Explaining Polling Error, the Role of Media Attention in the Dutch Parliamentary Elections of 2025

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Abstract:

This study examined the extent to which poll deviation can be explained by news media attention in the weeks preceding the 2025 Dutch parliamentary elections. Previous research has identified links between media attention, polls and election results, but these variables are often difficult to operationalize due to their interdependencies. News media attention in this thesis was operationalized as (1) the number of articles in which a party was mentioned and (2) article sentiment, so how positive or negative the article was. A total of 1107 news articles were collected from Dutch news outlets using Lexis Nexis, and two different polling dates from the Peilingwijzer were compared with the final election results. The results show that the number of mentions was strongly correlated with both poll deviation and election results. Sentiment was not significantly correlated with either poll deviation or election outcomes. It is concluded that news outlets have a responsibility in knowing that news articles can have this influence on elections.

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1. Introduction

Last October, after the fall of the Schoof cabinet in June earlier that year, new Dutch parliament elections took place. The fallen cabinet consisted of the PVV, VVD, NSC, BBB and the prime minister Dick Schoof, who was not part of any of these parties (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2024). The reason for dissolving the cabinet was an argument about immigration, according to the PVV the planned measures were not enough. They found the plans to reduce the influx of immigrants too weak, which led to them quitting the coalition after talks with the other three parties (NOS, 2025a). In the weeks before the actual elections of 2025, there was a lot of attention to political parties, their leaders and polls. The lead up to the elections was filled with debates, media coverage and interviews to inform people about political plans, ideas and opinions. The main players at the start of the election period were PVV, Groenlinks/PvdA, VVD and CDA, but in the end, it became a close race between PVV and D66, who at first was not expected to be a key party in these elections. (Ipsos I&O, 2025).

To provide some context for these elections the main worries of the Dutch public will shortly be discussed. According to voters, the most important topics of these elections were the housing market, immigration and defence (EenVandaag, 2025a). While most parties agreed on spending more money on the housing market and national defence, how this would be done and financed was up to debate. Parties like the VVD, D66, PVV and Groenlinks/PvdA wanted to build more cities or residential areas, while parties like JA21 and CDA wanted to solve the housing crisis by expanding all existing living areas to spread it out over the country (NOS, 2025b). As for defence, the main question was how to pay for the expansion of the Dutch army due to an increase of the NATO defence spending target. VVD, D66, CDA and JA21 wanted to

finance this by cutting back on the healthcare budget, PVV by loaning money from other countries, and Groenlinks/PvdA by increasing the taxes on wealth and companies (NU.nl, 2025; RTL, 2025a).

In the months after the fall of the Schoof cabinet the general sentiment in the society was that the Dutch politics were failing. Reports show that civilians found that political parties were too busy with themselves instead of working together, some even found that politics all together could not solve issues within society (Kieskompas, 2025; SCP, 2025). This also returned in the post-election analysis of the campaign time. Several key moments were identified in a report about this: The stability with which the CDA presented themselves and their willingness to corporate with other parties. The PVV not joining the first big television debate. The exclusion of the PVV by many other parties in potential coalitions (Asher, 2025b). While there are more to name, these moments can also be traced back in polls and in the perception of civilians of politicians (Asher, 2025b). The polls are often discussed in news media to inform people about which parties are doing well, and also return during interview questions, for instance in questions about with which other parties a party leader wants to form a coalition based on the seats in polls (NOS, 2025e).

In the background, the topic of regaining the trust of civilians also played an important role during these elections (NOS, 2025d; RTL, 2025b). The general trust level in Dutch politics among the public had been dwindling over the past years, and was only 29% after the fall of Schoof I, leading to many people being unsure who to vote for (Asher, 2025a). This theme of distrust in politics and the government already had been an important topic over the last few elections and was one of the major reasons why people voted for the PVV during the elections in 2023. For the last elections of October 2025 these low trust levels meant that many voters were unsure who to vote for (SCP, 2025).

In the end, D66 won the elections in October 2025, followed by the PVV, VVD, Groenlinks/PvdA and CDA (Kiesraad, 2025). As of writing this thesis a new government is installed, consisting of D66, CDA and VVD. Together these parties have less than 76 seats, which is needed for a majority in the parliament (NOS, 2026). While the elections have already taken place and the new government is installed, it is still interesting to look at what led people to vote for one party and not for another. Especially since, during the last two weeks of the elections, it was clear that many people were still 'floating', thus were unsure who to vote for (NOS, 2025c). It is known that for the Netherlands media attention and coverage plays an important role in the decision of voters. This mainly has to do with small campaigning budgets of political parties, meaning that advertisements and large campaigns are harder to set-up compared to European neighbours, while being covered by the news is free (Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025; Vermeer et al., 2024). The importance of media coverage for Dutch elections was also mentioned shortly before the elections and was called especially significant during the 2025 elections due to more than half of the voters being unsure who to vote for until the last day (EenVandaag, 2025b).

The relation between media attention and election outcomes is a difficult one to quantify due to many other factors influencing elections, such as important events, campaigning strategies and even the weather on election day (Crutzen & Flamand, 2023; Kulachai et al., 2023). While many variables are involved, the presence of a relation between news media coverage and election results has been claimed many times in the past. This was for instance done through monitoring voters opinions in the months before the elections, measuring sentiment, so how positive or negative articles were about parties, seeing if and how voters' preference swayed and by counting the number of times parties appeared in articles, tv-shows and debates (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Branstetter et al., 2024; EenVandaag, 2025b; Geers et al., 2017, 2019; Jacobs, 2005; Louwerse & Van Dijk, 2022; Takens, 2013; UNESCO, 2022; Van

Der Meer et al., 2023; Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025). What makes news media attention difficult to operationalize in practice is that polls and news coverage are intertwined (Jacobs, 2005). Polls can influence new articles, for instance through the coverage of parties that are doing well in polls and thereby creating the image a party could become the largest. Vice versa, news articles claiming some parties are doing well can also make people rethink their decision, which could lead to shifts in the polls and election results (Geers et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2005). Since polls and news coverage are connected, both must be considered when analysing the effect of news media on elections. This thesis contributes to bridging the gap in the quantification of news media attention and its relationship to electoral outcomes. It does so by analysing the Dutch 2025 parliamentary elections and news articles published in the four weeks before the election date in combination with two polling moments. The four weeks' timeframe was chosen based on earlier research on when both media and voters start paying interest in the elections. It was found that the first spark of interest happens four to five weeks before the elections, and the largest increase of interest happened two weeks before the elections (Kaid et al., 2007; Metag & Gurr, 2023). News articles will be analysed on presence of political parties and their sentiment, so how negative or positive articles are about the parties they mention. The roles of news media attention and polls on elections will be analysed through correlation and linear regression analyses, more details on how the data is prepared and processed can be found in section 3, the methodology.

Based on the analyses and relevant literature this thesis will answer the following research question (RQ): To what extent did election polls deviate from the results of the Dutch 2025 parliamentary elections, and to what extent is this deviation related to media attention for political parties in the weeks before the elections? The research is guided by the following sub-questions:

- SQ1: To what extent do election polls deviate from election results?

- SQ2: Is there a relationship between pre-election polls and final vote shares of political parties?
- SQ3: How and to what extent does the amount of media attention political parties receive relate to their vote share in elections?
- SQ4: To what extent does the sentiment of media coverage relate to election outcomes for political parties?

2. Literature review

2.1 Election polls and deviation from results (SQ1)

Election polls originated alongside modern day elections, which was driven by an interest in predicting the election outcome (Smith, 1990). Pre-election polling was first documented in 1824 during the US presidential election, although some argue that the first appearances of modern polling were in 1916 or 1936 (Smith, 1990). The first examples of polls consisted of deductions based on the number of mentions in newspapers, betting odds and even the number of toasts brought to a presidential candidate (Smith, 1990). While the first occurrences of polls were relatively simple, nowadays polls are often the result of survey and past election data being analysed by a machine learning algorithm, the current state of the art being the Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo Estimation (MCMC) (Jennings & Wlezien, 2018). This model can give probability distributions based on multiple polls and applies both a temporal weight, containing how public opinion changes over time, and a house effect weight for each party (Jennings & Wlezien, 2018; Lock & Gelman, 2010). The house effect is a multiplier the model learns from past elections and polls and is different for each party. In practice, this means that when voters are for instance too ashamed or scared to tell others about what they would vote for, the model accounts for this by learning from past election

data how much larger or smaller the true party support should be estimated (*Hoe werkt de Peilingwijzer?*, n.d.; Lock & Gelman, 2010).

Even though polls have continuously improved in accuracy, they can still turn out to be wrong in what candidate or party will win. Far away from the elections, two party systems are often easier to predict, but volatile party systems with more and smaller political parties, such as in the Netherlands, are harder to predict (Bunker, 2025). In general, the rule 'the closer to the elections, the more accurate the prediction' can be applied, although there are some differences depending on what type of election system is in place. For instance, when polls are done closer to the elections, polls for volatile political party systems often predict the results more closely than two party systems, while further away from the elections it is the other way around (Graefe, 2019; Jennings et al., 2020). Beside the improvements made to the type and accuracy of polls, examples such as the election polls of the USA during the 2016 and 2020 elections show that they can still turn out to be wrong (Jiang et al., 2023). Different forms of polling have been experimented with, yet none have been able to fully accurately predict election outcomes (Graefe, 2019; Lock & Gelman, 2010). So, according to the literature, polls can only give an indication on how well parties perform and not exactly tell which party will win and by which margin.

2.2 Pre-election polls and final vote shares (SQ2)

As showcased in section 2.1, polls can give an indication on how parties will perform, but they can also affect voters behaviour (Branstetter et al., 2024; Jacobs, 2005; Louwerse & Van Dijk, 2022). Several case examples have been analysed over the last decades, which all found that polls influence voters' decisions (Brettschneider, 1992; Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa Tejero, 2025; Vowles, 2002). Polls and news media, which will be discussed in section 2.3, separately can already influence voters, but they can also strengthen each other's influence on voters (Geers et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2005; Louwerse & Van Dijk, 2022). They can for instance

lead to voters switching parties based on which party is doing well, which is called the bandwagon effect (Geers et al., 2019). The concept behind it is that people, in the case of election voters, choose to follow and vote for the winning party, which is explained by the natural human urge to belong to the winning or most successful group (Farjam, 2021; Henshel & Johnston, 1987). Polls often show which party is doing well, and therefore activate this mechanism (Geers et al., 2019; Henshel & Johnston, 1987). Next to the bandwagon effect, people might also vote strategically based on how well parties are doing in polls (Engle & Morsky, 2024; Poama & Rouméas, 2025). For instance, if party A and party B are doing well according to the polls, one might choose to vote for party A instead of party C because they do not want party B to become the largest party.

These behavioural mechanisms indicate that poll standings actively shape final vote distributions. This provides a basis for SQ2, which asks if there is a relationship between pre-election polls and final vote shares for the Dutch 2025 elections.

2.3 Media attention and party vote shares (SQ3)

News media, in the context of newspapers and online news outlets such as the NOS, Volkskrant, Telegraaf or NU.nl, play an important role in informing the public on politics leading up to an election date (Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025). The way how they communicate news can affect the voters. For instance, through the tone of the article, how neutral or personal the article speaks to the reader, or the type of communication, how factual or opinionated the article is. This either leads to more cynicism or motivation to learn more about politics among voters: highly personal and opinionated news articles lead to more cynicism, while highly neutral and factual news articles further stimulate readers (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers et al., 2017; Takens, 2013).

Another interesting influence on elections was found in the EU elections of 2014. Voters who already knew who to vote for became surer of their choice after reading more news articles on the elections, while voters who were still unsure who to vote for started hesitating even more

(Geers et al., 2017). This had to do with confirmation bias, meaning that voters subconsciously were confirmed in their opinion and choice. Voters also tend to give more weight to what they think of a party leader in their choice if that party leader is mentioned more often in news articles (Takens, 2013). While voters are influenced through what they see, the importance and influence of media attention during election time differs per country. For the Netherlands, news articles and coverage play a crucial role during campaigning time when compared to their neighbours (Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025). This is caused by the campaign budgets of Dutch political parties being lower compared to other European countries, resulting in less opportunities for parties to share their vision on television and on the streets and voters therefore having to gain information on parties and their plans from the news media (Jacobs, 2005; Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025).

In practice, the relation between polls, news media attention and election results are hard to prove. Studies in the past have attempted to capture this relationship by offering limited access to certain politically oriented newspapers or news channels to people (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Those studies found that there was a statistically significant relationship present between how parties or political leaders were portrayed through news articles and polls by quantifying party mentions and applying text analysis techniques such as sentiment analysis (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Druckman & Parkin, 2005). These studies are especially interesting for this research since they have a similar approach, the main difference being that these studies actively monitored the voters during the consumption of news, meaning that they could track how perception of parties changed over time. Specifically for the situation of the Netherlands, research found that in other recent elections news media influenced how voters perceived parties (De Jonge & Gaufman, 2022; Vermeer et al., 2024). It also suggests that smaller parties profit more from mentions in articles and media coverage than larger parties in the Dutch electoral system (Vermeer et al., 2024).

This is all related to SQ3 and demonstrates that the volume of media attention a party receives can influence electoral performance. It is also interesting to see if the mentioned importance of news media for the Netherlands can be seen in the results of the analyses.

2.4 Sentiment of media coverage (SQ4)

The appearance of political parties in news articles is one thing, but how they are portrayed is a different story. In the field of research on sentiment of news articles and their approaches of delivering information to the public there is a distinction between two types of news: Strategic news and substantive news. Strategic news uses stronger adjectives, verbs or tones in its representation of certain events or uses quotes that evoke emotions to get the attention of the reader. Substantive news on the other hand provides its readers with a more objective representation (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers et al., 2017). Where the goal of substantive news is to inform readers, strategic news aims to influence readers. The strategic news articles lead to more cynicism among its readers compared to readers who only have access to substantive news (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers et al., 2017).

In addition, there has also been research on sentiment of news articles. Sentiment in this context is seen as how positive or negative an article is about a political party or member of a party. It was found that a positive sentiment in news articles for a party made it more likely for voters to vote for that party (Hopmann et al., 2010). Other research found that a negative sentiment towards a party or party member can shift assessments of voters of that party or person (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Furthermore, voters react more strongly on news articles with a negative sentiment, which is called negativity bias and has to do with how our brain learns better from negative experiences than from positive experiences (Soroka & McAdams, 2015).

The distinction between different types of communication in news articles is relevant to SQ4. It demonstrates that the sentiment and framing of news coverage can shape voter

perceptions. This motivates the use of sentiment analysis to investigate how positive or negative news articles cover political parties and see if and to what extent this influences voters.

2.5 Synthesis and research approach

Building on the existing knowledge about the relation between polls and news media attention with election outcomes this thesis will take on a similar approach as other studies and apply it to the most recent Dutch parliamentary elections. It will investigate if polls are indeed indicators for the election outcome for these specific elections and to what extent news articles are correlated with the election outcome. It will do so by operationalizing media attention with counting the number of party appearances and the help of sentiment analysis, by gathering poll and by using the election outcome (Sharma et al., 2025; Taj et al., 2019). The following methodology section will cover how these data were collected and utilized.

3. Methodology

All data and notebooks are available through the GitHub repository link in Appendix B.

3.1 Data

3.1.1 News articles

Quantifying news media and its relationship with the election outcome is a difficult undertaking due to it being interconnected with polls and public opinion (Jacobs, 2005; Van Der Meer et al., 2023). For this thesis the relation of news media and the election outcome was measured through analysing news articles (N = 1106) from five different news publishers: De Volkskrant (n = 269), De Telegraaf (n = 263), NRC (n = 244), AD (n = 171) and NU.nl (n = 159). Those five were chosen because they represent a broad range of the news landscape of the Netherlands (*Netherlands Media Landscape*, n.d.; “The Netherlands,” n.d.). The news articles were

extracted through the Nexis Uni platform with the following search string (*Nexis Uni*, n.d.): D66 OR VVD OR Groenlinks-PvdA OR PVV OR CDA OR JA21 OR FvD OR BBB OR DENK OR SGP OR PvdD OR ChristenUnie OR SP OR 50PLUS OR VOLT. The decision to only include parties that received seats in the parliament or polls was made because they represent the general sentiment of the public, since the other parties were not chosen. In addition to this search string, the period in which the returned articles should have been published was set to 30-09-2025 to 28-10-2025. The articles will be used as independent variables in the data analysis, which will be further discussed in the method section.

3.1.2 Polls

Since polls also influence voters, the polls of the Peilingwijzer were collected to include in the research both as independent and dependent variables (Louwerse & Van Dijk, 2022; Van Der Meer et al., 2023). The polling station was selected because it aggregates polls of Ipsos I&O and EenVandaag/Verian into a more accurate poll due to it having a larger sample of the population and a more complex model (*Hoe werkt de Peilingwijzer?*, n.d.; Ipsos I&O, n.d.; Verian, n.d.). Ipsos I&O and EenVandaag/Verian both work with interviews, they ask a representative group of the population what they would vote for, and how sure they are. (Ipsos I&O, n.d.; Verian, n.d.). De Peilingwijzer combines the results of the two, resulting in a bigger sample size, and applies a Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo Estimation (*Hoe werkt de Peilingwijzer?*, n.d.). The model can, as explained in the literature review, give probability distributions based on multiple polls, Ipsos I&O and EenVandaag/Verian in this case. Two polls of the Peilingwijzer were selected, one of two weeks before the elections and one the day before the elections (Louwerse, 2025). The specific choice for these two polling moments was made so that for each of the polling moments two weeks of news articles was available, which also made it possible for a comparison between the first two weeks and last two weeks due to having the same time period of articles available.

3.1.3 Election results

The official results of the elections published by the Kiesraad, an independent organization with the task to supervision Dutch elections, are also used in the analysis as dependent variables (Kiesraad, 2025). The analysis will consist of multiple regression models that either use polls or the election outcome as dependent variables. The number of seats each party received were transformed into proportions. This will be further discussed in the method section.

3.1.4 Ethical considerations

This study touched upon political preferences, but on an aggregated level, so no sensitive individual political preferences were measured or collected. The news articles, polls and election results also did not contain sensitive information and were publicly available data, therefore the data in this study was not considered harmful or unethical to use. The data were saved both locally during the analysis and on the servers of the RUG. Afterwards, the data and code were published on GitHub (see Appendix B).

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Preprocessing

In order to answer the question to what extent the deviation between the polls and the election outcome can be explained by media attention, and thus what relation is present, several preprocessing steps and linear regression models were applied. The results could then be used and further expanded in future research to continue filling the gap of quantification of media attention and elections.

To quantify the collected news articles the data underwent several preprocessing steps. Firstly, for each article the parties mentioned in it were saved in new columns named after the party names (‘D66’ or ‘JA21’ for instance). Each row in the dataset represents one article, and

for each party name column a value 0 was assigned if the party was not present in the article, or a 1 if the party was named in it. As a result, each row contains the full article text, and columns containing 0's and/or 1's. Some articles that got in the dataset but did not actually contain any parties (so when all party columns contain a 0) were removed from the dataset, as well as any duplicated articles, which came in because a news publisher uploaded a new version of the article.

Afterwards, a sentiment analysis was applied to the articles, using RobBERT, a Dutch pretrained language model based on the BERT model (Delobelle, 2024; Delobelle et al., 2020). Sentiment analysis aims to capture the emotion or polarity, so how negative or positive, of a text. This can be done in multiple ways, for example through dictionary approaches where words are assigned a positivity and negativity value, or through deep learning approaches where models take context into account (Mao et al., 2024). RobBERT belongs to the deep learning category. More specifically it is a transformer-based model, which takes the full context into account when assigning a sentiment label, making it more suitable for capturing nuanced or ambiguous language than dictionary-based models (Delobelle et al., 2020).

The RobBERT model returned three values, all ranging between 0 and 1, for each article: a negativity score, a neutrality score and a positivity score. An overall sentiment score was then calculated using this formula:

$$sentiment\ score = (-1 * negative\ score) + (0 * neutral\ score) + (1 * positive\ score)$$

This returned a value between -1 and 1, -1 being extremely negative, 0 being neutral and 1 being extremely positive. This formula has been used before in sentiment analysis research to get one singular score (Jongeling et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2025; Taj et al., 2019). This score was stored in a new column called 'sentiment_score'.

The data was then handled as follows: The total number of mentions in articles for each party was aggregated, together with the average sentiment score for all those articles. The results were rows in which the party's name was the index, followed by a count on articles and an average sentiment score. In addition, the number of seats parties received in polls and election results were added to this dataset. These were also added in other columns in which they were proportionalized to benefit the training of the models to prevent any risk of bias seeping into the models. The data was then analysed to answer the sub-questions.

3.2.2 Analysis and modelling

3.2.2.1 Poll deviation measurement (SQ1)

The deviation between election polls and election results was calculated as the difference between the proportionalized poll estimate and the proportionalized election result for each party:

$$Party\ deviation =$$

$$proportionalized\ party\ poll\ result - proportionalized\ party\ election\ result$$

This was computed for both available polls, the one published on 14 October and the one published on 28 October. Based on these values, the mean absolute error (MAE) and root mean squared error (RMSE) were also calculated to summarize the overall accuracy of each poll. The MAE represents the actual number of seats difference between the polls and election results, while the RMSE penalizes larger deviations by squaring the errors before averaging, making it more sensitive to parties where the polls was particularly far off. A bar chart in the results section shows the deviation per party for both polling moments.

3.2.2.2 Pre-election polls and vote shares (SQ2)

The relationship between the final pre-election poll and the actual election results was examined using Pearson and Spearman correlations, as well as a simple linear regression. Both correlation measures were included because Pearson correlation assumes a linear relationship and is sensitive to outliers, while Spearman correlation is non-parametric, meaning that it does not assume that the data follows a certain pattern, and does not rely on assumptions about normality or linearity. Including both therefore provides a more complete picture of the relationship between the pre-election poll and election results by considering different type of correlations while also making the analysis more robust given the small sample size of fifteen parties. The linear regression was added to estimate the effect size and direction of the relationship between polls and election outcomes. In all cases the proportionalized election results served as the dependent variable and the proportionalized poll results from 28 October as the independent variable.

3.2.2.3 Media attention and election outcomes (SQ3)

The relation between media attention and election outcomes was examined using both Pearson correlations and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Media attention was operationalized as the normalized total number of news articles in which a party was mentioned over the full four-week campaign period. Separate correlations were computed between this attention measure and the final vote share, and between media attention and the absolute poll deviation to capture both the direct and indirect link. To include a temporal dimension as well, the four-week period was split into halves, and the same correlations were rerun separately for the first and last two weeks of the campaign. An OLS regression was also run in which both the poll estimate, and total media attention were included as predictors of the election result, this to check if media attention adds explanatory value to polls.

3.2.2.4 Sentiment and election outcomes (SQ4)

The relation between the sentiment of media coverage, and both election outcomes and poll deviation, was analysed in a similar way as media attention and election outcomes. Sentiment was operationalized as the average sentiment score per party across all articles in the campaign period, derived from the sentiment analysis as described in the preprocessing section. Pearson correlations were computed between sentiment and vote share, and between sentiment and poll deviation. An OLS regression was also applied, which included poll estimate, total media attention, average sentiment, and an interaction term between media attention and sentiment as predictors of the election result. This model allowed for testing whether sentiment conditions the relationship between attention and polls.

3.2.2.1 Post-hoc robustness checks

Finally, two post-hoc analyses were conducted. In the first, a regression model with only media attention to predict election results was used to assess the standalone contribution of media attention and to check whether the addition of polls in earlier models suppresses that relationship. In the second post-hoc analysis, an interaction variable was constructed as the product of the poll estimate and normalized media attention. This variable was then used in a regression to predict the election results, to examine whether the combination of polling level and media visibility captures electoral performance beyond what either variable achieves individually.

4. Results

4.1 Poll deviation from election results (SQ1)

The analysis of election results, pre-election polls and news articles produced several findings that are relevant for understanding how media attention affected the election outcome and thus

poll deviations. Figure 1 shows the deviations for the polls of 14 October and 28 October compared with the final election outcome. Bars above 0 indicate an overestimation of the number of seats, while bars below 0 indicate an underestimation. First, it was found that the largest poll deviations were mainly associated with the bigger parties. This suggests that the largest seat shifts occurred between parties that had already attracted substantial voter support in the weeks before the election, rather than among the smaller parties. In addition, the deviations were clearly smaller in the poll published two weeks before the election than in the poll published four weeks before the election, indicating that polling estimates became more accurate as election day approached.

4.2 Pre-election polls and vinal vote shares (SQ2)

The final pre-election poll was very strongly related to the actual election result, with a Pearson correlation of r (13) = .976, $p < .001$ and a Spearman correlation of ρ (13) = .971, $p < .001$. This means that, despite some party-level deviations, the polls were generally a strong indicator of overall party performance and vote shares.

4.3 Media attention and election outcomes (SQ3)

The media analysis adds a second dimension to these findings. The collected news articles show that parties that performed well in the election also tended to receive more media mentions in the four weeks prior to the election day, as illustrated in figure 2. This indicates that larger and electorally stronger parties were also more visible in the news. At the same time, analyses of poll deviation and media attention showed that the number of mentions was positively related to poll deviation, r (13) = .717, p = .002. In other words, parties that received more media attention were also parties for which poll estimates tended to deviate more from the final result. This pattern was even somewhat stronger for the final two weeks of articles than for the first

two weeks, suggesting that late-campaign media attention may be more closely linked to shifts in electoral support.

4.4 Sentiment of media coverage and election outcomes (SQ4)

The sentiment of news coverage, however, did not show the same importance. As shown in graph 3, the distribution of positive and negative articles was fairly similar across parties relative to their total number of mentions. Statistical analysis also showed no clear relationship between sentiment and poll deviation. The correlation between sentiment and poll deviation was weak and negative, r (13) = -.148, p = .584. This suggests that the sentiment of coverage mattered less than the overall amount of attention a party received and was not of importance for these election outcomes.

4.5 Post-hoc robustness checks

Finally, the modelling results underline that polls remained the strongest predictor of election outcomes. The number of media mentions and final election results were more strongly related to each other, r (13) = .880, $p < .001$, than the number of mentions and poll deviation, r (13) = .717, p = .002. However, when polls were included together with media variables in linear regression models, the polls dominated the explanation of election results, which is consistent with their very strong relationship to the final election results. Adding an interaction term between the latest poll and the number of mentions did not show that media attention independently outweighed polling, but it did produce a model with a high explanatory power, R^2 = .946. Overall, the results suggest that media attention is associated with both party size and poll deviation, while sentiment contributes little additional explanatory value. Tables containing the results of the analysis can be found in appendix A.

Figure 1

Poll Deviations for Each Political Party Compared to the Election Results, in Number of Seats

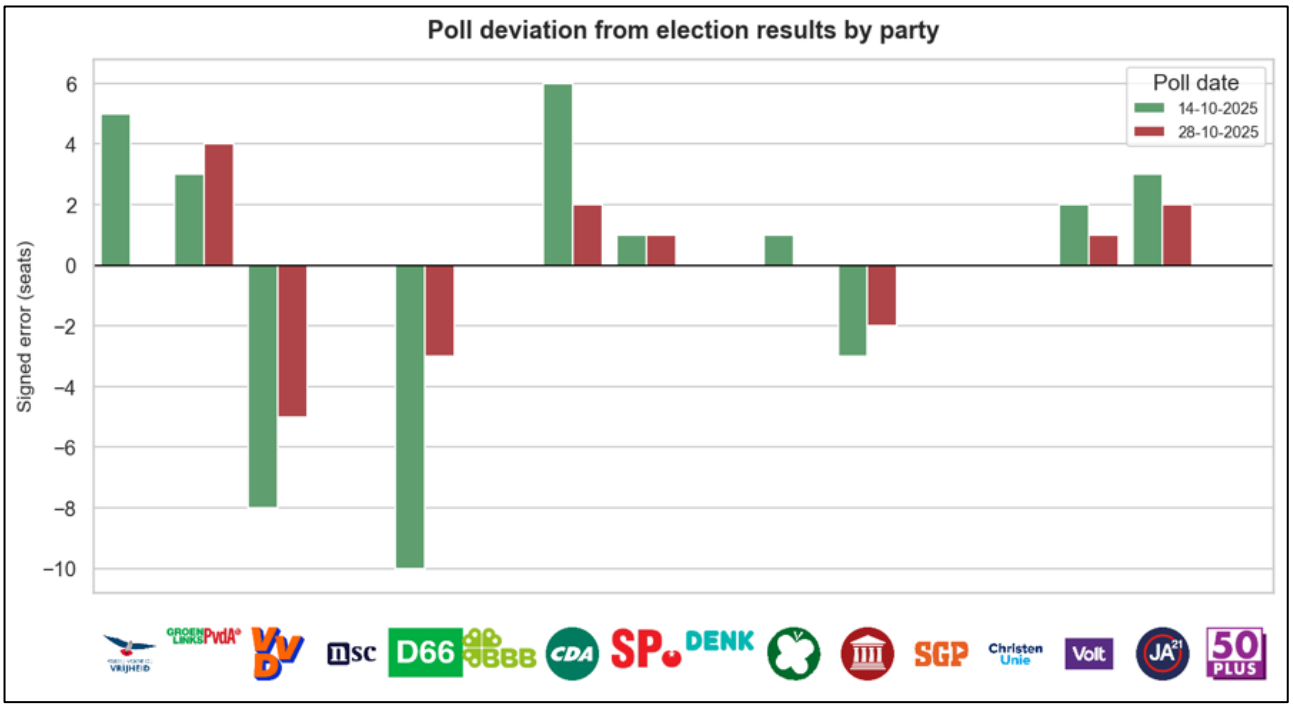


Figure 2

Total Number of Mentions per Party

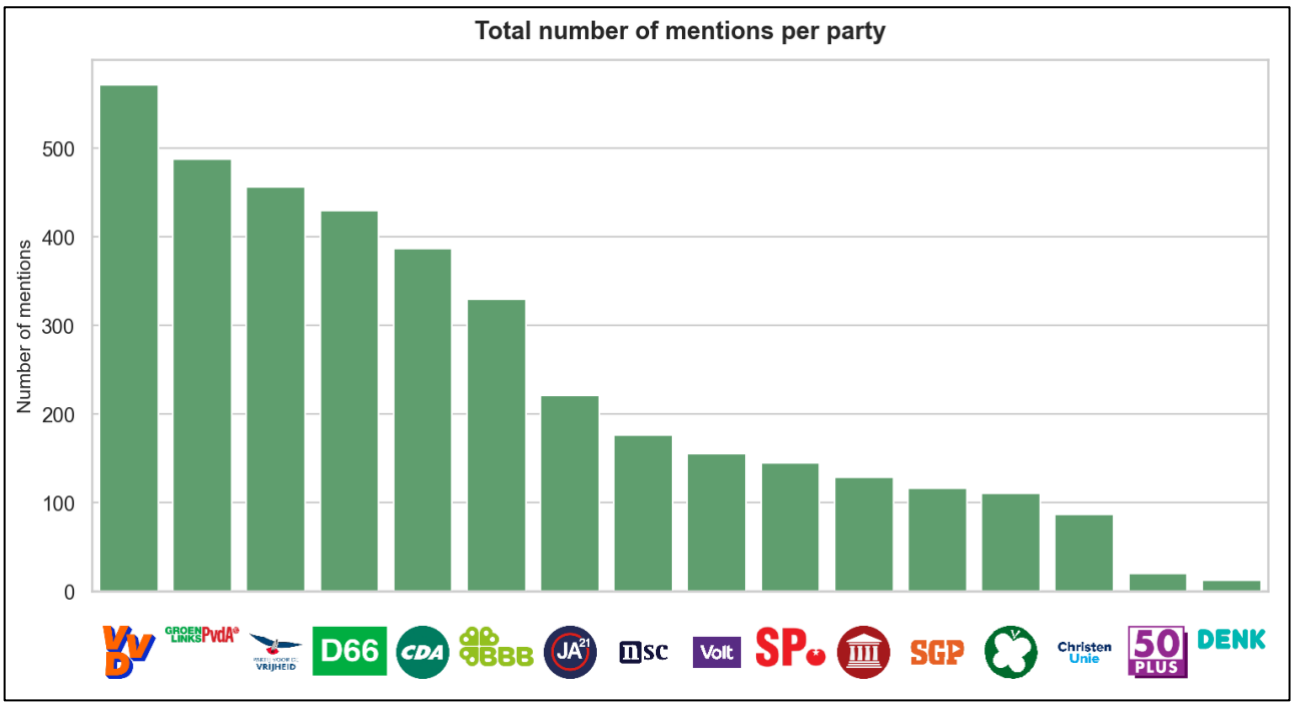
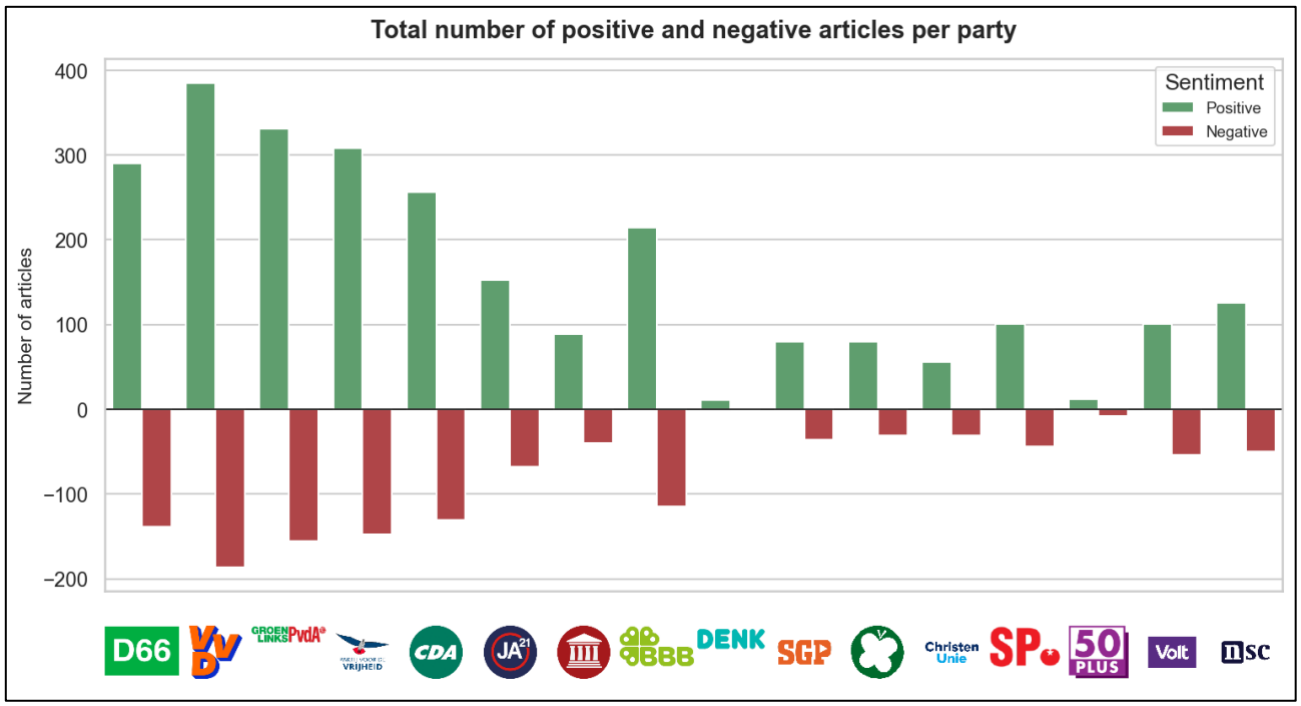


Figure 3

Total Number of Positive (above x-axis) and Negative (below x-axis) Articles per Political Party



5. Discussion

This section will cover insights taken from the results and a reflection on the research. It will first discuss the results and then focus on improvements and contributions that could be made in future scientific research.

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 Poll deviation from election results (SQ1)

To answer SQ1, to what extent do election polls deviate from election results, the results show that the largest poll deviations were associated with the biggest parties, suggesting that the most significant seat shifts occurred among parties that already had substantial voter support. In addition, the poll published closer to election day showed smaller deviations than the earlier

one, which is consistent with other findings that polling accuracy improves as the election day approaches (Graefe, 2019; Jennings et al., 2020).

5.1.2 Pre-election polls and final vote shares (SQ2)

Addressing SQ2, the very strong correlations found between pre-election polls and the actual election results r (13) = .976 and ρ (13) = .971, show that polls were a reliable indicator of overall party performance in the 2025 Dutch parliamentary elections. This suggests that, despite the deviations identified in SQ1, the polls were broadly tracking the electorate correctly in the final weeks of the campaign.

5.1.3 Media attention and election outcomes (SQ3)

Turning to SQ3, the results show a clear relation between the number of media mentions and election outcomes. It also makes sense that both the poll deviation and election results are affected by media attention, since the poll error is partly built up out of the election results, so if the election results are affected by media attention, then so is the poll deviation. Interestingly, however, the finding that the biggest deviations occurred for the largest parties does not fully align with earlier research on Dutch elections, which suggests that smaller parties profit more from media mentions than large ones (Vermeer et al., 2024). This does not mean that smaller parties profit more from media attention, it could be that this is not visible in the data because the polls only show numbers, and not the reason why voters voted for a small party. It could for instance be that, because Dutch political parties have lower campaign budgets, small parties can gain and keep the small number of seats during the election campaign because of media attention (Jacobs, 2005; Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2025). Future research could dive deeper into this through surveys or interviews with voters for instance.

While the results show a clear relation between the number of mentions and the elections, it is too simple to say that news media should be more careful in what or whom they

write about. Independent news media have the purpose to inform the public about events or happenings, even if that means that one party receives more mentions than others. For example, even during election time the country must be governed, meaning that parties currently being part of this government receive more attention, because they have to act and make decisions, which in turn leads to more media attention. It is good to be critical and analyse these findings to see if there are unfair patterns visible, such as biased articles or interference with news media. This, however, must be done in a careful manner and should not just be done based on this individual research but with a broader view, this to prevent false claims or unwarranted accusations towards the media. To notice patterns, it is needed to take a broader period to look at different Dutch elections and media attention during the campaigns while also using more news articles to build a stronger evidence base before making any claims about the effect of news media on elections.

5.1.4 Sentiment of media coverage and election outcomes (SQ4)

Addressing SQ4, the finding that the sentiment of news articles does not influence voter behaviour was an unexpected one. It was thought that parties with many critical news articles would lose some seats in the elections compared to the polls, as was shown in literature on media bias and sentiment, but this was not found (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Perhaps when a voter prefers a party, they are less inclined to be influenced by negative sentiment for that party, which has to with confirmation bias. The finding is, however, consistent with earlier research on voter confidence, which showed that voters who already decided who to vote for tend to become more confident in their choice after reading more election news, regardless of its tone (Geers et al., 2017). A further explanation may lie in the news articles themselves. If the majority of Dutch political news is substantive news rather than strategic, meaning that it is mostly objective, then the sentiment captured by RobBERT may simply be too weak to meaningfully alter voter intentions (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers et al.,

2017). Another possibility could be that the human brain only mainly registers the presence of a certain party name, and that the sentiment associated with a party in that article is not as strongly saved in memory as the presence of the name, but this must be researched further. Other research could look deeper into these questions by investigating the Dutch news media landscape to determine whether more substantive or strategic news is being published and to further research how news is perceived by its readers. In this regard, monitoring people while they consume news media and actively labelling articles as substantive or strategic could be a strategy to research this.

5.1.5 Main research question

Bringing together the answers to all four sub-questions, the results show that poll deviations can be explained with media attention for the Dutch 2025 parliamentary elections using the news articles in the weeks prior to the election. A nuance that must be added to this is that media attention was defined as the number of mentions and the sentiment for a party, yet it was found that only the number of mentions were of importance. The finding that media attention is so strongly correlated with polls and election results underline the importance of independence of news broadcasters and their responsibility in delivering information to the public.

5.2 Limitations

The research done in this thesis has several shortcomings and led to potential additional research ideas that could be executed in the future.

5.2.1 Limited media coverage

The news media that were selected do not cover the entire Dutch media landscape. As mentioned earlier in the data section, the five selected news publishers cover the general range

of publishers with their political orientation and size. This however still leaves out prominent outlets such as NOS, RTL and various smaller newspapers and regional broadcasters. The exclusion of the NOS is particularly noteworthy, given that it is the largest public news broadcaster in the Netherlands and therefore has a significant reach. The data of the NOS was however not available, multiple requests were made to gain access to the news articles of the time period before the elections, but the replies redirected to the general search function on their website. It was considered unfeasible to gather articles this way since there was no possibility to create a search string or filter on date, meaning that it was impossible to know whether all relevant articles were collected or not. Since partly collecting articles without knowing how many were not collected could lead to unwanted and unknown bias in the analysis it was decided to leave the articles out entirely. Future research on the same topic could include more news media such as the NOS to improve the quality of the research and its findings. To accomplish this considering the problems described above, one could work with a team to gather the news articles from the websites and cross check each other's work or attempt a collaboration with the news broadcasters.

5.2.2 Single election case

This thesis research only looks at one election, the Dutch 2025 parliamentary elections. The findings in this research can thus only be applied to this specific election and cannot be generalized to explain or investigate other elections. To make claims about Dutch elections, or elections in general, more research and case studies must be done and compared with each other. The differences in type of elections across and within countries makes this a difficult undertaking, since comparisons can be hard to draw, yet is the only way to eventually make broader and more generalizable claims about the relation between media attention and elections.

5.2.3 Excluded variables and campaign elements

This research only looks at news media attention, polls and their relationship with election outcomes. The campaigning time before the elections is more complex than what polls and news articles alone can capture. Appearances in TV-shows, public debates, opinion makers and social media posts all contribute to how the public opinion might shift in the weeks leading up to an election (Norris, 2000; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). News articles and polls only reflect these other factors to a certain extent. Future research could dive deeper into the full pre-election period and also incorporate those additional variables in the analysis to investigate how much each aspect independently contributes to election outcomes.

5.2.4 Methodological limitations in sentiment analysis

A methodological shortcoming in this thesis. State of the art automated sentiment analysis was used to quantify the tone of news articles. While this approach allows for processing large volumes of text, it may not fully capture the nuances or context-dependent meanings in the articles due to unique political discussions or new information which has not been added to the corpus. A hybrid approach, combining automated and human annotation sentiment analysis, could lead to more precise sentiment scores and potentially produce different results regarding the role of news article sentiment and poll deviations (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

6. Conclusion

The goal of this research was to identify the poll error of the Dutch 2025 parliamentary elections and to investigate if this error could be explained by media attention. The main findings of this thesis show that the number of mentions a political party received in the weeks before the elections have a clear positive relationship with both poll deviation and election results,

meaning parties that received many seats also received many mentions in the weeks before the elections. It also found that large parties contributed the most to the poll deviations during this election, meaning that most votes moved between large parties in the last weeks before the election date. Whether the sentiment in the news articles was positive or negative did not matter when comparing it with the number of seats won. Taken together, these findings answer the main research question: media attention for political parties in the weeks before the 2025 Dutch parliamentary elections was positively related to poll deviation, indicating that the extent to which polls deviated from results was partly associated with the media visibility of those parties.

These findings mostly align with what previous research has shown about the Dutch media-election dynamic. Given that Dutch political parties operate with relatively low campaign budgets compared to their European neighbours, news media coverage plays an important role in shaping the public perception during the campaign period. The fact that the number of mentions appears to drive both poll deviation and election results is consistent with earlier findings that a party name in the news may be sufficient to reinforce or shift voter preferences, regardless of the sentiment with which this party is covered. This last point, that the presence of a party in a news article might be enough to sway or reinforce a voter, might be an interesting finding to investigate further in future research.

This research contributed to the academic field of election and polling analysis in the hope that future research on the influences on Dutch elections or elections in general can dive even deeper into the topic. The finding that sentiment of news articles does not seem to matter might be an interesting starting point for future research, as well as the shortcomings of the number of news articles and the inclusion of other variables such as social media and political debates. A possible explanation for the sentiment finding is that voters process news in line with their existing preferences: those who have already made up their mind use new information

primarily as confirmation of their prior choice, a mechanism known as confirmation bias, whereas more uncertain voters may experience cognitive overload when confronted with large amounts of contradictory coverage, leaving them no more decided than before.

For politicians and news outlets, these findings should serve as a reminder that the independence of news outlets and journalists is an important pillar of our democracy and should be protected. This is to ensure fair elections and reporting of important events in the world, especially in these sometimes-turbulent times. Awareness on how media attention can shape electoral outcomes, even unintentionally, is a responsibility shared by politics, news publishers and us as voters. This is the central lesson that can be concluded from this thesis, the amount of attention news media gives to parties is measurably linked to how elections unfold, and that demands conscious reflection from everyone involved in the democratic process.

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8. Appendixes

8.1 Appendix A; Analysis tables

Table 1

Average Polling Error for All Parties Compared to Election Results

Poll	**Mean Absolute error (seats)**	**Root Mean Squared Error (seats)**
14-10-2025	2.63	4.02
28-10-2025	1.25	2.00

Table 2

Correlation Metrics between Different Variables

Metric	*r*	*p*
Pearson corr (poll, result)	.976	< .001
Spearman corr (poll, result)	.971	< .001
Corr (media attention, vote share)	.880	< .001
Corr (media attention, abs poll error)	.717	.002
Corr (media attention first two weeks, vote share)	.816	< .001
Corr (media attention first two weeks, abs poll error)	.667	.005
Corr (media attention last two weeks, vote share)	.907	< .001
Corr (media attention last two weeks, abs poll error)	.739	.001
Corr (sentiment, vote share)	-.166	.539
Corr (sentiment, abs poll error)	-.148	.584

Note. *corr = correlation, abs = absolute*

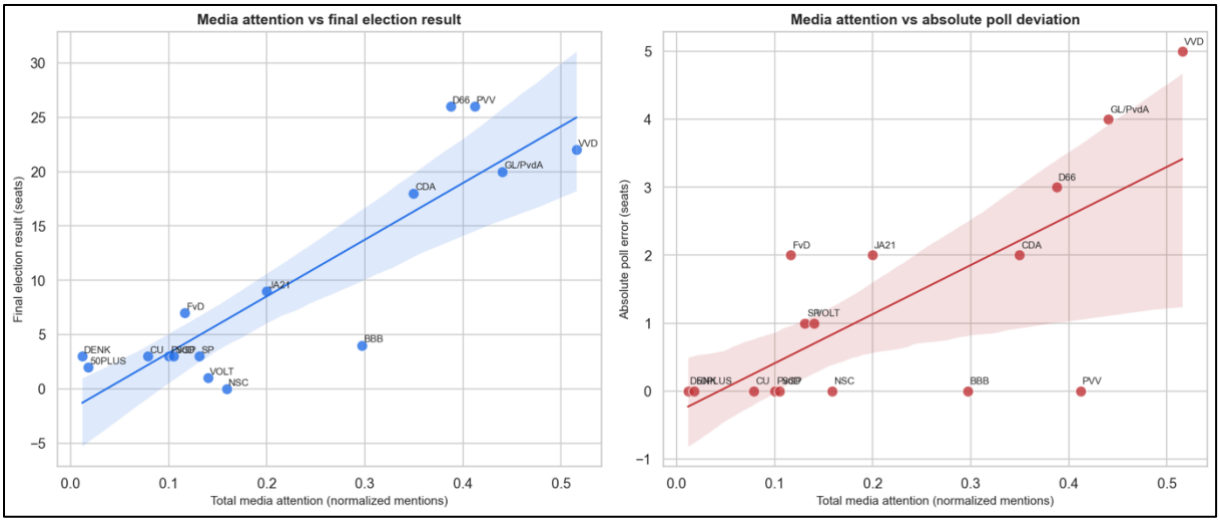
8.2 Appendix B; GitHub repository link

https://github.com/DitmerdH/bachelor_thesis_media_attention_elections.git

8.3 Appendix C; Extra graphs

Figure 4

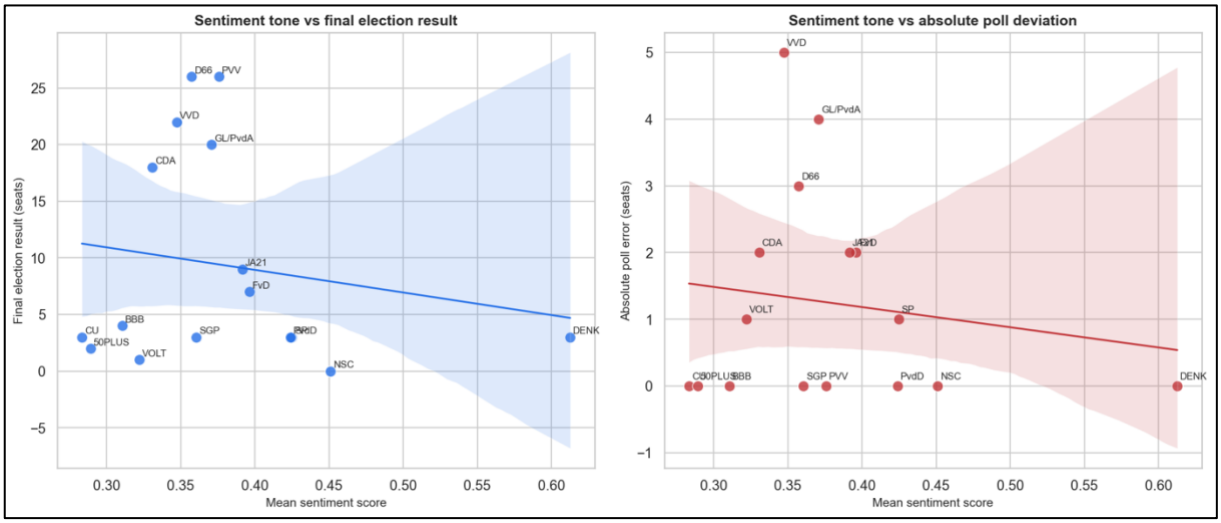
Regression Results of Media Attention againts (1) Election Results and (2) Absolute Poll Error



Note N = 15 (one data point per political party), shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5

Regression Results of Sentiment againts (1) Election Results and (2) Absolute Poll Error



Note N = 15 (one data point per political party), shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals