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English Summary

Before answering our research questions, we started in Chapter 1 by scrutinizing what trust and distrust/cynicism means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our literature review revealed two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. Using open-ended and closed-ended questions, we confirmed these two main dimensions. However, our results also showed that these dimensions consist of more elements than earlier research suggested. Political actors' reliability concerns general feelings of their honesty, but also the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country and whether political actors are responsive to the public. Political actors' competence concerns general aspects of competence, but also being decisive in taking care of problems and being aware of important problems. Moreover, we found that reasons for negative attitudes are not the same as reasons for positive attitudes towards political actors: persons with negative attitudes had more specific arguments than those with positive attitudes. To our knowledge, this chapter was the first to use open-ended questions to study what citizens mean when they express positive or negative attitudes towards political actors.

In Chapter 2, we studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism. In a study combining a content analysis of news media with a panel survey, we tested the unfavorable effects of strategic content as well as the favorable effects of substantive content. We found no across the board effect of strategic news, which is contrary to what we expected based on extant literature. We did find a clear negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism, but only among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds). In other words: substantive news can make younger citizens less cynical. This finding is in line with extant research that showed that older citizens' attitudes are relatively stable and are not easily changed during a campaign, while younger citizens are still developing their attitudes and can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

In Chapter 3, we studied the effect of political cynicism on voter behavior. We argued that cynical citizens can show their discontent in two ways: either by choosing another party or by not voting at all. We therefore studied the effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout. Additionally, we argued that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. For this reason, we included the similarity of the parties a person hesitates or changes between in our measures

for voter uncertainty and volatility. Our results showed that cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, we found that cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout.

In Chapter 4, we again studied the effects of news content on political cynicism, but this time in an experimental design and furthermore focused on younger citizens (18-25 year-olds). Also, we studied the effects of news content on two aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and voter uncertainty. Additionally, we studied the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive content in one news item. While strategic news content had a positive effect on cynicism for lower knowledgeable persons and substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small negative effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable. With regard to voter behavior, we found that any news content increases lower knowledgeable person's turnout intention, while substantive news makes the higher knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. This chapter is the first to study the effect of a news item that combines substantive and strategic news.

We aimed to answer two main research questions in this dissertation. The first research question was to what extent strategic and substantive news content affect political cynicism. Our studies yielded a mixed picture. We found a negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism for younger citizens in Chapter 2, and found in Chapter 4 that specifically the combination of substantive and strategic news negatively affects political cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 where we combined a content analysis with a survey, we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism, while we found a positive effect of strategic news on political cynicism in the experimental study in Chapter 4 for lower knowledgeable persons. The results of Chapter 4 are in line with other experimental studies as well as with a study that combined a content analysis with a survey. The latter focused on issue-specific strategic news as well as issue-specific cynicism, while we focused on all strategic news content and cynicism towards political actors in general, which makes it hard to compare the studies.

There may be several reasons for the different results of the experimental designs in Chapter 4 and other studies on the one hand and the content analysis and panel survey design in Chapter 2 on the other hand. The results are probably partly related to methodological differences. In the first design, the short-term effects of exposure to one specific news item or at most a few are measured, while in the second design, the longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content are measured. Also, in the first design, all

respondents are randomly exposed to specific news content, while in the second design, respondents select the news content themselves.

Apart from these methodological differences, we also think that the nature of strategic and substantive news have affected the results. Does strategic news only have a short-term effect on political cynicism which vanishes quickly? Does substantive news only have a longer-term effect which builds up after repeated exposure? Both may well be the case. On the short-term, when citizens are exposed to strategic news that mainly reports the strategies political actors pursue, this may induce cynicism. Exposure to substantive news may need some time to build up: if citizens are repeatedly exposed to media that report substantive issues about political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, this may slowly induce positive feelings about these actors.

Does strategic news induce cynicism only when substantive news is lacking or limited? In the real world, news is both strategic and substantive in nature. In the Netherlands, both kinds of news content are balanced. Moreover, as we have shown in Appendix E, all news outlets combine strategic and substantive news. On the long run, citizens are therefore exposed to a combination of both news frames. As we have shown in Chapter 4, substantive news neutralizes the unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism; the combination of strategic and substantive news even lowers cynicism. This is partly in line with other studies that found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. This indicates that strategic content only leads to cynicism if it replaces substantive news, whereas in many countries, strategic frames are added to substantive news. We think that the importance of substantive news is a noticeable contribution to the literature on the relationship between news content and cynicism.

The second research question we aimed to answer in this dissertation was to what extent political cynicism affects voter behavior. We have focused on several aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and actual turnout as well as ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Several authors have shown that cynicism reduces turnout. We found that cynicism induces turnout intention in the Netherlands, but it does not affect actual turnout. This may be explained by the fact that apart from abstention, dissatisfied citizens have another option in the Netherlands; they can choose between many different other parties. Indeed, cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Remarkably, the effects of cynicism on uncertainty and volatility have not been studied before. For understanding the effect of cynicism on the complete picture of voter behavior, we think this is an important addition to

the literature, especially in consensus democracies with multiparty systems, which we pay attention to later on in this Conclusion.