

THE ROLE OF FRAMING IN THE COALITION-MAKING PROCESS : A CASE STUDY OF THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

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The subject of framing in political debates remains significant for communication studies, especially regarding its role in the coalition forming process. One specific situation in the Belgian political landscape seemed particularly fitted to test a possible correlation between framing and coalition building: the German-speaking community. The CSP (Christlich Soziale Partei) seems excluded from the existing majority and escaping the opposition position it has been in since 1999 seems inevitable, as the majority said they were in favour of a continuation of the existing coalition if the outcome allows it. That a political party which defines itself as being in the political centre seems to be excluded from entering the government might give reason to assume that this could be possibly due to a communication or leadership style and not to opposing points of view.

Through analysing press coverage of the two legislative periods and encoding the statements the respective parties have made, we shall try to give an overview of the parties' communication styles and analyse its possible correlation with coalition forming.

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The role of framing in the coalition-making process

Two elements revived the political debate and press coverage around the 2019 campaign: the upcoming state reform – meaning the transfer of regional competences² like regional development planning and housing – and the newly established participatory democracy through the creation of a citizen's committee.

After restating the importance of the concepts of agenda setting and framing, their influence and role in party communication, we shall advance our hypotheses: firstly, the communication strategy of the CSP went more in the direction of conflict framing in the period 2018-2019, compared to 2013-2014 because chances to be in the opposition seemed higher. Secondly, the fact that the SP, PFF and ProDG used a strong consensus framing while the CSP used a strong conflict framing, confirms the current coalition parties in their intention to continue their cooperation after the election.

Those two hypotheses will be tested by analysing press articles and running interviews with top candidates of the political parties. The article will explain the effects of frame negation, consensus and personal attacks on coalition building, and thereby reveal party internal problems, a lack of relevant information for the voters and recall the importance of real conflict.

² The transfer of competences was one of the most highly discussed subjects in this election campaign; the CSP blamed the government for a bad negotiation but also stressed the importance of this issue for the German-speaking community and their crucial role in Wallonia on various occasions.

Key concepts

Framing

Saying that humans are rational beings is lagging behind the findings of neuroscientific and cognitive research. In political debates, facts are not decisive in themselves and depend on mental frames of interpretation, as defined and studied by cognitive sciences. Whenever our brain processes words and ideas, it activates knowledge and sense connections from previous experiences with the world. We understand words by our brain recalling physical processes associated with words, the «embodied cognition» (Wehling 2016: 21).

Frames and Their Influence on Voters' Minds

Every word gets its meaning by the semantics of the frame called up, meaning that in the political debate, every word is embedded in a frame that gives meaning. It is through framing that political actors shape the texts that influence or prime agendas and considerations that people think about (Entman 2007: 15).

Indeed, only an estimated 2 per cent of our thoughts are conscious processes. Most of our thinking, about 98 per cent, takes place outside our conscious perception (Wehling, 2016: 48). A recent experiment led at Stanford University by Thibodeau and Boroditsky in 2011 (*Ibid*: 49) asked participants to take part in an opinion poll on the topic of fighting crime. Two groups were given a text with statistics on which the decision should be based on. The participants did not rely on the facts and statistics mentioned when they thought about the topic. In both cases they were identical. What they decided on depended on the different frames that were activated – by three of more than 60 words.

Frame Negation

In public debates there are two situations in which it is particularly difficult to communicate in an ideologically authentic way: being against something and defending oneself. Indeed, one does not expound one's own world view, but the world view of the opponent. To negate a frame always means to activate it. The topic is discussed in the opponent's moral perspective and not in one's own (*Ibid*: 52). Denying an idea means activating it in the heads of his listeners or readers. Brain studies also show how – regardless of whether concepts are negated or affirmed – the brain always activates the areas in which these concepts are anchored (*Ibid*: 56).

Conflict Framing

First, conflict – defined by Sevenans and Vliegenthart as disagreement between individuals or groups of people – is at the heart of politics (2015: 188). Political debate exists because different political actors have different opinions on how societal problems should be addressed. Debating about opposing viewpoints is politicians' core business. In addition, in mass communication research, conflict is considered to be one of the most important parameters that indicate the relevance of a certain piece of information (*Ibid*). Moreover, disagreement about policies makes differences between political parties visible to the public (*Ibid*: 191). According to Schuck, Vliegenthart and De Vreese, conflict news including potential controversies show to the electorate that an actual political choice is to be made and increases the perception of an election's relevance (2014: 186-189). Note that conflict framing is something else than a general negative tone of the news, which is considered to be a moderator of polit-

ical agenda–setting effects as well (Sevenans et al. 2015 : 190). For example, a plane crash is bad news but does not implies conflict, whereas an article covering disagreement about budgetary affairs contains conflict but is not necessarily negative in tone (Putnam and Shoemaker 2007: 167).

Hypotheses

The German-speaking political landscape counts six different parties:

- the Christlich Soziale Partei (CSP) at the political center: sister party of the Flemish CD&V³ and the Walloon French-speaking cdH⁴;
- the ProDG: a regional free citizen list;
- the Sozialistische Partei (SP): social-democratic party associated to Walloon PS;
- the Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt (PFF): liberal party associated to the Walloon MR;
- the Vivant: radical democratic party, which originally founded in Wallonia as a being part of the OpenVLD⁵, offering an alternative to the MR⁶. It ceased to exist anymore in Wallonia, but only in the German-speaking community,
- Ecologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales (Ecolo): based on green politics and sister party of the Flemish Groen and Walloon Ecolo.

³ Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams.

⁴ Centre Démocrate Humaniste.

⁵ Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten.

⁶ Mouvement Réformateur.

The role of framing in the coalition-making process

Since 2004, the ProDG, the SP and the PFF form a majority⁷. In an article in *Grenz-Echo*, Oswald Schröder, editor-in-chief of the *Grenz-Echo*, describes the coalition negotiations of 2014: The CSP accuses above all Oliver Paasch of having broken a firm coalition promise. For Oliver Paasch (ProDG), «the CSP held parallel talks with the PFF and SP, aiming at banishing ProDG to the opposition.» That the reason why, according to him, he invited his former coalition partners to seal a new agreement (8 February 2019).

In 2019, the existing majority of ProDG, SP and PFF made a clear statement, announcing they were in favour of perpetuating the existing coalition, if the outcome of the election permitted it. The CSP reacted with its campaign slogan *Kein Bock auf Block – Kraft statt Klüngelei*, which can be translated into «Tired of the bloc – force instead of nepotism.»

Our first hypothesis is that the communication strategy of the CSP went more in the direction of conflict framing in the period 2014–2019, compared to 2009–2014, because chances to be in the opposition seemed higher. In 2014, nothing had been decided yet and no possible coalition was excluded, the *Grenz-Echo* described the elections as a «Dreikampf» – a three-way fight (21 February 2014). The different parties were thus looking for a con-

⁷ In the community elections of 2014, the CSP, obtained the most votes like in the three previous elections (1999, 2004, 2009), but the former coalition parties (ProDG, SP and SP) agreed again on a continuation of the alliance. The CSP remained in the opposition, where has been since 1999. In the current legislative period, the Government is composed of: Minister-President Oliver Paasch (ProDG), Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Culture, Employment and Tourism Isabelle Weykmans (PFF), Minister for Family, Health and Social Affairs Antonios Antoniadis (SP) and Harald Mollers (ProDG): Minister for Education and Scientific Research.

sensus with other parties, as reflected in their communication. The CSP knew they needed a coalition partner and entered into discussions with the SP, PFF and ProDG.

In 2019, the CSP had no more possibility of a coalition with ProDG, SP or PFF, these parties declaring their intention to continue the existing coalition, in line with the outcome of the election results. Consensus was therefore no longer an option for the CSP, the party pointing out differences between their role in the opposition and other coalition parties. Through their campaign slogan *Kein Bock auf Block* (tired of the bloc), the CSP thereby presented itself as an alternative. Likewise, designating Colin Kraft⁸ as a top candidate could also be interpreted as a signal that they were opting for a more provocative, conflictual style.

Our second hypothesis is that the fact that the SP, PFF and ProDG use a strong consensus framing, and the CSP uses a strong conflict framing, confirms the current coalition parties in their intention to continue their cooperation after the election. SP, PFF and ProDG use a consensus framing, because, on the one hand, they describe their cooperation as constructive. On the other hand, they need to justify their unusual choice of a clear pronouncement of a pre-election agreement with a common goal and this constructive cooperation. The consensus could also be a reaction to the CSP's conflict frame: the members of a group stick together when a common enemy attacks the group.

⁸ From 2015 to 2019, he was also secretary of the CSP group in the Parliament of the German-speaking Community. In the elections of 26 May 2019, Kraft was elected member of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community as SPC leader. Since then, he has been CSP party leader in this assembly.

Data and Method

As regards the testing of hypotheses, the current situation in the German-speaking community seems particularly manageable not only because of its limited media landscape, but also because of the limited number of political parties (6) and the accessibility of local politicians.

We will focus on ProDG, SP, PFF and CSP considering that Ecolo kept a low profile during the 2019 political debate (which could be a strategic choice: profiting from the green trend without displaying their ecological and costly proposals in a conservative political landscape). Also, according to Oswald Schröder, the party was not able to make itself heard in the political debate. He describes the current election campaign as a duel between CSP and the current majority, leaving the other two parties out of the debate (10 April 2019). We excluded Vivant as well, a party not regarded as a potential coalition partner either and whose communication is – as a radical democratic party, very critical of the system – therefore always conflictual.

In order to test our hypotheses, we analysed 601 articles of the local daily paper Grenz-Echo from Sep 1st, 2018 to April 20th, 2019 and from Sep 1st, 2013 to 31st May 2014. The Grenz-Echo is the only newspaper in German language in the Belgian media landscape. 222 statements were encoded, to which we attributed one of the following values: Conflict, Blame, Consensus, or Personal. We encoded a statement as conflictual, when a party mentioned its own opinion and – implicitly or not – showed a difference of opinion with a member of another party. A consensus exists, if there is a general agreement and *personal statement* is a personal attack, which is not about policy issues.

Interviews were also carried out with top candidates at the community level: Oliver Paasch (ProDG) and Isabelle Weykmans (PFF) as well as with the party chairman and top candidate at the European level Pascal Arimont (CSP). The retrieved information ought to assess a possible correlation between coalition building and consensus framing, thus communication, coalition building and points of view, thus politics or the conflict framing of the CSP and the continuation of the existing coalition.

Analysis and Conclusions

Our first hypothesis is that the communication strategy of the CSP went more in the direction of conflict framing in the period 2018-2019, compared to 2013-2014 because chances to be in the opposition seemed higher.

The table hereafter gives the points of view the CSP adopted towards the different political parties (ProDG, PFF and SP or the entire government). The results do not show a clear shift towards more conflictual statements towards all three parties than before.

	2013–2014	2018–2019
Conflict		
ProDG	11%	12%
SP	33%	80%
PFF	No sufficient data	25%
Government (ProDG, SP, PFF)	45%	45%
Blame		
ProDG	78%	75%
SP	83%	60%
PFF	N.A.	37%

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Government (ProDG, SP, PFF)	83%	70%
Personal		
ProDG	22%	63%
SP	76%	20%
PFF	N.A.	12%
Government (ProDG, SP, PFF)	5%	25%
Consensus		
ProDG	11%	13%
SP	17%	0%
PFF	N.A.	38%
Government (ProDG, SP, PFF)	0%	10%

Our hypothesis thus cannot be confirmed, considering that the CSP has not made a more intensive use of the conflict frame. The party rather used a different tone of communication towards the different political players. As for the PFF, they shifted their communication from no statements at all to showing more consensuses. It appears that the PFF is the party that attacked the least in a personal way. The CSP tried to distinguish themselves further from the SP. The CSP, which now focuses more on issues like geriatric care and nursery schools, tries to distinguish itself from a party with which it shares common ground. A certain level of resentment and aggressiveness towards the ProDG can be observed. A change that could derive from the shift towards more personal attacks and the steady conflict framing, which means that the parties do not have more discussions about opposing points of view. The same thing can be said about the communication towards the entire government (ProDG, SP, PFF).

Our second hypothesis stated that the strong consensus framing used by the SP, PFF and ProDG confirms the current coalition parties in their intention to continue their cooperation after the election. The consensus framing is indeed evidenced by the complete lack of conflictual statements. In the period from 1 September 2018 to 20 April 2019, neither ProDG, SP nor PFF did launch personal attacks nor blame on their coalition partners. However, the three parties did display a different tone of communication towards the CSP.

ProDG on CSP	
Blame and personal	42%
Conflict and blame	21%
Conflict	16%
Consensus	11%
Conflict and Personal	5%
Conflict, blame and personal	5%

PFF on CSP	
Conflict, blame and personal	60%
Conflict	20%
Consensus	20%

SP on CSP	
Blame and personal	50%
Conflict and blame	19%
Conflict, blame and personal	19%
Conflict	12%

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While the PFF did not comment that much on the CSP – actually not half as much as ProDG and SP – all three parties highlighted their good cooperation and common ground in several articles. In the interviews carried out with majority partners, the latter confirmed the consensus. Moreover, ProDG, SP, PFF and CSP claimed they are not excluding anyone but Vivant. Both ProDG and SP claimed that when it comes to their party communication and their coalition partner's, fairness is preferred over personal attacks, as well as proposals towards the best possible solution, qualities the CSP does not possess, according to them. Oliver Paasch and Katrin Jadin (PFF) reproached the CSP for releasing «fake news», while Mathias Zimmermann called Colin Kraft (CSP) *Nicht immer Meister der Zahlen* – not being good at figures – in a reader's letter in *Grenz-Echo* (27 March 2019). While PFF party members launched personal attacks (60%) when talking about the CSP, Isabelle Weykmans (PFF), although saying she had more common ground with SP and ProDG, was cautious in her comments on other parties, highlighting the fact that she could implement her program with the current majority.

According to Nicolas Baygert, attacking the opponent can be problematic, considering that from a strategic point of view, it puts a spotlight on the opponent's proposals (*La Libre Belgique* 09 May 2019). In other words: you debate in his ideological worldview instead of activating a frame in the minds of one's listeners that depicts one's own political beliefs (Wehling 2016: 56).

An illustration of the problem of such attacks can be found in the autonomy negotiations. The CSP attacked the majority of having negotiated badly, the budget deal not being sufficient. But in the process they draw attention to the fact that it was the majority that sealed the deal. SP and ProDG accused the CSP in various

articles (and in the interviews) of a lack of proposals as regards alternative policies and «populism». This frame negation makes it difficult for possible coalition partners to know on which policies one could agree upon.

According to SP and ProDG, the CSP style of communication became a lot more focused on personal attacks than in the 2013-2014 period – their use of fake news being another new phenomenon.

When being asked to describe his party's communication style, CSP party chairman Pascal Arimont answered that it excludes personal attacks. A further discrepancy could be found in his statement about the autonomy, stating that citizens are not interested in such abstract concepts. This apparent dissonance in party messages could be explained by an internal party problem. The more coherently and authentically ideological frames are communicated within a group, the easier it becomes for members to quickly and reliably commit themselves to their own values in everyday business, to remain true to their political line and to write coherent programs (Wehling 2016: 66).

Three days after the elections, the German-speaking community won again the race to build the first government in Belgium. 49.54% of the votes confirmed the existing majority and gave them 13 of the 25 seats in parliament. ProDG replaced CSP for the first time in the history of Eastbelgium as the strongest party.

But perhaps the most telling fact about the 2019 election was the number of blank votes, in which the German-speaking community scored among the highest in Belgium. The election did not tell so much about the voter's political worldviews, but more

about the party's political communication. Disagreement, conflict and differences of opinion between political actors mean to people there is something at stake. Conflict not only plays its role in balanced journalism, but even more in giving voters a perception of choice. No surprise that on social media and opinion letters the word «electoral fraud» became something of a buzzword.

The outcome of our study is that among the existing majority there has not been once a conflictual statement in the four-month election campaign. Different points of view on how societal problems should be addressed therefore remained invisible to the public. Conflict is not necessarily negative in tone or an attack. It is the two-sided depiction of disagreement between individuals or groups of people – the heart of political debate. Although insults and personal attacks have generalized in the international political sphere, it certainly does not prove successful in a political system, which often requires coalition partners to build a government. Not only does it put a spotlight on another parties' politics, but also complicates discussions afterwards.

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