Negative News and the Sleeper Effect of Distrust

Jan Kleinnijenhuis, Anita M. J. van Hoof, and Dirk Oegema

The role of the media in the creation of distrust is much debated in political communication. Will negative news, for example, relentless attacks on political authorities, result in political cynicism or in a stimulation effect? By and large the media may stimulate political participation, but it is less clear when negative news will nullify this effect. Negative news may not only have short-term behavioral effects but also effects on underlying attitudes such as trust in politicians, which may produce their “sleeper effect” on political behavior only in the long run. This article addresses two related research questions. Will negative news discourage trust in political leaders? Will trust have a sleeper effect for future party choice and future turnout within the months to come? The 2002 Dutch election campaign, being an unprecedented negative campaign as compared to other Dutch campaigns, provides a good case to investigate these questions. On the basis of a biweekly seven-wave panel survey study and a daily content analysis of television news and newspapers, negative news was found to have a significant effect on trust in party leaders in addition to prior vote preference and education. The distrust in party leaders also had a significant sleeper effect in the long run on turnout and on the actual vote in addition to previous intentions. In general, these findings support the malaise theory. They are helpful to explain why the Christian-Democrats could win the elections in defiance of the polls.

Keywords: political trust; negative news effects; political participation

Trust refers to a high estimation of the competence, honesty, or reliability of the one who is trusted, according to the expectations or norms of the beholder. Trust in government has decreased in recent decades, particularly in the United States (Chanley et al. 2000; Hetherington 1998; Nye 1997). A decrease in political trust and a negative evaluation of government performance have been observed in European countries as well, albeit at a more moderate level than in...
the United States (Kepplinger 2000). Not only the level of political trust appears to have shifted; the object of political trust has changed as well. In the era in which the spoken and written word was the primary source of communication, political trust in superiors was compelled by the power of the armies, nations, organizations, or institutions that they commanded. In current times, political trust in the personal skills of superiors appears to be a cause rather than a result of trust in the almost virtual organizations or institutions that they represent.

Scholars have looked for various possible explanations for these shifts in political trust. A number of researchers have focused on the media as a plausible source (see, for instance, Bennett et al. 1999; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Chanley et al. 2000; De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Entman 1989; Gordon 2000; Kepplinger 2000; Maurer 2003; Moy and Scheufele 2000; Newton 1999; Tsfati and Cappella 2003). In Capella’s (2002) words, “The media did it.” It makes sense to consider the media as most people depend on them for information on politics and politicians.

This article presents data and tests to investigate two central research questions in the debate. The first research question concerns whether negative news in the media discourages trust in political leaders over the course of weeks. The alternative hypothesis is that today’s trust in political leaders is merely an expression of prior political attitudes toward the parties that they represent. The closely related second research question concerns whether trust in political leaders bares a behavioral “sleeper effect” for future party choice over the course of months. The alternative hypothesis is that today’s trust in political leaders is already incorporated into today’s attitudes toward the parties that they represent. A sleeper effect occurs when the persuasiveness of (an impression of) a message increases with the passage of time. In the tradition of Hovland and colleagues (e.g., Hovland and Weiss 1951), scholars looked especially at a growing persuasiveness of messages stemming from sources that were first deemed “untrustworthy.” A sleeper effect occurs also when the behavioral impact of old messages from “trustworthy” sources increases with the passage of time.

Review of Questions on the News, Trust, and Participation

Authors have proposed many hypotheses for addressing the relationship between the role of the media and distrust in modern societies. Should we expect a demobilization effect (malaise) or a stimulation effect (mobilization)? Is the level of media use the originator of (dis)trust, or is it the type of news content? Is trust established within decades, milliseconds, or weeks? Is trust the dependent, the independent, or an intermediary variable? Does trust reside in institutions or in persons?

Malaise or mobilization? Several studies found that either heavy media use in itself or the type of news that modern media provide has a negative effect on
political trust (Cappella 2002; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Putnam 2000). This claim is inspired by studies that maintain that the content of news media is increasingly negative (Patterson 1993) or that watching television has diminished civic engagement (Putnam 2000). This view is known as the malaise theory.

An even larger number of recent studies, however, have found no evidence of a negative effect on political trust (Gross et al. 2004; Hetherington 1998; Moy and Scheufele 2000; Norris 2002). Some studies even found a stimulation effect that implies that conflicts and scandals in the news keep the audience enthralled (Newton 1999). Although news consumers may have become more cynical, some level of embitterment appears to enhance participation (De Vreese and Semetko 2002). This view is known as the “mobilization theory.” One explanation for these contradictory findings is that researchers have looked in different directions.

*Media consumption or news content?* Inspired by Robert Putnam (2000), many studies have considered media consumption as a source of political (dis)trust (Gross et al. 2004; Hetherington 1998; Moy and Scheufele 2000; Newton 1999; Norris 2002); other studies have considered news content as the source of political (dis)trust, in line with the work of Thomas Patterson (Cappella 2002; De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Kepplinger 2000; Maurer 2003; Min 2004; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Patterson 1993).

Hetherington (1998) was one of the first to relate both the causes and the effects of political trust to media consumption but was unable to find any significant effect of news consumption (either television or newspaper) on political trust. Newton (1999) found that television consumption in general had a negative relation on political trust, suggesting empirical support for the malaise hypothesis. He found even more support for the mobilization hypotheses, however, as the consumption of both broadsheet newspapers and television news had significant and quite strong associations with political knowledge and somewhat lower levels of malaise. Studies by Norris (2002) and by Moy and Scheufele (2000) found a positive relationship between media consumption and the broader concept of social capital, particularly with regard to social trust. Gross and colleagues (2004) considered the relation between media consumption and political trust within the context of the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11). They found a positive correlation between television news consumption and trust in government. Individual-level change in trust and confidence over the year that followed, however, could not be attributed to media use. Taking all of the evidence together, media consumption does not offer a very convincing explanation for the level of political trust. To arrive at a better understanding of the relation between news and political trust, we must consider characteristics of news.

Unlike studies that address media consumption as an independent variable, studies that use various aspects of news as independent variables have all found
news to have an effect (either direct or indirect) on political trust (De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Keplinger 2000; Maurer 2003; Min 2004; Mutz and Reeves 2005). This suggests that it is not so much the amount or intensity of news consumption that generates distrust; the explanation lies in characteristics of the news. All of the above-mentioned studies concentrate on negative aspects of the news (i.e., negative statements, strategic news, and uncivil behavior). Notably, some studies also suggest that negative news can have positive consequences. Negative statements in the news could be helpful for politicians, in the sense that it increases their visibility (Keplinger 2000). In addition, uncivil behavior on the part of politicians on television has made some programs more compelling to viewers (Mutz and Reeves 2005).

Given the promising research results that have been produced thus far, we will concentrate on aspects of news that may encourage or discourage trust.

Is trust a matter of milliseconds, years, or weeks? Neuroscientists are eager to inform us that the outcomes of elections depend largely on rapid, unreflective trait inferences of competence and reliability that occur within a one-second exposure to the faces of the candidates (Todorov et al. 2005). At the other extreme, Robert Putnam (2000) considered the last several decades when he proposed that the rise of mass-media consumption may have diminished the time required for social and political participation. History books also tell us about such great leaders as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Nelson Mandela, for whom it took almost a lifetime before their people were persuaded to trust them.

In the tradition of mainstream communication research, we will bridge the gap by addressing response times of several months.

Attitude or behavior? Dependent, independent, or intermediary variable? Studies that address the question of whether news leads to malaise or mobilization usually conceive of malaise and mobilization in terms of attitudes toward political institutions in general and toward the government in particular. Other studies address mobilization as behavior (e.g., voter turnout) rather than attitude (e.g., the direction of political trust) (De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Hetherington 1999). Studies that incorporate both attitudes and behavior indicate that strategic news may enhance an attitude of critical distrust while stimulating rather than discouraging participatory behavior (De Vreese and Semetko 2002).

This study treats political trust as an intermediary variable between the independent variable (i.e., media characteristics) and the dependent variable (i.e., political participation).

Is the object of trust an institution or a person? Putnam (2000) regards political trust as one dimension of the broader concept of social capital, which refers to the strength of the connections among individuals as nodes in social networks that are established by such norms and expectations as reciprocity and trustworthiness. Social capital is manifested at several levels: interpersonal (or social)
trust, civic engagement, and institutional trust. Other authors have also made distinctions among various levels of trust (De Vreese and Semetko 2002; Mutz and Reeves 2005). The concept of social capital thus connects various notions of political trust. Norris (2002) argues that all of these dimensions of social capital have been declining since the 1960s.

Although trusting persons and trusting institutions may be related in the long term, some empirical studies suggest that they may diverge in the short term. Negative news apparently affects trust in institutions only indirectly, through its effect on trust in persons and in the processes in which persons are highly visible. Personality attacks significantly depressed mobilization, as Min (2004) shows, while policy-based attacks covered in the news slightly stimulated mobilization.

This study therefore focuses on trust in leading politicians.

The 2002 electoral campaign in the Netherlands. Although political trust in the Netherlands is low, according to Dekker (2001), it was high in comparison to other EU countries. No consistent decreases in trust in government could be demonstrated until 2000. Since that time, however, Dutch society has been in turmoil. In light of two political murders (the assassination of Pim Fortuyn on May 6, 2002, and the assassination of Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004), lower levels of trust in Dutch society can be expected. Data from the Dutch National Election Survey Studies show that in 2002 political cynicism regarding democratic political institutions increased in comparison to earlier election years. It had slightly decreased again in 2003 (Van Holsteijn and Den Ridder 2005:85–86). The 2002 election campaign therefore provides an interesting case.

In the 2002 campaign, the coalition government, which was composed of PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid; social democrats), VVD (Vereniging voor Vrijheid en Democratie; right-wing liberals), and D66 (left-wing liberals), was challenged by a newcomer in the political arena: Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn deliberately attacked his political opponents and the media in an unconventional, harsh manner. Soon, Fortuyn became the most newsworthy politician. The tone of the campaign changed, and the incumbent parties were challenged. Opinion polls showed that Fortuyn and his party (List Pim Fortuyn [LPF]) had gained considerable support. Several months before the elections, the party leaders of the coalition government changed their strategy of ignoring Pim Fortuyn. They reasoned that the Dutch citizens could still be persuaded through a massive frontal attack of televised statements against Fortuyn's “right-wing extremist” ideas on immigrants and Islam, as well as against his personal weaknesses (e.g., impatience, injured vanity, and political incompetence). In this way, all parties resorted to the strategy of issuing attack statements to attract news (Kepplinger 2000). This unprecedented negative campaign provides a good case with which to address the first research question of whether trust in politicians is merely an unmediated by-product of prior party preferences or whether it is influenced by the negative tone of the news.
On May 6, just ten days before the elections, Pim Fortuyn was assassinated. Pim Fortuyn’s new party (LPF) gained 26 seats in Parliament in the elections of May 15, 2002—an unprecedented record. The coalition government of the “purple” parties (PvdA, VVD, and D66) lost almost half of their voters. Of the 150 seats in Parliament, they were able to safeguard only 23, 24, and 7 seats, respectively. In contrast to the predictions of polls in the days leading up to the election, the Christian-Democrats (Christelijk Democratisch Appel; CDA) increased their number of seats from 29 to 43, thus becoming again the largest party in the Netherlands. The CDA had addressed the same issues as Pim Fortuyn, albeit in more subdued tones.

This unexpected outcome provides a good case for addressing the second research question of whether this outcome reflects, in part, a sleeper effect of distrust in political leaders that had already originated several months before the elections.

The 2002 election campaign seems to be an exceptional one. While the trustworthiness of a political leader normally increases as elections approach, in accordance with the mobilization hypothesis, this did not seem to occur during the 2002 campaign. In accordance with the video malaise theory, the trustworthiness of the heavily attacked leaders of the two leading governing parties VVD and PvdA (Hans Dijkstal and Ad Melkert) decreased rather than increased during the campaign, while their challenger, Pim Fortuyn, was still deemed untrustworthy by the adherents of the old parties (Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 2005). This means that no trustworthy political leader was at hand for a significant group of voters. Political cynicism and trust in the democratic process thus appears to relate to the specific trustworthiness of electoral leaders during specific campaigns.

The apparent relationship between diffuse political cynicism and increases or decreases in the trustworthiness of electoral leaders during a campaign suggests that communication researchers should consider the types of news that may increase or decrease the trustworthiness of leaders during a campaign. As an additional hypothesis, we will therefore test whether voter turnout, which reflects trust in the political system, decreases when every party leader is deemed untrustworthy.

Toward a conceptual model. Figure 1 presents the research design. Our first main hypothesis (marked with a capital A) proposes that trust depends on the tone of news. Negative news about attacks on a party (negative news on the support and criticism axis) or about losses and failures (negative news on the successes and failures axis) decrease trust in a politician. We will assume that trust is partially a rationalization of prior vote preferences. Trust may also depend on personal background characteristics such as gender, age, education, and political awareness, as measured by factual political knowledge (Zaller 1992). These null hypotheses are marked with a lowercase a in Figure 1.
The second main hypothesis (marked with a capital B in Figure 1) proposes that trust in electoral leaders increases the likelihood that an individual will vote for that party in the future. This effect is in addition to the simple “autoregressive” effect, in which voters who preferred a party at an earlier point in time generally tend to prefer that party in subsequent elections (this hypothesis is marked with a lowercase b in Figure 1).

Method

Content analysis of campaign coverage of party news. To account for the news that was consumed by the majority of Dutch citizens, we analyzed the news from five national newspapers (Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf, Trouw, and de Volkskrant) and three prime-time television news programs (NOS Journaal [public broadcaster], RTL Nieuws, and SBS6 Het Nieuws [both commercial broadcasters]). For the purpose of this article, the data from a twelve-week period preceding the polls on trust in political leaders were used (January 1, 2002, until March 24, 2002). Each newspaper article that mentioned a party leader in its headline or lead was analyzed (n = 3,141 newspaper articles). All items in the television news programs that referred to party leaders were also included (n = 666 news items). The headline and lead of each news article and the complete television news items were reduced to elementary sentences of the type “source: subject/predicate/quality/object,” according to the network
analysis method for content analysis (NET) (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1997). A list of political parties, politicians, and issues consisting of more than 500 entries was used to capture the news.¹

To test the relative power of the tone of the news on trust in party leaders, we examine party-related conflict-oriented news.² Conflict-oriented news is operationalized as news sentences in which a politician of a certain party is criticized or supported by another actor or in which a politician of a certain party criticizes or supports another actor. The tone of the news regarding a party is measured as the net sum of the support (signed +1) and criticisms (signed −1) that a party receives from others, according to the news. Each news statement that expresses full support is coded as +1, and each sentence that expresses undisguised criticism is coded as −1. For the given research period, television news and print news about these parties resulted in 4,789 statements (see Table 1 for their distribution). These statements were weighted in order to assign greater importance to items appearing either on the front page or at the beginning of a news item.

The coders who participated in the analysis of the news from the campaigns that preceded the Dutch elections of May 2002 and January 2003 (social science students at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam who passed a coding test after having completed a course in coding) each coded the same set of 51 articles independently to assess coder reliability. With 8 coders, this resulted in 8,568 units of analysis for the reliability computations (51 articles × 6 parties × 1/2 × 8 × 7 pairs of coders). Intercoder agreement regarding the question whether a party was evaluated in an article (either positively, neutral, negatively, or in between) amounted to 90 percent, which results after a correction for agreement by chance in a value of .73 for Krippendorff’s alpha (nominal scale, equivalent to Scott’s Pi). Whether a party was evaluated positively or negatively amounted to a value of .76 for Krippendorff’s alfa (interval scale). The ordinary Pearson correlation coefficient amounted to .77. These levels of reliability set confidence in the outcomes of the content analysis.

Opinion data on political trust and (changes in) party preferences. The opinion data stem from a biweekly eight-wave panel survey by Blauw Research BV, beginning on February 23, 2002, until just after the elections. The number of respondents in each wave varied from a low of 430 (wave 5) to a high of 924 (wave 1). To obtain a representative reflection of the Dutch population, responses were weighted according to age, education, gender, and voting behavior during the previous parliamentary election in 1998.

Political trust in party leaders, as we understand it, refers to certain expectations or norms regarding party leaders. There is no single standard for measuring political trust. Hetherington (1998) operationalizes political trust in terms of such norms as honesty, efficiency, and correctness. De Vreese and Semetko (2002) use openness and fairness as indicators of political trust, and Kepplinger
Table 1
(Negative) tone of the news regarding six parties and public trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>“Purple” Coalition Parties</th>
<th>Opposition Parties</th>
<th>All Parties</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nos</td>
<td>–.42</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>–.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rtl4</td>
<td>–.49</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>–.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sbs6</td>
<td>–.28</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>–.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vk</td>
<td>–.27</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>–.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nrc</td>
<td>–.51</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>–.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tel</td>
<td>–.44</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>–.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trw</td>
<td>–.45</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>–.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ad</td>
<td>–.43</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>–.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All media</td>
<td>–.41</td>
<td>1,347</td>
<td>–.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean public trust (SD) 5.2 (2.1) 5.7 (1.8) 5.9 (1.9) 5.4 (2.6) 6.7 (2.1) 6.5 (2.0) 5.9 (2.2)

Note: The media data refer to the period from January 1 until March 24, 2002. Abbreviations of parties: PvdA = Partij van de Arbeid (Social Democrats); VVD = Vereniging voor Vrijheid en Democratie (right-wing liberals); D66 = left-wing liberals; LPF = List Pim Fortuyn; GL = Groen Links; CDA = Christelijk Democratic Appel (Christian Democrats). Abbreviations of newspapers: vk = de Volkskrant; nrc = NRC Handelsblad; tel = De Telegraaf; trw = Trouw; ad = Algemeen Dagblad. Abbreviations of TV networks: nos = NOS Journaal (public broadcaster); rtl4 = RTL Nieuws (commercial broadcaster); sbs6 = SBS6 Het Nieuws (commercial broadcaster). Table entries refer to the average tone of news statements, measured on scales ranging from –1 (completely negative) to +1 (completely positive), along with number of statements. Table entries for “all media” refer to the average tone of the news in all media, with media weighted according to their attention (in the test of the hypotheses, media will also be weighted with regard to audience size in the sample, thus giving the highest weight to NOS television news, and the lowest weight to Trouw). The opinion survey data about trust in politicians were gathered on March 24 to March 27, 2002. Trust in party leaders is measured on a 1 to 10 scale with standard deviations in brackets.
(2000) uses trustworthiness. Although various authors use various indicators, the common denominator in these indicators has to do with two basic norms by which political leaders are evaluated: norms of competence and problem awareness. We operationalized political trust in party leaders according to these two norms. Respondents were asked to assess party leaders on these norms by rating them on a scale from 1 to 10, with a score of 1 indicating *very poor* and a score of 10 indicating *excellent*. The following two questions were asked in wave 3 (the end of March 2002): “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate party leader X as a competent leader?” and “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate party leader X on his capacity to be aware of the people’s problems?” Political trust in an individual party leader was measured as the mean of these two evaluations (Cronbach’s alpha = .77).

The personal background variables that we included were gender, age, and education, all measured in wave 1; and political knowledge, measured in wave 2. Age was measured in ten categories and education in eight categories. Political knowledge was measured by asking the respondents to state the function and the party of four politicians. Political knowledge was operationalized as the proportion of right answers, ranging from 0 to 1 (with a score of 1 indicating that all answers were correct).

Vote preference was measured in seven waves before the election by asking the following question: “If the elections were to be held today, which party would you vote for?” Respondents could choose from a range of thirteen answers: the ten major parties participating in the campaign, another political party, “do not know,” and “will not (be allowed to) vote.” The actual vote was measured in wave 8, immediately after the election on May 15, 2002, by asking respondents to indicate the party for which they had voted.

Units of analysis. The units of analysis deserve special attention. Our units of analysis included only respondents who had read or watched at least one of the media that were included in the content analysis. It is not likely that any individuals used all of the media outlets that were included in this research. Individuals were therefore also asked which media they used regularly. For each respondent in the media-effect analysis, we included only that part of the media coverage that he or she could have read or seen. Because we were interested in the effect of negative news on political trust, and because trust in party leaders was measured at the end of March (wave 3), only the news about political parties and their leaders that preceded wave 3 had to be assigned as contextual variables for its readers and listeners.

In addition, for each hypothesis that was tested, only respondents who had participated in the precise panel waves underlying each test could be included.

We considered six political parties, as the other parties did not generate enough evaluations to draw reliable conclusions. The parties that we included (along with their party leaders) are as follows: PvdA (social democrats), the
largest coalition party, with party leader Ad Melkert; VVD (right-wing liberals), the second largest coalition party, with party leader Hans Dijkstal; D66 (left-wing liberals), the smallest coalition party, with party leader Thom de Graaf; CDÂ (Christian Democrats), the largest opposition party, with party leader Jan Peter Balkenende; Groen Links (GL; environmentalists), the second largest opposition party, with party leader Paul Rosenmöller; and finally the LPF, a new party founded by Pim Fortuyn. Opinion polls predicted that the LPF would become one of the major parties in Parliament, although the LPF would remain smaller than the PvdA.

In summary, for each of the hypotheses to be tested, the units of analysis are every combination of media-consuming respondents who had participated in the panel waves that were involved in the test, and any of the six parties.

Method of data analysis. The first step was to perform a regression analysis to assess the degree to which trust in electoral leaders may be considered a simple rationalization of prior vote preferences and personal background characteristics. Because the dependent variable is measured at the interval level (two items with a 10-point scale), ordinary least squares (OLS) was used. The tone of the news was added as an additional variable to this regression analysis to determine whether the tone of the news adds to the explanation of distrust.

The second step was to use the actual party for which each respondent voted at Election Day as the dependent variable to assess whether the explanation of the vote on the basis of former intentions to vote for a specific party could be improved by the trust vested in that party as measured at the end of March. A series of logistic regression models were estimated with the party preference of a voter in wave 3 and in the weeks thereafter as the dependent variable. Logistic regression was used in this step, as the actual vote is a dichotomous variable (yes or no for each of the six parties).

Results

The Tone of the News

The tone of the news in the 2002 campaign was rather negative, as shown in Table 1. Our data show that conflict-oriented news did indeed involve primarily conflicts, with less emphasis on finding alliances.

The tone in De Telegraaf, the newspaper with the widest reach among the least educated, was most negative (−.34). The tone in De Telegraaf was negative for all parties but most negative for the PvdA (−.44) and Pim Fortuyn’s LPF (−.51). Compared to the other media, however, it was also very negative in tone for the CDA (−.38) and GL (−.34).

SBS6 was on the other end of the spectrum. SBS6 is a commercial television station that gained a wide reach among the least educated public in only a few
years. The 2002 elections were the first elections covered by SBS6. Although the tone of the news on SBS6 was slightly negative also (−.03), it was quite moderate in comparison to the other media. Remarkably, the tone of the news for the LPF (.22) and especially for the CDA (.44) was generally positive, but the LPF was considered far more newsworthy than the CDA. For the PvdA, SBS6 was the only medium in which the tone was not extremely negative. SBS6 tried to represent “the voice of the people” in a manner that differed from that of De Telegraaf.

Compared to the most populist newspaper (De Telegraaf), the most populist television station (SBS6) more frequently adopted a stance against the intellectual or economic elite in general while sending less frequent negative messages about individual politicians.

Overall, the two leading governing parties, PvdA (−.41) and VVD (−.28) were criticized the most, even more than Pim Fortuyn’s LPF (−.23). On the average, the CDA was covered neutrally (.00). The standard deviations in the bottom row of Table 1 (in parentheses) show that the LPF was the most controversial party.

Average trust in party leaders corresponds by and large with the average tone of the news (bottom row in Table 1). On a 10-point scale, Melkert (PvdA, 5.2), Dijkstal (VVD, 5.7) and Pim Fortuyn (LPF, 5.4) were trusted least of all. Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA, 6.5) and Paul Rosenmöller (GL, 6.7) were trusted most.

**Hypothesis A: Does Negative News Discourage Trust in Party Leaders?**

To test our first hypothesis, we conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis. Political trust in party leaders, as measured at the end of March 2002 (wave 3), was the dependent variable. In addition to the tone of the news from the previous period, previous vote preference, as measured at the end of February 2002 (wave 1), was used as an independent variable. We controlled for the following background variables: sex, age, education, and political knowledge.

Three variables contributed significantly to the explained variance of political trust, as shown in Table 2: prior vote preference (as measured at the end of February 2002), education, and the tone of conflict-oriented news.

Although the correspondence between a negative tone of the news and trust in party leaders is clearly apparent at the aggregate level (see Table 1), the correspondence at the level of individual respondents is clearly lower, as is indicated by the weak, although significant, explained variance of the model (R-squared = .06). As expected, prior vote preference (i.e., vote preference, as measured at the end of February 2002) contributed to trust in party leaders. This is in line with our proposition that political trust in party leaders is, in part, a rationalization of prior vote preference, although education had an even stronger effect on trust in party leaders than did prior vote preference. Respondents who were
more highly educated trusted their political leaders more than did those with less education. Education facilitates one’s integration in society. According to the survey data at hand, a higher education is positively correlated with reading newspapers \((r = .18, p < .001, n = 707)\) but negatively with watching television news \((r = -.17, p < .001, n = 707)\). Thus, both the “stimulation effect” of newspaper consumption on trust (e.g., Newton 1999) and the malaise effect of watching television (Putnam 2000) may be in part a spurious correlation due to a higher education. Political knowledge had no significant effect in addition to education. None of the other background variables (e.g., age, sex) was significant either.

The tone of the news had an even stronger effect on the explanation of political trust (standardized regression coefficient = .21) than did prior vote preference or the other background variables. Our findings therefore support the malaise theory that negative news leads to distrust in party leaders.

The data also allowed us to test the hypothesis for each party separately. In models for each separate party, effects of the news tend to disappear when the variance in the tone of the news for a given party is low relative to the variance in tone when all parties are being considered. Substantial variance in the independent variables is a precondition for any regression analysis. Significant effects of the news show up for VVD, D66, GL, and CDA but not for the LPF and the PvdA. The latter parties were criticized so vehemently by each of the media that the remaining variance between the media appears to be fairly irrelevant. (Dis)Trust in the controversial Pim Fortuyn, who eloquently accused the media of “demonizing” him, was relatively independent of the precise level of media criticism.

Table 2
Effect of tone of the news, prior vote preference, and education on trust in party leaders (standardized regression coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Model</th>
<th>PvdA</th>
<th>VVD</th>
<th>D66</th>
<th>LPF</th>
<th>GL</th>
<th>CDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tone of conflict-oriented news</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.28***</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.32***</td>
<td>.31***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote preference in wave 1</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-.19***</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>.17***</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 3,917 485 418 211 677 430 721

Note: PvdA = Partij van de Arbeid (social democrats); VVD = Vereniging voor Vrijheid en Democratie (right-wing liberals); D66 = left-wing liberals; LPF = List Pim Fortuyn; GL = Groen Links; CDA = Christelijk Democratic Appel (Christian Democrats).

* \(p < .05\), ** \(p < .01\), *** \(p < .001\).
The malaise hypothesis therefore stands up to the test. Trust in politicians was dependent not only on social-demographic characteristics (i.e., with respondents who are more highly educated having greater trust in politicians); it was also dependent on the positive or negative tone of the news in the media that individual respondents reported to have read or watched in the preceding months.

Hypothesis B: Does Trust in Party Leaders Have Consequences for Voting Behavior?

To find out whether (dis)trust had a sleeper effect on future behavior, we tested whether (dis)trust (as measured at the end of March 2002) had any impact on actual party preferences (as stated in subsequent months) in addition to the autoregressive inertia effect of individual party preference (as measured at the end of March 2002). Table 3 presents an overview of the results of the logistic regression, with actual vote as the dependent variable and vote preference and trust (as measured at the end of March 2002) as the independent variables.

Trust had no measurable effect on party preference in early April and early May (not even on party preferences five days after the assassination of Pim Fortuyn) in addition to the autoregressive inertia effect of party preference, as stated at the end of March. Distrust therefore does not change preferences in the short term. Nevertheless, the sleeper effect of (dis)trust manifested itself on Election Day. Although prior vote preferences obviously explained the most variance in the parties for which respondents voted on Election Day, trust improved the explanation. In other words, trust gives rise to a sleeper effect. Additional controls affirmed the robustness of this outcome.

The sleeper effect offers an explanation for one of the mysteries of the Dutch elections of 2002. The unexpected low support for the Social Democrats (PvdA down from 45 to 23 of the 150 seats in Parliament), even in comparison to the polls of just a few days before the elections, and the unexpected high support for the CDA (up from 29 to 43 seats) in the elections of May 15 could be partially explained by (dis)trust in the leaders of these parties, as measured at the end of
March. This last-moment shift appears to have been caused by the sleeper effect of trust in the party leaders. Although distrust had already been shaped in March, its effects did not become apparent until Election Day. Data from the survey wave immediately after the elections ($n = 648$) indicate that a remarkably high percentage of voters in the 2002 elections said that their decisions on which party to vote for were indeed made either on Election Day itself (15 percent) or in the last days before the elections (17 percent).

### Trusting Nobody and Political Participation

As an extra step, we tested whether sharp distrust in party leaders at the end of March (i.e., those respondents who did not trust any of the party leaders) had a sleeper effect on voter turnout on Election Day. We tested whether turnout, which is a sign of trust in the political system, decreases when every party leader is deemed untrustworthy. Maximum trust was operationalized as the score of the most trusted party leader. We conducted a logistic regression with voter turnout as the dependent variable and maximum trust in addition to the intention to cast a vote by the end of March as independent variables. Table 4 gives the results.

A sleeper effect of maximum trust on turnout was indeed apparent. The intention to vote at the end of March 2002 had a significant effect on voter turnout on Election Day, and maximum trust in politicians added to the effect. Until a few days before the elections, many respondents who had not (or had barely) trusted any politician according to the measurements by the end of March maintained that they would vote in the elections. The sleeper effect of distrust manifested itself on Election Day in this regard as well. Many of the voters who did not trust any politician did not vote, despite the positive intentions that they had expressed at the end of March.

### Table 4

Effect of maximum trust on the intention to cast a vote and actual turnout (coefficients Exp[$B$]), 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intention to Cast a Vote (Wave 3)</th>
<th>Intention to Cast a Vote (Wave 4)</th>
<th>Intention to Cast a Vote (Wave 5)</th>
<th>Actual Turnout (Wave 7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention to cast a vote end of March</td>
<td>1,683.00***</td>
<td>518.67***</td>
<td>59.20***</td>
<td>22.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum trust in a party leader</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>1.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke $R^2$-squared</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N respondents</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. 

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Discussion

The role of the media in creating distrust is much debated. Do they bring about political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) or a political mobilization effect (Lau and Pomper 2001; Newton 1999)? Is the type of news (Patterson 1993) or media consumption as such (Putnam 2000) to blame? Is distrust a matter of years, months, or milliseconds (Todorov et al. 2005)? Is trust vested in persons (Min 2004) or in institutions? Analysis of the many empirical studies shows that, although media usage generally stimulates political participation, it is less clear when negative news will nullify this effect. Negative news may have not only short-term behavioral effects but also effects on underlying attitudes such as trust in politicians, which may bare a sleeper effect on political behavior only in the long term.

We used the Dutch 2002 national election campaign to test whether negative news affects distrust in party leaders (Hypothesis A). The 2002 Dutch election campaign was unprecedentedly negative in comparison to other Dutch campaigns. It therefore provides a good case for investigating whether trust in politicians is a by-product of prior party preferences and such background variables as age, education, sex, and political knowledge. We found that negative news did have a fairly strong effect on trust in party leaders, in addition to effects of prior vote preference and education. The sleeper effect of distrust on turnout and on the actual vote (Hypothesis B) became only visible after a period of months. In the 2002 elections in the Netherlands, the sleeper effect of distrust may at least partially explain the unexpected victory for the CDA in deviation from the results of previous polls.

The results of this study clearly indicate that the long-term sleeper effect of negative news on political behavior is partially mediated by such broad attitudes as (dis)trust in politicians. These results confirm our choice to treat trust as an intermediate variable; it is a dependent variable in terms of attitudes and an independent variable in terms of behavior. The research results lend support to the malaise theory. The type of news rather than news consumption is the culprit. The relationship between news consumption and trust turned out to be partly spurious, simply because trust increases with education, whereas a higher education is accompanied with less television usage and a higher newspaper usage. The results do not exclude the possibility that trust can be vested in milliseconds (Todorov et al. 2005), but they indicate that trust may also be accrued in months, whereas months may pass also before the effects of trust on political behavior become visible. A low trust in every politician whatsoever had a sleeper effect on turnout, which suggests that trust in institutions depends crucially on trust in persons (Min 2004).

The results suggest that citizens accrue information on a daily basis but that they will often not update their summary evaluation, for example, their intention
to cast a vote or to vote for a specific party, until the moment of decision. To put it differently, citizens will often use their former preferences as a heuristic when asked to voice their current opinion; they will engage in systematic information processing more often when the time has come to make important decisions (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). In the case of the 2002 elections in the Netherlands, the turmoil after the assassination of Pim Fortuyn just nine days before the elections may have evoked the feeling that one’s decision at the 2002 ballot box was important. In defiance of the polls, the CDA gained a landslide victory since voters started to retrieve from their memory that they trusted other party leaders less than CDA leader Jan Peter Balkenende. An open question is whether election outcomes that diverge from the latest polls can always be explained by a combination of disrupting events shortly before the elections, negative news, and the sleeper effect of distrust.

Notes

1. The network analysis method for content analysis (NET) is based on the network approach (Roberts 1997). According to the network method of content analysis, a (news) text can be regarded as a network of relationships between actors and issues. Both actors and issues can be thought of as nodes. In this way, news texts are reduced to nuclear sentences containing a relationship between two nodes. The nuclear sentences follow the pattern “source: subject/predicate/quality/object.” A list of political parties, politicians, and issues from more than five hundred entries was used as a collection of relevant nodes, capturing campaign news on party leaders. With this coded material, we can create the required news variables. In this study, we use the news types “conflict-oriented news” and “news on attributions of success and failures to parties.” Conflict-oriented news, which consists of news concerning either criticism of or support for a party, can be modeled as edges between actors. News concerning the attribution of successes and failures to parties can be modeled as edges between an unknown actor attributing success or failure to another actor. Does this actor actually acquire momentum? Other news types are possible as well, but they are not addressed in this analysis.

2. We originally delineated two sets of news sentences for the tone of the news: party-related conflict-oriented news and news on attributions of success and failures to parties. Because only conflict-oriented news contributed to the explanation of variance in trust in party leaders, the analysis in this article is limited to conflict-oriented news.

3. According to the test results with regard to Hypothesis A, trust as measured at the end of March absorbs the effects of prior conditions and former preferences, such as education and party preferences as measured at the end of February. The residual trust that was left unexplained by prior conditions and former preferences was entered as an independent variable in the logistic regression equation instead of ordinary trust to be sure that trust rather than these early conditions and preferences did bare the sleeper effect. Residual trust had the same effects as ordinary trust.

A second objection could be that the vote will also depend on the latest news. Therefore, we included the tone of the news from March 24 until May 15 as an extra independent variable in the equation. The tone of the last news has a significant effect indeed, but the effect of trust remained significant.
References


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