the age of 18. The sample was representative of the voting-age population in the Netherlands based on gender, age, geographic area, and level of education.³ Respondents were surveyed on: 1) policy preferences and priorities, and 2) perceived credibility of parties to achieve the policy

goals. In total, 5 valence and 15 positional issues (with two opposing goals) were measured. Respondents' positions were only asked on positional issues. For both valence and positional policy goals, the priority and credibility questions were included. The full list of issues is found in Appendix A, including further explanation on non self-explanatory issues.

Twitter Campaign Analysis

In line with De Sio *et al.* (2018), we consider the use of Twitter feeds by political parties and leaders as a way of providing official statements and positions to the media and the public; in other words, parties use Twitter mostly as a *press release* tool, even in countries with low or elite-only Twitter penetration, as confirmed by empirical research (Kreiss 2016; Parmelee and Bichard 2011). This, in turn, is likely motivated by the goal of emphasizing those issues in the media on which the party has decided to focus its strategic attention. For this reason, while it can be argued that the Twitter audience is in most countries hardly representative of the general population, we believe that the use of Twitter feeds for assessing issue emphasis should allow to effectively capture the party's strategic priorities in a campaign.⁴ All tweets of Twitter account of parties and party leaders competing in the election, were collected in the month preceding election day (15 February-15 March). After deletion of replies and retweets, 2,520 tweets remained for coding and were assigned a category from the policy goals included in the voter survey. Two coders performed this procedure separately. Inter-coder reliability analyses show an 88.7% inter-coder agreement, and a Cohen's kappa and Krippendorff's alpha of both 0.88. Many tweets (83%) did not receive a code, as these were not related to content, but rather to the process of the campaign (e.g. mentioning of party or leader presence; encouraging people to vote; to vote for them). As not all parties used Twitter to the same extent, the number of coded tweets differs per party.⁵

Method

We provide descriptive results regarding the highest-yield issues in the election campaign; and the amount of tweets that parties have dedicated to issues, compared to their strategic advantage on them. We use this information to answer our first two research questions. To provide a formal test of our third research question we use regression analysis to investigate whether parties' issue emphasis is better predicted by issue yield or by systemic issue salience. The unit of analysis is parties*issues (8 parties*20 issues, for a sample size of 160). As mentioned before, any issue goal is characterized in terms of (1) support (share of citizens and party constituency supporting the goal); and (2) parties' perceived credibility to achieve this goal. The ability of each issue goal to provide a movement in the optimal direction (i.e. the balance of the two properties that maximizes the risk-opportunity combination) is computed by a summary Issue Yield (IY) index. This expresses for each party how optimal the combination of risks (of losing existing support) and opportunities (of gaining new support) is offered by an emphasis on each issue goal. De Sio and Weber provide more precise information about the operationalization and formula of the IY index in this special issue (see also Appendix C).

Systemic issue salience (SS) is measured as the aggregate priority scores of voters given to an issue (Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Kaplan *et al.* 2006; Wagner 2012).⁶ Issue emphasis, depicting party strategy, is measured as the share of tweets related to an issue. This entails that the dependent variable represents a proportion and is thus constrained between 0 and 1. Therefore, following a previous application of issue yield theory that pays specific attention to this methodological challenge (De Sio *et al.* 2018: 15), we decided to adopt a general Tobit model⁷ for our empirical test of RQ3:

$$Emph_{ij} = \alpha + \beta Yield_{ij} + \gamma Salience_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

$$Emph_{ij} = \begin{cases} y_{ij}^* & \text{if } y_{ij}^* > 0 \\ 0 & \text{if } y_{ij}^* \leq 0 \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

where i indexes the political parties and j the policy issues, and the dependent variable $Emph_{ij}$ (i.e. the share of tweets by party i on policy issue j) is modelled as censored at 0 (y_{ij}^* is the unobserved uncensored variable; ε_{ij} is a stochastic component clustered within parties). $Yield_{ij}$ indicates the computed IY index for party i on policy issue j ; $Salienc_j$ stands for the systemic salience of the policy issue j , as captured by aggregate priority scores of voters given to that issue. The quantities of interest are the β and γ parameters. Finally, in order to assess which of the two approaches (party campaigns based on IY vs. party campaigns based on SS) is predominantly depicting each individual party's issue emphasis, we interact party dummies with IY and SS.

Results

Descriptive Results

To start, we present in Table 1 the top three positional issues according to within-party constituency yield (the issue goals that party constituencies most widely support), which provides an answer to RQ1 (demand side): can we observe ideologically heterogeneous issue opportunities among party *supporters* (not the public as a whole)? The results show that these voters mostly agree on ideologically consistent positions. On the left, party constituencies agree on progressive positions on both economic (pension age, income differences, permanent contracts) and cultural issues (assisted end of life, not closing borders, remaining in the EU).

[Table 1 about here]

On the right, we observe a combination of culturally progressive and conservative issues ranking high for both VVD and PVV voters (fewer refugees vs. assisted end of life), showing more ideologically diverse issue opportunities *within* the cultural dimension. The picture becomes even more diverse when taking PVV voters' economic positions into account, such as reducing the pension age and requiring employers to give employees a permanent contract after two years (86% and 83% of within-party agreement, respectively).

In sum, on the left we observe quite ideologically homogeneous issue goals among voters, while on the right there is more ideological heterogeneity, especially among PVV voters. In order to see whether parties have responded to these issue opportunities, we now turn to the question which issues parties have emphasized the most.

In Table 2 and Table 3, for left- and right-wing parties respectively, we present the top-3 issues with the largest number of tweets for each party (with IY cross-party ranking⁸ in parentheses), the top-3 high yield issues for each party, and whether these overlap or not. Issue type (valence or positional) is also reported. We are interested to see whether parties have used ideologically (non)coherent issue packages (RQ1 – supply side) and whether parties have focused more on valence or on positional issues (RQ2).

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 shows that left-wing parties have mostly emphasized positional issues that are consistent with their socioeconomic progressive ideology, such as reducing income differences and abolishing the deductible in health insurance. These ideologically consistent packages are in line with their voters' preferences (Table 1). Moreover, as expected, incumbent and mainstream party PvdA dedicated a considerable share (26%) of their tweets to valence issues regarding the economy, while the other parties did much less so. GL is the

only left-wing party that did not emphasize valence issues.⁹ The share of tweets of the top-3 issue categories shows that PvdA and SP had less focused campaigns, while the other parties (GL, D66, 50Plus) show a more focused campaign on issues that offered them strategic advantages. PvdA is the only party that did not emphasize any of their highest-yield issues, although they did spend considerable attention (17%) to the issue with their highest IY cross-party ranking and highest within-party agreement, regarding permanent contracts.

[Table 3 about here]

In Table 3, results are presented for right-wing parties. We do not see the ideologically diverse nature of VVD and PVV voters' preferences (see Table 1) reflected in the parties' campaign, as both parties emphasized 'classic' right-wing issues and do not show ideological incoherency. Furthermore, similarly to what we observe on the left, positional issues dominate the campaign. However, all parties except for the newcomer FvD also emphasized some valence issues. In line with expectations, incumbent VVD stressed economic valence issues (20%). CDA and PVV stressed the valence issue regarding protection against terrorism (respectively 10 and 8% of tweets). The campaigns of all parties are very focused on a set of key issues, except for CDA's. While VVD, PVV, and FvD dedicated at least 60% of their tweets to two central issues, CDA tweeted about five different issues in a much more dispersed way. All parties on the right exploited at least one of their strategic issue opportunities.

Regarding our first research question, we can conclude that left-wing parties' ideological issue packages are in line with those of their constituencies, while on the right VVD and PVV do not seem to fully exploit the ideologically diverse position-taking of their voters. When comparing the type of issues emphasized, the answer to our second research

question is that, as expected, Dutch parties mostly opted for conflict-mobilizing strategies by focusing on positional issues, and that especially niche and challenger parties did even more so than mainstream parties. We now turn to the last research question to formally assess the strategic performance of the parties during the campaign.

Regression Analysis

Did Dutch parties campaign strategically on Twitter or did they merely react to the system-wide agenda? This regression analysis predicts Twitter issue emphasis based on two rival predictors: the issue yield (IY) vs. the systemic salience (SS)¹⁰ for issue-party combinations. We present two analyses: 1) a general model across all parties, which assesses the predominance of either of the two predictors in the strategies of all parties and provides the general answer to RQ3; 2) the estimation of party-specific models (through interactions), in order to assess which of the two approaches is predominant for each party,¹¹ thus allowing us to rank Dutch parties in terms of ‘strategicness’, based on the assumption that larger effects of IY imply more strategic behaviour.

In Table 4, we present results of the regression analysis, through three different specifications for estimations of Tobit models of issue emphasis. In Model 1, we regress Twitter emphasis on IY; in Model 2, we regress Twitter emphasis on SS; finally, in Model 3, we estimate the full theoretical model with both indices. In the first model, the coefficient for IY is positive and statistically significant: IY (measured before the campaign) is a predictor of Twitter emphasis of specific issues during the campaign, with a noteworthy and statistically significant effect (and with an explained variance¹² of .21). In the second model, SS has a positive and significant effect, too, but smaller than the previous IY effect and the explained variance is only 0.03.¹³ Finally, the third model confirms that IY in the Dutch context is a better predictor of Twitter emphasis than SS: the strength of the coefficient for IY is more

than twice as high as SS coefficient's. Furthermore, the goodness-of-fit statistics of the full model are better than those of Model 2 and very similar to those of Model 1, explaining 21% of the variance. In short, we conclude that Dutch parties *on average* campaigned strategically on Twitter rather than merely reacting to the system-wide agenda related to the underlying dynamics in public opinion. Hence, issue yield theory is confirmed by this empirical analysis of the Dutch case. Parties usually strategically emphasize issues that might provide higher electoral returns as calculated by the IY measure.

[Table 4 about here]

In order to verify whether this finding applies to individual parties and not just in the pooled sample of parties, we estimated party-specific coefficients (see Table B.1 in Appendix B) by interacting both IY and SS with party dummies.¹⁴ The explained variance of the model strongly improves when adding party-specific interactions (.41). The marginal effects are presented in Figure 1 for each of the parties.

[Figure 1 about here]

A prevalence of IY implies that a party behaves strategically, emphasizing goals with the highest yield (regardless of issue salience according to public opinion), whereas a prevalence of SS means that a party merely reacts to the system-wide agenda (issue salience), emphasizing goals which rank first according to public opinion's priorities (regardless of the low or high value of their yield for that party).

The results show that, out of the seven parties, all except one (PvdA) have positive and significant marginal effects for IY, in line with our expectations. Furthermore, results show

that for most parties the coefficient for the marginal effects of IY is higher than (or equal to) that of SS. This implies that our claim about the importance of issue yield theory in explaining electoral campaigns in contemporary Netherlands does not come from a single outlier party driving the effect observed in the pooled analysis (Table 4). Rather, strategicness of campaign emphasis in terms of the issue yield framework seems to be a general feature of most Dutch parties.

Clearly, this general finding does not mean that all parties have been equally strategic. 50Plus, FvD, D66 and GL (in that order) have acted most strategically. A clear pattern is observed: these parties adopted strategic choices, whereas other parties did not or less so. For these parties, the IY marginal effects are much higher compared to the SS marginal effects. These results are in sharp contrast with those for outlier PvdA: it is the only party with a larger marginal effect for SS than for IY. Furthermore, the marginal effect for IY is not statistically significant. This implies that PvdA was not acting strategically during the campaign, but merely reacted to the system-wide agenda. This confirms what we have seen in the previous section (Table 2): PvdA did not emphasize (or did not tweet at all) any of its high-yield issues (e.g., the pro-EU stance and progressive cultural goals related to migration). Instead, the party tweeted on issues with lower yield (e.g., the valence issue on economic growth, which was much more favourable for VVD). Conversely, one of their principal competitors on the left to whom they lost many votes¹⁵, GL, focused on a smaller number of left-wing economic issues, which all had a good IY cross-party ranking.

We did not have a sufficient number of tweets to include VVD in the model with interactions. Based on Table 3 we see that the Prime Minister's party VVD strategically focused on a few issues with high IY, including economic valence issues, while at the same time chose to compete with PVV on the same issue domain, imitating some of Wilders' positions on integration and immigration, which may explain why Wilders did not win as

much as expected. PVV combined strategic emphasis on high-yield issues with adaptation to voters' priorities. PVV focused their strategy on immigration-related issues (80% of their tweets) on which the party had the highest IY, that were also high on the public agenda.

Lastly, for some parties the marginal effects of IY and SS on issue emphasis are statistically indistinguishable (i.e., confidence intervals overlap). This is the case for SP and CDA. In other words, we cannot say whether strategic behaviour or reaction to the system-wide agenda prevails in their campaign, meaning that these parties have followed a more balanced approach.

In sum, we find that issue yield theory is confirmed by this empirical analysis applied to the Dutch case.

Conclusion

We have analysed the issue opportunities among voters and the strategies that parties have used during the election campaign for the 2017 Dutch general election. Results show that most party constituencies take ideologically coherent positions on issues that provide a high yield, and most parties campaigned on positional and ideologically consistent issues, taking a conflict-mobilizing strategy focused on a core set of issues. The hypothesis that parties emphasize issues with a strategic advantage for them is supported by our findings. The electoral gains of small parties GL, D66, 50Plus, and FvD, and the major loss of PvdA seem to be related to the extent to which these parties emphasized issues with a strategic advantage for them. It seems that the most optimal campaign strategy is to emphasize a small set of key positional issues that combine the three key ingredients of IY: public support, constituency support, and party credibility. We can conclude that issue yield theory is applicable even to the highly fragmented party system of the Netherlands, as the model is able to adequately

capture the multiparty competition dynamics and in general parties' strategicness goes hand in hand with their electoral results.

In terms of individual party strategicness, PvdA appeared a clear outlier compared to all other parties, as they merely reacted to the system-wide agenda. However, given the major loss that the party suffered, additional factors need to be considered to explain this devastating result. Firstly, the party had a leadership change shortly before the start of the election campaign. The new party leader was inexperienced in national-level campaigning, and mostly known for his governing, not political experience. Secondly, the party clearly suffered from having been the junior coalition party to the VVD during the crisis. While VVD managed to claim the government's success of recovering from the economic crisis, PvdA did not manage to frame their coalition participation as a success story, but merely one of political compromise. Taken together, the PvdA's lack of an experienced and popular leader, not having a focused campaign emphasizing issues with a strategic advantage, and the cost of governing came at a very high price for the party. PvdA's loss came to the advantage of GL and D66. Those two parties acted strategically during the campaign and did not carry the 'burden' of having been in government with the right-wing VVD, as PvdA did.

In a nutshell, our analysis suggests that there is an association between party strategy and electoral performance. Nevertheless, this association is far from perfect and should require a cross-country comparative analysis for a proper empirical test (as carried out by De Sio and Weber in this issue).

In this regard, to conclude, we would like to suggest a possible extension of issue yield theory, identifying particular patterns of limitation to voter availability within specific electorates. After all, any party will have an electoral potential (Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991; Van der Brug *et al.* 2005) and will have parts of the electorate that would never vote for it, for any of various reasons. It may be because loyal voters are unavailable to any other party

than the party they will always vote for; it may be because voters systematically rule out a vote for a particular party. The last-mentioned phenomenon may be partly due to *ostracism*, a deliberate strategy by other parties to systematically rule out all political cooperation with that party (Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009). Future studies may focus on the issue-based tactics currently encompassed by issue yield theory and their interaction with tactics that do not involve policy issues (Meguid 2008: 36). The 2017 Dutch case offers an illustration of such interaction on the right. As the systemic salience of immigration issues seems to have partly shaped the competition on the right, the PVV was in an excellent strategic position by ranking first on all issue goals that were anti-immigration. So why did the PVV fail to win more than it did, losing 12 seats in public opinion polls in the last 11 weeks before the election? Our explanation, based on a theory outlined in Van Spanje (2018) is that CDA and VVD succeeded in a combination of isolating and imitating the PVV. On the one hand, they tried to isolate the PVV by labelling it as a non-reliable partner and excluding it as a potential coalition partner. On the other hand, CDA and VVD imitated Wilders' rhetoric on immigration. To the extent that they convinced policy-oriented voters that voting for this party was pointless, it may explain why the PVV's success remained surprisingly limited. If so, this seems a useful addition to the insights based on issue yield in this paper. More generally, linking issue yield theory to unavailability of particular segments of the electorate, whether due to non-policy issue tactics or not, could open promising avenues for future research.

Endnotes

¹In this regard, such a strategy would allow parties to appear as “concerned, responsive and informed” (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, 337), thus creating conditions for a better electoral performance (Wagner and Meyer 2014). However, saliency theory (Budge and Farlie 1983) assumes a relatively

static view of party issue emphases: contextual factors and external events mostly modify the configuration of competitive advantages for different parties, by making salient their core issue goals (Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge 2015, 766). Consequently, this mechanism somehow represents the opposite extreme on a continuum of strategicness, as – in the ideal-typical *riding-the-wave* scenario – all parties would express the same issue emphasis, so that none would exploit any competitive advantage offered by any issue.

² The survey was carried out shortly before the election, i.e., during the election campaign. A possible objection is that citizens' issue *preferences*, particularly during the campaign for the elections, could be influenced by parties' campaigns, thus being less stable than we expect on the basis of the issue yield theory, which implicitly assumes that citizens have 'fixed', exogenous issue preferences. However, especially in the short term of a campaign, we expect parties to mostly rely on their ability to make an issue more salient, rather than on an alleged ability to change voter preferences on an issue. This is because issue *preferences* are arguably much less malleable than issue *saliencies*, just as agenda setting theory holds that news media often succeed in influencing what issues citizens think about – but *not* in influencing what they think about these issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Thus, it seems unlikely that IY Theory's assumption of exogenous issue preferences is violated.

³ The survey was administered by Demetra SRL, Italy. Some of the results shown are also based on an additional weighting by past vote recall.

⁴ Furthermore, feeds on Twitter represent the most widely accessible form of party communication and we can expect parties to adopt strategic choices much more on social networks like Twitter than on their electoral platforms, which could represent a possible alternative through manifesto data (Graham *et al.* 2013).

⁵ The animal party (PvdD) has tweeted so little they are not included in any analyses.

⁶ Systemic salience represents the percentage of all respondents that reports the issue as 'high' priority, with respondents reporting 'medium' priority being counted as half.

⁷ The rationale for this methodological choice is that, particularly when a relevant number of party-issue combinations with 0 emphasis is present (55.3% in this study), for extremely unfavourable issues

parties might decrease emphasis even below 0 if that were possible. As a consequence, emphasis can be considered censored at 0.

⁸ The IY cross-party ranking indicates the ranking of the IY score for a given party on a given goal compared to the IY scores for other parties on the same goal. The rationale is that in multi-party systems having a high yield on an issue is not enough for a party to have a strategic advantage, if other parties have an even higher yield on that issue. Therefore, the most strategic choice for a party would be to emphasize issues for which they have: (1) a high yield; (2) a high IY cross-party ranking.

⁹ As no positional issue regarding fighting climate change was taken up in the coding procedure, a large number of GL tweets were not assigned to any of the issue codes. However, they tweeted considerably on this issue as well, implementing their strategy to emphasize both their green as well as their left/socialist ideology.

¹⁰ To recall, systemic salience is measured as the aggregate priority scores of voters given to an issue: see endnote 6.

¹¹ CU, DENK, PvdD, SGP, and VVD are excluded from regression models due to too few tweets. For diagnostic purposes, we have ran party-by-party regressions and results do not differ much from marginal effects when parties with less than 25 Tweets on issues are included. When parties with fewer tweets are included in the model with interactions, the strength, direction and significance of marginal effects for the other parties do not change substantially, confirming the robustness of results.

¹² The measure reported as ‘explained variance’ (see De Sio and Weber in this special issue) is a new goodness-of-fit statistic based on RMSE, to avoid problems for comparing models through ‘pseudo-Rsquared’ in Tobit regression. This measure is calculated as follows: an empty Tobit model (constant only) is estimated; RMSE is saved as σ_1 ; the Tobit model with covariates is estimated, with RMSE saved as σ_2 ; finally, the VarExp measure is calculated as $(\sigma_1^2 - \sigma_2^2) / \sigma_1^2$. This measure is a proportional reduction of error; as such, it can be interpreted according to an ‘explained variance’ metaphor. Nevertheless, it cannot be considered equivalent to R-squared, as the addition of parameters does not only affect the prediction of the dependent variable, but also the

relation between the observed dependent variable and its latent construct, as the two are estimated together at the same time.

¹³ These measures have different theoretical (and empirical) ranges. Yield has a range (-1 to +1) that is twice as large as SS (0 to 1), so its relevance is even higher.

¹⁴ As an additional robustness check, we interacted each of the two effects separately to detect collinearity, creating two different marginal plots for marginal effects of IY and SS on issue emphasis. Results are substantially similar to those presented in Figure 1.

¹⁵ Based on authors' calculation using the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 data (preliminary release): 16% of 2012 PvdA voters voted for GL in the 2017 general election.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Mathilde M. van Ditmars is senior researcher and lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Lucerne. She obtained her PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute in 2017. Her main research interests include political socialization, attitude formation and development, and broader questions regarding voting and party behaviour.

Nicola Maggini is a Research Fellow in the Department of Legal Sciences of the University of Florence and a member of CISE (Italian Centre for Electoral Studies). His main research interests are socio-political attitudes, electoral systems, voting behaviour and party competition in comparative perspective. He has published in Italian and international journals and is the author of *Young People's Voting Behavior in Europe. A Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Joost van Spanje is associate professor of political communication, University of Amsterdam. His research team is working on two research projects. A first project revolves around legal action against anti-immigration parties in Europe since 1965, and its effects on citizens. A second project concerns media reactions to new parties in postwar mature democracies, and their electoral consequences. Joost's latest publications include the monograph 'Controlling the Electoral Marketplace: How Established Parties Ward Off Competition' (2018).

ORCID

Mathilde M. van Ditmars <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3615-9887>

Nicola Maggini <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6844-1641>

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Appendix A

Positional issues (2 opposing goals)

1. Require employers to give employees a permanent contract after two years / Do not require employers to give employees a permanent term contract after two years
2. Allow elderly who think their life is completed, to be assisted in ending their life / Do not allow elderly who think their life is completed, to be assisted in ending their life
3. Do not increase the tax on meat / Increase the tax on meat to the 21% tariff
4. Abolish the student loans and bring back the student scholarship / Maintain the student loans and do not bring back the student scholarship
5. Reduce income differences / Do not reduce income differences
6. Reduce the pension age to 65 / Keep the pension age at 67
7. Require foreigners in The Netherlands to fully adapt to Dutch culture / Allow foreigners in The Netherlands to preserve their own culture
8. Abolish the deductible in health insurance, even if this means higher fees / Do not abolish the deductible in health insurance
9. The Netherlands should stay in the EU / The Netherlands should leave the EU
10. Increase defence spending, to come closer to the NATO norm (2% of national income) / Do not increase defence spending
11. Introduce possibilities for binding referenda / Only keep the current possibilities for non-binding referenda
12. Take in fewer refugees in The Netherlands / Maintain the current refugee policy in The Netherlands
13. Do not completely close the Dutch borders to immigrants / Completely close the Dutch borders to immigrants
14. Legalise the selling and growing of weed / Maintain the current weed policy

15. Restrict the right to social provisions to Dutch nationals only / Maintain the right to social provisions for Dutch residents without the Dutch nationality

Valence issues

1. Protect the Netherlands against terrorist attacks
2. Keep the current economic growth
3. Further reduce unemployment
4. Fight environmental pollution
5. Improve care for the elderly and disabled

Note: The health insurance deductible issue regards the amount of costs (set by the government) that patients are to cover before the insurance starts covering subsequent costs. The government sets the height of the deductible every year. Some parties (SP, PVV) want to abolish the deductible all together, to reduce individual citizens' medical costs.

The permanent contract issue regards a recent law (July 2015) that requires employers to provide their employees with a permanent contract after having had temporary contracts for two years. Many parties (except for SP and PvdA, initiator of the law) want to abolish this rule.

The assisted end of life issue is a D66 bill that complements existing euthanasia law. It provides people who are not in severe physical or mental suffering (as required by euthanasia law) the opportunity to receive assistance in ending their life. Most culturally progressive parties favour it.

Appendix B

[Table B.1 about here]

Appendix C – Updated calculation of issue yield

NOTE: this is an excerpt from a separate article in this same special issue.

The issue yield summary index is a summary measure (calculated according to a nonlinear expression) expressing the combination of electoral risks and opportunities that each issue (for positional issue: each side on an issue) offers to a party. In its first formulation issue yield was calculated as follows. Let:

i = proportion of electorate supporting a policy;
p = proportion of electorate supporting a party;
f = proportion of electorate supporting both;

Then (through geometric reasoning: see De Sio and Weber 2014, pp. 876-878):

$$\text{scaled issue yield} = \frac{f - ip}{p(1 - p)} + \frac{i - p}{1 - p}$$

This paper uses an updated formulation, relying on a new explicit measurement of party credibility, where all such components are weighted by such party credibility, thus allowing a generalization to valence issues. Party credibility was measured through the following question in the questionnaire: “Which parties do you think are credible for achieving [this goal]?”. The latter was deliberately a multiple-choice item, to limit endogeneity on party preference.

Let:

cred = party credibility on the goal in the electorate at large
intcred = party credibility on the goal within the party base

Then

$$\text{updatedyield} = \frac{(f - ip)\text{intcred}}{p(1 - p)} + \frac{(i - p)\text{cred}}{1 - p}$$

(Note that intcred has to be replaced with 1-intcred if (f-ip) is lower than 0 (goal is supported in the party *less* than in the whole sample).

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Table 1. Highest-yield positional issues by party constituency. Percentage agreement among party supporters within brackets.

Left		Right	
SP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Permanent contracts (85%) 2. Reduce pension age (84%) 3. Assisted end of life (84%) 	CDA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. NL should stay in EU (77%) 2. Permanent contracts (76%) 3. No increased meat tax (76%)
PvdA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Permanent contracts (89%) 2. Reduce income diff. (87%) 3. Assisted end of life (87%) 	VVD	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assisted end of life (81%) 2. NL should stay in EU (79%) 3. No increased meat tax (74%)
GL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assisted end of life (87%) 2. Do not close borders (86%) 3. NL should stay in EU (85%) 	PVV	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fewer refugees (93%) 2. Adapt to Dutch culture (89%) 3. Assisted end of life (88%)
D66	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assisted end of life (84%) 2. NL should stay in EU (83%) 3. Do not close borders (79%) 	SGP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adapt to Dutch culture (89%) 2. No assisted end of life (86%) 3. Increase defence spending (79%)
		CU	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Permanent contracts (83%) 2. Reduce income diff. (76%) 3. No assisted end of life (74%)

Table 2. The three issues with the largest number of tweets (with IY cross-party ranking in parentheses) and the three issues with highest IY, including IY scores, for left-wing parties.

Party	Top 3 issues with largest number of tweets			Top 3 issues with highest IY		
	Issue type	Issue	% of tweets	Issue type	Issue	IY
SP	P	<u>1. Abolish deductible</u> (1)	21%	P	<u>1. Abolish deductible</u>	0.34
	P	2. NL should stay in EU (but reform) (10)	12%	P	2. Reduce income differences	0.33
	P	3. Reduce pension age (2);	11%	P	3. Improve care for elderly	0.32
	P	permanent contracts (2);				
V	reduce unemployment (2)					
PvdA	P	1. Permanent contracts (1);	17%	P	1. NL should stay in EU	0.40
	V	economic growth (4)		P	2. Do not close borders	
	P	2. Multiculturalism (3);	13%	P	3. Maintain refugee policy	0.36
	P	reduce income differences (2)				
GL	P	1. Reduce income differences (3)	45%	V	1. Fight environmental pollution	0.45
	P	2. Abolish deductible (2)	13%	P	2. Do not close borders	0.39
	P	<u>3. Maintain refugee policy</u> (2)	11%	P	<u>3. Maintain refugee policy</u>	0.35
D66	P	<u>1. NL should stay in EU</u> (3)	22%	P	<u>1. NL should stay in EU</u>	0.38
	V	2. Reduce unemployment (5)	20%	P	2. Do not close borders	0.28
	P	3. Legalise weed (3)	16%	P	3. Assisted end of life	0.26
50Plus	P	<u>1. Reduce pension age</u> (1)	82%	P	<u>1. Reduce pension age</u>	0.36
	V	<u>2. Improve care for elderly</u> (1)	8%	V	<u>2. Improve care for elderly</u>	0.33
	V	3. Reduce unemployment (10)	5%	P	3. Abolish deductible	0.17

Note: Underlined issues indicate a match between issue yield and relative attention in tweets.

Table 3. The three issues with the largest number of tweets (with IY cross-party ranking in parentheses) and the three issues with highest IY, including IY scores, for right-wing parties.

Party	Top 3 issues with largest number of tweets			Top 3 issues with highest IY		
	Issue type	Issue	% of tweets	Issue type	Issue	IY
CDA	P	1. Increase defence spending (2)	17%	P	1. NL should stay in EU	0.34
	V	<u>2. Protect against terrorism</u> (3);	10%	V	<u>2. Protect against terrorism</u>	0.28
	P	maintain weed policy (2);		V	3. Economic growth	0.26
	P	student scholarships (4);				
	P	keep pension age (3)				
VVD	P	1. Do not abolish deductible (1)	40%	P	<u>1. NL should stay in EU</u>	0.41
	P	2. <u>NL should stay in EU</u> (1)	20%	P	2. Do not reduce income diff.	0.37
	V	3. <u>Economic growth</u> (1);	10%	V	<u>3. Economic growth</u>	0.36
	V	reduce unemployment (3);				
	P	fewer refugees (3);				
	P	welfare chauvinism (2)				
PVV	P	<u>1. Adapt to Dutch culture</u> (1)	48%	P	1. Take in fewer refugees	0.67
	P	<u>2. Close borders</u> (1)	24%	P	<u>2. Close borders</u>	0.56
	P	3. Welfare chauvinism (1);	8%	P	<u>3. Adapt to Dutch culture</u>	0.51
	V	protect against terrorism (2)				
FvD	P	1. NL should leave EU (2)	40%	P	1. Do not reduce income diff.	0.21
	P	2. Adapt to Dutch culture (5)	30%	P	2. Take in fewer refugees	0.15
	P	3. <u>Referenda</u> (2);	8%	P	<u>3. Referenda</u>	0.12
	P	close borders (2);				
	P	defence spending (7)				

Note: Underlined issues indicate a match between issue yield and relative attention in tweets.

Table 4. Issue competition in the Netherlands: effects of issue yield (IY) and systemic issue salience (SS) on issue emphasis.

	(1) IY	(2) SS	(3) IY + SS
<i>IY</i>	0.61** (0.20)	.	0.56** (0.19)
<i>SS</i>	.	0.42** (0.14)	0.22** (0.07)
Constant	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.30** (0.11)	-0.25** (0.09)
Observations	160	160	160
AIC	11.09	33.89	10.43
BIC	20.31	43.11	22.73
Explained variance	0.21	0.03	0.21

*Note: table entries represent coefficients for the Tobit regression of issue emphasis on the hypothesized predictors (estimation based on robust standard errors, with observations clustered by party). Parties with fewer than 25 tweets on issues are excluded from the analysis. The dependent variable is censored at 0. Standard errors reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

Table B.1 Strategic behaviour vs. public opinion's priorities: effects of issue yield and systemic issue salience on issue emphasis by parties.

	Model (1)	Model (2)
<i>Issue yield</i>	0.56** (0.19)	0.13*** (0.01)
<i>Systemic Issue Salience (priority)</i>	0.22** (0.07)	0.13*** (0.04)
<i>CDA (reference category)</i>		0 (.)
<i>FvD</i>		-0.13*** (0.00)
<i>50Plus</i>		-0.09** (0.03)
<i>PvdA</i>		-0.22*** (0.01)
<i>GL</i>		0.06*** (0.01)
<i>D66</i>		-0.16*** (0.02)
<i>SP</i>		-0.16*** (0.01)
<i>PVV</i>		-0.41*** (0.05)
<i>FvD × Issue yield</i>		1.22*** (0.13)
<i>50Plus × Issue yield</i>		2.10*** (0.09)
<i>PvdA × Issue yield</i>		-0.09*** (0.01)
<i>GL × Issue yield</i>		0.38*** (0.06)
<i>D66 × Issue yield</i>		0.56*** (0.04)
<i>SP × Issue yield</i>		0.23*** (0.02)
<i>PVV × Issue yield</i>		0.54*** (0.06)
<i>FvD × Priority</i>		0.06*** (0.01)
<i>50Plus × Priority</i>		-0.31*** (0.01)
<i>PvdA × Priority</i>		0.35*** (0.02)
<i>GL × Priority</i>		-0.24*** (0.04)
<i>D66 × Priority</i>		0.06*** (0.01)
<i>SP × Priority</i>		0.18*** (0.00)

<i>PVV</i> × <i>Priority</i>		0.30*** (0.04)
Constant	-0.25** (0.09)	-0.09*** (0.03)
Observations	160	160
AIC	10.43	-31.70
BIC	22.73	-28.62
Explained variance	0.21	0.41

*Note: table entries represent coefficients for the Tobit regression of issue emphasis on the hypothesized predictors (estimation based on robust standard errors, with observations clustered by party). Parties with fewer than 25 tweets on issues are excluded from the analysis. The dependent variable is censored at 0. Standard errors reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

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Figure 1. Marginal effects of issue yield and systemic issue salience on issue emphasis.

