

Rising Star or Into the Abyss?

How Journalists Interpret Polls and Their Impact on How Parties are Covered in the News

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20180589

Master's thesis

Master of Political Communication

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Abstract

Electorale peilingen zijn vandaag een belangrijke bron van nieuws. Toch heeft onderzoek aangetoond dat de berichtgeving over peilingen vaak van slechte kwaliteit is. Bovendien geven journalisten steeds vaker zelf verklaringen bij politieke gebeurtenissen in de artikels die ze schrijven. Deze nieuwsartikels beïnvloeden hoe burgers over partijen en politici denken, wat deze dynamiek mogelijk problematisch maakt. Daarom wordt in deze thesis de relatie onderzocht tussen een verandering in peilingresultaat en de toon in de daaropvolgende peiling- en algemene berichtgeving over Vlaamse politieke partijen. Ik onderzoek dit aan de hand van een kwantitatieve en kwalitatieve analyse van nieuwsartikels en opiniestukken uit drie traditionele Vlaamse kranten. Toon wordt gemeten met een nieuw en uitgebreid meetinstrument dat kijkt naar expliciete en impliciete toon, en waarvan de betrouwbaarheid getest is. De resultaten tonen aan dat wanneer een partij stijgt in de peilingen, de peilingberichtgeving over deze partij significant positiever is. Een partij die daalt in de peilingen, kan negatievere peilingberichten verwachten. Bovendien is de toon negatiever in opiniestukken dan nieuwsartikels. Uit de kwalitatieve analyse blijkt dat journalisten verschillende verklaringen geven voor de peilingresultaten zoals de invloed van kopstukken, issue ownership en het belang van deze issues. Deel uitmaken van een regering verklaart bovendien vaak een daling in de peilingen. Alhoewel de literatuur het suggereert, is de invloed van peilingresultaten op de toon van algemene partijberichtgeving verwaarloosbaar. In de discussie en conclusie worden deze resultaten en aanbevelingen voor toekomstig onderzoek besproken.

Keywords: opinion polls, news coverage, interpretative journalism, tone, content analysis, opinion pieces

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1 Introduction

In the last few decades, the number of electoral opinion polls and the amount of poll coverage have increased, leading to a greater focus on what academic researchers call “the horse race”. This term is used to describe how the media portray politics as a horse race (i.e. a contest) where there are winners and losers in the battle for public opinion and approval of interest groups (Aalberg et al., 2011). Polls have become an important source of news for the media. After all, election or opinion polls are “inexpensive to cover and filled with attention-grabbing drama” (p. 11), which are important news values (Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012). Reporting on opinion polls attracts a large audience and is a great substitution for news provided by political actors. This increased focus on the horse race is most obvious in the United States where Traugott (2005) found a 900% increase in the number of publicly released trial heat polls between the years 1972 and 2000. According to Patterson (1994) the focus of election stories used to be the policy scheme (in the 1960s), whereas more recently most election stories are framed within the game or strategy scheme. Also in European countries, the phenomenon is on the rise. For example, in Germany, the frequency of poll reports within 12 weeks before the federal elections increased from 65 in 1980 to 651 in 2002 (Brettschneider, 2008). In Sweden, the frequency of poll reports in election news rose from 98 to 117 between 1998 and 2006 (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2009), and also in Belgium the number of articles with an explicit reference to polls doubled between 2000 and 2006 (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2008).

In addition to a rise in polls and poll coverage, journalism has become more interpretative (Esser & Umbricht, 2014). In news articles, journalists more often go beyond facts and express their opinion, focus on explaining events or speculating about the future, and evaluate how political actors are doing. In her longitudinal content analysis, Soontjens (2019) shows an almost linear increase in the amount of interpretative journalism in Belgium between 1985 and 2014. This makes sense, as in Belgium 93% of journalists believe it is important that information is accompanied by an adequate analysis and interpretation (Raeymaeckers et al., 2012). Moreover, Patterson (1994) found that in 1960 only 8% of election stories were interpretative (as opposed to descriptive), whereas in 1992 more than 80% of election stories were interpretative in nature. Furthermore, journalists in Belgium have a great deal of professional autonomy. Most journalists feel free to decide which

stories they select and experience even more freedom to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasised (Standaert & Mertens, 2016). In this way, journalists and media have become powerful actors and are even seen as the Fourth Estate (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

In this context, it is important to investigate how media deal with polls and the subsequent news coverage. Does all this (media) attention for polls have consequences for how political parties are portrayed in the news? This thesis will therefore focus on the relationship between poll results political parties receive and the tone of the subsequent poll and general news coverage about these parties. After all, how parties are portrayed in the media indeed has political consequences. Kahn & Kenney (2002) find that political candidates who receive an editorial endorsement are viewed more positively by voters. Stolwijk (2017) concludes that being exposed to poll coverage has a positive effect on young voters' campaign interest and turnout in elections. Moreover, he finds that poll evaluations about a party in poll coverage affect the odds of voting for this party. In addition, Hopmann et al. (2010) show that visibility and tone in news coverage influence how likely citizens are to vote for a certain party. This influence is not necessarily problematic. However, research has shown that the quality of poll coverage (i.e., to what extent journalists mention methodological information and nuances in articles about polls) is often poor. For example, Louwerse & van Dijk (2022) conclude that in the Netherlands, the quality of poll coverage is low, based on their analysis of the presence of the items recommended by the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), the reporting of the margin of error and whether journalists correctly interpret the (in)significance of changes in poll result. Also in other countries such as the United States (Beckers, 2021) and Belgium (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2008), the quality of poll coverage is fairly low.

Research has been conducted on the effects of polls on voting preferences (e.g., Dahlgaard et al., 2017; Van der Meer et al., 2016) and turnout in elections (e.g., Großer & Schram, 2010). There are also studies investigating the effect of polls on subsequent poll coverage. For example, Patterson (2016) shows that when a candidate is doing well in the polls, it is more likely there will be more positive coverage about this candidate and vice versa. However, when it comes to the effect of polls on general party coverage, research is scarce. Two studies are fairly similar to this thesis. Firstly, Stolwijk & Schuck (2021) investigate the effect of poll results on the amount and tone of subsequent party coverage. However, this

study was conducted close to the elections, during the last six weeks of the campaign and showed minimal changes in poll results. As the research for this thesis is conducted in Flanders over a longer period and outside of election times, different results can be expected. Secondly, Tryggvason (2021) investigated the impact of poll coverage on the subsequent party coverage in Sweden. Sweden has a similar political and media system compared to Belgium. However, Flemish newspapers use the game frame more often than their Swedish counterparts (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2009). Even though the Swedish and Flemish political and media contexts are very similar, this thesis still contributes to the existing literature as Tryggvason (2021) investigated the impact of poll coverage, not poll results. This thesis also differs from previous research as most studies about the tone of news coverage measure tone simply by categorising an article as positive, neutral, or negative (e.g., Stolwijk & Schuck, 2021; Tryggvason, 2021; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Hopmann et al., 2010). However, in this thesis tone will be measured with a more elaborate instrument that looks at the explicit and implicit tone on a 5-point scale. A score ranging from “strongly negative” to “strongly positive” is determined based on a two-step measurement that takes into account the direction of the tone and whether powerful language is used that adds to this tone.

With this new measurement for tone, this thesis will investigate the relationship between an increase or decrease in poll result for a party and the tone of subsequent poll and general news coverage. It is hypothesised that an increase in poll result leads to more positively toned poll and general coverage and a decrease in poll result leads to more negatively toned coverage for a party. News articles and opinion pieces from the print versions of three Flemish newspapers (De Standaard, De Tijd, and Het Laatste Nieuws) between December 2021 and May 2023 will be analysed using a quantitative content analysis that focuses on implicit and explicit tone. Moreover, a limited qualitative analysis will give more insight into how journalists explain the rise and fall of political parties in Flanders.

2 Theoretical framework

In the last decade, media have become more important in politics. They are even regarded as the Fourth Estate of political power (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Academic scholars have since referred to this phenomenon as the mediatisation of politics. Strömbäck and Esser (2014) define this concept as “a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations, and actors have increased” (p. 239). Two indicators for the mediatisation of politics relate to the topic of opinion polls and their effects and are relevant when investigating the impact of opinion polls on news coverage: the framing of politics as a strategic game or a horse race and the journalistic style of news reports (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). The media’s focus on the horse race shapes its coverage (1). Moreover, covering opinion polls allows journalists to interpret poll results as they can discuss explanations and possible consequences of these polls. This way journalists are active agents, yet they can still appear objective as they base their interpretations on numbers (2).

2.1 The News Media and Polls

In the last few decades, academic scholars have given much attention to how politics are framed, and more specifically, to how politics are continuously framed as a game (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2011; Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2017). Journalists regard politics as a game and do so increasingly often (Patterson, 1994). The game frame refers to news stories that portray politics as a game, emphasising the fact that politics is a contest with winners and losers (Aalberg et al., 2011). When opinion polls are mentioned in news coverage, explicitly or implicitly, this is referred to as the horse race (Banducci & Hanretty, 2014). The use of opinion polls (or the horse race) fits perfectly within the frame of politics as a game, as they allow journalists to report on who is winning and who is losing. Moreover, because of their scientific basis, polls give a semblance of objectivity to these claims and interpretations of how a party is doing (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; Patterson, 2005; Paletz et al., 1980). For journalists, the game frame “is not just a frame they apply, but also the major part of their cognitive schemas of politics” (p. 14), which is why journalists use opinion polls to see how the game is going (Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012).

The game frame is often used when reporting on politics and politics is often depicted as a horse race, not only in the United States (Patterson, 1994; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011) but also in Europe (Brettschneider, 1997; Sonck & Loosveldt, 2008; Strömbäck & Aalberg, 2008; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2007; Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2009). There are numerous reasons why the news media focus on and even sponsor opinion polls (see for example Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012). The first important reason is that opinion polls are considered newsworthy. Polls measure and reflect public opinion which has a direct and powerful effect on politics (Crespi, 1980; Paletz et al., 1980). They can appeal to anyone, including those who are otherwise not interested in politics or have little political knowledge (Rosenstiel, 2005). Polls are also related to different news values, such as the power elite, entertainment, surprise, good and bad news, and follow-up news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012). A second reason why news media focus on opinion polls is because they are a form of exclusive news, giving journalists not only a scoop (Crespi, 1980; Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012) but also serving as a substitution for news created by politicians. Zaller (1998) calls this the rule of product substitution: the more tightly controlled political campaigns are, the more journalists will try to create their own news about the political campaign.

The increased focus on the horse race has consequences. Patterson (1994, 2005, 2008, 2016) provides ample anecdotal and empirical evidence for how polls in the United States affect the news coverage of candidates. According to Patterson, journalists use polls as a basis for claims they make about candidates. The poll results themselves are obvious facts, a candidate is either doing well or not. However, the reasons why a candidate receives a certain poll result are less clear so journalists can provide explanations. These explanations are mere interpretations and speculations of the journalist, but as they are “backed” by the poll result, they seem to be objective. All candidates have their strengths and weaknesses, but it is their position in the horse race that determines which will be focused on, Patterson concludes. When a candidate is doing well in the polls, journalists look for reasons to explain this. Journalists have the habit of looking for news in what leaders do and thus candidates who are doing well will be described favourably. Candidates that are doing poorly will see their weakest features stressed in news coverage as the narrative around candidates has to be coherent with their polling result. Wlezien & Soroka (2019) investigated the reciprocal

relationship between poll results and party coverage in the United States and found evidence of the relationship going in both ways. However, the effect of poll results on the tone of party coverage was more robust. Not much research has been conducted about this relationship outside the specific case of the United States. Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck (2012) suggest doing well in the polls may positively influence the tone of party coverage. This goes both ways: doing poorly in the polls may negatively influence the tone of subsequent news coverage and can trigger news stories about why this party is losing ground. Stolwijk & Schuck (2021) investigated the impact of poll results on the tone of subsequent party coverage in Germany and found no general influence. However, this study was conducted in the last six weeks of the election campaign and in this period, so change in poll results was minimal. As this thesis focuses on news coverage outside of election times and covers a longer period, a different result can be expected. I propose the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between poll results and the tone of poll coverage:

- H1a: An increase in poll result leads to more positively toned poll coverage.
- H1b: A decrease in poll result leads to more negatively toned poll coverage.

In news coverage, there are different types of articles. Besides general news articles, newspapers also publish opinion pieces and editorials. A prominent function in these articles is the expression of a certain opinion, usually by a (former) journalist (Van Dijk, 1998) or expert. Opinion pieces and editorials can be found in many newspapers, however, research focusing on this type of article is scarce. Ekman & Krzyzanowski (2021) and Van Dijk (1998) both state that articles that focus on opinions remain largely under-researched. One study by Andrew (2007) finds that opinion and editorial articles are less neutral than general news articles in the news coverage of the Canadian federal election campaign. Other studies compare the tone in opinion pieces and general news articles but focus on non-political subjects such as harm reduction interventions for people who use drugs (Wild et al., 2019) or the portrayal of nursing homes in newspapers (Miller et al., 2012). Wild et al. (2019) found negative coverage to be more than 10 times more common in opinion pieces compared to general news articles. Miller et al. (2012) found more mixed results: editorials were more likely to be negative, but columns were more likely to be neutral or positive. Collins et al. (2006) find editorials and columns to be more often positive or negative than

neutral. However, general news articles were less often neutral than editorials or columns. Consequently, there is no clear consensus on how the tone of opinion pieces differs from general news articles. We can still expect opinion pieces to be more subjective as they focus on expressing a certain opinion, whereas general news articles are more objective (Andrew, 2007). Therefore, opinion pieces should be more positively or negatively toned.

- H1c: Opinion pieces will have a significant effect on the tone of poll coverage.

2.2 Interpretative Journalism and Polls

When journalists report on political parties, they not only want to tell what parties are doing and saying, but also why and what the consequences might be for the public. Looking into public opinion is helpful in this regard. Opinion polls are a way to interpret how the public is responding to the words and actions of parties. In that sense, it can be seen as a form of interpretative journalism. Soontjens (2019, p. 955) defines this phenomenon as: “A journalistic style that goes beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism. It is characterized by news coverage containing journalistic explanation, evaluation, and speculation, without – explicit as well as implicit – references to verifiable facts or statements provided by sources.” Patterson (2000, p. 250) states that this style of reporting gives journalists more control over the message: “whereas descriptive reporting is driven by the facts, the interpretative form is driven by the theme around which the story is built.” Essentially, this means that this phenomenon allows journalists to frame stories in a certain way, stressing some aspects and not others or giving explanations that are not based on actual sources. Numerous sources confirm that interpretative journalism is on the rise. Patterson (1994) showed that the proportion of interpretative election news (on the front page of The New York Times, United States) increased from 8% to 80% between 1960 and 1992. In that same time frame, he found that the source of the tone of these election stories was increasingly determined by journalists and not by quotes from their sources. Again, Patterson’s studies were conducted in the United States. However, this is not just an American phenomenon. Esser (2008) found in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States that in an average election story, journalists were heard more than politicians’ voices. Moreover, and similarly to the rule of substitution by Zaller (1998), he states that journalists analyse and compress candidates’

statements. Soontjens (2019) analysed coverage of coalition negotiations in Belgium between 1985 and 2014 and concluded that the number of interpretative news reports strongly increased.

While this increase in interpretative journalism – focusing more on the “why” than the “what”, “who” or “when” – is not necessarily a bad evolution (Esser & Umbricht, 2014), we should be cautious when dealing with opinion poll coverage. In the case of poll coverage, an increase in interpretative journalism can be problematic as different studies in multiple countries have concluded that the quality of poll coverage is poor. In Spain, Portilla (2016) found that less than half of the examined poll stories included the margin of error. More than half of the poll stories did not contain any methodological information (34,5%) or the methodological information was mentioned only in another news story in the same newspaper, but not on the same page (28,2%). Next, in Sweden, Tryggvason and Strömbäck (2018, p. 2148) concluded that “journalists very often fail to take statistical uncertainties into account and that they, in about half of the cases, provide explanations for changes that are within the margin of error.” In both the Netherlands (Louwerse & van Dijk, 2022) and Flanders (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2008) the quality of poll coverage is also low. More specifically, in Flanders between 2000 and 2006, the quality of poll coverage decreased: general poll information (such as the target population and name of the polling institute) was disclosed (on average) 34% of the time in 2000, whereas by 2006 this percentage had decreased to 9,8%. Moreover, in about 26% of the news articles, the degree of subjectivity was coded as having mainly subjective interpretations, as opposed to mere informative results.

Journalists reflect public opinion when reporting about opinion polls. However, the quality of this coverage is poor as it often fails to mention methodological elements such as the margin of error. This can be problematic as journalists not only reflect public opinion but also influence it. For example, Hopmann et al. (2010) conclude that the visibility and tone of party coverage influence voting decisions. Editorial slant (defined as the quantity and tone of news coverage) also impacts the image perception of the audience which in turn influences candidate evaluations (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Journalists do not only influence public opinion but they can also be influenced by their own frames. Gitlin (1980) in Scheufele (2000, p. 7) describes news frames as working routines for journalists which allow them to quickly categorise information and “to package it for efficient relay to their audiences.”

According to Patterson (1994), journalists need to tell a coherent story, therefore they rely on the frames they have used. Rosenstiel (2005, p. 700) draws a similar conclusion:

The more 'synthetic' style of contemporary journalism has increased the tendency to allow polls to create the dominant context by which journalists explain and organize other news – becoming the lens through which reporters see and order a more interpretative news environment.

Furthermore, Scheufele (1999) calls attention to the fact that journalists are just as susceptible to the frames they use as their audience is. Fishman (1980) in Scheufele (1999) showed that frames can be picked up by other journalists. Lastly, Tryggvason (2021) investigated the relationship between the tone of poll coverage and the subsequent general coverage of parties in Sweden and found that mainly positive poll stories spill over and generate more positive general coverage for political parties. Therefore, I propose the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between poll results and the subsequent general coverage of political parties:

- H2a: An increase in poll result leads to more positive general coverage for political parties in the month afterwards.
- H2b: A decrease in poll result leads to more negative general coverage for political parties in the month afterwards.
- H2c: Opinion pieces will have a significant effect on the tone of general news coverage about political parties.

Because of an increase in interpretive journalism, journalists are more likely to provide explanations for political events that are in line with opinion poll results. Journalists appear to be objective when reporting on and analysing opinion polls because of their scientific basis (Patterson, 2005). However, the analyses of polls made by journalists are often no more than interpretations and speculations, even though they are sometimes presented as facts (Strömbäck, 2012a). Journalists also make implicit references to public opinion but then report their own interpretation of what the public opinion is about a certain issue and thus calls for more attention from academic researchers to these interpretations (Beckers, 2020). Bhatti & Pedersen (2016) call for future analyses of poll coverage quality to include an

analysis of journalistic interpretations of poll results as well. Therefore, this thesis will include a limited qualitative analysis of poll coverage, focusing on how journalists interpret opinion poll results and what kind of explanations they give for the poll result of each political party. I propose the following research question for this qualitative analysis:

- RQ: How do journalists explain the rise and fall of political parties in election polls?

3 Data and methods

3.1 The Case of Flanders, Belgium

Belgium is a parliamentary democracy and a federal state with three regions and three communities. This thesis focuses on the Flemish region. Hallin & Mancini (2004) categorise Belgium in the Democratic Corporatist Model where there is high newspaper circulation and strong state intervention but also protection of press freedom. Recent research into opinion polls in Flanders is scarce. Sonck & Loosveldt (2008) found an increase in the use of opinion polls between 2000 and 2006 and focussed on which methodological information is included in news coverage of opinion polls. Vliegenthart & Van Aelst (2010) found a relationship between a party's position in the polls and its media visibility. However, the effect was only present for some parties. Beckers (2020) investigated how journalists report on public opinion in Flanders and concluded that polls are mentioned more often in print than in television news. She also found that during the election campaign, polls are mentioned more often in all types of news. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, much research about this topic has been conducted in the United States (see for example the works of Patterson) so the political and media context are quite different. The United States is a two-party system and an example of the Liberal Model as described by Hallin & Mancini (2004). Further, news media in the United States strongly focus on opinion polls and the horse race (Patterson, 1994), which is not the case in Flanders. Of the Flemish news media, only two regularly organise opinion polls. Het Laatste Nieuws organises a poll – “De Grote Peiling” – every three months in collaboration with commercial broadcasters VTM and RTL, and Walloon newspaper Le Soir. De Standaard annually organises a poll – “De Stemming” – in collaboration with public broadcaster VRT. Therefore, these newspapers are included in the analysis, as well as one newspaper that doesn't organise opinion polls (De Tijd).

3.2 Data selection

The relationship between poll results and the subsequent poll and general coverage will be analysed in three Flemish newspapers, i.e. De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws, and De Tijd. Of these newspapers, I will analyse print articles for all the polls that were published between December 2021 and May 2023. Interviews and articles only containing reactions of readers are excluded from the analysis. In this period, 8 polls were organised by De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws. One other poll was conducted in this period, but it was excluded as it was organised by a Walloon newspaper, La Libre, and thus fell outside of the scope of this thesis.

To answer H1 and H2, I analyse both poll coverage and general coverage (and make sure there is no overlap between the news articles used for these analyses). For **poll coverage** (N = 65 articles), I searched on BelgaPress for any news articles mentioning the word “poll” or “polls” (peiling/en), “De Stemming” or “De Grote Peiling” and at least one of the seven Flemish political parties. For each poll, all articles from the day of the publication of the poll and the first six days after were analysed. Out of these, I manually selected the news articles that had a substantive focus on reporting poll results and poll analyses (similarly to Larsen & Fazekas, 2020). Only articles about election and popularity polls in Flanders were analysed, thus this does not include local or thematic polls, articles that are about polls in Wallonia or Brussels, or polls about Walloon parties. For **general coverage** (N = 170 articles), I searched on BelgaPress for any news articles mentioning one of the Flemish political parties in the title or lead that were on the first 4 pages of the newspaper on the day each poll was published and in the 29 days after the day of the publication of the poll results. Using an Excel coding sheet and SPSS, these articles will be analysed quantitatively, focusing on the tone. More details of how the articles were selected can be found in the codebook (see Appendix).

The qualitative part of this thesis deals with **poll interpretations**. For this part, I analyse all poll coverage (as defined above), as well as every relevant paragraph of the other news articles from the BelgaPress search. The coding is done using Nvivo and focuses on how journalists interpret electoral opinion polls, i.e. which explanations they offer and which consequences of polls they speculate about.

Table 1*Overview of the polls and the number of articles analysed*

Poll	Date of publication (t)	News outlet	Number of poll / general coverage articles
P01	11/12/2021	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	4 / 19
P02	26/3/2022	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	8 / 21
P03	7/5/2022	VRT / De Standaard	14 / 32
P04	18/6/2022	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	4 / 20
P05	17/9/2022	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	7 / 26
P06	3/12/2022	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	12 / 13
P07	1/4/2023	HLN/VTM/RTL/Le Soir	7 / 23
P08	13/5/2023	VRT / De Standaard	9 / 16
Total			65 / 170

3.3 Operationalisation

All variables are measured with each mention of a Flemish political party as the registration unit and taking into account the paragraph or title as the observation unit. This allows me to analyse the tone in a detailed way. Moreover, by doing this analysis manually and not using automatic sentiment analysis, the tone can be analysed for each party separately as only the sentences about this party are taken into account.

The codebook (see Appendix) contains variables about **characteristics of the article or mention**: for each mention of a party a unique ID number is coded, the coder's initials (for reliability testing), whether the article is poll or general coverage, and what outlet the article is from. Moreover, the date of publication for each article, whether it was an opinion piece or not, which poll it belonged to, and what party was mentioned were also coded.

The change in **poll result** is measured at the ratio level. This variable has two versions: one compares the result of a party in the current poll to its result in the previous poll, and the other compares a party's current poll result to its last election result. For example, in the variable that compares the current poll result to the last election result, a mention of a party whose poll result is 1,8% lower than its last election result will have a value of -1,8.

The presence of **quotes** is coded using three dummy variables: whether a quote by a politician, expert, or other source is present.

To measure the tone of news coverage for parties, I look at both **explicit tone and implicit tone**. Previous research that measures tone often does so using a 3-point scale (as positive, neutral, or negative) (e.g. Stolwijk & Schuck, 2021; Tryggvason, 2021; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Hopmann et al., 2010). This is a rather simplistic measurement of a complex and hard-to-capture concept such as the tone of news coverage. Moreover, “tone” and “favourability” are sometimes used interchangeably (as Lengauer et al. (2011) also report). For example, both Vliegthart et al. (2010) and Lefevere (2011) say they measure tone, but the operationalisation shows they actually measure favourability. However, tone is a difficult concept to measure reliably as it remains a challenge to code this in a completely objective way. A detailed and elaborate codebook should help in this regard. Thus, as Zunino (2016) suggests, tone will be measured in a way that is defined more clearly and elaborately.

In this thesis, tone will be measured using a newly created instrument. Two types of tone are analysed: explicit and implicit tone, similarly to Arango-Kure et al. (2014) who measure explicit judgement and implicit tendency to investigate the tone of news magazine covers. Both types of tone are measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from strongly negative (-2) to strongly positive (+2). To code explicit and implicit tone, I use a two-step measurement instrument. In the first step, I look at whether a positive, neutral, or negative tone is present for the party that is mentioned. For example, “PVDA gaat er stevig op vooruit in de peiling” is considered neutral for explicit tone (as PVDA is not described as e.g. “winning the poll”), but positive for implicit tone (as this is a favourable statement from the perspective of PVDA). In the second step, I look at the use of strong language. Strong or powerful language includes sarcasm, words with a strong negative or positive connotation (e.g. “catastrofe”, “naar beneden donderen” (in polls), “een desastreuze peiling”), metaphors (e.g. “bloedarmoede bij de kopstukken”, “aan de schandpaal genageld worden”) and strongly sensational language (e.g. “historische nederlaag”, “tot op het bot verdeeld”). If the paragraph contains strong language that adds to the positive or negative tone for the party that is mentioned, a +2 or -2 (instead of +1 or -1) score is given. To make sure the amount of strong language is in proportion to the length of the paragraph, two or more powerful elements have to be present if the paragraph is longer than 4,5 lines before a +2 or -2 score can be allocated.

Explicit tone is measured as explicit evaluations about a party or politician that use certain terms, similar to Farnsworth & Lichter (2004). For this measurement, I do not interpret what

the title or paragraph says, but only look for the presence of certain evaluative words and very close synonyms (e.g. something is explicitly described as “negatief/positief”, “goed/slecht”, “sterk/zwak”, “winnaar/verliezer”, “success/falen”, etc. for a party or politician). If a positive or negative explicit tone is present, the mention is coded respectively as +1 or -1. Neutral (0) is coded when there is no explicit evaluation present for a party or when the amount of positive and negative elements is equal. If strong language is present in the explicit evaluation, the mention is coded as +2 or -2, as described above.

For example, a party can be described as a winner (“winnaar”) or loser (“verliezer”) which is a positive or negative tone, but not strong language. These elements are thus coded respectively as +1 and -1. However, if it is described as a triumph (“triomf”) or downfall (“nederlaag”), this is considered strong language and is coded as +2 or -2. Other examples are words such as “ellende”, “heisa” or “affaire” which contribute to a negative tone (-1), whereas “schandalig”, “catastrofe”, “crisis” or “ramp” are considered as strongly negative (-2). Lastly, a poll can be described as good (“goed”, +1) or bad (“slecht”, -1) for a party. However, a poll can also be described as terribly bad (“bar slecht”, -2) or historically well (“historisch goed”, +2), which is strong language.

Implicit tone is measured by looking at whether the party or politician that is mentioned is put in a negative or positive context. Here, what the title or paragraph says is interpreted more broadly. Thus, this measurement takes into account the events and facts that are described and whether they are good or bad news for the party. This is also known as “favourability” and focuses on whether an article is positive or negative from the perspective of the actor that is mentioned. Examples of implicit tone include mentions of positive or negative characteristics of the party (e.g. “geloofwaardig” or “loyaal”), positive or negative developments for a party (e.g. something damages a party, electoral or poll results, a politician or party is linked to criminal offences, unity in a party, ...), a party or politician is criticised or receives support, or a party is said to be (in)consistent in their position on a subject. If a positive or negative implicit tone is present, the mention is coded respectively as +1 or -1. Neutral (0) is coded when a title or paragraph is not clearly positive or negative for a party. This means that there is no evaluation present and the facts that are described don’t give a positive or negative context for the party. Neutral (0) is also coded when there is an

equal number of positive and negative elements for the party that is mentioned. As with explicit tone, if strong language is present a +2 or -2 score can be allocated.

An example of implicit tone can be found when journalists describe an increase or decrease in poll results. This can be described as “politicus X stijgt naar plaats X” (+1) or “politicus X prijkt op plaats X” (+2). A party can be divided (“verdeeld”, -1) or can be described as divided to the bone (“verdeeld tot op het bot”, -2). A politician can be described as trustworthy (“geloofwaardig”, +1) or s/he can be described as “grande dame” (+2) of the party or “numero uno” (+2).

The reliability of the codebook was tested in a short reliability analysis (N = 10), for which a student was hired and trained. The codebook was tested, revised, and improved several times using different news articles. Because of this elaborate training and testing, all variables except for explicit and implicit tone received a Krippendorff’s Alpha (KALPHA) reliability score of 1. For explicit tone, KALPHA was 0,90 which is very acceptable. For implicit tone, KALPHA was 0,77. This score approximates the ideal standard for KALPHA in social sciences, which is 0,80 (De Swert, 2012). Considering that tone is a concept that is very difficult to measure reliably and in detail, these scores are certainly satisfactory.

4 Results

The following section consists of three parts. First, an overview of the main variables is given. Second, I will discuss the results of the first hypothesis regarding the effect of poll results on tone of poll coverage and the limited qualitative analysis of the poll interpretations. Finally, the third section focuses on the second hypothesis regarding the effect of poll results on tone in general coverage.

Firstly, Table 2 shows the number of mentions of parties in poll and general coverage. In total 2492 mentions of Flemish political parties were coded. Of those mentions, one third (33,7%) was poll coverage and two thirds (66,3%) were part of the coded general coverage. The mentions of parties are more equally distributed across all parties in poll coverage than in general coverage. This makes sense as in poll coverage, there is something to write about each party. However, in general coverage, this is not necessarily the case. One interesting finding is that mentions of Vlaams Belang make up 14,1% of all poll coverage, but only 2,4% in general coverage. This is similar to a finding in the impartiality report on VRT and VTM of 2022: Vlaams Belang accounts for 1% of the total speaking time by politicians on VTM (the Flemish commercial broadcaster that belongs to the same company as Het Laatste Nieuws), whereas its election result in 2019 was 18,5%. For no other party the difference between the proportion of speaking time and received votes is this large (Van Aelst et al., 2023). Next, in poll coverage, most mentions are of CD&V (21,3%) and Open VLD (19,6%) whereas in general coverage, most mentions are of CD&V (33%) and N-VA (24,6%). All three parties belong to at least one government: N-VA is only part of the Flemish government, CD&V and Open VLD are part of both the Flemish and federal government. In total, mentions of CD&V make up the largest part of the dataset (29,1%). In the period that was covered in this analysis, the party's poll result decreased quite severely which triggered the writing of articles about its decrease in poll result, troubles within the party (that might explain this decreasing result) and the subsequent attempt to strengthen its profile. This will be discussed further in the section of the qualitative analysis.

Table 2

Overview of number of mentions in poll and general coverage per political party

Party	Poll coverage	General coverage	Total
PVDA	38 (4,5%)	30 (1,8%)	68 (2,7%)
Groen	71 (8,4%)	204 (12,4%)	275 (11%)
Vooruit	132 (15,7%)	162 (9,8%)	294 (11,8%)
Open VLD	165 (19,6%)	265 (16,1%)	430 (17,3%)
CD&V	179 (21,3%)	545 (33%)	724 (29,1%)
N-VA	137 (16,3%)	406 (24,6%)	543 (21,8%)
Vlaams Belang	119 (14,1%)	39 (2,4%)	158 (6,3%)
Total	841 (100%)	1651 (100%)	2492 (100%)

Table 3

Overview of number of mentions in poll and general coverage for news versus opinion pieces

	Poll coverage	General coverage	Total
News articles	616 (73,2%)	1568 (95%)	2184 (87,6%)
Opinion pieces	225 (26,8%)	83 (5%)	308 (12,4%)
Total	841 (100%)	1651 (100%)	2492 (100%)

Next, Table 3 presents the number of (mentions of parties in) opinion pieces in poll and general coverage. Within poll coverage, 26,8% of all articles are opinion pieces, whereas in general coverage only 5% of the articles are opinion pieces. Table 4 shows which parties' poll result (mainly) increased or decreased. In this table, the variable of poll result is a nominal variable with three categories: increase, decrease or the result remains the same. However, in the analyses that follow, the change in poll result will be a variable at the ratio level, as described in Section 3.3. Parties whose poll results mainly increased are the far left PVDA and far-right Vlaams Belang, as well as the social-democratic Vooruit. Parties whose poll results mainly decreased are Open VLD, Groen, CD&V and N-VA. It is important to mention that I first determined which variable was most suitable to use for measuring a decrease or increase in poll result. Pearson correlations were performed between the tone of news coverage and the poll result of parties compared to their previous poll result, or compared to their previous election result, as presented in Table 5. In both cases, the association was significant but both in poll and general coverage the association between poll result and tone was stronger when compared to the previous election result of parties. For this reason,

the following analyses are performed with the variable that compares the current poll result with the previous election result of parties. Nonetheless, in itself this is an interesting finding as it suggests journalists may focus more on the long term change in poll result to determine how a party is doing.

Table 4

Overview of the number of mentions in which a party's poll result (PR) increased, decreased or remained equal (compared to its last election result)

Party	Increase in PR	Decrease in PR	Equal PR	Total
PVDA	68 (100%)	0	0	68 (100%)
Groen	0	275 (100%)	0	275 (100%)
Vooruit	227 (77,2%)	43 (14,6%)	24 (8,2%)	294 (100%)
Open VLD	0	430 (100%)	0	430 (100%)
CD&V	0	724 (100%)	0	724 (100%)
N-VA	34 (6,3%)	509 (93,7%)	0	543 (100%)
Vlaams Belang	158 (100%)	0	0	158 (100%)
Total	487 (19,5%)	1981 (79,5%)	24 (1%)	2492 (100%)

Table 5

Pearson correlations between tone and two types of poll result in poll coverage (N=841)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Explicit tone	-			
2. Implicit tone	-	-		
3. Poll result (last election)	0,294***	0,497***	-	
4. Poll result (last poll)	0,194***	0,325***	-	-

Pearson correlations between tone and two types of poll result in general coverage (N=1651)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Explicit tone	-			
2. Implicit tone	-	-		
3. Poll result (last election)	0,138***	0,184***	-	
4. Poll result (last poll)	0,075**	0,125***	-	-

*Note: *** p < 0,01 ; ** p < 0,05 ; * p < 0,10*

In the next sections, I will perform bivariate analyses and multiple linear regressions to determine whether poll results have an effect on the tone of news coverage for political parties. However, several assumptions have to be met. First, the assumption of autocorrelation was tested using the Durbin-Watson test. In all models, this assumption was met. Second, the presence of multicollinearity is tested using the VIF. The VIF of all variables was between 1 and 5, unless otherwise stated. Next, the assumption of normality was tested by looking at the Normal P-Plot of Regression Standardised Residuals and to check the assumption of homoscedasticity, I looked at the scatterplot of residuals. Unless otherwise stated, all these assumptions were met.

4.1 Poll results and Tone in Poll Coverage

Figure 1.1

Explicit tone per party in poll coverage (N=841)

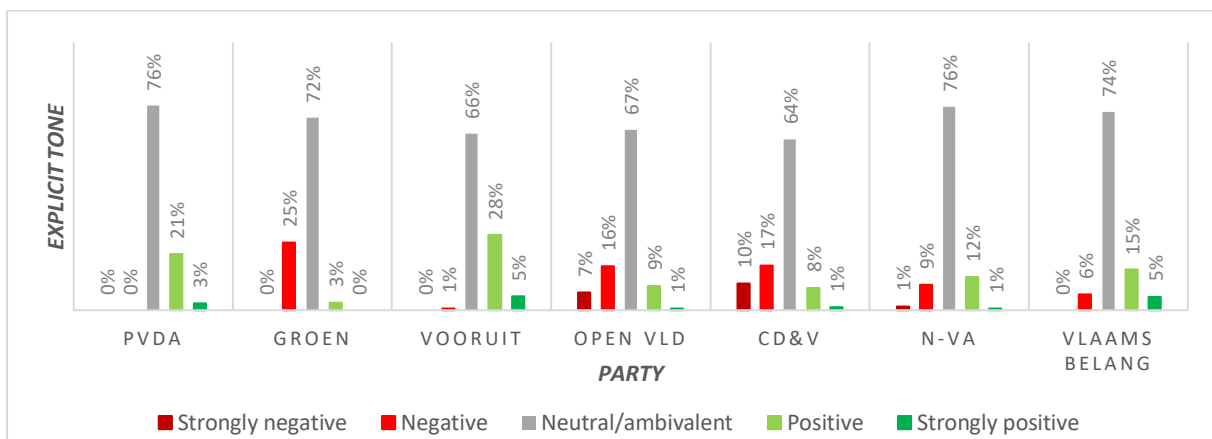
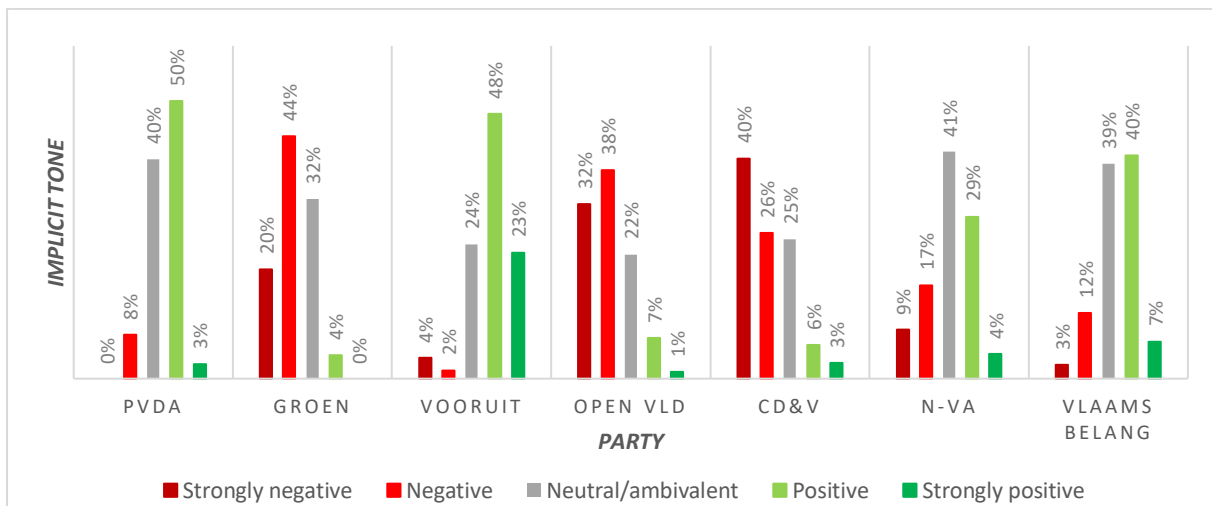


Figure 1.2

Implicit tone per party in poll coverage (N=841)



Figures 1.1 and 1.2 present the explicit and implicit tone in poll coverage for each party. I expected parties whose poll result increases (PVDA, Vlaams Belang and Vooruit) to have a mainly positive tone and parties whose poll result decreases (Open VLD, Groen, CD&V and N-VA) to have a mainly negative tone. Looking at the relationship between tone and party in poll coverage, it becomes clear that parties of which the poll result increases receive more positive than negative poll coverage. For implicit tone, the relationship is more clearly present. For example, in explicit tone PVDA receives 23,7% (strongly) positive coverage, whereas in implicit tone the party's coverage is 52,6% (strongly) positive. Also, parties whose poll result decreases receive more negative than positive poll coverage. Groen, for example, received 25,4% explicitly (strongly) negative and 63,4% implicitly (strongly) negative coverage. The results thus support **H1a and H1b** so far. However, for one party (N-VA) this is less obvious. N-VA's poll result mostly decreased but the party receives slightly more (strongly) positive than negative poll coverage. The difference, however, is small in comparison to other parties. This ambiguous result will be discussed in the section about the qualitative analysis.

Table 6

Pearson correlations between tone and poll result, in general and per party (poll coverage)

Selected group	Explicit tone	Implicit tone	N
<i>General correlation</i>	<i>0,294***</i>	<i>0,497***</i>	<i>841</i>
PVDA	0,212	0,286*	38
Groen	0,152	0,414***	71
Vooruit	-0,007	0,157*	132
Open VLD	0,192**	0,175**	165
CD&V	0,051	0,273***	179
N-VA	0,001	0,096	137
Vlaams Belang	0,213**	0,172*	119

Note: *** $p < 0,01$; ** $p < 0,05$; * $p < 0,10$

Next, bivariate correlations were investigated between the main variables. Table 6 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for the association between poll result and tone in general and for each party separately. First, in general, the association between poll result

and explicit tone is significant and of (almost) moderate strength ($r(839) = 0,294$; $p < 0,001$). For implicit tone, the relationship is also significant and moderately positive ($r(839) = 0,497$; $p < 0,001$). This supports **H1a** and **H1b**: when the poll result increases, the tone is more positive and vice versa. There are differences between the parties, however. For Open VLD and Vlaams Belang, the relationship is significant for both explicit and implicit tone, but for CD&V, Vooruit, Groen and PVDA there is only a significant relationship with implicit tone. This suggests that Open VLD and Vlaams Belang are more explicitly evaluated in poll coverage (for example Open VLD are considered as “losers” and Vlaams Belang as “winners”). For N-VA, the relationship is not significant for both explicit and implicit tone. This was also visible in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, and could be expected when there is an almost equal amount of positive and negative tone.

The result of an Independent Samples T-Test of the relationship between opinion pieces and explicit tone indicated that news articles ($M = 0,02$; $SD = 0,732$) were significantly more positive in tone ($t(839) = 1,949$; $p = 0,014$) than opinion pieces ($M = -0,09$; $SD = 0,568$). A news article is on average 0,105 points more positive (on a 5 point scale) than an opinion piece (and vice versa). Also for implicit tone, news articles ($M = -0,11$; $SD = 1,185$) were significantly more positive in tone ($t(839) = 4,926$; $p < 0,001$) than opinion pieces ($M = -0,56$; $SD = 1,101$). Here, a news article is on average 0,446 points more positive than an opinion piece. So far, **H1c** is confirmed as the association between opinion pieces and tone is significant.

Table 7.1

Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting explicit tone in poll coverage

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Poll result	0,05	0,01	0,29***	0,05	0,006	0,29***	0,05	0,006	0,29***	0,06	0,02	0,31**	0,06	0,02	0,31**
Opinion				-0,05	0,05	-0,03	-0,05	0,05	-0,03	-0,05	0,05	-0,03	-0,05	0,06	-0,03
Q politician ^a							-0,04	0,09	-0,02	-0,05	0,08	-0,02	-0,05	0,09	-0,02
Q expert ^a							0,05	0,12	0,02	0,05	0,11	0,01	0,05	0,12	0,02
Q other ^a							0,11	0,16	0,02	0,09	0,15	0,02	0,09	0,15	0,02
Vlaams Belang										-0,28	0,21	-0,14	-0,27	0,21	-0,14
PVDA										-0,1	0,19	-0,03	-0,1	0,19	-0,03
Groen										-0,30	0,1	-0,12***	-0,3	0,1	-0,12***
Vooruit										0,13	0,13	0,07	0,13	0,13	0,07
Open VLD										-0,17	0,08	-0,1**	-0,17	0,08	-0,1**
CD&V										-0,11	0,1	-0,07	-0,12	0,1	-0,07
HLN													0,004	0,06	0,003
De Tijd													0,01	0,08	0,005
R ²		0,09			0,09			0,09			0,13			0,13	
F for change R ²		79,35***			0,97			0,32			6,11***			0,009	

Note: *** p < 0,01 ; ** p < 0,05 ; * p < 0,10 ; a = quote by politician, expert or other source

Table 7.2

Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting implicit tone in poll coverage

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Poll result	0,15	0,009	0,5***	0,15	0,009	0,48***	0,15	0,009	0,48***	0,18	0,03	0,6***	0,18	0,03	0,58***
Opinion				-0,29	0,08	-0,11***	-0,31	0,08	-0,12***	-0,3	0,07	-0,11***	-0,36	0,08	-0,13***
Q politician ^a							-0,26	0,13	-0,06**	-0,27	0,12	-0,06**	-0,03	0,12	-0,07**
Q expert ^a							0,05	0,18	0,009	0,04	0,16	0,006	0,07	0,16	0,01
Q other ^a							-0,12	0,24	-0,02	-0,18	0,22	-0,02	-0,16	0,22	-0,02
VB ^b										-1,18	0,3	-0,35***	-1,15	0,3	-0,34***
PVDA										-0,7	0,27	-0,12***	-0,65	0,27	-0,11**
Groen										-1,04	0,14	-0,15***	-1,01	0,14	-0,24***
Vooruit										0,03	0,18	0,008	0,04	0,18	0,01
Open VLD										-0,81	0,11	-0,27***	-0,81	0,11	-0,27***
CD&V										-0,41	0,14	-0,14***	-0,39	0,15	-0,14***
HLN													0,12	0,08	0,05
De Tijd													-0,05	0,11	-0,01
R ²		0,25			0,26			0,26			0,39			0,39	
F for change		275,77***			13,55***			1,46			29,12***			1,78	
R ²															

Note: *** p < 0,01 ; ** p < 0,05 ; * p < 0,10 ; a = quote by politician, expert or other source ; b = Vlaams Belang

Tables 7.1 and 7.2 show the result of a multiple linear regression with the poll result and a dummy variable for opinion pieces as main independent variables and the explicit and implicit tone as dependent variables. Model 1 shows the effect of poll results on explicit (R^2 adj. = 0,085; $F(1, 839) = 79,349$; $p < 0,001$) and implicit tone (R^2 adj. = 0,246; $F(1, 839) = 275,771$; $p < 0,001$), both are significant. In Model 2, a dummy variable for opinion pieces is added. Next, in Model 3, I control for the presence of quotes of politicians, experts and other sources. In Model 4, six dummy variables are added to control for an effect of the political parties. N-VA is the reference category. Lastly, in Model 5 two dummy variables are added to control for an effect of news outlets. This last model is also significant for both explicit (R^2 adj. = 0,113; $F(13, 827) = 9,266$; $p < 0,001$) and implicit (R^2 adj. = 0,385; $F(13, 827) = 41,373$; $p < 0,001$) tone. The first notable observation is that the explained variance for explicit tone is consistently lower than for the model of implicit tone. This makes sense because implicit tone is a broader concept of tone that is closer to "favourability" and thus follows along more closely with an increase or decrease in poll result.

Model 5 shows that poll results are a significant predictor for explicit ($\beta = 0,305$; $t(827) = 2,348$; $p = 0,019$) and implicit tone ($\beta = 0,584$; $t(827) = 5,386$; $p < 0,001$). Thus, **H1a and H1b** are accepted: an increase in poll result leads to more positive coverage (and vice versa).

However, other variables in this model are also significant predictors. For explicit tone, none of the control variables had a significant effect except for the party variables of Groen ($\beta = -0,121$; $t(827) = -3,023$; $p = 0,003$) and Open VLD ($\beta = -0,097$; $t(827) = -2,188$; $p = 0,029$). This means that for these parties, the explicit tone is significantly more negative (than for N-VA). Groen and Open VLD are part of the government at the federal level and are said not to benefit from this, as became clear from the qualitative analysis which will be discussed more in detail later. Both parties are said to suffer from a shortage of popular figureheads: recently, some of the most popular figureheads of Groen decided to leave national politics and Open VLD is said to go all in on its prime minister but with no success so far. Also policy-wise, Groen and Open VLD are said to not enjoy being part of the federal government. For quite some time, Groen was in the spotlight during the energy crisis and the subsequent debate about nuclear energy, but they failed to convert this attention into (possible) votes. Open VLD provides the prime minister of a federal government made up of ideologically very

different parties. This makes it difficult for them to add their own emphasis to policies, which is not favourable for the party.

For implicit tone, the effect of opinion pieces is significant ($\beta = -0,134$; $t(827) = -4,279$; $p < 0,001$), which means we can partially accept **H1c**. On average, the implicit tone is more negative in opinion pieces than news articles. Next, for implicit tone, if a quote of a politician is present, the tone is significantly more negative ($\beta = -0,070$; $t(827) = -2,5$; $p = 0,013$) than without quotes. Moreover, the effect is significantly weaker for Vlaams Belang, PVDA, Groen, Open VLD and CD&V than for N-VA. Thus, the only party for which the effect is not significantly weaker than N-VA is Vooruit. On the left side, Vooruit has become the leading party and on the right side, N-VA is often still considered as the “real” leading party as they were the largest party in Flanders after the 2019 elections. This may explain why for them the effect is stronger than for other parties. Lastly, the news outlet is not a significant predictor for tone in this model.

Even though some other variables affect tone as well, the effect of the poll result remains the has the strongest effect on tone, confirming **H1a and H1b**. **H1c** is partly accepted as opinion pieces have a more negative tone than news articles, but only regarding implicit tone. This makes sense, because in news articles of poll coverage, parties are more often explicitly described as “winning” or “losing”, performing “well” or “poorly” than in opinion pieces. However, we have to interpret these results with caution as there is a possible problem of multicollinearity. In Model 5, the poll result has a VIF of 16,021 and the Vlaams Belang dummy variable has a VIF of 10,353. Nonetheless, in Model 3 there is no multicollinearity problem and the same variables remain significant: only poll results for explicit tone, but poll results, opinion pieces and quotes by politicians for implicit tone.

4.2 Explaining the Rise and Fall of Parties in Polls

To answer the more broad research question “How do journalists explain the rise and fall of political parties in election polls?”, I conducted a limited qualitative analysis of the poll interpretations coverage to explore what reasons journalists give when describing an increase or decrease in poll results.

For the far left PVDA and far right Vlaams Belang, journalists give very similar reasons to explain why their poll results change: their increasing results are linked, firstly, to their focus on social media. For PVDA this was described as follows:

Hun kapiteins zijn mediasavvy en spreken de taal van sociale media vloeiend. Onder meer hun communicatiestrategie maakt dat hun populariteit met rasse schreden toeneemt. Al tiktokkend klimt Hedebeuw in de populariteitspoll naar de vijfde plaats. Hij is de 'coming man', zeggen de onderzoekers. (De Standaard, 13/5/2023)

For Vlaams Belang, it was mentioned that they focus on social media because they do not have access to traditional media. Also, the party spends a large amount of their budget on social media (especially Facebook), which has made it the most popular party (and party president) on Facebook. Secondly, the success of both parties is linked to the rise in anti-political sentiment. In multiple articles, a vote for PVDA or Vlaams Belang is described as a protest vote as is made clear in this article:

Dat Vlaams Belang vandaag de foertstemmen binnenhaalt, is een understatement. In De Stemming zijn hun kiezers veruit het meest negatief over alle regeringsniveaus. Meer, 51 procent geeft aan dat de democratie bedreigd is. Het is ook veelzeggend dat bij Vlaams Belang bovengemiddeld veel respondenten aangeven dat alle politici 'zakkenvullers' of 'poenpakkers' zijn. (De Standaard, 10/5/2022)

The rise in anti-political sentiment is thus also linked to a broad dissatisfaction and anger with politics. Moreover, the general level of trust in politics in Flanders is considered to be low. Journalists use this fact as well to explain the rise of PVDA and Vlaams Belang. Third, a sense of impoverishment is said to also explain rising poll results for extreme parties as people who vote for PVDA or Vlaams Belang generally have a lower income. Lastly, voters for PVDA and Vlaams Belang are very loyal to their party and already more sure about which

party they will vote for. As one headline in De Standaard put it: “De Vlaams Belang-kiezer: uiterst pessimistisch en uiterst loyaal” (De Standaard, 10/5/2022).

For the other parties, mainly other reasons are given to explain their poll result. Firstly, a specific person can influence the party’s success. For example, Vooruit’s party president Conner Rousseau is said to positively impact the party’s poll result because of his focus on youngsters and social media (amongst other things). Rousseau is said to not only focus on his more serious side, but also on other things such as his participation in the singing contest The Masked Singer and making fun content for Instagram and TikTok. In this way, he reaches more (especially young) potential voters.

Hij zit regelmatig in nieuwsprogramma's en kranten om zijn serieuze flank af te dekken, maar sinds hij furore maakte als het Konijn in 'The Masked Singer' is hij ook een graag geziene gast in entertainmentprogramma's en de 'boekskes'. Rousseau heeft zo een echte BV-status bereikt. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 3/12/2022)

Furthermore, journalists say he strengthened internal cohesion within the party which is one of many factors explaining the success of Vooruit. In contrast, Vlaams Belang’s party president Tom Van Grieken is said to profit from the success of his party, making *him* more popular. Another difference is that Van Grieken focusses especially on reaching a large audience on Facebook, whereas Rousseau is present more on Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, Open VLD is said to hope for a “*kanseliersbonus*” (i.e. a higher poll or election result because the prime minister belongs to the party). For a long time, their party president and thus also the prime minister, Alexander De Croo, was the most popular politician in Flanders. However, more recently this is not the case anymore. Moreover, besides De Croo, the party lacks popular figureheads:

Open Vld lijkt bovendien aan bloedarmoede bij de kopstukken te lijden: na Alexander De Croo is het wachten tot er met Bart Somers op plaats 12 een blauwe politicus opduikt in de populariteitspoll. Dat zorgt voor zenuwachtigheid aan de top, die op zoek moet naar een smoel. En die zal twee kanten moeten bedienen. Want niet alleen aan N-VA verliest Open Vld kiezers, ook Vooruit kon 13% oude liberale stemmers afsnoepen. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 26/3/2022)

Sammy Mahdi, the relatively new party president of CD&V, is also said to have made positive changes such as increased internal cohesion and a more clear profile for the party. In multiple articles, journalists say he had to save the party: “Nu er een nieuwe kapitein aan het roer komt om het zinkende CD&V-schip te redden” (Het Laatste Nieuws, 14/5/2022). Before Mahdi became the party president of CD&V, a minister and the previous party president both resigned shortly after the latest (and “*dramatische*”) poll was published (De Standaard, 7/5/2022). Journalists claim the poll drove them and the party to make this decision.

Secondly, it is important for a party to be linked to policy domains which voters see as a priority (i.e. have issue ownership and salience). Groen for example, is linked to the climate, however, voters do not see this as a high priority thus the party does not win many votes because of it. In contrast, Vlaams Belang owns the issue of migration, which is deemed as a priority for many citizens. Moreover, since Vooruit owns most social issues, Groen (also a leftist party) has been unable to claim any. Groen is also linked to the issue of energy, however “De kernenergiesaga speelt de partij parten en alle inspanningen om de energieprijzen te milderen, stralen niet positief af op de partij. De prijzen blijven torenhoog” (De Standaard, 7/5/2022). N-VA owns the issue of state reform as they strive to introduce a confederal state model. An article mentions this and links it to the progress that was (not) made regarding the issue: “Het helpt niet dat er al die tijd weinig of geen vooruitgang is geboekt op het communautaire vlak, toch de belangrijkste - bestaansreden van de Vlaams-nationalistische partij” (De Standaard, 13/5/2023).

Third, being part of a government is a reason journalists often cite for a decrease in poll results. The only parties that are not in the regional or federal government are PVDA and Vlaams Belang, hence, their poll result increased and the tone of their poll coverage is more positive. For the parties that belong to the government, especially a lack of reforms is said to reflect negatively on their poll result. As the previous quote shows, this is also the case for N-VA which is only part of the Flemish government. Furthermore, the political editor of De Tijd wrote in an opinion piece about Groen that they “zich kapot regeren” (De Tijd, 8/12/2022). Journalists say it is difficult to renew a party when it is tied to one or two government agreements. Also, the performance of the government as a collective reflects on the parties that are part of it. However, one party is the exception to this rule: Vooruit is part of the federal government, but manages to place itself somewhat outside the government. They

are repositioning themselves (successfully for now) to attract more voters (especially from Vlaams Belang), journalists claim.

Taking a closer look at the poll interpretations also allows me to explain some outspoken results. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show CD&V is mentioned more often in a (strongly) negative tone than other parties (10,1% strongly negative and 16,8% negative). This is also clear when looking at the reasons that are given for their poll result: two prominent figures of the party have resigned after the publication of disappointing polls, the party's profile is unclear, the party does not claim any issues and is internally divided. In different articles, the downfall of CD&V (a Christian democratic party) is described as "structural" because their voters are older, habitual voters and society has become more secularised. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 also reveal that the tone for N-VA is rather mixed. Numerous reasons are given for why the party's poll result decreased since the last election, such as their participation in the Flemish government, the success of Vlaams Belang and the lack of "kanseliersbonus" from Flemish minister-president Jan Jambon. However, N-VA started this legislature as the largest party of Flanders. Some positive things are mentioned as well such as the high party discipline, large margin for growth and popularity of minister Zuhair Demir and party president Bart De Wever, as is made clear in the next quote:.

De Wever is er in al die jaren in geslaagd om zijn partij te verbreden, maar de afhankelijkheid van zijn persoon blijft groot. Meer dan de helft van de N-VA-kiezers verklaart dat hij een belangrijke drijfveer is om voor de N-VA te stemmen. Bijna een op de drie kiezers zou hem volgen in het - erg onrealistische - scenario dat hij de deur van zijn partij achter zich zou dichttrekken, de hoogste score van alle politici. (De Standaard, 7/5/2022)

Journalists also speculate about possible consequences of poll results. They mainly try to predict which alliances for a new government are possible with the current poll results. For instance, journalists speculate on what would happen if N-VA and Vlaams Belang together gain a majority in the Flemish Parliament. One opinion piece from former spin-doctor (and Open VLD politician), Noel Slangen puts it this way:

Wat als Vlaams Belang en N-VA morgen samen een meerderheid halen? Die vraag gonst al maanden door de Vlaamse gangen en recente peilingen tonen aan dat die

kans bestaat. Men hoeft niet eens een meerderheid van stemmen te halen. Een goede 45% volstaat om een meerderheid in het Vlaams Parlement te scoren. Maar wat koopt die coalitie daarvoor, eens de slingers en confetti verdwenen zijn? (Het Laatste Nieuws, 5/12/2022)

Journalists thus speculate about whether the “cordon sanitaire” (the name of the agreement made by all parties never to govern with Vlaams Belang) will be broken. Another aspect that is mentioned in this regard is the importance of who will become the largest party in Flanders in 2024 (Vlaams Belang or N-VA?) as that party will have the initiative to form a government. Furthermore, they predict that it is possible that centrist parties will work together to form a larger bloc against the rise of the extremist parties. Lastly, for parties that are not doing well in the polls, often journalists refer to party congresses as an effort to renew the party.

4.3 Poll results and Tone in General Coverage

Figure 2.1

Explicit tone per party in general coverage (N=1651)

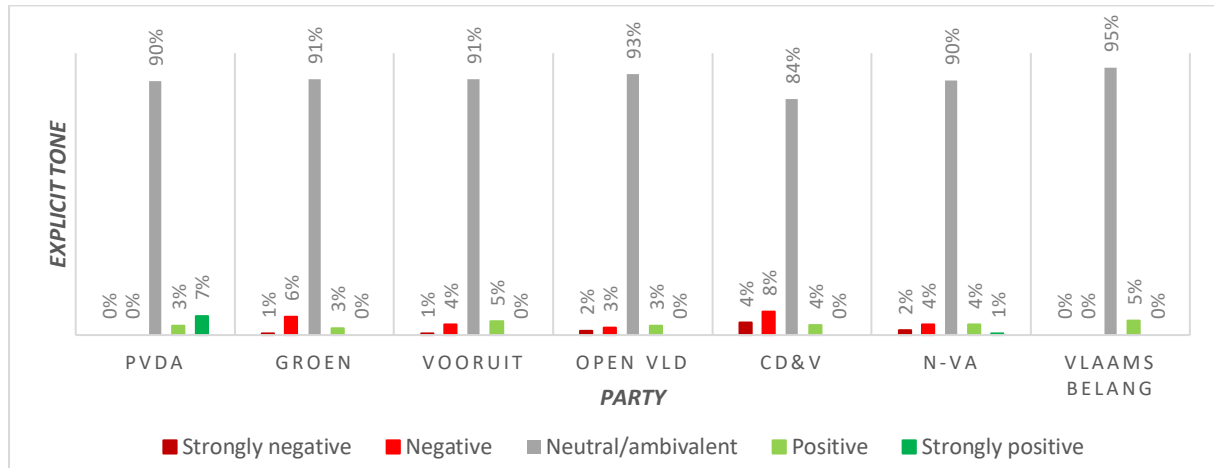
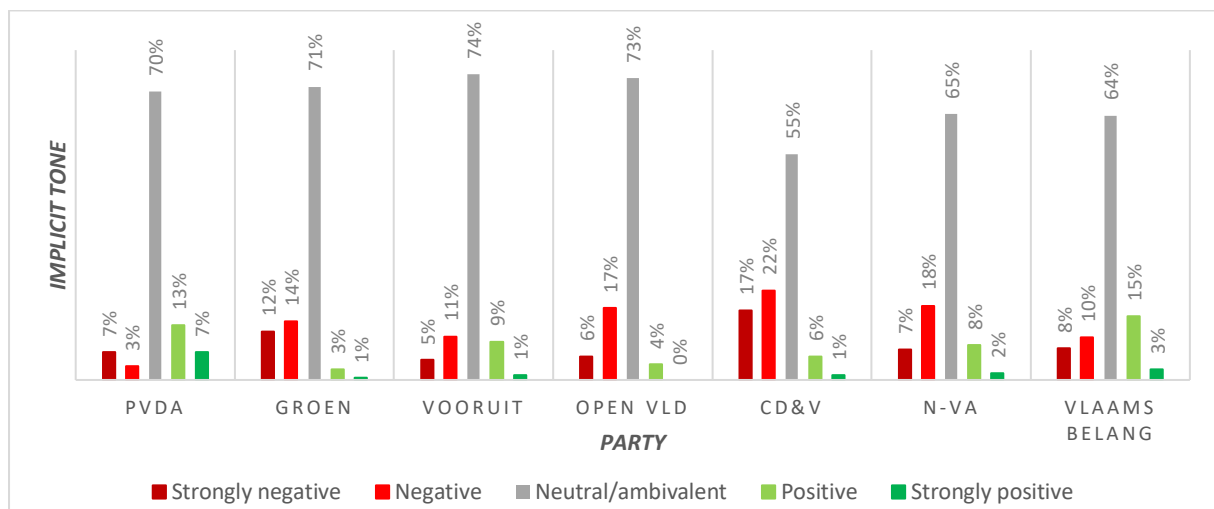


Figure 2.2

Implicit tone per party in general coverage (N=1651)



Figures 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate the explicit and implicit tone for each political party in the general coverage. PVDA, Vlaams Belang and Vooruit are parties whose poll result (mainly) increased so I expect their explicit and implicit tone to be more positive than negative. The other parties' poll results (Groen, Open VLD, CD&V and N-VA) mainly decreased, thus their tone should be more negative than positive. PVDA, Groen and CD&V follow this pattern for both explicit and implicit tone: PVDA receives mainly positively toned general coverage (10% is (strongly) positive in explicit tone; 20% is (strongly) positive in implicit tone), whereas Groen and CD&V receive mostly negatively toned general coverage. The relationship is most

obvious for CD&V, for which 12,8% is (strongly) negative in explicit tone and 38,6% is (strongly) negative in implicit tone. As mentioned before, this party's poll result decreased severely so this could be expected. Vooruit, Open VLD and N-VA also follow the pattern as proposed by **H2a and H2b**, but only for implicit tone. I had also expected this to be the case, as in general coverage there are less explicit evaluations (e.g. describing a party explicitly as doing "well" or "poorly"). Lastly, for Vlaams Belang the relationship is only clear for explicit tone, as the party received 5,1% positive general coverage. However, for implicit tone, Vlaams Belang received an equal amount of (strongly) positive and negative coverage (18%), although the party's result only increased. Therefore, based on these first results, **H2a and H2b** are not completely supported.

Table 8

Pearson correlations between tone and poll result, in general and per party (general coverage)

Selected group	Explicit tone	Implicit tone	N
<i>General correlation</i>	<i>0,138***</i>	<i>0,184***</i>	<i>1651</i>
PVDA	-0,557***	-0,612***	30
Groen	0,184**	0,239***	204
Vooruit	-0,106	-0,09	162
Open VLD	0,049	0,150**	265
CD&V	0,068	0,066	545
N-VA	0,056	0,172***	406
Vlaams Belang	0,160	-0,182	39

Note: *** $p < 0,01$; ** $p < 0,05$; * $p < 0,10$

Next, Table 8 presents the bivariate correlations between poll results and tone, both in general and per party. The general association between poll result and explicit tone is significant, but weak ($r(1649) = 0,138$; $p < 0,001$). Regarding implicit tone, this association is also significant and somewhat stronger but still weak ($r(1649) = 0,184$; $p < 0,001$). This means we should expect a smaller effect of poll results on tone in the linear regression. However, the association is still significant thus so far **H2a and H2b** are supported: if a party's poll result increases or decreases, the tone will respectively be more positive or negative. When

we look at the correlations for each party separately, it becomes clear that this association is only significant for some parties. For PVDA and Groen, the association is significant. Groen follows the expected direction for explicit ($r(202) = 0,184$; $p=0,008$) and implicit tone ($r(202) = 0,239$; $p<0,001$). However, for PVDA the association is negative meaning that a higher poll result is associated with a more negative tone for both explicit ($r(28) = -0,557$; $p=0,001$) and implicit tone ($r(28) = -0,612$; $p<0,001$). It is possible that this is caused by the relatively low number of mentions that was coded for PVDA ($N=30$) or the fact that PVDA is considered an extremist party. For Open VLD and N-VA, the relationship is only significant regarding implicit tone. This could be expected as for explicit tone, the proportion of neutral mentions is larger in general coverage (88,7%) than in poll coverage (69,4%). For Vooruit, CD&V and Vlaams Belang, there is no significant relationship between poll result and explicit or implicit tone. Based on Figures 2.1 and 2.2, this was to be expected for Vlaams Belang as it had an equal amount of positive and negative coverage, and for Vooruit because the difference in amount of positive and negative coverage was rather small. However, for CD&V this is a surprising result as Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show they receive more (strongly) negative general coverage and their poll result only decreased.

The relationship between opinion pieces and tone was also investigated. An Independent T-Test shows that for explicit tone, opinion pieces ($M = 0,05$; $SD = 0,561$) were significantly more positive ($t(1649) = -1,771$; $p=0,04$) than news articles ($M = -0,06$; $SD = 0,421$). On average, an opinion piece is 0,111 points more positively toned than a news article. However, looking at the implicit tone we see the opposite: news articles ($M = -0,28$; $SD = 0,755$) are significantly more positive ($t(1649) = 2,308$; $p=0,012$) than opinion pieces ($M = -0,59$; $SD = 1,20$). On average, a news article is 0,307 points more positive than an opinion piece regarding implicit tone. This result is quite ambiguous for **H2c**: opinion pieces are on average more positive in explicit tone but more negative in implicit tone. This will be discussed further in detail when dealing with the multiple linear regression of general coverage.

Table 9.1

Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting explicit tone in general coverage

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Poll result	0,02	0,004	0,14***	0,02	0,004	0,13***	0,02	0,004	0,13***	0,02	0,01	0,14**	0,02	0,01	0,13*
Opinion				0,08	0,05	0,04*	0,07	0,05	0,03	0,08	0,05	0,04	0,1	0,05	0,05**
Q politician ^a							-0,03	0,03	-0,03	-0,03	0,03	-0,03	-0,03	0,03	-0,03
Q expert ^a							-0,35	0,15	-0,06	-0,35	0,15	-0,06**	-0,34	0,15	-0,06**
Q other ^a							-0,08	0,08	-0,02	-0,07	0,08	-0,02	-0,06	0,08	-0,02
Vlaams Belang										-0,12	0,12	-0,04	-0,09	0,12	-0,03
PVDA										0,05	0,11	0,02	0,09	0,11	0,03
Groen										-0,05	0,04	-0,04	-0,05	0,04	-0,04
Vooruit										-0,06	0,06	-0,04	-0,04	0,06	-0,02
Open VLD										0,01	0,03	0,01	0,02	0,03	0,1
CD&V										-0,04	0,04	-0,05	-0,05	0,04	-0,05
HLN													-0,07	0,03	-0,07**
De Tijd													0,002	0,03	0,002
R ²		0,02			0,02			0,03			0,03			0,04	
F for change R ²		31,396***			2,86*			2,47*			1,49			3,87**	

Note: *** p < 0,01 ; ** p < 0,05 ; * p < 0,10 ; a = quote by politician, expert or other source

Table 9.2

Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting implicit tone in general coverage

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Poll result	0,05	0,007	0,18***	0,06	0,007	0,2***	0,05	0,007	0,19***	0,07	0,02	0,26***	0,07	0,02	0,25***
Opinion				-0,39	0,09	-0,11***	-0,41	0,09	-0,11***	-0,39	0,09	-0,11***	-0,37	0,09	-0,1***
Q politician ^a							-0,08	0,05	-0,04	-0,08	0,05	-0,04	-0,07	0,05	-0,03
Q expert ^a							-0,2	0,27	-0,02	-0,19	0,27	-0,02	-0,18	0,27	-0,02
Q other ^a							-0,68	0,15	-0,11***	-0,67	0,15	-0,12***	-0,66	0,15	-0,11***
VB ^b										-0,39	0,21	-0,08*	-0,36	0,21	-0,07*
PVDA										-0,1	0,19	-0,02	-0,07	0,19	-0,01
Groen										-0,19	0,07	-0,08***	-0,19	0,07	-0,08***
Vooruit										-0,17	0,11	-0,07	-0,15	0,11	-0,06
Open VLD										-0,02	0,06	-0,007	-0,01	0,06	-0,006
CD&V										-0,04	0,08	-0,03	-0,04	0,08	-0,03
HLN													-0,06	0,05	-0,03
De Tijd													0,01	0,05	0,008
R ²		0,03			0,05			0,06			0,07			0,07	
F for change		57,79***			19,62***			7,82***			1,99*			1	
R ²															

Note: *** p < 0,01 ; ** p < 0,05 ; * p < 0,10 ; a = quote by politician, expert or other source ; b = Vlaams Belang

Tables 9.1 and 9.2 present the multiple regression that was performed to investigate the effect of poll results on tone. The models and reference categories used for this regression are the same as for poll coverage: the first model has only poll result as independent variable. Next, opinion pieces, quotes, parties and outlets are added stepwise. All models in itself are significant, but the highest adjusted R^2 is found in Model 5 for explicit tone (0,027) and in Model 4 for implicit tone (0,059). Thus, for implicit tone the model that adds outlets to the regression does not significantly contribute to the explained variance. The first important finding here is that in general coverage, the models explain far less variance than in poll coverage. Similarly to what we saw in poll coverage, the explained variance is higher for implicit than explicit tone.

Next the results of Model 5 will be discussed for explicit and implicit tone. This model shows that poll results have a significant effect on explicit ($\beta=0,126$; $t(1637)= 1,744$; $p=0,081$) and implicit tone ($\beta=0,252$; $t(1637)= 3,557$; $p<0,001$). Notice that for explicit tone, the effect is only significant at the 0,10 level in Model 5. However, in Model 4 (without the outlets), the effect is stronger and significant at the 0,05 level ($\beta=0,142$; $t(1639)= 1,986$; $p=0,047$). Hence, which news outlet an article is published in matters. The effect for explicit tone is significantly weaker in the newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws than in De Standaard. Therefore, **H2a and H2b** are partly accepted: poll results have a significant effect on explicit and implicit tone (also when controlling for the effect of opinion pieces, quotes, parties and outlets), but the explained variance is very low. Returning to Model 5, the effect of opinion pieces on explicit and implicit tone is significant for both explicit ($\beta=0,052$; $t(1637)= 2,046$; $p=0,041$) and implicit tone ($\beta= -0,103$; $t(1637)= -4,171$; $p<0,001$). However, the results are ambiguous as for explicit tone the relationship is positive, but for implicit tone the relationship is negative. This was to be expected as the bivariate analysis between opinion results and tone gave the same opposite directions. This could mean that when an explicit evaluation is present in an opinion piece, it is more likely to be positive. However, more in general, the tone in opinion pieces towards parties is implicitly more negative, meaning it is more negative from the perspective of that party. Consequently, we can only partially accept **H2c** as there is a significant effect, but the direction is not clear. The effects of poll result and opinion pieces are both significant, also when controlling for other variables. For explicit tone, the only control variables that have a significant effect are quotes by experts and the

outlet variable for Het Laatste Nieuws. This means that when a quote by an expert is present, the explicit tone is significantly more negative but the effect is weak ($\beta = -0,055$; $t(1637) = -2,251$; $p = 0,024$). Also for Het Laatste Nieuws, the relationship is negative but weak ($\beta = -0,069$; $t(1637) = -2,378$; $p = 0,018$). The significant control variables for implicit tone are quotes by other sources (than politicians or experts) and the party variable for Groen. The effect of quotes by other sources is significant and negative ($\beta = -0,109$; $t(1637) = -4,519$; $p < 0,001$), and of similar size as the effect of opinion pieces. Next, mentions of Groen are significantly more negative compared to N-VA ($\beta = -0,078$; $t(1637) = -2,737$; $p = 0,006$). In poll coverage, Groen was also a significant predictor, possibly because of their participation in the federal government and lack of figureheads. In general coverage, especially their participation in the federal government could explain why Groen has a significantly more negative implicit tone. The party variable for Vlaams Belang is also significant but only at the 0,10 level. The effect is negative but very small so the implicit tone of mentions about Vlaams Belang is slightly more negative than for N-VA. A possible explanation for this, is that Vlaams Belang is considered an extremist party, which can be why they receive (slightly) more negative general coverage. All other control variables do not have a significant effect.

Regarding the assumptions for linear regression, two things have to be mentioned. First, the VIF of the variable poll results is 8,789 which is greater than 5. However, a VIF lower than 10 is still acceptable for multicollinearity. Second, the Normal Probability Plot shows that the data is not normally distributed as the shape of the line is more S-shaped than linear. This means that the effect only behaves as expected when the increase or decrease in poll result is large.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This thesis deals with the question of whether poll results influence the subsequent news coverage of political parties. To investigate this relationship, a quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed of three Flemish newspapers. First, the effect of poll results on tone was analysed in poll coverage. Next, I investigated the same effect in general news coverage.

First, the results of this study show that in poll coverage, there is a positive and significant impact of a change in poll results on the explicit and implicit tone of Flemish political parties. If a party's poll result increases (compared to their previous election result), this leads to more positively toned poll coverage. If a party's poll result decreases, it can expect more negatively toned poll coverage. This effect is still significant when controlling for the influence of opinion pieces, quotes from politicians, experts and other sources, political parties, and news outlets so H1a and H1b are supported. This is in line with previous research by Patterson in the United States. When a party rises in the polls, it can be expected to be wrapped in a positive, favourable image but when a party's poll result decrease, the focus will be on negative, unfavourable aspects. Moreover, journalists try to explain poll results, so for a party on the rise, naturally, journalists stress what is going well for the party (e.g. high party loyalty, a reliable party president, ...). For parties who perform poorly in the polls, journalists try to explain what the cause could be: the party is part of the government but fails to make the promised reforms, issues that are owned by the parties are not considered relevant, ... Furthermore, opinion pieces are also a significant predictor, but only for implicit tone so H1c was partly accepted. On average, opinion pieces are more negative in implicit tone than news articles. A possible explanation is that opinion pieces focus more on a broad context which makes that they use less explicit evaluations. A party that is doing well in the polls is not necessarily described as "a winner" (which happens more frequently in news articles of poll coverage) but a more elaborate and sensational description is given of a party that jumps ahead in the polls. This result is in line with Wild et al. (2019), who also found opinion pieces to be more negative in tone than news articles.

The qualitative analysis of poll interpretation articles gives more insight into how journalists explain poll results and speculate about consequences. It shows that for both extreme parties (the far-right Vlaams Belang and far-left PVDA), similar explanations are given to

explain their success in the polls. For example, the rise in anti-political sentiment and their focus on social media are said to cause their increasing poll results. A range of different explanations is given for the other parties. The party president or other figureheads of a party are considered to have a big influence on how the party is doing, both regarding the content (e.g. profile of the party, their position on issues) and the image (e.g. personality, visibility) of the party. Issue ownership is also mentioned often to explain a rise or fall in the polls. If an issue is considered to be a priority by citizens, the party that owns this issue will do better in the polls. Additionally, being part of a government can explain decreasing poll results, journalists claim. It is more difficult for parties to keep a strong profile when they are part of an alliance with different parties, as they will have to make compromises. Besides explaining poll results, journalists also speculate about the consequences of polls. They mainly discuss possible alliances that can be made with the most recent poll results. For example, according to the polls, N-VA and Vlaams Belang could almost have the majority of the seats in the Flemish Parliament. However, if Vlaams Belang were to join the next government, this would mean that the “cordon sanitaire” would be broken for the first time since it was agreed upon in 1989 so this is frequently mentioned in (poll coverage) articles about these parties.

Second, in general news coverage, results show there is also a positive and significant effect of poll results on tone. However, the most comprehensive model (which includes the effects of opinion pieces, quotes, parties, and news outlets) explains very little of the variance in tone (between 3 and 6%) so H2a and H2b are only partly confirmed. Polls determine the tone of general news articles about parties only to a negligible extent. Other factors such as policies pursued by the party or a specific policy issue dealt with by a party minister are likely to have more influence. For example, if Vooruit were to run into problems with a particular government dossier, the tone in general news coverage for Vooruit might well become more negative. The qualitative analysis also showed that the success of the governing Vooruit is seen as remarkable. For example, journalists write that the party has managed to position itself somewhat outside the (federal) government. Alternatively, as elections get closer, there may be a stronger effect of poll results on the tone of general news coverage. For instance, more articles will be published that focus on how parties did or try to predict how parties will do in the approaching election.

Previous research also found rather mixed results. First, Tryggvason (2021) investigated the effect of the tone of poll coverage on the tone of general party coverage in Sweden. He found a significant effect of positive poll stories on the subsequent general news coverage. However, the effect of negative poll stories was less clear as it did not hold when introducing a more rigorous model. This means that the effect for parties whose poll result mainly increased (Vooruit, PVDA, and Vlaams Belang) should be stronger than for parties who mainly decreased in the polls (Groen, Open VLD, CD&V, and N-VA), yet this is not the case when looking at the results presented in this thesis. Figure 2.2 illustrates the proportion of positive and negative tone in general coverage for each party and shows that for the parties that decrease in the polls, the proportion of (strongly) negative coverage is larger than the proportion of (strongly) positive coverage for rising parties. Moreover, the regression shows only a significant effect of the party variable on implicit tone for Vlaams Belang and Groen, but it is negligible in size. Second, Stolwijk & Schuck (2021) looked at the effect of poll results on the tone of general news coverage in Germany. They did not find a significant effect of a change in poll results on the amount of positive or negative news coverage (across all parties). For the leading party separately, the effect was significant for the amount of positive and negative general coverage. For the challenger party, there was only a significant effect on the amount of negative news coverage. In Flanders, N-VA can be seen as the leading party, and Vlaams Belang as the challenger party. N-VA has long been the largest party in Flanders, appealing to a broad range of voters but more recently, Vlaams Belang has become the largest party in Flanders (according to the polls). It still is more a challenger party than a leading party because it has not yet taken part in any government. The results in this thesis, however, do not show a similar distinction because the association between poll results and tone are not stronger for N-VA and Vlaams Belang than for other parties. As a consequence, the research on the effect of poll results on the tone in general news coverage does not convincingly show a strong general impact. Other factors will better predict why the tone of general coverage varies for political parties. Furthermore, H2c, which deals with the influence of opinion pieces on the tone of general coverage, can also not be completely accepted. The effect of opinion pieces is significant for both explicit and implicit tone, however, the direction is different. Results show that an opinion piece is on average more positive in explicit tone, but more negative in implicit tone. Miller et al. (2012) found that editorials are more negative in tone than columns, which could explain this

ambiguous result. When examining opinion pieces, no distinction was made between editorials (written by journalists) and columns (written by experts or other non-journalists).

With these results and the findings in previous research in mind, I conclude that the relationship between a change in poll results and the tone in poll coverage for political parties is positive and significant: an increase (or decrease) in the polls leads to more positively (or negatively) toned poll coverage. In poll coverage, opinion pieces are on average more negative than news articles. However, when looking at general coverage, it is unlikely that poll results have anything more than a negligible influence on the tone for political parties and the effect of opinion pieces is ambiguous.

As explained in the introduction, the tone of news coverage matters because it can influence how citizens evaluate parties and politicians. How journalists write about political parties can then affect voting behaviour. It is important, both for citizens and journalists, to be aware of this dynamic. The quality of poll coverage should also be investigated and improved. This includes making sure that a realistic interpretation is given of what poll results mean. As the number of polls and the amount of poll coverage increase, it becomes increasingly important for citizens and journalists to be aware of what statistics can and cannot prove. After all, polls cannot prove that a party would receive exactly 10,2% of the votes if elections were organised at this time. Polls are based on scientific research so a more correct interpretation would be that with 95% certainty, the poll states that a party would get between 8% and 12,4% of the votes. Formulating a poll result in this way would make clear that polls do not provide a certain picture of how well a party is doing, which can limit the impact of reading about polls on how one evaluates a party or politician.

Finally, this thesis contributes to the existing literature by introducing a new measurement instrument for tone in party coverage. It is quite detailed and looks at the explicit and implicit tone on a 5-point scale, taking into account whether powerful language was used that adds to the tone. This instrument was tested for reliability and reached satisfactory KALPHA scores. However, the sample of the reliability analysis was rather limited so with a more extensive reliability test (and possible subsequent alterations), the instrument could still be improved. I recommend that future research expands the definition of explicit tone as it turned out to be quite narrow. Explicit tone only looks at the presence of certain words (or very close synonyms) so I propose to first do an extensive qualitative analysis of party

coverage to determine what exactly makes a statement about a party sound positive or negative in tone. Nonetheless, as the instrument has been proven to be reliable so far, it makes a solid basis for future research that focuses on the tone of party coverage. Another limitation of this thesis is the rather limited sample for general news coverage. Only the first four pages of the newspapers were analysed for general coverage, resulting in a sample of 170 articles. Moreover, the more comprehensive models of the linear regression in poll coverage do not meet the multicollinearity assumption as two variables had a VIF exceeding 10 so these results should be interpreted with certain caution.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to previous research by investigating the relationship between rising or falling in the polls and the tone of general news coverage for parties. Research about this topic is scarce and has thus far not convincingly proven a substantive and general significant effect exists. The results of this thesis also show the influence of poll results on the tone of general coverage is significant, but negligible. Future research should thus include more possible predictors that are related to the subjectivity and degree of interpretation in news articles such as which issues are currently widely discussed (or receive most media attention) and which parties are associated with these issues. The specific type of news article could also predict the tone of news coverage. This should be looked at in a more detailed way by analysing columns, editorials, news reports, and other types of articles separately. A final recommendation for future research is to look into which explanations are given for changes in poll results closer to an election as the data for this thesis was collected entirely outside of election periods.

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7 Appendix: codebook

SELECTION OF NEWS ARTICLES: POLL COVERAGE

BelgaPress search: ("pvda" OR "vooruit" OR "groen" OR "cd" OR "open vld" OR "va" OR "vlaams belang" OR sp.a) AND ("peiling" OR "peilingen" OR "de stemming" OR "de grote peiling")

- Only print articles
- Newspapers: Het Laatste Nieuws, De Standaard, De Tijd
- Period: $t + 6$ days (t = date of publication poll results in print newspaper)

Manual selection criteria:

- Focus on reporting the results of election and/or popularity polls for Flemish parties in Flanders. (This does not include: local polls, thematic polls, articles that are about polls in Wallonia or Brussels or polls that are about Walloon parties or politicians)
- Substantive focus on polls in general: analysis and opinion pieces about (explanations, context for and consequences of) the electoral or popularity polls.
- Interviews and articles with mainly reactions of readers are not included in the analysis.

SELECTION OF NEWS ARTICLES: GENERAL COVERAGE

BelgaPress search in title and/or intro: "pvda" OR "vooruit" OR "groen" OR "cd" OR "open vld" OR "va" OR "vlaams belang" OR sp.a

- For each article, whether the name of an actual party (not “groen licht geven”) is present is manually checked.
- Only print articles
- Newspapers: Het Laatste Nieuws, De Standaard, De Tijd
- Period: $t + 29$ days (t = date of publication poll results in print newspaper)
- On the first 4 pages of the newspaper
- Interviews and articles with mainly reactions of readers are not included in the analysis.

OBSERVATION AND CONTEXT UNIT

The **observation unit** is each mention of a Flemish political party. The **context unit** is the title or paragraph. However, when coding a mention for e.g. Vlaams Belang, only what is said about Vlaams Belang in this title or paragraph is taken into account. Subtitles are not coded separately but are taken into account when coding the paragraph that follows it.

VARIABLES: CHARACTERISTICS OF ARTICLES OR MENTIONS

Missings	If a variable is missing, code 99
ID_num	ID number: each mention of a Flemish party or politician (as described below) is given an ID number as follows: M0001, M0002, ...
Coder	Coder initials: JT or MV
D_gen	Dummy variable to indicate whether the article is poll or general coverage (0 = poll coverage, 1 = general coverage)
Outlet	News outlet: in which newspaper was this article published? (1 = De Standaard, 2 = Het Laatste Nieuws, 3 = De Tijd)
Date	Date on which the article was published: dd/mm/yyyy
D_Fweek	Dummy variable to indicate whether the article was published within one week after the publication of the poll or later? (0 = later than one week after publication of poll, 1 = within one week after publication of poll)
D_opinion	Dummy variable to indicate whether the article is a news article (including analysis, background, simple news reports, ...) or opinion piece / column (0 = news article, 1 = opinion/column)
D_P01, 2, ...	Set of dummy variables to indicate which specific poll this article is about (0 = this article does not belong to this poll, 1 = this article belongs to this poll)
Party	Political party: which Flemish political party is mentioned? Thus, for which party is this title or paragraph coded?

- If the exact name of the party isn't mentioned, but it is clear what party the paragraph or title is about, the mention is coded as well (e.g. use of "they" when it is

clear from the context of other paragraphs which party it is about, or when a term like “the socialists” is used in the context of Flemish politics).

- Example: “De Croo is boos op de groenen” → check the article: does “de groenen” refer to Ecolo, Groen or both? If it only refers to Ecolo (Walloon party), then don’t code this mention.
 - If in the beginning of the article the party of a certain politician is mentioned, mentions of this politician further in the article should be coded, even if then the party isn’t mentioned anymore. When the party of a politician is not mentioned anywhere in the article, mentions of this politician are not coded.
 - Mentions of a party president, prime minister (De Croo) or minister-president (Jambon) (regardless of whether the party is mentioned or not) should always be coded. Mentions of other politicians are not coded when their party is not mentioned (unless as described above).
 - Mentions of the De Croo/federal- or Jambon/Flemish-government are not coded as they refer to a government of multiple parties.
 - When a person is clearly linked to a certain party in the article, but this person is not (or no longer) an member of parliament for that party, all mentions of this person are coded for that party (e.g.: NVA delegates person X to Council of ...)
 - Mentions of the youth parties are also coded and taken into account.
- ➔ 1= PVDA
 - ➔ 2= Groen (or Agalev, if the link is clearly made in the article)
 - ➔ 3= Vooruit (or sp.a)
 - ➔ 4= Open VLD
 - ➔ 5= CD&V (or CVP, if the link is clearly made in the article)
 - ➔ 6= N-VA
 - ➔ 7= Vlaams Belang (or Vlaams Blok, if the link is clearly made in the article)

D_title/lead/parag Set of three dummy variables to indicate whether the mention is in a title, lead or paragraph (e.g. for D_title: 0 = this mention is not in a title, 1 = this mention is in a title)

D_Q_pol/exp/other Set of three dummy variables to indicate whether a quote by a politician, expert or other source is present that says something about the party for which the mention is coded (e.g. for D_Q_exp: 0 = no quote by an expert present or it does not say anything about the party that is mentioned, 1 = quote by expert present that says something about the party that is mentioned)

- When a source is paraphrased by the author of the article, this does not count as a quote. Quote marks should be present.
- Examples:
 - o *Een volgens aanwezigen “enorm arrogante” Jambon*: code q_pol = 1 for N-VA
 - o *Volgens De Croo heeft Open VLD uitzonderlijk goed gepresteerd*: code q_pol = 0 for Open VLD (paraphrased)
 - o *“We zijn goed bezig”, aldus De Croo*: code q_pol = 1 for Open VLD
 - o *Groen betreurt het voorval: “De Croo had dit anders moeten aanpakken, hier zijn we niet mee akkoord”. Ook PVDA is niet tevreden met deze gang van zaken.* : Q_pol Open VLD = 1 (quote is about Open VLD), Q_pol Groen = 0 (this quote is by someone from Groen, but it says nothing about the party), Q_pol PVDA = 0

VARIABLES: TONE

This measurement instrument is designed to measure two types of tone: implicit and explicit tone. These two types are measured/coded separately and don't influence each other. This means that a mention can have an explicitly negative but implicitly positive tone.

When for one type of tone, both positive and negative elements are present, look at the amount of positive and negative elements:

- Approximately equal number of positive and negative elements = 0
- Predominantly positive elements = +1 (or +2 depending on presence of strong language)
- Predominantly negative elements = -1 (or -2 depending on presence of strong language)

Only take into account things that are said or written about the party for which you are coding the mention. General negative elements (e.g. bad Covid-numbers) are not taken into account, unless the party you are coding for is blamed for this in the article.

EXPLICIT TONE

Explicit tone is measured as explicit evaluations about a party or politician that use certain terms. For this measurement, you cannot interpret what the title or paragraph says, you can only look for the presence of the words listed below and very close synonyms. This measurement does not take into account the description of events or facts and whether these are good or bad news for the party. Here, only look at the words used for these evaluations about the party you are coding for.

- Negatief of positief
 - o E.g.: “hij krijgt negatieve publiciteit”
- Goed of slecht
 - o Goed, beter, beste, niet goed, de minst goede
 - o Slecht, slechter, slechtste
 - o Bv: **Niet meteen de beste manier om die bij haar kiezers te promoten.** = -1
- Sterk of zwak
 - o Sterk, sterker, de sterkste, een sterkte (of bv troef), de kracht
 - o Zwak, zwakker, de zwakste, een zwakte (of bv gebrek, tekortkoming)
- Winnaar of verliezer
 - o Winnaar, winnen, heeft gewonnen, opmars, overwinning, triomf
 - o Verliezer, verliezen, heeft verloren, terrein verliezen, nederlaag, neergang, ondergang
- (Niet) populair
 - o Populair, niet populair, onpopulair, de populairste, de minst populaire
 - o NOT: hij staat in de hoogste/laagste regionen van de lijst met populaire politici, hij staat op plaats x in de lijst van de populairste...
- Juist of fout
 - o Een fout maken, het foute doen, een verkeerde beslissing
 - o Het juist(e) doen, een juiste beslissing maken, het is niet de juiste keuze om op x te stemmen

- Gelijk of ongelijk krijgen
 - o Gelijk krijgen, geen gelijk krijgen, ongelijk krijgen
 - o Bv: *Een paar dagen later kreeg hij (BDW) wel gelijk.*
- Chaos of orde (en crisis)
 - o Chaos, chaotisch, verwarring, miserie
 - o Duidelijkheid, orde
- **Schandaal/schandalig, aan de schandpaal genageld worden, catastrofe, crisis,** crisioverleg, **ramp/rampzalig**, ellende, heisa, **hetze, rel**, affaire, debacle (in the context of a scandal)
 - o Bold words are also strong
- Success of falen
 - o Success, ergens in slagen, iets wel kunnen (realiseren, doen, waarmaken, ...)
 - o NOT: iets werpt vruchten af voor een partij (implies a working strategy → implicit)
 - o Falen, ergens niet in slagen, iets niet kunnen (realiseren, doen, waarmaken, ...)
 - o Het tij (niet) kunnen keren, de dans (niet) kunnen leiden, ... (+/-2)

Examples

- Describing that a party is winning according to the polls without using the word “winst” or “winnen” does not contribute to an explicit tone
- “*Vlaams Belang is de winnaar van onze peiling*” contributes to explicit tone
- Not being able to realise something contributes to explicit tone so when an article states “*hij kan het tij niet keren*”, this is a strong synonym so it also is considered as explicit tone
- “*N-VA is de grootste partij van Vlaanderen*” is explicitly neutral as no words from the list above are mentioned. However, implicitly this is positive (see later)

If one or more of these words is present and applies to the current party you are coding for, use the following scale to determine a score for the explicit tone:

-2	-1	0	+1	+2
strongly negative	negative	neutral/mixed	positive	strongly positive

- A **positive** (+1) or **negative** (-1) explicit tone is present when one of the words listed above is used to describe the party or something related to the party you are coding for. Make sure to still take into account the context insofar it is necessary to determine the explicit tone correctly:
 - o E.g.: party X solved the crisis → positive
 - o E.g.: there is no crisis for party X → neutral
 - o E.g.: party X is going through a crisis → negative
 - **Neutral** (0) is coded when there is no explicit evaluation present for a party or politician or when there is an equal amount of explicitly positive and negative elements.
 - **A + or – 2 score** can be given if powerful or strong language is used in the explicit evaluation for the party you are coding for. These words need to add to the tone, so random sensation language (that doesn't contribute to the positivity or negativity of the tone for a certain party) is not taken into account. Powerful language includes:
 - o Sarcasm
 - o Words with a strong negative or positive connotation: catastrofe, crisis, ramp/rampzalig, hetze, rel, schandaal/schandalig, de sterkhouders, ...
 - o E.g.: Metaphors or *beeldspraak*: aan de schandpaal worden genageld, het tij (niet) kunnen keren, de dans (niet) kunnen leiden, ...
 - o Sensational language: sterk verliezende premier, zware nederlaag, het is ellende troef, de grote winnaar, zijn grote populariteit, historisch goed/slecht, aan de juiste kant van de geschiedenis staan, grootste crisis in de geschiedenis, overwinning, triomf, beste peiling in jaren, bar slechte peiling, ...
- ➔ If the paragraph is longer than 4,5 lines: two or more powerful elements have to be present for the party you are coding for (otherwise, one powerful element is enough)
- ➔ It is possible that a paragraph is neutral (for a particular party), but still contains strong language. Even then, you code the paragraph as neutral for that party. Only

when a (positive or negative) tone is present, then you look at how that tone is expressed: with or without strong words. This way, you can reach a + or - 2 score.

- *“De strijd tussen extreemrechts en de socialisten zou zo weleens hét duel van de verkiezingen in 2024 kunnen worden: de twee hebben elkaar tot voornaamste vijand uitgeroepen. Al maanden zijn ze verwickeld in een gevecht om wie 'het sociaalt' is.” → strong language, but no clear positive or negative tone, so this is coded as neutral*

Uitleg_exp In this column, write why this score for tone was given

IMPLICIT TONE

Implicit tone is measured by looking at whether the party or politician you are coding for is put in a negative or positive context. Here, you do have to interpret what the paragraph says and see if one of the situations listed below are present. Thus, this measurement does take into account the events and facts that are described and whether they are good or bad news for the party.

- Characteristics of a party or politician are mentioned that give a positive or negative image of the party or politician
 - E.g.: geloofwaardigheid, standvastigheid, loyaal, lui, integer, ...
 - Positive or negative developments
 - E.g.: something damages a party, a party is humiliated, a party should be worried about something, ...
 - E.g.: *“Daarbij komt minister van Welzijn Wouter Beke in beeld. Volgens veel partijleden kan hij de schade van de coronacrisis en het drama in een Oost-Vlaamse crèche nooit meer goedmaken.”*
- 1) Electoral or polling results
- Increase is positive, decrease is negative
 - If only the rank is mentioned: top 3 is positive, author stresses rank is high is positive, author stresses rank is low is negative (otherwise: neutral)

- E.g.: *“De lezing is bij elke partij anders, maar de uitkomst blijft hetzelfde: na bijna drie jaar stoot N-VA Vlaams Belang weer van de troon als grootste partij van Vlaanderen.”* → 0 (top 3 & decrease)
- E.g.: *“1 op 4 stemt Vlaams Belang”* → 0
- 2) Connection to criminal offences: corruption, racism, homophobia, forced labour, transgressive behaviour or harassment, ... (also when reference is made to an official complaint or criminal case)
 - Does not have to be explicitly mentioned, e.g. a clearly racist quote without it being described as racist
 - If a more sensational word is used (that is not the correct legal term), this is strong language (e.g.: not intimidation but toxic leadership)
- 3) (Dis)trust in a party or politician, (dis)loyalty to the party
 - E.g. voters are loyal (NOT: trust in government)
- 4) Unity or internal conflict within party
 - E.g.: someone is kicked out of the party, criticism within party, chairman can unite the party well, division within a party, ... (NOT: division in a government)
 - E.g.: *“Siham El Kaouakibi, die brak met haar partij Open VLD”, “De CD&V-parlementsleden dringen aan op direct vertrek van Beke”*
- Receiving criticism or support
 - The person/party who gives criticism or support = 0
 - The person/party who receives criticism or support = negative or positive
 - When in same paragraph, someone defends himself against criticism: look at what is most prevalent: more criticism = negative, more defence or equal amount = neutral
- Party strategy that (doesn't) work(s), why something works or doesn't work
 - E.g.: list achievements to show that someone is doing well (or poorly), something is described as being difficult for the party or politician (difficult negotiations, difficult campaigning, ...), something is a problem (or e.g. sore point, malaise) for a politician or party, something is an advantage or disadvantage, ...
 - Submitting or making a proposal, without having achieved anything = neutral

- Breaking or keeping a promise, (in)consistency
 - E.g.: first spouting off an idea but then going along with it anyway, promising certain measures that do not materialise, keeping his word, ...
 - E.g.: *“De voorzitter draait wel vaker”* = negative
- Positive or negative prediction or speculation
 - E.g.: *“Blunderde Crevits of stelde Jambon cijfers bij?”*, *“Het zal moed, zweet en tranen kosten om opnieuw goed te scoren in de peilingen”*, *“Valt de partij nog te redden? Dit is misschien het einde ervan”*
- ! NEUTRAL:
 - Links with distrust/trust (in politics in general), being called (un)democratic, extreme or extremist, ...) without other clearly negative or positive elements
 - Party X wants to destroy Party Y (and other elements such as attacking, defending, ...) without other clearly negative or positive elements

If one or more of these situations is present and applies to the current party you are coding for, use the following scale to determine a score for the implicit tone:

-2	-1	0	+1	+2
strongly negative	negative	neutral/mixed	positive	strongly positive

- A **positive** (+1) or **negative** (-1) implicit tone is present when one of the situations listed above is used to describe the party or something related to the party you are coding for
- **Neutral** (0) is coded when a paragraph or title is not really positive or negative for a party or politician. This means that there is no explicit evaluation present and the facts described are not really good or bad news for the party. Neutral is also coded when there is an equal amount of favourable and unfavourable elements for the party.
- A **+ or – 2 score** can be given if powerful or strong language is used in the implicit evaluation for the party you are coding for. These words need to add to the tone, so random sensation language (that doesn’t contribute to the positivity or negativity of the tone for a certain party) is not taken into account. Powerful language includes:

- Sarcasm
 - Metaphors or *beeldspraak*: de een zijn dood is de andere zijn brood, een koude douche, bloedarmoede bij de kopstukken, iets werpt vruchten af (werkende strategie), een partij zit in de slop, partij X wordt van de troon gestoten, ...
 - Words with a strong negative or positive connotation: hij ziet dit akkoord als een vodge papier, verbrande figuren, wegzakken, naar beneden donderen, tuimelen naar plaats x, een partij gaat naar de afgrond, een partij wordt verscheurd, een desastreuze of dramatische peiling, de malaise, ...
 - Sensational language: alarmbellen gaan af, vooruit springen, tot op het bot verdeeld zijn, iemand vervroegd afserveren (bv als iemand uit partij gezet wordt), een bom droppen, dat wordt een splinterbom, zwaar onder vuur liggen, fors wegdeemsteren, ...
- ➔ **If the paragraph is longer than 4,5 lines:** two or more powerful elements have to be present for the party you are coding for (otherwise, one powerful element is enough)
- ➔ It is possible that a paragraph is neutral (for a particular party), but still contains strong language. Even then, you code the paragraph as neutral for that party. Only when a (positive or negative) tone is present, then you look at how that tone is expressed: with or without strong words. This way, you can reach a + or - 2 score.

Uitleg_imp In this column, write why this score for tone was given