

Strategic Framing of The European Union:

How Dutch Political Parties Strategically Frame the European Union on Facebook

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Abstract

Since the Treaty of Maastricht issues regarding the European Union have become politicised within the Netherlands. With the rise of Eurosceptic parties both on the extreme left and radical right, EU membership no longer seems self-evident. Whereas challenger parties try to put new issues regarding the EU on the political agenda, mainstream parties feel constrained to share their opinions due to their governmental responsibility. Since the rise of social media, political parties no longer have to fight over available space in newspapers and can communicate directly to the public. Even though the electorate is internally divided on EU issues, mainstream parties are now also forced to share their opinions on the European Union on social media. Within this thesis I will therefore explore how Dutch political actors frame the European Union on Facebook and how party position influences party strategy. Almost all parties seize the opportunity to share their opinions on the EU and employ multiple frames with the hope to receive the most votes.

Keywords

European Union, Framing, Party Strategy, Politicization

1. Introduction

In 1991 several European countries decided to join forces and increase collaboration by forming the European Union (Serricchio, Tsakatika, & Quaglia, 2012). The European Steel and Coal Community that had been established in 1952 transformed into a supranational organization that currently counts twenty-eight member states. However, more than twenty-five years after the Treaty of Maastricht ‘*the wind of change*’ mentality that prevailed in the 1990’s appears to have evaporated (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014). Whereas the Dutch used to be rather enthusiastic about the European Union, the Treaty of Maastricht managed to drastically change this positive attitude (Harmsen, 2004). Like many EU member states, the Dutch showed a decrease in support in the Eurobarometer poll right after the treaty was signed. Ever since it seems as if a Eurosceptic wind is blowing from Great Britain towards Europe’s mainland, carrying the idea that EU membership is no longer self-evident (De Wilde, 2010). While Great Britain has started negotiations to leave the European Union as a result of the Brexit referendum, politicians in other EU member states are also promoting a Eurosceptic stance in the run-up to the European elections in 2019 (The Guardian, 2016).

According to Hooghe and Marks (2009) the European Union became politicised after the treaty because political authority was transferred from nation states to the European Union. Altogether this organisational change led to an increase in conflicts on topics like sovereignty, political identity and financial redistribution within several member states. Especially parties on the extreme left and radical right of the political spectrum openly criticise certain aspects of the EU (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014; Van Bohemen et al., 2018). As a result of this politicization, mainstream parties are also expected to communicate a clear and broad program about the European Union to the public. They, however, have to deal with all the dimensions of the EU instead of focussing on just one aspect like most challenger parties do (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014).

In that regard it is important to realize that the media landscape, and therefore communication with the public, has changed over the last decade. Back in the days of traditional media, political actors had to compete over the available space within newspapers and television shows and were chosen based on their expertise on certain issues (Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007). However, with the rise of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook it is now possible for political actors to communicate their stances on multiple issues directly with the public. This can be beneficial during electoral campaigns, but using Facebook also entails risks. Only recently Facebook introduced strict policies, which state that organisations and individuals that spread political content must verify their account.

The reason for these stricter policies is to prevent abuse of the Facebook network and the spreading of fake news, which occurred during the USA presidential campaigns in 2016 (NOS, 2018). Facebook thus is a valuable weapon that can influence political campaigns and the public's opinion.

Therefore, within this research I will explore how messages on the EU are communicated to the public by using the framing typology developed by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010). The concept 'framing' is described as follows: "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Several scholars like Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010; 2013), Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007), Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have examined how political issues are framed within the public debate by both media channels and political parties, however the data used in previous research have all been gathered from traditional media sources. This research is therefore scientifically relevant because data is now gathered from the social media channel Facebook. The usage of social media by political actors means that they are no longer constrained by the available space within newspapers, which might affect the way political actors present themselves and their views. Especially now social media has given political actors the opportunity to also communicate their opinions about issues on which they are not considered to be an expert; it is interesting to see if political actors actually seize this opportunity to own new issues within the political debates.

I expect that the messages on Facebook are framed in such a way that they justify the position of the political actor and serve his or her interest (Helbling et al., 2010). It is, however, not a given fact that all parties share their thoughts about the European Union on social media. When certain issues are high on the public and political agenda, like the EU has become over the last decades, a political actor has the option to emphasize or de-emphasize its position on certain issues (Meijers, 2015). The governmental responsibility of certain political actors might constrain them to share their stances on the EU with the public as well as their diverse voters base. Some political actors might therefore believe it to be more beneficial to de-emphasize the issue. For this reason the differences between mainstream and challenger parties will also be taken into consideration and will be linked to issue ownership theory, that states that different political parties own different political issues and are considered the expert on certain issues by the public (Smith, 2010). Altogether this leads to the following research question: How do Dutch political actors frame the European Union on Facebook and

how does party position influence party strategy?

To understand the process of politicization of the EU within the Netherlands the first part of my theoretical framework will give a historic overview of events that caused this politicization. Subsequently, a short explanation of the concept framing will be given. However, the definitions of the different frames will be more thoroughly explained in the result part of this thesis to make sure the results are understandable. Furthermore, I will explore the differences between mainstream and challenger parties in their strategies regarding the politicization of the European Union.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Politicization of the European Union in the Netherlands

For an extensive period of time the Netherlands was considered to be one of the most enthusiastic countries when it comes to European cooperation (Harmsen, 2004). From the 1950's onwards the Dutch government supported the development of a supranational institutional structure. They showed this support by being one of six countries that started the European Steel and Coal Community (ESEC), which would later on develop into the European Economic Community (EEC) (Hanf & Soenterdorp, 1998). According to policy makers removing the trade restrictions was necessary for the prosperity of the Netherlands and its economic development. This process of European integration was initiated by political elites for the sake of peace and economic prosperity. Although the social democrats and radical left did show signs of scepticism about the European integration, overall Dutch citizens showed high rates of support for European integration in the Eurobarometer polls (Harmsen, 2004).

This positive feeling about the European cooperation remained salient until the evolvement from the EEC into the European Union. Support for European cooperation declined in 1992, right after the Treaty of Maastricht. Because of this system-transforming event, the European Union was no longer an economic enterprise but also integrated on a more political level (De Wilde, 2010), a process that was mostly criticised by the radical right. Extreme left parties already questioned EU integration of markets since the establishment of the ESEC. This growing criticism on both the radical left as well as the radical right, leads to the so-called U curve in Euroscepticism. (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014).

Since Eurosceptic opinions came from both the radical left and right, EU membership no longer seems self-evident these days, especially with radical right wing parties promoting the 'Nexit' (NRC, 2016). The public starts to question the benefits of the Dutch EU

membership and the issue becomes highly politicized. Hutter and Grande (2014) argue that politicisation exists out of three different dimensions: *issue salience* (visibility), *actor expansion* (scope) and *actor polarization* (intensity and direction). Within this section the three dimensions will be adapted to the Dutch case to provide more background information on the politicization of issues regarding the European Union.

First, *issue salience* can be established when specific topics are frequently raised by political actors in public debates. If an issue is not debated in public it can never receive enough attention to become fully politicized (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Two main issues received increased attention in the Netherlands after the Treaty of Maastricht, namely the EU budget and the loss of sovereignty of the nation state. In the 1990's the Dutch went from net receiver to net contributor to the EU budget (De Wilde, 2010). This means "the Netherlands' share in payments to the EU is higher than its share in receipts from the EU budget" (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007, p. 36). The budgetary consequences of increased integration and enlargement of the EU contributed to a more sceptic stance towards the European Union. Shortly after the liberal party VVD urged the government to discuss a reduction of Dutch contribution to the EU budget. This reduction was supported by the 'purple' coalition (VVD, PvdA, D66) and was included in the governing agreement after the new Dutch elections in 1998.

Moreover, according to Hooghe and Marks (2009), issues regarding the European Union became politicised because of this transfer of political authority from nation states to a supranational organisation. As mentioned before, due to the Treaty of Maastricht the European Union gained more responsibility in several policy areas and the European Parliament received more power (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). Subsequently conflicts on topics like sovereignty and national identity received increased attention in public debates. "European integration means less leeway for nation states concerning international migration, while immigration flows may be perceived as a threat to national identity" (Van Bohemen et al., 2018, p. 5). The balance between national interests versus community interests was discussed more often and the European Union became a topic on the national political agenda.

Second, *the expansion of actors* involved in a public debate contributes to the politicization of an issue. It is hard for an issue to become politicized if only a few actors participate in the public debates on the European Union. Moreover, European integration used to be discussed by and decided on by executive elites, especially during the formative phase. It is therefore key that actors with non-governmental functions also participate in the debate before an issue can become politicized (Hutter & Grande, 2014). As mentioned before the

politicization of the EU was mainly caused by an increase of intensive public debates about the EU budget and sovereignty in which not only mainstream but also challenger parties participated. “The EU budget became part of ‘normal politics’ with a clear government versus opposition dynamic.” (De Wilde, 2010, p. 103). Moreover, the number of right-wing populist parties strongly increased in Europe during the 1990’s. In the Netherlands Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and later on in the 21st century Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and Forum voor Democratie (FvD) proclaimed anti-immigration and nationalist stances. PVV and FvD also promote a more Eurosceptic stance (De Wilde, 2010; NRC, 2019a). Right-wing populist parties mostly put the identity aspect of the European Union on the agenda.

This brings me to the third dimension, namely the polarisation of the conflict among different actors (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Having a public debate with a different set of actors does not necessarily mean an issue is politicised. It is important that different actors put forward different positions. Polarization can be conceptualised as follows: “the intensity of conflict related to an issue among the different actors” (p. 1004). Although mainstream party VVD was alert on e.g. budgetary issues, most mainstream parties traditionally did not communicate a strong anti-EU stance towards the public due to constraints caused by their governmental responsibility (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). According to Laceywell (2017) especially socio-democratic parties have lost votes over the last decades due to obscuring certain issues in their communication to the public. However, the issue became polarised because both the radical left and right had different reasons for their Eurosceptic stances. According to the extreme left, European integration is a threat to Dutch welfare state provisions, due to trade liberalization and the creation of a single market. Euroscepticism on the radical right, in contrast, focuses more on issues of sovereignty, national interest and identity (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014).

Due to the increase of Eurosceptic ideas represented within parliament by challenger parties as well as the fact that since 1990 the polarized debates on issues regarding the European Union have occupied a permanent place on the national political agenda (De Wilde, 2010), mainstream parties are also expected to take a clear stance on the matters of the European Union. Within this research I will show how mainstream parties and challenger parties frame the European Union and how their governmental responsibility might influence the strategies they employ in trying to gain control over the politicization of the EU.

2.2. Framing and Party Strategy

2.2.1. Framing

Within Sociology it is Erving Goffman who is well known for his work on ‘framing’ (1974). A frame refers to ‘schemata of interpretation’, which guides the way an individual interprets social reality. In this research the other side of the story is explored, so not how the message is perceived but how it is communicated to the public will play a central role. The main purpose is to explore which political party uses which frame to define a certain issue relating to the European Union. Several scholars have already researched the framing of political messages by the media and political actors. In this research I will therefore use the frames developed by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010), which are based on the frame categorisation from Habermas (1993).

There are three overarching frameworks that can be distinguished: the ‘cultural’, ‘economic’ and ‘other utilitarian frame’. First, the ‘cultural frames’ underscore the ideas and values that are inherent in a community, which can be split into a ‘nationalistic’ or ‘multicultural-universalist frame’. Second, the ‘economic frame’ entails the connection between the European Union and economic issues regarding the classic left-right conflict, with on one side the concern for ‘labour and social security’ within ones own nation state and on the other side the ‘economic prosperity’ brought by the EU. The third and final frame is the ‘other utilitarian frame’ and contains arguments, which are used to justify the position of a political actors by employing arguments regarding ‘political efficiency and efficacy’ of the EU and the ‘security and ecology’ within and outside the EU borders. These frames will be used as sensitizing concepts during the analysis. To make sure that the content of the frames can easily be connected with the results found after the analysis, I have chosen to elaborate more extensively on the frames in the results part of this thesis.

Frame	Sub frames
Cultural	Nationalistic Multicultural-Universalist
Economic	Labour and Social Security Economic Prosperity
Other utilitarian	Political Efficiency and Efficacy Security and Ecology

Table 1. Frame categorisation

Source Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010)

2.2.2. Party Strategy and Responses

Although the idea of framing seems rather straightforward, it is important to understand in which context a certain frame is chosen. Political parties all claim to have their own ideology, but I argue that this ideology does not always lead to a self-evident frame. According to the spatial theory of party competition parties are rational actors that respond to what other parties do and attempt to maximize the share of votes they receive. Parties adjust their position on certain issues in the face of changes in their political surroundings. These alterations are either based on changes in public opinion, positional shifts or electoral gains by the competition (Meijers, 2015).

When an issue is ranked high on the public and political agenda, like the EU currently is, a political party has the option to emphasize or de-emphasize its position on this issue. This is in line with the issue ownership theory, which shows that different political parties own different political issues and are considered the expert on certain issues by the public (Smith, 2010). The public will vote for the party that focuses most on their own issues during the election campaigns. “Political parties selectively emphasize or stress the set of policy issues they own” (Smith, 2010, p. 1477). Voters will consider certain parties most competent to handle a particular issue. The green parties will be considered the expert on environmental issues and own this issue, whereas social democratic parties own the issue of welfare redistribution. A challenger party as well might focus on only one aspect of the EU, whereas mainstream parties feel like they have to emphasize different dimension of the EU or might decide not to communicate any stances on the EU at all (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014).

Meijers (2015) makes the distinction between mainstream and challenger parties. In which challenger parties are the parties that have not governed before, while the mainstream parties did experience governmental responsibility and have been part of coalitions. Challenger parties are, however, unconstrained by governmental responsibility and seek to put new topics on the political agenda (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). The ideas of mainstream parties, on the other hand, are influenced by their previous experience in office and their desire to be in office again. They also have to deal with all the dimensions of the EU instead of focussing on just one aspect like most challenger parties do (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014). These mainstream parties are more careful in adopting a new position compared to their previous stances, because it might reduce their chance to be in office again and/or to find coalition partners. Moreover, Meijers (2015) argues that mainstream parties overall have no interest in putting issues regarding the European Union on the agenda, because they are often internally divided on this topic and so are their electorates. It is therefore interesting to see if

how mainstream and challenger parties present their positions on Facebook.

When looking at the so-called U curve in Euroscepticism it shows that on the radical left and radical right parties and supporters show the most Eurosceptic attitudes (Van Bohemen et al., 2018). The highest support for the EU can be found in the centre. Several researches have shown that parties fight for the so-called median voters. While both radical left and right have managed to achieve an increase in votes, parties in the centre have lost votes over the last decades (Lacewell, 2017). This loss of votes for the social democratic parties is caused by a lack of communicating clear stances to the public (Meijers, 2015), which was considered as most beneficial strategy because of the division amongst the general voter regarding the EU. Altogether, parties only want to emphasize the issues they are associated with and want to compete with other parties on only one dimension. For example VVD emphasizes the importance of trade and open markets for de Dutch economy. When competing on other dimensions, they fear electoral losses. Since not communicating clear stances has led to a decrease in votes for social democratic parties according to the literature, it is interesting to see if, when and how they communicate opinions on the EU to the public.

Overall, based on the work of Van Spanje (2010) three different responses are expected of mainstream parties when Eurosceptic parties enter the public arena. First, mainstream parties might accommodate (accommodative response) by copying the challengers' anti-EU stance and thus decide to emphasize the issue. As mentioned before when assuming parties are rational actors seeking to increase the share of votes they receive from the public, copying might seem beneficial. This could be either because public opinion has changed or because the competition has experienced electoral gains (Meijers, 2015). Second, a mainstream political party could take up a radically different position than the Eurosceptic party (adversarial response). Although it is a different and more positive position towards the EU, the adversarial response still means that the party's stance on the issue is emphasized. Third, mainstream parties might choose not to take a clear stance at all (dismissive response) and therefore employ an obscuring strategy. Based on these theories I expect to see this response mostly from mainstream parties, because they are constrained by other governmental obligations or might be internally divided. However, mainstream parties might be forced to employ an adversarial response and therefore own new issues to secure their votes. When analysing the Facebook data, these three responses will be used as sensitizing concepts.

3. Methodology

To answer the research question: *How do Dutch political actors frame the European Union on Facebook and how does party position influence party strategy?* a discourse analysis on 1111 Facebook messages has been conducted. “Discourse is not a simply a neutral device for imparting meaning. People seek to accomplish things when they talk or when they write” (Bryman, 2015, p. 532). By conducting a discourse analysis on several Facebook messages I will be able to uncover underlying strategies employed by the political actors. The messages were gathered from Facebook pages of ten out of thirteen leaders of the political parties that are currently in the Dutch House of Representatives. I chose to gather most data from the verified accounts of the party leaders because those accounts overall have a more opinionated content, whereas the account of the political parties have a more general content on which they also promote events. Unfortunately, both the party leaders of ‘Partij voor de Dieren’ (PvdD) and ‘ChristenUnie’ do not use Facebook to communicate to the public. To fill up the data gap for these parties, data was gathered from the verified party profiles of the ‘PvdD’ and ‘ChristenUnie’. Luckily these party profiles did contain a lot of messages regarding the EU and the party’s viewpoints. The party ‘50 Plus’ is not represented on Facebook and will therefore not be included in this analysis. There were several Facebook pages about the party ‘50 Plus’, however these pages were not verified and therefore might contain information that does not represent the viewpoint of the ‘50 Plus’ party.

By conducting qualitative research it is possible to explore the viewpoints of several political actors on the European Union. This research will help understand how strategy and a party’s position within parliament might constrain certain political actors in their communication about the EU. Because Facebook, unlike Twitter, allows users to share extensive messages with their followers, the political actors can communicate substantial arguments. Because this research focuses on the identification of frames and potential strategies used by the political actors, I chose not to use a specific timeframe when looking at the data. Some political actors started using Facebook earlier than others. I therefore chose to use all the data that was gathered from the year 2012 until present. Some political actors started using Facebook later on, but because I do not want to compare the parties over time it is not necessary to have data from the exact same timeframes for all actors. The aim of this research is to explore the frames used not to compare the parties to each other.

3.1. Data

As mentioned before 1111 messages were gathered from Facebook. These messages were collected with the scraping tool Facepager. This tool makes it possible to fill in the Facebook ID of the party or leader of the party. The scraping tool will then focus only on the Facebook page of that specific person or party. Thereafter the tool asks you which resource is desired. Examples of the resources are likes, comments, videos or posts. For this research only the posts of the specific ID's (political actors) were gathered. Subsequently, Facepager fetches all the data, which you can then download and open in a csv file. To make sure only messages about the EU would remain, I came up with a list of keywords and filtered the posts by using the keyword search in excel. The list of keywords among others contained the concepts EU, Europ(e), Sovereignty, Brussels, Brexit, Nexit, Ukraine, EUCO, Euro, sovereignty, monetary union, international cooperation, migration, refugees, identity, culture, borders, single market.

Subsequently, the messages that remained after the selection on keywords were coded in Atlas.ti. The coding of the data consisted out of three steps: open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2014). By means of coding the data can be broken down, examined, compared, conceptualized and categorised (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Moreover, data on all political parties and their position within parliament were gathered. An overview can be found in the results. As mentioned before the frame typology of Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest (2010) will be used as sensitizing concepts and were used during the axial coding phase. The rest of the theoretical framework will function as a glass through which I will look while analysing the data (Boeije, 2014).

The internal validity within this research might raise questions. The data are rather straightforward. The aim of this research however remains to understand the strategy behind the messages. By using sensitizing concepts and a structured documentation of the coding process I believe the findings can be considered believable. I am however aware of the fact that while doing qualitative research staying objective is important. The theoretical framework and typologies will structure the coding process.

Type	Party	Current Party Leaders	Previous Party Leaders	Pro or Anti- EU
Mainstream	VVD	Mark Rutte	Alexander Pechtold Diederik Samsom	Pro
	CDA	Sybrand Buma		Pro
	D66	Rob Jetten		Pro
	ChristenUnie	Gert-Jan Segers		Pro
	PvdA	Lodewijk Asscher		Pro
Challenger	PVV	Geert Wilders	Emile Roemer	Anti
	SP	Lilian Marijnissen		Pro/Anti
	FvD	Thierry Baudet		Anti
	GroenLinks	Jesse Klaver		Pro
	SGP	Kees v.d. Staaij		Pro
	PvdD	Marianne Thieme		Pro
	Denk	Tunahan Kuzu		Pro

*Table 2. Overview Dutch Political Parties: Mainstream and Challenger
Overview sources in Bibliography*

4. Results

The main purpose of this research is to explore which political actor uses which frame to communicate a message about the European Union to their followers. Later on, these frames will guide the analysis of the party strategies and will show to what extent the political parties own specific issues regarding to the European Union and how the parties respond to the overall politicization of the EU. At the beginning of the results a table has been added to get a clear overview of the frames employed by the political actors.

4.1. Identifying Frames

One of the aims of this research is to answer the first part of the research question: How do Dutch political actors frame the European Union on Facebook? To answer this question the frames developed by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) guided the analysis. Almost all the messages that were gathered from Facebook fitted one of the frames categories, as you can see in table 3. According to Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) there are three overarching frameworks that can be distinguished: the cultural, economic and other utilitarian frame. The frames will be explained first and will then be linked to the results that were found during the analysis of the Facebook pages of the political actors.

Frames	Sub-Frames	Used by Political Actors
Cultural	<i>Nationalistic</i>	<i>FvD</i> <i>PVV</i>
	<i>Multicultural-Universalist</i>	<i>D66</i> <i>SGP</i> <i>PvdA</i> <i>GroenLinks</i> <i>Denk</i> <i>PvdD</i> <i>CU</i>
Economic	<i>Labour and Social Security</i>	<i>PvdA</i> <i>PVV</i> <i>GroenLinks</i> <i>SP</i> <i>PvdD</i>
	<i>Economic Prosperity</i>	<i>D66</i> <i>VVD</i>
Other utilitarian	<i>Political Efficiency and Efficacy</i>	<i>SGP</i> <i>PvdA</i> <i>D66</i> <i>SP</i> <i>VVD</i> <i>PvdD</i> <i>CU</i> <i>FvD</i>
	<i>Security and Ecology</i>	<i>D66</i> <i>PVV</i> <i>GroenLinks</i> <i>VVD</i> <i>PvdD</i> <i>CU</i>

Table 3. Overview Results Frames

4.1.1. Cultural Frames

Nationalistic Frame

FvD and PVV

First, the ‘cultural frame’ refers to values and ideas that are internalized by a certain community or country. The ‘cultural frame’ can further be distinguished into a ‘nationalistic’ and ‘multicultural-universalist frame’. The word ‘nationalistic’ already gives away the biggest part of this frame, namely that it entails messages on the homogenous society and preservation of national boundaries (Helbling et al., 2010). This frame is about sovereignty, national identity and the protection of it. The frame is related to ideas and statements about fear of mass immigration and xenophobia and how these threats might harm national traditions.

In the messages from nine out of twelve parties a cultural frame was uncovered. As expected, based on the literature, both radical right parties ‘Forum voor Democratie’ and

‘Partij voor de Vrijheid’ did employ a ‘nationalistic frame’ when discussing issues regarding the EU. The usage of these frames is in line with the literature on the U-curve of Euroscepticism, where the radical right parties show Eurosceptic attitudes on the socio-cultural dimension. Both parties strongly emphasize the preservation of national boundaries.

FVD wants power back at the Dutch voter! We want democratic renewal, an end to uncontrolled immigration, power back from Brussels to The Hague and a free, tolerant society with lower taxes and less bureaucracy.

- Thierry Baudet, FvD, 24-09-2018

For FvD, immigration is one of the concepts used when discussing the EU, but FvD more often links sovereignty to the democratic process in which the people should decide what happens in their nation state instead of the EU. The ‘cultural frame’ is therefore employed in several messages, but is often combined with, for example, the ‘security and ecology’ and ‘political efficiency and efficacy frames’.

The xenophobic idea that is mentioned by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) within the ‘nationalistic frame’ is only employed by PVV. It might be a strategic move of FvD to not share xenophobic attitudes because they compete with PVV over voters on the radical right. PVV has often been criticised for their xenophobic stances, which also led to several lawsuits (NRC, 2019a). Voters on the radical right might see a brighter future in a party with less xenophobic stances. The PVV overall discusses sovereignty in the light of control over borders, increased immigration and the islamization of the Dutch society.

We are the future, not the past. And we’re getting stronger and stronger. We want a revival of our nation states and more national identity/sovereignty, less immigration/islamization and no more open borders. And less Brussels. And we will win. You are the past, Guy Verhofstadt.

- Geert Wilders, PVV, 21-10-2018

In this last message Wilders also lashes out at Guy Verhofstadt, who is currently the leader of the liberal party in the European Parliament. Almost all political actors criticize or question the stances of other politicians in their messages. Wilders however does this most often. It seems to be a part of the structure of his messages.

Wilders manages to use the same concepts in all the messages he posted on Facebook. He mentions how the EU facilitates immigration and often holds another political actor

accountable for these problems. He, moreover, discusses closing the Dutch borders and regaining sovereignty. Also links are made to other frames, but the messages always build on a ‘nationalistic frame’. Sometimes more substantial information is given:

Today, Brussels wants to inundate us with Third World immigrants. Mostly from Islamic countries. It wants to distribute these immigrants all over the EU member states. The result will be a disaster. It will dilute the Judeo-Christian and humanist identity of our nations.

- Geert Wilders, PVV, 16-12-2017

Part of Speech at SPC convention Czech Republic

But other times the messages are short and only contain hash tags repeating the core thoughts of the PVV:

#StopEU #StopIslam #Nexit

- Geert Wilders, PVV, 29-04-2019

The combination of shorter and longer messages and the continuous repetition of the same concepts give the reader a clear overview of the PVV’s position on the European Union.

Multicultural-Universalist Frame

D66, SGP, PvdA, GroenLinks, Denk, PvdD and CU

The second cultural sub-frame is the ‘multicultural-universalist frame’, which is the opposite of the ‘nationalistic frame’ and is build up out of two sub-frames the ‘multicultural-inclusive frame’ and the ‘moral-universalist frame’. The ‘multicultural-universalist frame’ in itself refers to “general moral principles and universal rights that are claimable and acceptable for everyone, regardless of particular interests or cultural identities” (Helbling, Hoeglinger & Wüest, 2010, p. 500). A ‘multicultural-inclusive frame’ entails statements of an inclusive and open Europe. Whereas a ‘moral-universalist frame’ focuses more on general principles and universal rights that count for all individuals, like humanitarian rights and non-discrimination.

Seven out of twelve political parties employ the ‘multicultural-universalist frame’. So, three political parties do not express any cultural ideas in regards to the EU, namely VVD, CDA and SP. All seven parties discussed the EU in the light of its democratic, moral and humanist responsibilities. The moral-universalist sub-frame is therefore employed more often. The messages from SGP, ChristenUnie and Denk focus on religion and discrimination. This attitude is especially in line with the Christian party ideology of both the SGP and

ChristenUnie. Both parties request the EU to help people that are victims of discrimination based on religion both in and outside Europe.

Minister Timmermans and the EU must do their best to ensure that the Christians in Egypt are better protected.

- Kees v.d. Staaij, SGP, 09-10-2013

Strong support must be sought within the European Union to tackle the persecution of faith.

- ChristenUnie, 15-05-2013

The frames employed by DENK are in line with their multicultural ideology. Kuzu emphasizes multiple religions when sharing thoughts about EU interference with discrimination and refers to the common European values.

In #Europe there should not be room for nationalism, anti-semitism or muslim hatred. These are issues that are in contrast with our European values.

- Tunahan Kuzu, DENK, 15-11-2018

The other parties, PvdD, D66, GroenLinks and PvdA, mostly rely on human rights in their messages about issues regarding e.g. refugees or the Ukrainian referendum. GroenLinks, PvdA and D66 emphasize the role of European cooperation in this fight for human rights.

Refugees fleeing war and violence are entitled to a safe place. Whether in the Netherlands, in France or in Greece. Europe must show its strength. Putting European hands together.

- Alexander Pechtold, D66, 21-06-2018

The cooperation agreement with Ukraine is a symbol of the Europe in which we believe: The Europe that stands for democracy, respect for civil rights and freedom.

- Jesse Klaver, GroenLinks, 24-02-2016

PvdD emphasizes the hard debates that are held about immigration and how other parties portray refugees as terrorists. Moral values are again mentioned as a reason to give refugees a fair change for a better life, regardless of their religion or origin. But since ‘Partij voor de Dieren’ mostly focuses on animal rights and the climate, messages about immigration are often linked to the problems that cause this mass migration.

Instead of only thinking of the distribution of immigrants over European countries, PvdD is one of the parties that continuously emphasizes the causes of migration. PvdD wants to explore to what extent climate change, arms trade and trade policies influence the mass migration to Europe.

4.1.2. Economic Frames

Two parties that did not employ a cultural frame, VVD and SP, did give more attention to issues regarding social security, budget issues, labour (migration) and economic growth. Considering the VVD is a party that focuses on business owners, it is not surprising that the economic frame is often used and cultural aspects are not emphasized. SP being a leftist party emphasizes the EU being a threat to the welfare state provisions and only discusses immigration when immigrants are considered a threat to that same welfare state. SP therefore also employs the economic frame most often. This is in line with what has been discussed in the literature.

Labour and Social Security Frame

PvdA, PVV, GroenLinks, SP and PvdD

The economic and other utilitarian frames that Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) distinguish are both inspired by the utilitarian frame from Habermas (1993). Within a *utilitarian frame* the focus lies on how a position is justified and how the position will help the political actor to “attain a specific goal or defend a particular interest” (Helbling et al., 2013, p. 24). Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) chose to insert a utilitarian frame that focuses on the economic aspects, which makes sense because economic cooperation is one of the core tasks of the EU. Within the ‘economic utilitarian frame’ the statements made about the economic consequences of being part of the European Union. There are two sub-frames: the ‘economic prosperity frame’ and the ‘labour and social security frame’. Both sub-frames have to do with how the European Union influences the traditional economic right versus left conflict.

SP and PvdA both employ the ‘labour and social security frame’. These two parties have three main issues they communicate to the public: the effect of labour migration on equal payment within European countries, taxes that should be paid by multinationals and the overall influence of the EU on the welfare state. GroenLinks also touches upon these issues, but they moreover compliment the EU for taking measures to prevent tax avoidance. All three parties are positioned on the left of the economic political spectrum and this ideology comes forward on their Facebook pages. Their overall goal for the European Union is to promote equal welfare among the member states.

Europe will have to change radically. That means that the big companies have to pay fair taxes and that we stop labour migration that is only meant to reduce the costs of labour.

Lodewijk Asscher, PvdA, 06-03-2017

Don't let Brussels take control of our healthcare, our education and our pensions. So we say no to this European Union. Because: European cooperation? Yes! European super state? No!

- Lilian Marijnissen, SP, 19-04-2019

I love Europe, but oh, how difficult it is to love this EU. This economic Europe. An EU based on the ideology of market forces and competition. In which economic interests take precedence over social interests.

- Jesse Klaver, GroenLinks, 28-05-2018

Another issue that also influenced the politicization of EU membership in the first place is still of importance these days, the EU budget. The PVV, SP and PvdD often share their opinion about either the amount of money the Netherlands contributes to the EU or the way the budget is spend by the EU. SP shows the public how money in their opinion should not be spent on the EU, but should go to e.g. children that grow up in poverty. PvdD also asks for an explanation of the expenditures of the EU to e.g. new office buildings or mega stables in Ukraine. The PVV often claims that the Dutch tax money that has been spent on EU membership should be reinvested into the Dutch welfare state.

Open borders, Marrakesh, billions to EU/Africa and for us higher energy bills, VAT, health insurance premium, rent. Bah!

- Geert Wilders, PVV, 17-12-2018

Economic Prosperity Frame

D66 and VVD

The ‘economic prosperity frame’ entails messages about high skilled immigrants, which are communicated in a context of economic growth and wealth. Examples could be that a supranational organization like the European Union is necessary, because small states cannot cope with the globalizing market by themselves. On the other side, the ‘labour and social security frame’ is used when discussing fear of unemployment rates and threat for the welfare state. These problems are often linked to an increase of globalization and the associated immigration in which the ‘losers of globalization’ want to be compensated by the government for the increased risk of unemployment caused by e.g. labour migrants that are willing to work for lower wages or the fact that more lower skilled jobs are moved to developing countries (Rommel & Walter, 2017).

Whereas SP and PvdA, both left wing parties, consider labour migration within Europe as a threat to equal payment, D66 frames labour migration in a more positive way and employs the ‘economic prosperity frame’. D66 considers labour migration and the free market necessary and beneficial for Dutch businesses and the stability of the Dutch economy.

The reality is simple: we need more people from the rest of Europe. Let us not close our eyes to that. The SP sets European workers against each other. And VVD and CDA refuse to tell the real story. While the free market and the farmers really depend on European freedoms. As far as D66 is concerned, the borders remain open for them. That is the success of the European project. That is the key to the success of our economy and society.

- Rob Jetten, D66, 07-03-2019

D66 and VVD also refer to the necessity of a strong and united Europe. This would according to both parties only benefit the welfare state. Rutte as party leader of the VVD and prime minister of the Netherlands does not often share very opinionated messages. When he does give an opinion it is often on behalf of The Dutch government. In case of the VVD they have been the largest party in the Dutch House of Representatives for almost a decade. The responsibility of being the leader of the governing party and being prime minister at the same time, does lead to a larger share of informative messages on the Facebook profile of Mark Rutte. Often these messages are combined with subjects like open market, trade and security.

This morning I spoke in the European Parliament about the future of the EU. European cooperation is important for growth and jobs, but also because of the simple fact that cooperation offers security. It is precisely now that geopolitical relationships are shifting that it is important for the EU to remain united. Together we stand stronger. The EU itself is proof that international cooperation and free trade are the basis for prosperity, security and stability.

- Mark Rutte, VVD, 13-06-2018

4.1.3. Other Utilitarian Frame

The third and final frame builds on the utilitarian frame distinguished by Habermas (1993) and is called *the other utilitarian frame*. Still within this frame, the justification of a position and how this position contributes to the interests of the actor are central. *The other utilitarian frame* has a stronger focus on societal and political statements. Two sub-frames can be distinguished: the ‘political efficiency and efficacy frame’ and the ‘security and ecology frame’. The ‘political efficiency and efficacy frame’ entails statements about the political system and how it functions. The ‘security and ecology frame’ however entails matters of security, both on an internal and external basis. For example internal issues like corruption and external issues like peace and protection of borders. The frame can also be mobilized when discussing the environment and global warming.

Political Efficiency and Efficacy Frame

SGP, PvdA, D66, SP, VVD, PvdD, FvD and CU

Political actors do not only share their position about issues the EU deals with, they also reflect on the organizational structure and functioning of the EU. What is astonishing is that all political actors that employ the ‘political efficiency and efficacy frame’ agree that the EU as a political system should undergo changes. When looking at how political actors review the EU, I stumbled upon a distinction. Some actors discuss the functioning of the EU in light of elite versus the people and still consider the EU an elitist project.

The 'Brexit' heralds the end of the EU as an elite project. Only a radically reformed European cooperation has a future!

- Kees v.d. Staaij, SGP, 24-06-2016

It is time to stop the European elite. We do not want to become a province in the realm of Brussels bureaucrats. It is time for a just and democratic Europe. No dictations from Brussels, but power for people.

- Lilian Marijnissen, SP, 10-04-2019

"Europe has a democratic deficit and a credibility deficit, especially when it comes to combating climate change."

- PvdD, 10-02-2017

Other political actors also discuss re-democratization, but emphasize the importance of cooperation between member states. What stands out is the clear distinction between mainstream and challenger parties. The mainstream parties do criticise the functioning of the EU, but show that they are aware of the fact that they are actually partially responsible for how it functions. They therefore seem more solution oriented compared to the challenger parties.

Yes, Europe must be better. Much better. But only if we join hands can we meet the demand for genuine, democratic European politics.

- Alexander Pechtold, D66, 09-05-2018

With each candidacy, the content is paramount for the Netherlands: implementing the strategic agenda and focusing the EU more and more on core tasks. This reform agenda must ensure that Europe is given more focus and is limited to the major issues.

- Mark Rutte, VVD, 31-08-2014

The change that the Christian Union wants is first and foremost not to deprive people of responsibility, but to give them freedom to take responsibility. We also want to extend that to Europe. The solution to the European crisis is not the flight forward to more Europe, but less and a better Europe.

- ChristenUnie, 10-08-2012

Security and Ecology Frame

D66, PVV, GroenLinks, VVD, PvdD and CU

Five parties employ the ‘security and ecology frame’ when discussing the EU on Facebook. Security and ecology are two examples of issues that according to D66, GroenLinks, PvdD, CU and VVD cross borders and therefore should be dealt with by means of cooperation among the different member states. They consider the EU as the institution that could contribute in coping with issues like climate change, animal welfare and security of the borders of Europe. D66, VVD and GroenLinks also emphasize the history and main goal of the European Union to unite different nation states. D66, GroenLinks and PvdD mostly focus on issues regarding ecology, whereas VVD and CU also mention the importance of (cyber) security.

The EU is the outcome of the greatest peace project of all time. And the Netherlands still needs Europe to be able to cope with the major challenges of our time, such as the climate and refugee crisis.

- Rob Jetten, D66, 05-05-2019

Together with our European sister parties, we are moving towards the 2019 elections. Because issues such as animal welfare, agricultural subsidies, bullfighting, animal transport, privacy and democratization of Europe are cross-border. # EU2019 # growing resistance

- PvdD, 25-06-2018

European cooperation is important for growth and jobs, but also because of the simple fact that cooperation offers security. It is precisely now that geopolitical relationships are shifting that it is important for the EU to remain united. Together we stand stronger. The EU itself is proof that international cooperation and free trade are the basis for prosperity, security and stability.

- Mark Rutte, VVD, 13-06-2018

There, on the other hand, is also the possibility of employing the frame to hold the EU accountable for security or ecology issues. In several Facebook messages the PVV discusses the danger of mass immigration and links islamization with attacks that have been happening within Europe.

According to EU Commissioner Avramopoulos, 3 million migrants are now ready to come to Europe. How many terrorists, rapists, ISIS sympathizers and social assistance recipients are among them?

- Geert Wilders, PVV, 02-06-2017

4.1.4. The Informative Frame

The frames developed by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010) were used to analyse traditional media messages. On Facebook, however, I noticed that politicians not only share their opinions on issues regarding the EU, but political actors also inform their followers about meetings they had, members that can be voted for during the European Elections, petitions that can be signed or events for party members where EU issues will be discussed. For example:

Together with @esther.delange I arrived at the EPP-top in Brussels. We are discussing the European Summit for the coming weekend with our sister parties in Europe.

- Sybrand Buma, CDA, 28-06-2018

This quote is an example of the extra freedom social media gives the political actors compared to traditional media. Facebook and other social media channels might therefore have an added value, because these messages give the public more inside information about the whole structure of the European Union and how the politicians actually contribute to the political process within the EU. Reasoning out of a strategic perspective, as has been argued before, mainstream parties often are internally divided on issues regarding the EU. This might also be the case for their followers. De-emphasizing the issues regarding the EU might therefore be considered most beneficial, also when keeping in mind the possibility of forming new coalitions in the future.

4.2. Party Strategy

After the results of the frames employed by the political actors, the question that remains is how does party position influence party strategy? As mentioned before, when certain issues are high on the public and political agenda a party has the option to emphasize or de-emphasize its positions on certain issues (Meijers, 2015). What we can clearly state is that almost all challenger and mainstream parties do emphasize their opinion about the EU on

their Facebook accounts. Only CDA manages to share almost nothing and seems to de-emphasize the issue.

4.2.1. Challenger Parties

PVV, SP, FvD, GroenLinks, SGP, PvdD and Denk

Based on the literature it is expected that mainly the challenger parties would emphasize issues regarding the European Union, due to their non-governmental responsibilities. According to the results all challenger parties do choose to emphasize issues regarding the EU. Moreover, one would expect that challenger parties like to compete on one specific aspect of the European Union, whereas mainstream parties have to formulate plans for all the dimensions of the EU (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2014). When looking at the frames used by the political actors a couple of things stand out. When connecting the frames to the political socio-cultural and socio-economic dimensions, most parties employ the frame that we would be expected based on theory. Both radical right parties FvD and PVV employ the nationalist frame. FvD does emphasize the sovereignty of the nation state, and combines it with negative attitudes towards immigration and bureaucracy. Immigration, according to Wilders, also leads to danger and terrorism, which is why PVV also employs the ‘security and ecology frame’. What is interesting are the ideas of both PVV and FvD regarding what can be done with the money that currently goes to the EU. According to both PVV and FvD the remaining money should be invested in the Dutch welfare state and specifically in education, health care and security. Geert Wilders emphasizes this more often than Thierry Baudet. These statements lean more towards an economic leftists position on the socio-economic dimension and are not in line with the classic radical right Euroscepticism. This is therefore not in line with the expectations.

The SP currently represents the radical left in the Dutch House of Representatives. When looking at the frames employed by the SP their focus only lies on the socio-economic dimension. By employing the ‘labour and social security frame’ and ‘political efficiency and efficacy frame’ their messages entail statements regarding the protection of the welfare state and the political power the EU gained to influence the welfare state since the Treaty of Maastricht. Considering the radical left has always been sceptic about economic integration, SP now shows that the transfer of the EEC to the EU might also have added to leftist Euroscepticism. According to Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest (2010) the ‘nationalistic frame’ entails messages of sovereignty. However the ‘nationalistic frame’ only contains

messages regarding culture. But SP proves that sovereignty cannot only be ascribed to the cultural, but also fits the economic or other utilitarian frame. SP connects sovereignty with labour migration and e.g. the Dutch pension system, which are not cultural, but economic or political. The SP focuses on the same aspect of the European Union in most of their messages. This is therefore in line with the expectations based on the literature.

The other challenger parties GroenLinks, SGP, PvdD and Denk all employ the ‘multicultural-universalist frame’, which is in line with the leftists socio-cultural ideology of GroenLinks, PvdD and Denk. Although these parties can all be considered challenger parties, there is a difference in how the parties discuss the EU on their Facebook pages. SGP mostly used the ‘multicultural-universalist frame’ to discuss the rights of other Christians, which makes sense based on the party’s Christian ideology. What however is surprising is that SGP out of these challenger parties also strongly criticizes the EU and employs the ‘political efficiency and efficacy frame’. Denk only employs one frame and does not comment on the EU in another way. PvdD and GroenLinks both employ at least three different frames of which the ‘security and ecology frame’ is most salient because both parties have a strong emphasis on ecological issues.

4.2.2. Mainstream Parties

VVD, CDA, D66, ChristenUnie and PvdA

Based on the literature it is expected that mainstream parties either choose to de-emphasize issues regarding the EU or, due to the increased politicization, do decide to share their stances on the EU with the public through social media channels. VVD, D66, CU and PvdA all discuss the EU on their Facebook page and thus emphasize issues regarding the EU. PvdA, CU and D66 have all employed the ‘multicultural-universalist frame’. Since these parties are mainstream it would probably endanger the party’s position when choosing a ‘nationalistic frame’. What stands out is the fact that both VVD and CDA do not employ a cultural frame. They do discuss cultural issues, but without stating clear opinions. When cultural issues such as the refugee crisis come up, they are formulated in an informative manner.

It was decided earlier this week that 120,000 refugees would be spread across European countries. That is of course only a first step. Yesterday at the European Council we discussed what needs to be done. The emphasis was on the short term. We have agreed that we will improve the humanitarian conditions at the shelters in the region. We are going to invest in this, mainly by supplying food. That is certainly important now that winter is coming. The Netherlands contributes more than substantially to this.

- Mark Rutte, VVD, 24-09-2015

When it comes to the economic frames the mainstream parties choose the sub-frame that best fit their rightists of leftist stance of the socio-economic dimension of the political spectrum. D66 and VVD are more rightist and choose the ‘economic prosperity frame’, whereas PvdA employs the ‘labour and social security frame’. CDA and CU do only share informative messages regarding economic issues.

When looking at the messages it is clear that also mainstream parties are aware of the changes in the public opinion. It is surprising that all mainstream parties, except for CDA, state that the EU should undergo changes. Not one mainstream political actor believes the EU currently functions well. For example PvdA tries to find a balance in the migration debate. While communicating that Europe should help refugees, the party also already seems to be aware of possible critique, thus adding some terms and conditions.

Anyone who wants to be part of Schengen or to receive European subsidies also contributes to the reception of endangered citizens. We offer refugees the opportunity to become part of our society, but we ask them to learn the language quickly, to roll up their sleeves with volunteer work and to accept the core values of our free society: equality between men and women, gay and heterosexuals, respect for believers and people who are not religious.

- Lodewijk Asscher, PvdA, 06-12-2016

Moreover, the mainstream parties all emphasize the importance of working together on issues that cross borders, such as immigration and climate change. VVD also seems aware of increased feeling of sovereignty among the public. It emphasizes the importance of partnership of the member states. This short message contains metaphors and historical references to why the European Union has been established in the first place. What is so interesting about this message is the final sentence in which Mark Rutte manages to create a ‘we’ feeling and frames being a EU member state as part of the Dutch identity.

How do I view the European Union? In one sense: as a community of values and partnership of 27 sovereign countries, making each other stronger on topics that require a joint approach and that fulfil mutual agreements. For me what the European Union is not, is a train that inevitably moves forward to a final federal destination. (...) So we should not strive for that 'closer union', but for an increasingly perfect EU. The EU can only deliver on its promise if the individual Member States are strong and retain their individuality. We must cherish that individuality as our breeding ground for new ideas, innovation and creativity. After 1945, we have not become the most prosperous, most social and democratic continent in the world by compensating for each other's weaknesses, but rather by joining forces and making each other stronger.

- Mark Rutte, VVD, 02-03-2018

The main difference I discovered is the way the mainstream parties thought out the information they put into their messages on the EU. This is also why it is hard to state that every message only fits into one of the frames distinguished by Helbling, Hoeglinger and Wüest (2010). Especially the mainstream parties try to satisfy the public and almost defend both their stances and the EU as a whole, which they are considered responsible for establishing in the first place. Combining pro-EU stances with critical notes overall seems a rather strategic move that might be considered necessary to maintain the votes they receive and contradict the stances of the challenger parties.

4.3. Issue Ownership

When looking at issue ownership of parties, two frames can be considered as owned. First, the 'nationalistic frame', which is owned by radical right and challenger parties 'Forum voor Democratie' and 'Partij voor de Vrijheid'. For voters that are concerned about preservation of national boundaries, a homogenous society and sovereignty, PVV and FvD are the go-to party. The second and final frame that can be considered as owned is the 'economic prosperity frame'. Interestingly, this frame is owned by two mainstream parties, VVD and D66. Whereas the 'nationalistic frame' almost automatically means that the messages contain Eurosceptic thoughts, it is the other way around for the 'economic prosperity frame', where the advantages of the European Union are discussed. For pro-European voters that are mostly interested in the economic benefits of the EU, D66 and VVD are both interesting parties to vote for. Multiple parties employ the 'multicultural-universalist', 'labour and social security',

‘political efficiency and efficacy’ and ‘security and ecology frame’. Not one party therefore actually owns one of these frames.

Although the ‘nationalistic’ and ‘economic prosperity frames’ are owned, the issue ownership theory states “political parties selectively emphasize or stress the set of policy issues they own” (Smith, 2010, p. 1477). If a political party owns a frame it is important that the party does not emphasize other issues regarding the EU. D66 and VVD being mainstream parties do share their stances on multiple issues such as the climate and political efficiency, which is in line with the literature. The same goes for PVV and FvD who own the issue on ‘nationalist frame’. However PVV and FvD sometimes both leaned towards an economic leftist stance in their messages, which might cause confusion amongst the voters. Being challenger parties it would be expected that both PVV and FvD do not compete on different dimension and therefore employ a minimal amount of frames. However, PVV in total employs three different frames. FvD does employ two frames, which could in the end be beneficial and give the electorate a stronger and more structured overview of the stances of this radical right party.

Overall, no party can be considered as owner of the different issues regarding the EU. What, however, can be said based on these results is that parties did seize the opportunity to share their opinions with the public on issues on which they are traditionally not considered to be an expert. The only party that did not seize this opportunity and de-emphasized everything about the EU is political party CDA.

4.4. Party Responses

To see how mainstream parties respond to the increase of Eurosceptic parties within the political arena, an overview of party responses has been made. The parties are categorised based on their overall pro- or anti-EU stances on Facebook. It is evident that most of the mainstream parties have chosen to communicate their opinion regarding the European Union with the public. D66, VVD, CU and PvdA all emphasize the necessity of the European Union. It is, however, important to keep in mind that most mainstream parties also showed the public a more critical view on issues regarding the EU. These four mainstream parties all employed the ‘political efficacy and efficiency frame’ and argued that the EU should undergo some changes to function in a more efficient way. D66 shares the most pro-EU views and therefore takes an opposing stance compared to the Eurosceptic parties. D66 identifies itself as pro-EU and believes in a stronger Europe. D66 is therefore the only party with an adversarial response.

Although D66 did mention that the EU is not perfect yet and should do better, remaining parties VVD, CU and PvdA emphasize that the EU should focus on its core tasks and made statements about less Europe. These three parties seem to respond to the more Eurosceptic attitudes that live amongst the public by defending their stances in Facebook messages. I therefore conclude that mainstream parties VVD, CU and PvdA lean more towards an accommodative response and try to ensure their position in the electorate by pleasing both the pro- and anti-EU electorates.

One remaining mainstream party, CDA, has decided to use a more dismissive response. CDA discusses the EU, but it does not make any clear statements of being pro- or anti-EU. It seems as if CDA still regards the EU as a given fact and believes the institution is there to handle certain problems. The EU is therefore mentioned in messages but only in an informative way.

Responses	Political Actor
<i>Accommodative (coping anti-EU stance)</i>	<i>VVD PvdA CU</i>
<i>Adversarial (Pro-EU)</i>	<i>D66</i>
<i>Dismissive</i>	<i>CDA</i>

Table 4. Responses Mainstream Parties regarding pro- or anti-EU

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Within this research the following question was explored: How do Dutch political actors frame the European Union on Facebook and how does party position influence party strategy? The political actors employed multiple frames when discussing issues regarding the European Union. The four parties, VVD, D66, FvD and PVV were closest to owning the ‘nationalistic’ and ‘economic prosperity frame’, they however decided to also compete on other dimensions of the EU like ‘political efficiency and efficacy’ or ‘security and ecology’. Therefore neither the mainstream parties, nor challenger parties managed to communicate clear stances on just one dimension with the public, which was expected for mainstream parties, but not necessarily for the challenger parties. The mainstream parties overall did compete on more dimensions than most challenger parties.

Considering the politicization of the EU it seemed only a matter of time before mainstream parties would communicate their opinions to the public. After analysing the Facebook messages posted by different political actors, I can conclude that almost all parties

seized the opportunity to share their opinions about the European Union on Facebook. As well mainstream as challenger parties emphasized the EU on their Facebook accounts. Challenger parties on the radical right (FvD and PVV) and extreme left (SP) as expected took a Eurosceptic stance. Mainstream parties VVD, CU and PvdA on the other hand managed to formulate their messages in a clever way and tried to keep balance between being pro-EU and staying critical. They therefore seem to lean more towards an accommodative response to make sure the diverse electorate is satisfied with their stances.

And as the results of the recent European Elections show, PvdA and VVD managed to increase their share of votes compared to 2014 (NRC, 2019b). Radical right party PVV and extreme left party SP lost all their seats in the European Parliament. Radical right party FvD on the other hand did receive a large share of votes after its first electoral run. It thus seems as if the adversarial response has paid off for the mainstream parties. But of course other factors can influence voting outcome as well. Future research should therefore explore the causes of these changes in the electoral outcome and research if new strategies are applied by both mainstream and challenger parties. It would therefore be very interesting to conduct this research again during the next European elections to see if and the frames and party strategies have changed.

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