

**From COVID-19 to controversial freedom restrictions in the media,  
from incumbency bonus to political fragmentation**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis at the onset of 2020, pushing other issues off the media agenda. A rally behind the flag effect showed up in the polls, promising an incumbency bonus for governing parties. The research question here is which factors led to political fragmentation in elections one year later. The data come from a content analysis of newspapers, television and web content, and from a panel survey during the election campaign preceding the March 2021 elections in the multiparty system of the Netherlands. The data suggest that political fragmentation resulted from audience fragmentation in a networked world, a shift in the media agenda from health issues to controversial solutions, the comeback of traditional issues just before the elections, and the middle-of-the road issue positions of the mainstream governing parties that made them indistinguishable for many voters.