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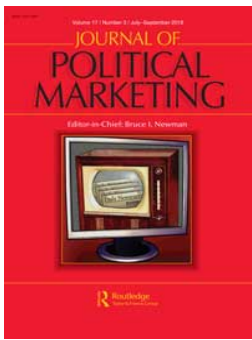
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Credibility Enacted: Understanding the Meaning of Credible Political Leadership in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Campaign of 2010

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In times of perception politics, the credibility of electoral candidates is a crucial asset in political marketing. This raises the question to which political leaders citizens attribute credibility and how political credibility is gained and lost through media performance. We analyze and compare two contrasting cases during the Dutch parliamentary election campaign of 2010. Whereas in this campaign Mark Rutte—leader of the liberal party VVD—gained credibility, the credibility of Job Cohen—at the time, leader of the social-democratic PvdA—waned substantially. To understand this we extend the source credibility approach with a dramaturgical approach, and as such we shed light on what happens in the dynamic, interactive process between leaders and audiences in which credibility is constructed.

KEYWORDS *credibility, election campaign, perception politics, political impression management, political leadership, the Netherlands*

CREDIBILITY AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Credibility is a crucial asset for political leaders and it is key to understanding failure and success in the competitive political market. Following Kouzes and Posner, leaders need credibility because “if people don’t believe in the messenger, they won’t believe the message. If people don’t believe in *you*, they won’t believe in what *you* say” (2003, XV). Although credibility might

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be considered important at all times, it is particularly relevant in light of the current debates on personalization and perception politics (De Landtsheer, de Vries, and Vertessen 2008; Garzia 2011). Politics has become dramatized and—in line with the rules of media logic—style instead of content has come to the fore.

As research on political marketing has argued, citizens are more inclined to form “intuitive impressions of political candidates based on certain cues such as language style, appearance characteristics, and nonverbal behavior” (De Landtsheer et al. 2008, 219) to guide their decisions. Parties and issues are certainly not superfluous for evaluating politics and developing political preferences, but political candidates are the prime representatives of their parties and it is up to them to communicate their issue positions persuasively and to gain support (Campus 2010; Langer 2007, 2010; McAllister 2007). It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the central premises of political marketing research is that political leaders’ images are important for electoral success and political support and that a great deal of research in this discipline has been devoted to studying image (Garzia 2013; Grebelsky-Lichtman 2010; Newman 1999; Sheaffer 2008; Smith 2009).

Citizens form an impression of leaders by integrating information acquired from leaders’ physical characteristics, their media performances, and their record as a political leader (Newman and Perloff 2004; Newman 1999; McGraw 2003). In order for that image to lead to a favorable evaluation of the leader, not just any kind of image will suffice. Contrary, their image should lend leaders credibility in the sense that they are considered—as a minimum requirement—suitable for the leadership position at hand. This is not limited to being considered the most preferred candidate for the presidential or prime ministerial position, but this can also entail that leaders are thought of as adequate opposition leaders. In either case, being considered credible by constituencies or citizens is of utmost importance for one’s message to be accepted (Mbennah and Schutte 2000; O’Keefe 1990; Perloff 2010; Self 2009), if only because in the media credibility is regularly a point of evaluation (Stevens and Karp 2012). In this paper we therefore aim to explore credible political images and we pose the following research question: What in political leaders’ performance could help to understand the level of credibility they get attributed? As such, we add to literature on political marketing in that we show how credibility is enacted as well as what it means to be credible in contemporary politics and what kind of performance is effective on the political market.

To study credibility, two different and mostly separate approaches can be distinguished: the source credibility approach and the dramaturgical approach (Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz 1969; Gardner and Avolio 1998). Whereas the first focuses on the characteristics leaders need for an audience to attribute credibility, the second draws attention to the performative side of political leadership and how meaning is communicated in the interaction

between leader and audience. By extending the source credibility approach with the dramaturgical approach in our analysis of two Dutch political leaders whose image needed repositioning, we intend to enrich and further our insight into credible political leadership. We acknowledge that to fully understand credibility, leaders' performances alone do not suffice. Therefore we explore alternative understandings of gaining and losing credibility as well.

The starting point of this study was the contrasting credibility development of two political leaders in the 2010 Dutch parliamentary election campaign. This campaign revolved around the duel between Mark Rutte (Liberal Party, VVD) and Job Cohen (Social Democratic Party, PvdA). Prized as "European hero" by *Times Magazine* in 2005 and elected runner-up World Mayor in 2006, former mayor of Amsterdam Job Cohen built a reputation of an effective bridge-builder and reconciler of social and political differences. Upon entering Dutch national politics on March 12, 2010, he was welcomed with great enthusiasm and almost instantly Cohen was the most preferred prime minister (*NRC Handelsblad* 2010). Independent commentators welcomed Cohen's step toward the national political platform and even competitors on the right acknowledged and feared his electoral appeal. A former VVD party leader, who is still highly popular on the right, called Job Cohen a true "electoral magnet" (*Volkskrant* 2010b). However, Cohen was not able to live up to the expectations, and in the various public polls on most preferred prime minister and most trusted party leader, Cohen lost considerably (AD 2010; De Hond 2010a, 2010b; *Financieel Dagblad* 2010; Parool 2010; Synovate 2010a; TNS Nipo 2010a; 2010b; *Telegraaf* 2010c).

Compared to Cohen, Mark Rutte had gone through some very difficult "credit-scarce" years: Rutte had barely won the Liberal Party's (VVD) internal leadership election in 2006, and an unceasing popular rival within the party made his political life difficult (Van Praag 2006). In the following years, Rutte's leadership remained disputed, and at the start of the 2010 election campaign Rutte's credibility as potential prime minister was comparatively low. In the polls on most preferred prime minister, for example, he was not even considered a candidate. This gradually changed, and as the campaign progressed the media discussed his "resurrection" from someone who dropped off his laundry at his mother's to the next prime minister with great debating skills and knowledge (*Volkskrant* 2010c). In other words, he gained political credibility (De Hond 2010a, 2010b; Synovate 2010a; TNS Nipo 2010a, 2010b; *Volkskrant* 2010a; *Telegraaf* 2010d). At Election Day, not Cohen's PvdA but Rutte's VVD won the largest electoral share; on this basis Rutte could claim the prime ministerial position. The margin was small but significant, considering where Cohen and Rutte came from. Translating the general research question to these two cases, we wondered what in Rutte's and Cohen's performances during the 2010 Dutch parliamentary election campaign could help to understand their contrasting credibility development.

In the next section, the relevance of Rutte's and Cohen's case is further discussed, after which we pay attention to alternative understandings of why, according to citizens, Cohen and Rutte lost or gained credibility. Subsequently, we elaborate on the concept of credibility and pay attention to the source credibility and dramaturgical approaches to political performance. Having stipulated the theoretical framework, as well as the fitting research methods, we proceed with a deeper empirical understanding of the cases. We conclude this paper with some remarks on the meaning of our findings, the possible contribution to the literature, and a preliminary research agenda.

WHY MARK RUTTE AND JOB COHEN?

The contrasting cases of Rutte and Cohen were first of all selected because they are intrinsically interesting: two political leaders, working the same national political market, at the same place and period in time. Why did one of them—Cohen—lose his head start, and why did another—Rutte—make up arrears? In terms of political marketing, how did each of them craft their image and what consequences did this have for their political fortunes? Besides the intrinsic value of these cases, they are embedded in a salient context. The Netherlands has witnessed turbulent political years, with six national elections in 10 years and a rather volatile electorate (Van der Meer et al. 2015). Commentators socialized in the highly competitive winner-takes-all electoral systems of the UK and the US tended to see Dutch elections as a variant of the relatively predictable and uneventful consensual type. Since the advent and death of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, nevertheless, Dutch elections have become a matter of growing interest, and concern, for political observers internationally.

Political personae like Rutte and Cohen have come to the fore, but due to collective and collegial traditions in the consensus-oriented democracy of the Netherlands, individual political leadership is not self-evident and remains understudied ('t Hart 2005; Hendriks and Karsten 2014). After all, after Election Day parties—winners and losers—need to work together (Andeweg and Irwin 2005; Hendriks and Karsten 2014). By paying close attention to contrasting cases, we add to the knowledge of what type of leadership can grow and can gain credibility in this type of democracy. The Netherlands could function as a “least likely case”: If the credibility of individual political leaders matters in this system—institutionally, not particularly sensitive to individual leadership—then it is likely to matter more widely (Flyvbjerg 2006).

ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDINGS

Besides their performance, three alternative understandings might explain Cohen's declining and Rutte's rising credibility: (1) it's the party, (2) it's the

media, and (3) it's the economic crisis. Some suggest that the individual leader does not matter all that much in parliamentary democracies and that evaluations of parties and party leaders cannot be separated (King 2002; Van Holsteyn and Andeweg 2010). A change in party leaders' credibility might be simply the result of a changed evaluation of the represented party. Parties are indeed generally older than their leaders and are likely to exist long after those leaders are gone. However, as a result of party dealignment and individualization, it can be expected that a spillover from party evaluation to party leader becomes less stringent (Garzia 2011; Van Holsteyn and Andeweg 2010). Citizens have not lost their political preferences, but they feel less attached to specific parties (Mughan 2009). Due to the weakening of this link and the lesser importance of parties, party leader evaluations have become more independent of party evaluations.

The second alternative understanding relates to media power as well as *media logic* (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Van Aelst et al. 2008). While not making the claim that media deliberately harm or promote party leaders' reputation—without party leaders giving them reason—research suggests that what citizens read or hear about a leader and especially the tone of those messages affects their candidate evaluations (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2013; Kotler and Kotler 1999). In line with the notion of media logic—in which events are dramatized and leaders are framed to be engaged in a win-or-lose “horse race” (Hallin and Mancini 2004)—Cohen was first portrayed as a winner, and then, within a few weeks, as a leader who did not stay on top of his game. Rutte's story, contrarily, was one of a miraculous comeback. The extent to which citizens change their evaluation of leaders depends upon the number of messages they receive about them. As a negative tone started to dominate in the newspaper articles about Cohen, the credibility citizens attributed to Cohen went down as well. In Rutte's case, the opposite applies: Due to the media's positive stance toward Rutte, citizens' evaluations of his credibility went up. As such, although Rutte and Cohen might have provided the basis for the media's stance toward them, both leaders could not (fully) control the message that was presented of them (Kaid 2004) and the type of media reporting might have accelerated the change in their credibility.

Paraphrasing Clinton (“It's the economy, stupid”) one might cut the third understanding short by arguing “It's the economic crisis” that clipped Cohen's wings, while it fortified Rutte's. It was thought that immigration would be the prominent campaign issue, especially because sworn enemies Wilders and Cohen opposed each other on this topic. However, it was the economic crisis and the resulting cutbacks that became most important. Building on issue-ownership theory (Budge and Farlie 1983), in this respect Rutte had an advantage over Cohen who would have benefited if immigration remained the main theme. The assumption is that—contrary to left-wing parties—right-wing parties aim for and are associated with topics like state finances (Green-Pedersen 2007; Van der Brug 2000). Regarding

the economic crisis and the necessary cutbacks, Rutte and the VVD built a strong and favorable reputation on putting the state's finances in order (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2013). The Social Democrats could have focused on social security as part of the broader theme of economy and cutbacks, but as Cohen was not an economic expert it proved difficult (and unsuccessful) to utilize his party's potential on this aspect.

Although these understandings add pieces to the puzzle of Rutte's and Cohen's credibility trajectories, they do not solve it entirely. Attention to leaders' performance as a co-determining (f)actor is warranted. It is up to leaders to take full advantage of favorable conditions or to defend themselves in hard times. Moreover, even though negative messages in the media might hamper leaders' credibility, it are still leaders who give cause and direction to interpretations, also the positive ones: "politicians are performers, and the best performer wins the crowds" (De Landtsheer et al. 2008, 221–222). Overall, alternative understandings of the previous type set the context with which leaders have to work. Such a context can make their job easier or more difficult, but the outcome is never a done deal.

EXTENDING SOURCE CREDIBILITY WITH A DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH

Being able to persuade others is indispensable for political leaders to achieve their goals, including winning elections (Demirdöğen 2010; Grint 2000). For the success of persuasion attempts, source credibility has been identified within persuasion theory as essential for understanding the appeal of some leaders over others. Source credibility has been defined in terms of the judgments of an audience concerning someone's believability (Berlo et al. 1969; O'Keefe 1990). This implies that in contrast to the trait approach common in leadership studies, in which is tried to objectively assess a leader's personality, source credibility is a relational concept. It is not something leaders possess—it is not inherent to their personality—but it needs to be earned. Audiences decide, time and again, whether a leader is worthy of being attributed credibility. Consequently, leaders cannot assume credibility, and what matters is not what a leader *is*, but how he or she *appears* (Demirdöğen 2010). In this respect one's image—a central concept within the field of political marketing—is decisive, as it affects their perceived political suitability (Scammell 1999; De Landtsheer et al. 2008). The basic building blocks of these images are attributed characteristics (McGraw 2003; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). Research since the 1950s has shown that to be considered credible, leader's images should reflect competence, trustworthiness, and caring (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; McCroskey and Teven 1999; O'Keefe 1990; Perloff 2010; Garzia 2013).

Competence entails whether leaders—for instance, party leaders or cabinet ministers—understand what is happening and know what needs to be done. In other words, it is about leaders' skills, expertise, and knowledge necessary for their claims and positions. Trustworthiness, the second credibility dimension, refers to speakers' honesty and reliability. As such, trustworthiness relates to the extent we believe that leaders tell the truth and will not betray us (Hovland et al. 1953; Perloff 2010). The third dimension, perceived caring, was originally part of the trustworthiness dimension, but McCroskey and Teven (1999) convincingly established that they denote two different things. Whereas trustworthiness refers to honesty and reliability, caring points to whether speakers "have listeners' interests at heart, show understanding of others' ideas, and are empathic toward their audiences' problems" (Perloff 2010, 168). Leaders' image in terms of competence, trustworthiness, and caring—and thus whether audiences feel they are worthy of being attributed credibility—is inferred from observable qualities of these leaders, including their physical presentation, media appearances and experiences, and political leadership record (McGraw 2003; Newman 1999). The impression that leaders make is therefore not set in stone, but they can build and manage it. Although they are not able to completely control all aspects of their image, they are certainly not helpless either (De Landtsheer et al. 2008; Newman 1999). Leaders can engage in—and scholars can study—impression management strategies, which entails the "process by which people control the impressions others form of them" (Leary and Kowalski 1990).

What the source credibility approach neglects, however, is what in leaders' performance helps to understand the credibility audiences attribute to them. With the source credibility approach, credibility can be pinpointed at a specific moment in time—how competent, trustworthy and caring the leader's image is in the audience's perception—but this does not clarify what happens in the dynamic interactive process between leaders and audiences in which credibility is constructed. Here a second approach to credibility, a dramaturgical approach, is instrumental. After all, central to dramaturgy is "how people express themselves to, and in conjunction with, others to create meaning and influence" (Gardner and Avolio 1998, 33). Goffman—one of the prime contributors to developing this dramaturgical genre in research—studied human behavior with the use of concepts borrowed from theater (Brissett and Edgley 1975; Goffman 1956; Sinha 2010). Key is that in contact with others, individuals try to control the impression they make on them—perform facework—whereas at the same time the others are trying to acquire information about the individual or "they bring into play information about him already possessed" (Goffman 1956, 1).

While Goffman was a sociologist, his dramaturgical approach has also entered the domain of leadership and management studies, where it is mainly used to integrate theorizing on leader and follower interactions—especially in

the context of charismatic leadership—and when studying leaders as meaning makers (Gardner and Avolio 1998; Sinha 2010; Peck and Dickinson 2009). This has resulted in a greater appreciation of the role both leaders and followers play in their relationship. In addition, it could therefore also help to open up the black box of leaders' performance in the interaction with their audience to find out what in leaders' performance makes that they are attributed higher or lower credibility. For leaders trying to manage their image and for scholars to analyze leaders' enacted performance, three impression management strategies require attention: staging, framing, and scripting (Benford and Hunt 1992; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Hajer 2009). Systematically analyzing—in this case—these three activities for Rutte and Cohen reveals how they enacted their credibility, as it shows fundamental differences in their performances.

Staging relates to the surroundings in which leaders perform in view of a certain audience, for example, in a televised debate or in parliament. It is about the setting design, the props present, and the personal appearance of the actors (Gardner and Avolio 1998; Schlenker 1980). As Edelman noted: “in the drama, the opera, the ballet, in the display of paintings and in the performance of music setting is plotted and manipulated, just as often is in the staging of governmental acts” (1967, 96). Settings and the way political leaders act in them thus matter for how performances are perceived and what behavior is considered appropriate (Hajer 2009; Sheaffer 2008). Just as “settings do things with people,” also leaders' appearance matters for the perception of their performance. Appearance-related cues, like physical characteristics, wardrobe, and hairdo, contribute to the impression leaders make on citizens (De Landtsheer et al. 2008; Hoegg and Lewis 2011).

Framing “involves communications that shape the general perspective upon which information is presented and interpreted” (Gardner and Avolio 1998, 41). In this process, some elements are highlighted, while simultaneously other elements are obscured (Van Hulst and Yanow 2014). Framing and frames are, moreover, omnipresent. They are people's mental images and networks of association to make sense of the world and new events are interpreted along the lines of these images and networks (Castells 2009; Lakoff 2004). Politicians looking for support thus need to understand their markets (Kotler and Kotler 1999) and engage with the frames their audiences employ if they want to be heard and get their views accepted. As such, political leaders' frames need to resonate in society (Entman 2003; Kinchy and Kleinman 2003; Metzke 2006; Newman and Perloff 2004). Moreover, especially in politics there tend to be multiple frames competing for dominance. If a counter frame is dominant, the leader's frame is evaluated by the standards of others. In that case, leaders can never win. Therefore they need to take initiative and engage in reframing and defend themselves against critique (Castells 2009; Entman 2003; Lakoff 2004).

Scripting, the third and final dramaturgical element, “refers to the development of a set of directions that define the scene, identify actors,

and outline expected behavior” (Benford and Hunt 1992, 38). The element of scripting can be considered an extension and operationalization of the frames political leaders want to advance. Frames are idea-based; the aim of the scripts is to coordinate performance and to enable leaders to enact their (alternative) vision on the world. These scripts first of all identify the cast of the performance: Leaders have to point out who their friends and enemies are “on stage” to clarify their position and role. Besides casting roles, also the construction of the dialogue is part of scripting (Gardner and Avolio 1998; Hajer 2009). In managing the dialogue, leaders draw on rhetorical techniques—like pathos, logos, and ethos—to be as effective as possible in enacting and dramatizing their views and vision (Benford and Hunt 1992; Koc and Ilgun 2010; Perloff 2010; Sheafer 2008; Aristotle trans. 2004). Next to what is said, how it is said is thus important. The relationship with the audience, finally, depends on how leaders involve their audiences in their performance and how audiences respond (De Bruijn 2009; Hajer 2009; Snow, Zurcher, and Peters 1981). This can be analyzed by looking for clues in, for example, news reporting on audiences’ evaluation of leaders (Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Biehl-Missal 2011; Clark and Greatbatch 2011).

To conclude, taking a dramaturgical perspective does not render the source credibility approach obsolete. Contrarily, the way in which leaders enact the various elements of staging, framing, and scripting has consequences for their image—their trustworthiness, competence, and caring—and thus for their success on the electoral market. However, how these activities should be enacted in light of credibility remains to be seen and is the focal point of this study. Moreover, by adding the dramaturgical perspective, justice can be done to the dynamic nature of credibility: It is in the interaction between leaders and audiences that credibility is constructed. To understand the contrasting credibility developments of Rutte and Cohen, we therefore employed the concepts of staging, framing, and scripting to see how Rutte and Cohen performed and compared this to their images and credibility as constructed by their audiences in newspaper articles and opinion polls.

METHODOLOGY

To study the credibility of Cohen and Rutte, we conducted a dramaturgical analysis (see previous paragraph) in which we paid attention to how these leaders performed their credibility as well as to how their performance was perceived by citizens and journalists. To this end, we collected three types of data. Existing opinion polls were used to assess the source credibility citizens attributed to Rutte and Cohen over the course of the parliamentary election campaign. In fact, this information served as the starting point of this study: It was because of these polls that we knew that Cohen’s source credibility declined whereas Rutte’s increased.

In addition to the opinion polls, we relied on an analysis of newspaper articles to determine the image journalists and citizens constructed of Rutte and Cohen. These articles were collected from the databank LexisNexis, with use of the key words “Rutte” and “Cohen.” The search was limited to the period between February 19 (fall of the previous cabinet) and June 10 (day after Election Day) and to the three national newspapers that at the time had the biggest circulation of copies in their category: the tabloid newspaper *Telegraaf*, the quality newspaper *Volkscrant*, and the free newspaper *Metro* (HOI Institute for Media Auditing n.d.). Our search resulted in a total of 1186 newspaper articles. These articles were analyzed by manually selecting those fragments that related to Rutte’s and Cohen’s performance, as well as those fragments that contextualized their position in the election campaign. Next, these fragments were reexamined to explore and code what credibility dimension was at stake (trustworthiness, competence, and/or caring) and whether the interpretation of these changed. Regarding Rutte’s and Cohen’s performance, we analyzed 20 different television appearances broadcast between February 19 and June 9, 2010, in which they made a substantial appearance. Our selection consists of speeches, current affairs talk shows, and debates broadcast by public and commercial stations and dispersed over the selected months. In two shows both leaders were present to also ensure a direct comparison of Rutte and Cohen. The performances were transcribed and coded manually based on the developed dramaturgical framework outlined in the previous paragraph. Next, the resulting coding of each dramaturgical element in Rutte’s and Cohen’s media presentations was explored for the credibility characteristics at stake.¹ In addition, Rutte’s and Cohen’s execution of each of the dramaturgical elements was compared to deduce differences in how they dramatized their image in their performances. In turn, this coding of Rutte’s and Cohen’s performances and the differences between them were compared to and connected with the shifts in the interpretation of Cohen’s and Rutte’s image in the newspapers and the opinion polls to understand how their credibility was enacted.

RESULTS: UNDERSTANDING RUTTE’S AND COHEN’S CREDIBILITY

In this section we present the findings of our analysis. We first establish what image Rutte’s and Cohen’s audiences constructed and the credibility they attributed to them (as summarized in Figure 1). Next, from our analysis of the enacted staging, framing, and scripting we derive three differences between Rutte and Cohen in their dramatization that can help us to understand why Rutte succeeded in building an image of a credible potential prime minister and politician while Cohen was losing ground.

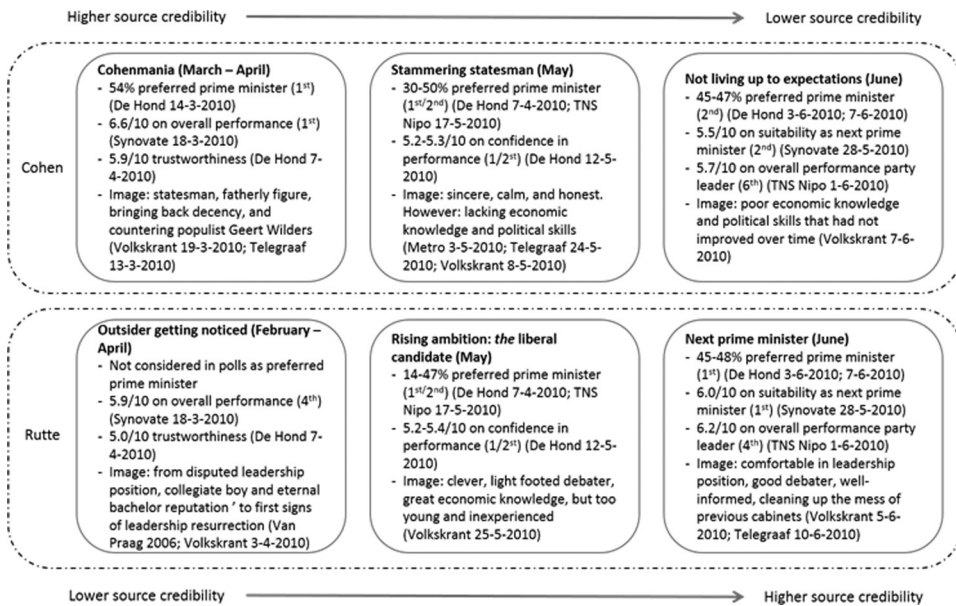


FIGURE 1 Attributed source credibility by citizens to Rutte and Cohen in opinion polls and constructed image in newspapers.

Cohen's and Rutte's Image in the 2010 Election Campaign

When Cohen resigned as mayor of Amsterdam on March 12, 2010, and moved to national politics, a period of “Cohenmania” emerged. Given the choice of three potential candidates, 54 percent of the respondents selected Cohen as their favorite prime minister (De Hond 2010c). Moreover, Cohen was considered most trustworthy (5.9 out of 10; De Hond 2010d), and he was rated highest on his overall performance (6.6 out of 10; Synovate 2010a). At this stage Cohen's image primarily reflected his trustworthiness and caring. According to citizens and the news media, Cohen had the “statesmanlike” appearance of a mayor of all Dutch citizens, and he would battle citizens' concern about the growing indecency in Dutch politics and society (Volkskrant 2010e; Telegraaf 2010a; Van Zuydam and Metze 2015). Starting at the end of April, however, two contrasting images of Cohen competed for dominance. Cohen was still a sincere and honest statesman, but he had become a statesman with a stammer who lacked economic knowledge and the necessary skills to survive in politics (Metro 2010a; Telegraaf 2010b; Volkskrant 2010c). In the polls he remained the most preferred prime minister, but his lead over Rutte diminished and citizens' confidence in his performance declined (De Hond 2010d, 2010e; TNS Nipo 2010b). By June, Cohen's image as lacking economic knowledge and the necessary political skills dominated and Cohen was thought not to have met the set expectations.

Already before Election Day, news media evaluated Cohen's campaign and they concluded that "it was one election too soon" (*Volkscrant* 2010g). Compared to earlier "Cohenmania," Cohen's ratings had deteriorated substantially: He obtained the sixth score of all party leaders on his overall performance (5.7 out of 10; TNS Nipo 2010a) and a 5.5 out of 10 on his prime ministerial suitability (Synovate 2010b).

At the start of the 2010 election campaign, Mark Rutte had been leading the Liberal Party for 4 years. Rutte's leadership was disputed, however, due to internal struggles and a highly popular rival within the party who at one election even managed to get more preferential votes than Rutte. Moreover—inherited from his previous election campaign—Rutte had not yet fully shed his image of a collegiate boy and eternal bachelor (Van Praag 2006; *Volkscrant* 2010c). In March his image started to shift, however: Journalists noticed his improved debating skills, and some even spoke of "Rutte's resurrection" (*Volkscrant* 2010c). Also in the polls this shift was reflected. In early March he was not even considered a potential prime minister, but a month later he was Cohen's prime competitor and he was the second most trusted leader (5.1 out of 10; De Hond 2010, 2010e). However, Rutte's prime ministerial suitability was still doubted: Some thought he was laughing too much—while Dutch politics is supposed to be serious business—and Rutte suggested he would stay in parliament to let more senior candidates take office. From May onward, citizens recognized Rutte's strengths: He repeatedly won debates and he was praised for his broad economic knowledge and sharp tongue (*Volkscrant* 2010b). Furthermore, Rutte declared he was *the* prime ministerial candidate for the Liberal Party. In the polls, Rutte was now the second most preferred prime minister (TNS Nipo 2010b), and by the end of May, he superseded Cohen in this respect (De Hond 2010b; Synovate 2010b). Rutte was perceived as clearly being at ease in the leadership position; he appeared to be a good debater, well informed, caring for the "hard working" citizens pestered by the financial crisis and the "mess" created by previous cabinets (*Volkscrant* 2010g; *Telegraaf* 2010f).

Consequently, Rutte and Cohen mostly differed regarding their perceived competence. After all, while Rutte's image was one of a caring, trustworthy, and competent leader, Cohen became primarily defined by his—for this time and place—lacking political competence. Even though in direct comparison the differences between the poll ratings of Rutte and Cohen might seem small, the differences are still important. In the horse race setting (Hallin and Mancini 2004) that characterized the 2010 parliamentary election campaign, even small differences could have substantial impact on the results. Moreover, as an analysis of the images of Rutte and Cohen reveals, the numbers of the polls alone hide that the meaning that is attributed to these figures matters as much as the figures themselves: In the Dutch context, the image stuck that Rutte had won these elections while Cohen lost them.

Taking a Dramaturgical Perspective

To understand what in Rutte's and Cohen's performance could help to understand their difference on competence, we studied their enacted staging, framing, and scripting. The analysis revealed that both Rutte and Cohen had a potentially strong frame at their disposal during the campaign to structure their vision. Rutte framed his vision in terms of a "responsible society," rooted in classic liberal values like responsibility and freedom. This frame—which Rutte also translated to his views on individual topics—entailed that:

"If you think we can come out of the crisis by arranging those seats a little bit, but actually not doing much. If you think the Netherlands will become healthy spontaneously, don't vote for the Liberal Party on June 9. June 9 (...) is about the question whether we cover it all up a little or whether we are really going to tackle the problems" (Party conference speech 2010).²

Next to the clear presentation of his vision in his speech at the Liberal Party's summit, Rutte also translated it to his views on individual issues. Take, for example, his stance on the mortgage interest relief. Contrary to left-wing parties who considered it a "subsidy," he referred to it as a means to correct the (too) high tax burden. This view fits with the responsible society frame as taxes limit people in their freedom to decide how they want to spend their money and take responsibility for their lives (NOVA Politiek 2010). Cohen, on the other hand, entered the campaign with a vision framed in terms of a "decent society." He argued:

"In 2005 the Labour Party choose a new manifest of principles, in which a decent existence for all, and full participation of all in society is central. (...) The great political challenge isn't whether changes are necessary, but how you do that in such a way that everybody can participate in them. That you don't get a country of losers and winners" (Candidacy speech 2010).

This frame is rooted in values including solidarity and equivalence. Like the values on which Rutte's frame was based, these values are generally supported by Dutch citizens (Halman, Sieben, and van Zundert 2012). Similar to Rutte, in Cohen's case it is possible to trace his "decent society" frame and the accompanying values to his views on individual issues, although it required a bit more effort due to the flawed enactment of his vision (see below). In Cohen's view, government spending should not be reduced recklessly, but fundamental measures should be implemented to balance the budget (Prime ministers debate 2010). Otherwise, unemployment would rise steeply, which—linked to the idea of a decent society—would impede the opportunities of people to "join and participate" fully.

Although both visions could be considered potentially strong, they are grounded in values deemed important in Dutch society and they are applicable to various domains of life (economy, politics, and society) with the potential to connect individual views into one overall vision; their effectiveness depends mostly on how they are actually enacted. In this respect, three differences in Rutte's and Cohen's dramatization of their vision were deduced from the analysis that shed light on why Rutte was more able than Cohen to reinforce the image of a credible political leader, fit for the stage at hand.

Rerouting Critique

As every politician in an election campaign, Rutte and Cohen were at least at some point criticized by competing politicians and scrutinized by journalists. There is, however, a large difference in the frequency and severity with which Rutte and Cohen were criticized. While critique on Rutte was discernable, it also quickly disappeared. Critique on Cohen, to the contrary, consolidated and even became dominant. This difference between Rutte and Cohen can be understood in terms of their ability to reroute critique. When criticized, Rutte was mostly accused of turning his back on the weak, a direct attack on his caring image:

Host: (...) Is it correct that if you translate your program to people in society, that the bottom pays a higher price than the top? (...)

Rutte: We say that the consequences of the crisis—everyone will feel something of that. Only the people that are most weak, the chronically ill and disabled, those are for example the people who are long term dependent on benefits. You also know me of drafting the Employment and Assistance Act. I've designed that act in such a way that especially those people who have the weakest position, that they're protected. Right, the state as a shield for the weak. For those groups we wish to spend an additional half a billion euros' (Paul Rosenmöller en... 2010).

This excerpt from one of Rutte's television performances is exemplary of Rutte's ability to reroute critique. He admitted up front that painful measures were necessary, but he countered the critique that the weaker in society would pay more than others. After all, more instead of less money would be spend to assist them. Furthermore, in dealing with critique, he did not copy the language style of the host. Rutte was not speaking in terms of who would pay the price. To the contrary, he identified the groups that should be protected, as he stressed to have done before. As such, Rutte left no credibility-threatening critique unanswered.

Cohen, in contrast, was mostly criticized by competing politicians and journalists on his insufficient economic knowledge and political skills, but he seemed unable to reroute this critique. First of all, he repeatedly could

not answer finance-related questions. In two major debates, for example, he could not explain the financial consequences of his health care plans (*Metro* 2010b; *Telegraaf* 2010e). Moreover, Cohen did not create opportunities to defend himself. Repeatedly it was only after hosts explicitly asked him that Cohen responded (e.g., Prime ministers debate 2010; Carré debate 2010). Take, for example, the following situation in which it was openly doubted whether Cohen would survive in today's politics:

- Host:* If I remember correctly Hero Brinkman had called you the worst mayor after the second world war.(...) [video fragment]. If you already thought that was unnecessarily grieving, than you have a lot coming.
- Cohen:* We'll see, we'll see.
- Host:* You're not worried?
- Cohen:* No, I'm not really worried. No, no. You?" (Pauw and Witteman 2010a)

Cohen does not effectively reroute the critique attacking his leadership competence. He does not respond to the example in the video fragment the hosts showed in which Cohen clearly could not deal with resistance. Moreover, in his responses, Cohen stayed close to the language of those uttering the critique. In the above example, Cohen speaks in terms of "worrying" instead of using confidence- or competence-related vocabulary. A similar picture emerged from the different debates, which resulted in journalists considering him an "easy prey for his opponents" (*Volkskrant* 2010i). Consequently, Rutte was able to divert the accusations that he would not care for the weaker in society, preventing this critique from sticking to his image. Cohen, contrarily, did not adequately address his perceived lack of economic knowledge and political skills, thereby affirming people's doubts.

Taking the Lead

The second difference in the way in which the decent and the responsible society frames were dramatized and the leaders enacted their credibility is related to what we call "taking the lead." Whereas Rutte was able to take initiative in his media presentations, Cohen's attitude was mostly a passive one. In his media presentations, Rutte did not merely answer to journalists' questions, but he also succeeded in connecting his answer to his underlying "responsible society" frame. Thereby, he tied his views on individual issues together into one coherent vision. Cohen, in contrast, tended to stay close to the original question asked, without referring to his "decent society" frame or its underlying values. As a result, his position on individual issues seemed unprepared and it was unclear how this fitted into the bigger picture. Take, for example, the following excerpts from Rutte and Cohen's media presentations, in which Rutte responds to the statement that he is just lucky that

immigration is not the dominant election theme and Cohen explains why he proposed additional cutbacks:

Rutte: “You cannot cure the economy if you don’t simultaneously stop the large influx of opportunity-deprived immigrants, of whom too many directly go on benefits. The difference with Wilders is that he always (...) that he’s concerned with religion. No, I’m concerned about the behavior of people; for me it’s not about their origin, but about their future (...).” (Knevel & Van de Brink 2010).

Cohen: “Well, this was the right moment because we could also (...) because it was also possible to realize that. And, for me personally it was also that you could see that (...) with the whole euro crisis that it was really necessary to give a very clear signal there” (Miljarden Gezocht 2010b).

In general, Rutte took the lead in his media communications. As in the excerpt, Rutte tended to start with a short summary statement, indicating whether he agreed or not, after which he explained his answer. He took the lead in the sense that went beyond the question as such, taking the liberty to tie his views to his vision based on freedom and taking responsibility (also after the excerpt stops). Cohen, in contrast, merely started to talk without from the outset clarifying what his point would be. Consequently, this helped Rutte to build and maintain an image of a leader who knew what he was doing and who had thought about what he wanted to achieve—in other words, the image of a competent leader—while Cohen continued to struggle in this respect.

Showing Clarity

The final difference in the way in which Rutte and Cohen dramatized their vision can be described as showing clarity. In short this is about knowing your facts and refraining from indirect and abstract language use. Take for instance Rutte’s proposal on employed income tax credit:

“A welfare mother in the Netherlands who starts working 4 days a week, currently she loses about 35 euros in income. If you increase that income-tax break, like we propose, you remove that poverty fall and you make it more attractive for people on benefits to go back to work” (Miljarden Gezocht 2010a).

As can be seen in this example, Rutte’s sentences are relatively short. In addition, to clarify his message Rutte used everyday language and he included recognizable examples. As such, Rutte showed he was aware of the consequences of his proposals. Cohen, on the other hand, did not seem to have a clear overview of the consequences of his plans. See for example

the following excerpt in which Cohen responds to the question how he is planning to finance his idea of Liberation Day as an annual public holiday:

Cohen: "(...) Yes, I also don't know just yet how we are going to pay for it. Uh, uh, I, it, for me it was mainly about saying that I think it is important that we, that we on this point, and that, that also the entire Netherlands says about this: Yes, that is, it is one of the, one of the things, uh, that we also share with each other. And then it is also wise to, to also then, to celebrate it in that way" (Pauw and Witteman 2010b).

What this excerpt moreover clearly exemplifies is that Cohen had the tendency to hide his message behind subordinate clauses and vague language, in addition to not knowing all the facts on his own proposals. Combined with refraining from using concrete examples, Cohen failed to provide insight into what he wanted to achieve and why. Again, this difference in the enactment of their views shows how Rutte was able to strengthen his image of a credible leader, whereas Cohen was less successful in this respect.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As a consequence of the rise of perception politics as well as the dramatization of politics as described in various studies conducted in the field of political marketing, citizens are more inclined to form intuitive impressions of candidates to guide their decisions (De Landtsheer et al. 2008; Garzia 2013; Miller et al. 1986). In this paper we argued that not any image suffices for political leaders but that political leaders need to maintain credibility, in context and in situ. With the source credibility approach, leaders' credibility can be pinpointed at a specific moment in time, but it does not clarify what happens in the dynamic interactive process between leaders and audiences in which credibility is constructed. For this reason, we extended the source credibility approach with a dramaturgical perspective and analyzed how Rutte's and Cohen's images and credibility developed as well as what in their performance could help to understand how of credible leadership is enacted. In this way we were able to supplement alternative understandings that could not fully explain the contrast.

In the campaign, Rutte's image evolved from an outsider getting noticed—the phase in which his image was still that of the collegiate boy and eternal bachelor—to being considered the next prime minister: a smart, well-informed debater who would take care of individual citizens' (economic) concerns. Audiences' perception of Cohen's performances, contrarily, transitioned from a period of "Cohenmania"—in which his reputation as a burgomaster-statesman and his consensus-building qualities were emphasized—to the stammering statesman who lacked economic knowledge and political skills, the man who has not been able to live up to the set

expectations. As such, the main difference in Cohen's and Rutte's contrasting credibility development seems to relate to their perceived competence.

The dramaturgical analysis revealed three differences in Rutte's and Cohen's enactment of their respective visions that shed light on what is expected of today's politicians in elections. To persuade audiences of their competence, caring, and trustworthiness, politicians first of all have to be able to reroute critique that might otherwise stick to their images. This can be done by providing counter-evidence and by staying away from the language of those uttering the critique language that would affirm the opponent's problem analysis. Second, politicians need to take the lead; in answering questions initiative has to be taken to connect one's answer to the underlying frames and values to build a coherent vision. As such, leaders can show they understand what is going on and why, as well as what needs to be done. Third, politicians have to show clarity. By using direct everyday language and by providing concrete examples, leaders can clarify their views and make them more tangible for their audiences.

Cohen was welcomed enthusiastically in Dutch national politics because people remembered his success as a mayor of Amsterdam. In that role he was most praised for his efforts to "keep things together," for example, when intercultural tensions intensified after the murder on filmmaker Theo Van Gogh (Hajer and Uitermark 2008). In other words, he was valued for his thoughtful, consensus-seeking leadership style. This contrasts with Rutte's streetfighter style: quick on his feet, sharp tongue, and not afraid to address comments. Consequently, it can be concluded that different leadership positions require a different capacities and that therefore successful leaders do not necessarily flourish in all roles. This finding aligns with what Goffman (1974) notes on authenticity and what Hajer refers to as the performative habitus: the "embodied dispositions, developed over the course of many years that help or hinder actors to respond tactically to a given situation" (Hajer 2009, 71). Grown for so many years in the apolitical, above-all-parties office of the Dutch mayor, Cohen could not replace his routines overnight.

These findings add to the literature on political marketing in that they deepen our knowledge of impression management, supplementing the existing literature (cf. De Landtsheer et al. 2008; Leary and Kowalski 1990; McGraw 2003). In line with the contribution of the dramaturgical perspective in other domains (Gardner and Avolio 1998; Sinha 2010; Peck and Dickinson 2009), adding a dramaturgical perspective also renders a greater appreciation of the role both leaders *and* audiences play in their relationship in the field of political marketing. While leaders can steer and control the impression they make to some or even considerable extent, credibility is constructed in the interaction between leaders and audiences. Therefore, in this study we have started to open up the black box of the interaction to see how leaders try to enact their credibility, with the involvement of their audiences.

Replication research is needed to determine whether the two studied cases are exceptional or whether they are indicative for particular types of cases. This requires not only research into other Dutch settings but also research into other political systems. Moreover, we only analyzed cases during an election campaign. As has been argued in political marketing literature, however, also in the running of government leaders need to manage their reputation to maintain their competitive edge on the political marketplace (Newman and Perloff 2004). After all, political credibility is dynamic and dependent upon role, place, and time where it is up to audiences to attribute credibility time and again to the leaders who wish to get—or maintain—a foothold in the political market.

NOTES

1. The full dramaturgical analysis—including all subelements of staging, framing, and scripting—is available through upon request from the first author.

2. The video material of this quote and all upcoming quotes, as well as of additional examples, can be accessed (if legally possible) through <http://www.sabinevanzuydam.nl/publications/credibility-enacted> or by contacting the first author.

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