

Negative media attention during election campaign does not harm party leaders: study

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Positive media attention for politicians has a far larger effect on citizen's voting behaviour than negative media reporting. Interestingly: negative attention during an election campaign has no negative consequences whatsoever for party leaders. Loes Aaldering discovered this during her research "Images with Impact. The Electoral Consequences of Party

Leader Portrayal in the Media." The researchers have no immediate explanation for this. Aaldering will defend her doctoral thesis on Friday 26 January at the University of Amsterdam. Her research was funded with a grant from the NWO programme Research Talent.

The consensus was that the image voters have of [party leaders](#) would substantially influence the outcome of democratic elections. Loes Aaldering investigated how the [media](#) describe party leaders based on their character traits and how these leadership images in the media influence voters in determining their vote.

She did this by mapping the [attention](#) that Dutch newspapers devoted to Dutch party leaders between 2006 and 2012: positive and negative media reporting about politicians. Aaldering and her colleagues also made use of the EenVandaag Opiniepanel, which consists of 50,000 respondents who were questioned 110 times during the period investigated. Do the character traits of [party](#) leaders – for example, communication skills and integrity – influence citizen's voting intentions?

The research revealed the obvious: positive media attention has a positive effect on the voting intention of citizens, and negative media attention has a negative effect. However, what was particularly surprising is that the influence of positive media attention is considerably greater than that of negative media attention. Furthermore, negative media attention during campaign periods was found to have no effect whatsoever. How politicians are portrayed in the media during these weeks clearly has no effect on their position.

The researchers do not have an immediate explanation for this, but they do have a hunch. Aaldering: "This surprising outcome could be explained by the fact that reporting on the basis of leadership characteristics during campaign gives the signal that the leader "matters," even if these reports have a negative tone."

According to the researchers, another plausible explanation is that, during the campaign period, negative reporting predominantly originates from political opponents instead of from more objective journalists.

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