

# Vici for Professor Rens Vliegenthart

## Study about framing discontent

**The angry citizen is a household term. There is a lot of discontent in society, which politicians exploit. Populism reigns supreme. But how does that work, exactly? How do politicians deploy the language of discontent and to what effect? That's what Professor Rens Vliegenthart will investigate over the next five years.**

The central concept in the study is 'discontent framing'. 'That is a communication style used by politicians to put citizens' dissatisfaction into words,' explains Vliegenthart. 'One element of it is the

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use of populist rhetoric, us-and-them polarities and agitation against the elite. It's all about how

you use language to present issues and position yourself.'

'A second element is saying malicious things about others,' he continues. 'A third is using disinformation or fake news or accusing someone else of doing so. Discontent framing involves one or more of these elements. I want to understand what that looks like, which politicians do it and whether it varies from one issue to another in the way it affects citizens and political decision-making.'

One of the ways in which Vliegenthart and his team are going to tackle their subject is to analyse large quantities of speech by politicians. 'Manually, but also using digital methods. We will be looking at three arenas: social media, traditional media and the political arena of party programmes, parliamentary questions and



Rens Vliegenthart • Photo Duncan de Fey

debates. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of utterances here. So it's number-crunching big time. We will also conduct surveys and experiments.'

### Climate change

Vliegenthart will be zooming in on three themes: climate change, Covid-19 and immigration. He sees these topics as typical polarization material used by politicians. But what is the scale of that polarization? 'It is often thought that angry citizens cause polarization. That the Netherlands is practically going up in flames because of discontent. But is that really the case? I want to get past the

assumptions; I want to measure it.'

The study will produce scientific articles and a few dissertations. But Vliegenthart also wants to write a book for a wider audience and develop teaching materials for secondary schools. 'And not just for schools, but preferably for vocational colleges, where this knowledge might be even more sorely needed. Of course I also want to confront the politicians themselves with the consequences of a particular communication style.' RK