



Learning Who Belongs

Media Framing and Legitimacy Construction of Religious Schools in
the Netherlands

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Abstract

Religious schools in the Netherlands have long been a source of democratic tension. Religious education is protected in the constitution under Article 23, which means that schools can teach based on their own beliefs while receiving funding from the government. However, while some consider Article 23 as contributing to a diverse society, others argue that religious schools do not benefit social cohesion and teach discriminatory ideas. Public discourse on religious schools makes visible a particular tension between different democratic principles. Religious schools, different values, and the role of the government can be framed differently to either problematize or legitimize them. These framings construct the interpretive resources through which citizens encounter and evaluate the debate, raising questions of who and what are considered to have a rightful place in a democratic society.

The thesis aims to analyse media framings of legitimacy surrounding religious schools, studying what this means for the interpretive resources available to citizens. It draws on an understanding of civic education as a lifelong and communicative process. After finishing school, we spend most of our lives being educated through the media. Therefore, how legitimacy is constructed has implications for how citizens encounter and evaluate democratic issues. By conducting a longitudinal constructionist framing analysis of three Dutch newspapers – De Volkskrant, Trouw, and De Telegraaf – shifts in legitimacy constructions over time and across outlets are studied. The research suggests that the newspaper coverage has become more polarized over time, with deliberative frames appearing less often in recent years. This narrows the interpretive resources available to citizens, which has implications for civic learning opportunities through media. Moreover, Islamic and Christian schools seem to be structurally framed differently, with Islamic schools facing more delegitimization. Lastly, the newspapers construct legitimacy differently, meaning that the outlet a citizen engages with shapes the environment through which they encounter and evaluate issues. The thesis illustrates that media framing does not just report on democratic tensions but actively shape how democratic life is constructed and contested.

Keywords: *Legitimacy, Media Framing, Civic Education, Religious Schools, Dutch Newspapers, Longitudinal Study*

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Introduction

On October 20th of 2025, the Dutch politician Henri Bontenbal stated: “In a pluralistic society, opinions that differ from your own will always cause tension” (NOS, 2025b). His statement was in response to an investigation by Nieuwsuur, a Dutch current affairs program, that reported Reformed and Islamic schools are teaching students conflicting messages. Dutch schools are obligated to teach about democratic values such as equality and tolerance, yet because Freedom of Education is enshrined in the constitution, schools are also allowed to base their education on religious beliefs. Nieuwsuur reported that Reformed schools do teach about principles such as equality, but also oppose these teachings by instructing students that women should act subservient to men and refrain from taking on leadership roles (NOS, 2025a). Despite following the civic education guidelines, some schools simultaneously teach and contradict them by, for example, speaking out against homosexual relationships. This highlights the tension between the principles of equality and freedom of education.

Some, such as Bontenbal, argue that religious education is allowed to be in conflict with the constitutional principle of equality (NOS, 2025b). He finds it important for a diverse society to have the freedom to have and practice diverse beliefs. Others are of the opinion that religious education is outdated and not befitting for a democratic society such as the Netherlands (Kamphuis & Bertram-Troost, 2023, p. 1). The tension surrounding religious education has been longstanding; it was present before freedom of education was first enshrined in the Dutch constitution in 1848, and still causes public debate nowadays (Ter Avest et al., 2007, pp. 204–205).

Public discourse on religious schools in the Netherlands makes the tension between different democratic values especially visible. The debate involves the conflict between two constitutional rights, namely freedom of education and equal treatment, which affect schools, students, parents, and communities. Through media framing, religious schools, different values, and the role of the government are made either legitimate or problematic. Citizens encounter these frames which shape the space through which they can understand democratic values and institutions.

Legitimacy is central to this research because it shapes whether institutions or constitutional articles are perceived as having a rightful place in a democratic society. As Peters (2007, pp. 97–98) argues, legitimacy is not a fixed property, but it is embedded in people’s beliefs and

produced through public discourse, creating a dynamic concept that shifts over time. Media framing selects and emphasizes particular aspects of reality (Entman, 1993, p. 52), making it an important mechanism through which legitimacy is constructed in public discourse as it shapes how institutions and democratic principles are represented and evaluated. The debate about religious schools comes down to the question of whether institutions have a rightful place in the Netherlands. Therefore, legitimacy is not just a useful concept but the core to what the debate is about; religious schools' existence and practices are being justified or challenged based on perceived legitimacy.

While formal education plays an important role in shaping students to become active democratic citizens, we keep learning long after finishing school (Dewey, 1997, pp. 4–7). Civic learning is a continuous process as we keep learning through encountering others, public discourse, and through active participation in democratic life. Howells (2001, pp. 160–161) argues we spend most of our lives being educated by the media, as it is one of the most important environments through which individuals encounter public life. Therefore, media framing's construction of legitimacy contributes to how citizens encounter public issues and evaluate institutions. While existing research on civic education mostly focuses on formal education (Crittenden & Levine, 2007), the role of media framing remains relatively unexplored, especially regarding how legitimacy constructions made available by newspapers shape the interpretive resources citizens encounter. These resources refer to the frameworks of understanding that are constructed through media framing, and through which citizens encounter, evaluate, and make sense of democratic issues.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how three major Dutch newspapers, *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*, and *Trouw*, construct legitimacy in their coverage of religious schools over the past five decades. Through Van Gorp's (2010) constructionist framing analysis, the thesis identifies how frame packages engage different dimensions of Beetham's (2013) framework of legitimacy, and how these constructions have shifted over time. We spend most of our lives being educated by media, therefore, it is important to understand how legitimacy is constructed through media framing and what this means for the interpretive resources citizens use to evaluate public issues.

Research Questions and Outline

The main research question is as follows: *How is legitimacy surrounding religious schools constructed through media framing in Dutch newspaper coverage?*

Three sub-questions will guide this analysis:

RQ1: How are religious schools represented and evaluated in newspaper coverage?

RQ2: How do the frame packages relate to Beetham's (2013) three dimensions of legitimacy?

RQ3: How do framings differ across the three newspapers and over time?

The thesis is structured in four main parts. First, the literature review argues that media framing constructs legitimacy, shaping the interpretive resources through which citizens encounter and evaluate institutions and actors. It builds the theoretical framework for analysing the data and answering the research questions. Second, the method and methodology section explains and reflects on the chosen methods. The chapter justifies why Van Gorp's (2010) framing method fits the aim of this research and why the case of religious schools in the Netherlands is especially relevant. Third, the analysis presents the four identified frame packages: *Religious Schools as Socially Problematic*; *Freedom of Education as a Constitutional Right*; *State Responsibility for Regulation*; and *Religious Schools as a Site of Democratic Tension*. It showcases the underlying reasonings the frames portray and highlights the different treatment Islamic and Christian schools receive. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the key findings, answers the research questions, and reflects on the implications of media framing on civic learning.

Literature review

This chapter discusses three key themes of the thesis: civic learning as a mediated and lifelong process, legitimacy as socially constructed and contested, and framing as a mechanism through which legitimacy is produced in public discourse. It aims to connect these to each other to argue that newspapers, through framing, construct the interpretive resources through which legitimacy can be understood and evaluated by citizens. In doing so, I argue that media do not only report on public issues; they actively structure the information environment in which citizens learn about issues and evaluate them.

Civic Learning as a Lifelong Mediated Process

A Lifelong Communicative Process

Philosopher and educational reformer Dewey (1893, p. 660) once wrote: “Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life.” Civic education does not only consist of the classes one gets taught in school, instead it is a lifelong process taking place in all instances of life (Dewey, 1997, pp. 4–7). John Dewey’s conception of civic education still has a large influence in our current understandings and practices of civic education (Zorić, 2015, pp. 427–428). He emphasized the importance of fostering critical thinking, shared experience, and active lifelong learning. Correspondingly, Schugurensky and Myers (2003, p. 347) see the development of civic competences and values as a continuous process in our lives, albeit it mainly unconscious. Citizens do not just participate in democracy but actively live it through everyday encounters and interactions with public issues. In this perspective, all communication and therefore all aspects of social life are educative (Dewey, 1997, p. 7).

However, since civic education is a broad concept, there is no clear agreed upon definition among scholars (Muleya, 2018, pp. 27–29). The concept is contested in academia and shaped by different theoretical perspectives. Muleya (2018) highlights how civic education is understood in multiple ways, from limited understandings of knowledge to broader interpretations including identity, participation, and lived experience. The diversity in understandings of civic education reflects how it is not limited to formal schooling but embedded in a wider social context. Following the broad approach to civic education, this thesis understands it as a continuous process in everyday communication and practices, which includes interactions with others and engagement with media.

Despite the broad conception of civic education, where it is treated as an overarching concept that happens through everyday life, this is often not how it is researched. A significant amount of literature still situates civic education only within the formal schooling system and, thus overlooks the role of informal and lifelong learning (Crittenden & Levine, 2007; Schugurensky & Myers, 2003, p. 348). According to Crittenden and Levine (2007), this has to do with the fact that schools are often tasked with teaching civic education, making it a suitable place for research. Moreover, they point out how civic habits and values are easier to influence when people are still young.

Schools do play a central role in teaching children how to live a democratic life, as their purpose is often to encourage civic participation and enable citizens to become active participants in community life (Drisko, 1993, p. 105; Nieuwelink et al., 2016, p. 1). They do not only inform the students but actively contribute to development of skills and values. Similarly, Dewey (1997, p. 286) argued schools should serve as mini communities, functioning as a space where values, skills and practices are reproduced. But while schools play an important role, they represent only one part of a broader process of civic education that continues outside these institutions. When civic learning is limited to formal education, we risk overlooking how citizens continue civic learning throughout adulthood.

Civic learning is understood as being embedded in communication, which is why engagement with media becomes central to civic education. Howells (2001, p. 160) argues that once formal education has ended, people spend most of their lives being educated by the media. Especially media that are meant to inform, such as newspapers, play an important role in civic learning. The way articles frame public discourse shapes the conditions under which citizens encounter and evaluate issues. The focus is shifted from what citizens are being taught in schools to the communicative environments through which civic learning can occur.

Mediated Learning

Media have become one of the most important environments through which individuals encounter public life. Acknowledging the notion that civic education is a lifelong process that continues after school into adulthood, Howells (2001, p. 160) states: “The result is that whenever we complete our formal education, we spend the majority of our lives being educated by the media.” Livingstone and Markham (2008, p. 368) support this by showing that media engagement is connected to civic participation, suggesting that how issues are presented in media does more than just informing citizens.

Shah et al. (2009, p. 102) expand on this argument by linking media use to the development of communication competences, which they emphasize as an important civic skill.

Communication competences involve the ability to engage in discussion, interpret information, and participate in deliberative activities. These skills are not solely developed by attending school but are shaped through communication and engagement with media and public discourse (Lee et al., 2013, p. 686; Shah et al., 2009, p. 114). Therefore, routine engagement with media, such as interpreting and evaluating arguments, can be a form of civic learning, even if it is a passive activity.

However, the role of media in civic education has long been a contested topic. Lippmann (1922, pp. 24–30) argued that media simplified complex political realities, leading to citizens relying on stereotypes rather than fully understanding the complexities of social life.

Similarly, Postman (1987, p. 29) criticized the shift toward entertainment oriented media, arguing it undermines serious public discourse. He did however state that media such as newspapers allow for reflection and rationality that he considered necessary for serious public discourse (Postman, 1987, p. 63). Their criticism points out that media do not simply educate, but structure how information is selected, simplified, and interpreted for the public.

Being exposed to media does not automatically lead to informed or critical engagement as this is heavily dependent on context. This conditional understanding of media's role in civic education is supported by Livingstone and Markham (2008) in an empirical study. The authors suggest news engagement can cause a virtuous cycle, where citizens who are already politically engaged become more interested and active in civic life. Conversely, those who are unengaged may experience a vicious cycle and become even less interested or involved in politics. Factors such as prior knowledge, education, and motivation impact citizens information seeking behaviours (Livingstone & Markham, 2008, p. 353), as does media literacy more broadly, which has been shown to contribute to more engaged democratic attitudes and behaviours (Tully & Vraga, 2018, pp. 167–169). Similarly, Howells (2001, p. 161) argues an informed and critical public is needed to avoid education from turning into persuasion, or information from turning into propaganda.

Even though media consumption does not automatically lead to civic learning, they remain a central site of civic education. Media do not directly teach citizens what to think, but they do select and frame issues through which citizens can make sense of them. Porto (2007, pp. 310–311) argues that civic competence is not developed just through political knowledge, but it is

enhanced through the availability of diverse interpretive frames in the public sphere. By routinely engaging with these interpretive resources, civic learning opportunities are provided to citizens through interpretation, comparison, and evaluation.

Citizens who encounter a range of different framings of public issues are better positioned to evaluate competing claims and develop their own arguments than those who only encounter a single dominant frame (Porto, 2007). This shifts the focus from what individual citizens know to what interpretive resources are available to them. To come to an understanding of how these interpretive resources are constructed, media needs to be placed inside a broader communicative environment. This space is often conceptualized as the public sphere, where public discourse takes place and where shared understandings of political and social issues are formed (Habermas, 1964, pp. 49–50). In this public sphere, media play an important role in shaping how issues are presented and evaluated, especially in relation to legitimacy.

Legitimacy and the Public Sphere

Legitimacy as Socially Constructed

Legitimacy is central for understanding how institutions and authorities are evaluated, justified, and accepted in a society. Legitimacy construction shapes whether institutions such as religious schools are seen as legitimate or problematic in a democratic society. Peters (2007, p. 98) discusses legitimacy as the relationship between people and parts of the political system, requiring people to have beliefs that motivate support and compliance with the rules. In this understanding, legitimacy is not produced by the institutions themselves, but in the perceptions and evaluations of citizens. These beliefs appear in public discourse that evaluates, affirms, or challenges institutions' actions. Legitimacy can both be rationalist, based on reasoning, and non-rationalist, based on belief and identity (Peters, 2007, pp. 98–99). This becomes especially relevant in public discourse where different types of legitimacy appear and compete. For example, rationalist arguments can relate to legality or rules while non-rationalist arguments are based on beliefs or identity.

Because legitimacy lives in citizens' beliefs and not in the institutions themselves, it is socially constructed by being produced and reproduced through public discourse. As Peters (2007, p. 88) argues, public discourse is a primary mechanism through which culture is reproduced and social change occurs. Therefore, legitimacy is not simply a static and given phenomenon, but it is dependent on ongoing communication. Public discourse can affirm,

challenge or even change existing claims of legitimacy. This highlights how legitimacy is an inherently dynamic and unstable concept and is able to change over time.

Beetham (2013, pp. 15–16) discussed three dimensions of legitimacy, providing a framework for evaluating this legitimacy construction. Firstly, power has to conform to established rules, ensuring that actions follow procedures or laws that are recognized. Secondly, the rules can be justified by reference to shared beliefs and values. Thirdly, there needs to be evidence of consent by the public, which, for instance, can be demonstrated through active participation. Together, these three dimensions or levels constitute the conditions under which power is perceived as legitimate. Which shapes whether institutions, constitutional articles, and democratic principles are considered legitimate or problematic. Moreover, it is important to mention that these three dimensions do not operate separately. For example, a frame that invokes legal rules without justification through shared beliefs may not appear legitimate, even if it does follow the established rules.

Beetham's (2013) framework provides the analytical perspective needed to examine how media framing constructs legitimacy. While Beetham did not design his framework for media analysis such as analyzing frames in newspapers, the three dimensions provide the analytical language for identifying how legitimacy is structured in media. When a frame calls upon a constitutional rule, it engages with the first dimension. If it appeals to shared values, such as equality or tolerance, it engages with the second dimension. When it presents public opinion, it shows evidence of consent and engages with the third. It is through the combination of Beetham's (2013) dimensions, and the way frames use or contest them, that turns framing into a mechanism of legitimacy construction. Therefore, media framing does not just report on legitimacy, it actively participates in constructing it through selecting which legitimacy dimension to use, which actors to legitimize, and which values to treat as most important.

The Public Sphere and Legitimacy

The processes through which legitimacy is produced and contested take place in the public sphere. Habermas (1964, p. 49) defines the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”. It is a space in which citizens form shared opinions and evaluative standards through public discourse. In Habermas' understanding, the bourgeois public sphere first emerged in the 18th century, where individuals came together to discuss and debate (Calhoun, 1992, p. 21). The public sphere mediated between private life and the state, and in it public opinion was formed that could

potentially criticize or even constrain the government, thus, legitimizing or problematizing. The public sphere functions as a space where legitimacy is continuously negotiated and evaluated.

Habermas' first account of the public sphere faced significant critique, as it excluded people based on gender, race, and class (Calhoun, 1992). Moreover, he received criticism for idealizing a singular public while disregarding the formation of counter publics. Despite the criticism, Habermas' core principles of inclusive debate, rational discourse, and forming opinions remain relevant. However, where the public sphere was first imagined as face to face, modern interpretations of the public sphere recognize that public discourse is mediated through mass and digital media (Benson, 2008, p. 3). This change has led to a more diverse media through which public discourse occurs (Fischer & Jarren, 2024, p. 211), expanding the space in which legitimation is constructed and evaluated.

Within the public sphere, media can serve multiple functions: it can structure the public agenda (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147), provide frames (Entman, 1993), and mediate the communication through which citizens can evaluate social issues (Fischer & Jarren, 2024, p. 201). News media play an important role in public discourse, as journalists are able to simplify complex issues and provide citizens with understandable information (Fischer & Jarren, 2024). A public sphere can disseminate ideas into the public for discussion and debate, which can lead to creating a dynamic democratic society. In this public sphere, public opinion is formed as institutions are evaluated, justified, and contested.

However, the public sphere is not a neutral space, as those in power and existing structures influence which issues get discussed and who is given attention. Benson (2008, p. 19) argues that media, through journalists, contribute to defining who or what counts as a legitimate actor in the public sphere. Journalists create visibility to specific individuals, groups, or institutions and decide how they are presented. In doing so, they influence who is seen as legitimate or relevant in public discourse. For instance, through emphasizing one of Beetham's (2013) legitimacy dimensions such as justifiability based on shared beliefs or evidence of consent. At the same time, media can also be constrained depending on ownership structures and commercial pressures, as market demands influence journalistic selection and content (Fischer & Jarren, 2024, pp. 202–203).

The public sphere is the space where Beetham's (2013) abstract legitimacy dimensions become more concrete and visible. Certain cases make these processes more visible than

others, especially when they involve tensions about competing values or principles (Patriotta et al., 2011, p. 1809). For instance, debates about the role of religion in institutions such as schools can highlight this legitimacy construction. It raises questions regarding pluralism, equality, and shared norms in a democratic society, and media can select and emphasize certain values to either legitimize or delegitimize. These tensions make religious schools a useful case when studying how legitimacy is constructed and contested in public discourse, as it can highlight the different evaluative criteria.

The concept of legitimacy connects media framing and civic learning, because citizens encounter and evaluate democratic issues through the legitimacy constructions provided by media framings. The interpretive resources citizens encounter contain legitimacy constructions determining who and what has a rightful place in a democracy. Therefore, how legitimacy is constructed through media framing shapes the resources through which citizens can encounter and evaluate democratic issues.

Democratic Tensions: Secularism and Religion

Religion has long been a source of contention in public debate, especially in secular countries such as the Netherlands (Bracke, 2011, p. 32; Glendinning, 2014, p. 52). The issue arises because, as Peters (2007, p. 98) states, legitimacy claims can be either rational, based on reason, or non-rationalist, based on beliefs and identity. While the public sphere is usually associated with rational deliberation and reasoning, religion often draws on particular beliefs which may not always be universally shared, or easily translated into public reasoning (Habermas, 2006, pp. 10–11). This creates a tension between different forms of justification in public discourse.

Loobuyck (2007, pp. 24–28) discusses there are three positions on the role of religion in public discourse. The first is the exclusive view, in which religion is seen as a private matter that should not interfere in public debate. The weak inclusive view is second, and it permits religion to be used in public debate, but only insofar it has supplementary value instead of being the main argument. During political decision-making there is no more space for religious statements. Lastly, there is the strong inclusive view, in which arguments based on beliefs and religion are welcomed and taken seriously. All three positions have been defended and criticized by scholars (Loobuyck, 2007). The exclusive view has been criticized for presenting secularism as a neutral framework, when it actually reflects specific values and assumptions (Ahdar, 2013, pp. 418–425). Despite this, Loobuyck (2007) notes that even

Christian politicians have started refraining from using religious arguments in political debates.

These three views also appear in the media, where religion can be either legitimized or delegitimized depending on how it is framed in relation to democratic norms and values (Hjarvard, 2016, pp. 10–12; Mihai, 2023, pp. 6–7). By choosing what frames to use, media take part in constructing the boundaries of legitimate religion in democratic life. Framing is not just a matter of reporting on issues; it is a process of normative construction. Therefore, how religion is framed in public discourse is not just descriptive, it is actively shaping the boundaries of legitimate religious activities in democratic life.

Framing as a Mechanism of Legitimacy Construction

How do Frames Construct Meaning?

Framing plays a central role in shaping how public issues are understood within the public sphere. It refers to the process through which issues are constructed and presented in specific ways to promote particular interpretations (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames select specific aspects of reality and make those more salient while excluding other aspects. In turn, individuals construct interpretations of these framed issues in order to make sense of events, organize their understanding, or reconsider their views (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104; Goffman, 1986, pp. 10–11). People understand issues through interpretative lenses or frames to make sense of the world around us. Consequently, media frames provide people with interpretive frameworks that help them understand complex issues by organizing them into coherent stories. Thus, frames function by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality while excluding others, shaping how issues are understood (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Following Van Gorp (2010), frames are conceptualized as culturally embedded packages of meaning, consisting of both manifest framing devices and latent reasoning devices. The combination of these devices enables a more interpretive analysis of how frames are constructed and reproduced in discourse. Framing devices are visible markers in the text such as metaphors or exemplars, and reasoning devices are the underlying logics that structure interpretation. Van Gorp (2010) operationalizes these reasoning devices through Entman's four framing functions, using them as an analytical tools to analyze how frames are expressed in a text. Through these two types of devices, media texts organize the presentation of public issues.

Entman (2007, pp. 164–165) identifies four core functions of framing: problem definition, causal analysis, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Through the problem definition function, frames can inform citizens of what counts as legitimate public issues. Causal analysis addresses who are viewed as responsible and who should act in a particular situation. Moral evaluation highlights what is at stake, allowing citizens to consider competing values. Lastly, the treatment recommendation function presents possible solutions, for instance, through suggesting changes in policies. The functions structure how issues are presented and evaluated, shaping the range of possible interpretations that are made available to readers.

However, framing is also shaped by other conditions, such as capitalist media logics and the attention economy (Wu, 2016), which may influence which issues are selected and made visible in media coverage. Early media research often portrayed audiences as passive receivers of media content, however, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes citizens as active interpreters (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, pp. 326–328; White, 2025, pp. 3–9). Individuals interpret frames through existing knowledge structures and values (Druckman, 2001, p. 246). Accordingly, framing effects are shaped by audience interpretation, meaning that even in a structurally constrained media environment, people actively take part in making sense of media. Thus, even under such conditions, media framing still structures the interpretive resources through which citizens encounter and make sense of public issues.

Framing and Legitimacy

Framing is a key mechanism through which legitimacy is constructed in public discourse. The connection between framing and legitimacy becomes clearer when considering how framing relates to Beetham's (2013) three dimensions of legitimacy. When a frame discusses established rules or legal procedures, such as constitutional articles or government responsibilities, it engages with the first dimension of Beetham's legitimacy framework. In doing so, it constructs or contests whether institutions meet the established legal standards. When a frame uses shared values such as equality, freedom, or tolerance to argue, it engages with the second dimension and contributes to the justifiability dimension of an institution or actor. When frame packages highlight public support or opposition, they contribute to the construction of public consent. In this way, framing translates abstract levels of legitimacy into concrete representations that can be interpreted and evaluated in public discourse.

Media framing does not only reflect social reality. It actively contributes to constructing meaning and thus, legitimacy. Framing routinely provides citizens with interpretive resources through which democratic institutions and issues can be evaluated. Particular frames might become especially dominant in society. These so called “strong frames” are embedded in existing beliefs and ideological structures (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 111), therefore shaping what is perceived as problematic or acceptable. In the Dutch context, for example, frames grounded in constitutional principles such as equality or freedom of education may carry more weight than frames emphasizing religious identity alone, because they draw on more commonly shared beliefs. Framing plays a role in structuring how citizens encounter and evaluate issues, linking media discourse to processes of civic learning and legitimacy.

Framing, Interpretive Resources, and Civic Learning

The role of framing in constructing legitimacy has important implications for civic education. Civic education is a lifelong pursuit that involves being informed and gaining civic competences, such as developing the ability to evaluate institutions and participate in democratic life (Dewey, 1997; Veldhuis, 1997, pp. 9–11). Media framing structures the conditions under which citizens encounter public issues through providing problem definitions, causal attributions, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). The media frames shape the range of resources available to citizens. Citizens do not passively receive these frames, but they actively interpret frames through their existing knowledge and values (Druckman, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009).

Porto (2007, pp. 310–311) argues that citizen competence is not only based on knowledge level, but on the availability of diverse interpretive frames that allow for comparison and reflection in the public sphere. When media offer multiple, competing frames of an issue through Entman’s (1993) framing functions, they provide richer interpretive conditions than when public discourse is dominated by one single frame. This aligns with broader framing literature, which emphasizes that media select and highlight specific aspect of reality, thereby shaping which interpretations become prominent in public discourse (D’Angelo, 2017; Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1986). Citizens who encounter a range of frames are in a better position to compare perspectives, evaluate competing legitimacy claims, and develop their own beliefs. Citizens who encounter only one dominant frame have limited interpretive possibilities.

The interpretive resources available to citizens are shaped by what media make available. To gain insights into the range of available resources, it is important to not just analyze individual frames, but also their distribution and diversity across media. Therefore, both the structure of the resources and the individual interpretation matter, which connects to researching newspaper coverage of contested topics. When newspaper articles present multiple framings and constructions of legitimacy, it creates rich interpretive conditions for civic learning. In turn, when a newspaper has articles consistently using one framing, these conditions are narrowed. By examining how frame packages are distributed across *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*, and *Trouw* and over time, I aim to research the interpretive resources that are made available to Dutch citizens who are engaging in this discourse.

However, it is important to note that exposure to diverse frame packages does not automatically lead to civic learning. As Howells (2001, p. 161) and Lippmann (1922, pp. 24–30) both discuss, media has the potential to simplify or distort issues as well as inform on them. The relation between media framing and civic education is shaped by external factors, such as media literacy and prior knowledge. This thesis examines the structure of the interpretive resources, which legitimacy constructions are present, and how this varies over time and across newspapers. In doing so, I hope to contribute to understanding how media shape the possibilities for civic learning in a democratic society.

Method and Methodology

Methodological Approach

To analyse how media framing constructs legitimacy in newspaper coverage of religious schools, a qualitative interpretive approach is adopted. Legitimacy is not a fixed element institutions possess or do not possess, it is produced through continuous processes of meaning making and communication (Peters, 2007, p. 98). Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 73) argues: “predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs”. Therefore, context-dependent knowledge is more valuable than the search for generalised findings. The thesis focuses on how legitimacy is discursively produced in a specific media context, creating context dependent insights into the relationship between media framing, legitimacy construction, and civic learning.

Legitimacy is a judgement or evaluation produced through processes of communication and beliefs in the public sphere (Beetham, 2013, pp. 15–16; Peters, 2007, p. 97). Therefore, it is not confined to media discourse but grounded in broader social and institutional relations. The method to study this needs to be capable of capturing how meaning is constructed and communicated. Qualitative framing is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth analysis of how issues are defined, who or what is seen as responsible, how issues are morally evaluated, and which solutions are proposed (Entman, 1993).

Quantitative approaches, such as agenda setting or content analysis, are more valuable for researching which issues receive attention and in what frequency (Jensen, 2020, pp. 165, 273). However, they are not suited for capturing evaluations and meaning making processes that are needed to understand legitimacy construction. Other qualitative approaches have various focuses, such as linguistics or power dynamics (Jensen, 2020, pp. 112–114), but framing analysis is suitable to study the frameworks of understanding relevant to my research topic. Therefore, I employ a qualitative framing analysis to study these discursive processes.

Framing has been widely studied in media and communication research, but it encompasses a range of approaches that differ in their understandings and analytical focus (Scheufele, 1999, pp. 109–114). Entman (1993, p. 51) discusses how despite the presence of framing in the social sciences, there is no clear general definition and refers to it as a “scattered conceptualization”. Similarly, Cacciatore et al. (2016, p. 20) argue that the concept has

become so widely used and applied that it risks losing analytical precision, and they call for a more precise terminology.

Therefore, it is important to first look at the different approaches in framing research. A distinction needs to be made between frame building approaches and frame effects approaches, where the first examines how frames are constructed and the second focuses on how frames influence audience interpretations (Scheufele, 1999, pp. 115–117). Furthermore, Cacciatore et al. (2016, pp. 9–10) distinguish between equivalence framing, which manipulates the presentation of logically equivalent information, and emphasis framing, which involves the selection and highlighting of particular aspects of an issue. Also, framing research can be conducted deductively, by using predefined frames to study their frequency across a large sample, and inductively, allowing frames to emerge from the text themselves (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, pp. 94–95). This thesis instead adopts an inductive, emphasis and frame building approach, treating framing as embedded in texts and communicative practices instead of their measurable effects on readers.

Van Gorp's (2010) constructionist framing method is especially appropriate for this study. Unlike deductive approaches, it does not use predefined frames but constructs them inductively from recurring combinations of framing and reasoning devices across texts. He uses the term "frame package", based on Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) notion of media package. The difference is in that Van Gorp (2010, p. 10) focuses on the broader culture and society, and not primarily on media routines.

Van Gorp's (2010) method allows the analysis to remain aware of historical and cultural changes, which is especially important given the longitudinal design of the thesis. Frames and underlying cultural logics can shift over time, so a method that forces categories onto the data risks overlooking the changes that the analysis aims to examine. By allowing frame packages to emerge from the data across five decades, this constructionist method makes it possible to capture how the language, cultural beliefs, and underlying assumptions surrounding religious schools shift over time.

Case Selection

In this study, newspaper coverage of religious schools in the Netherlands is chosen as the critical case. A critical case, in Flyvbjerg's (2001, pp. 77–79) framework, is a case that has strategic importance to the topic and gets selected because if an argument holds up for that

specific case, it is likely to hold up for others. Both freedom of education (Article 23) and equal treatment (Article 1) are protected in the constitution, meaning the tension between religious autonomy and democratic equality is institutionally embedded. Debates surrounding religious schools often involve tensions between important democratic values, such as freedom of education, tolerance, and equality. This provides a rich context in which to analyse how media framing contributes to civic education by structuring how legitimacy is interpreted in public discourse. The aim is not to study the audience, but to analyse how legitimacy is discursively constructed and presented as an interpretive resource in the public sphere.

Furthermore, the Netherlands provides a relevant context for this case study. The Netherlands belongs to the democratic corporatist media system, which is characterized by a shift towards neutral commercial press and high journalistic professionalization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 74–75). Historically, this model often had high political parallelism, the extent to which different media reflect political orientations, which was also evident in the Netherlands (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). Because the Netherlands has become more secularized, political parallelism has decreased, however, there are still several media outlets that can be traced back to their political or religious pillars (Vermeer & Kormelink, 2024, p. 96).

To fully understand why religious schools are such a sensitive topic in the Netherlands, it is necessary to discuss the process of pillarization. From the late 19th century until the 1960s, Dutch society was organized through different pillars or subcommunities, such as Protestant, Catholic, or liberal (Koops, 2021). These communities maintained their own institutions, which included schools, newspapers, and even hospitals. The political conflict regarding schooling first concerned whether the Netherlands should only have public schooling, and later whether religious and public schools should receive equal funding (Ter Avest et al., 2007, pp. 204–205). In 1917, Freedom of Education was expanded so that all schools would be guaranteed equal state funding and was from then on known as Article 23.

From the 1960s onwards, the Netherlands became increasingly secularized, but while the pillarized system largely disappeared, Article 23 on freedom of education remained (Koops, 2021). The establishment of the first Islamic schools in 1988 gave public discourse a new dimension, as Article 23 was first designed without other religious communities, such as Islam or Hinduism, in mind (Vermeulen, 2007, p. 38). Spiecker and Steutel (2001, pp. 293–294) argue that the Dutch response to the developing pluralism in society was shaped by its

pillarized history. People questioned whether it was beneficial to have Muslim communities form their own modern pillars, and whether their schools would be compatible with Dutch democratic values. Such tensions create a context in which legitimacy is actively contested, making diverse framings visible in public discourse.

I selected three newspapers in order to include variation across the Dutch public sphere, namely *De Volkskrant*, *Trouw*, and *De Telegraaf*. *De Telegraaf* is the most widely read newspaper in the Netherlands, has a diverse audience, and is characterized as a more conservative popular newspaper that prioritizes broad reach and tends to cover more sensational aspects of news compared to the other two newspapers (Bakker & Scholten, 2019, p. 16; Schaap & Pleijter, 2012, pp. 75–76; Van der Eijk, 2000, pp. 315–319). Both *Trouw* and *De Volkskrant* are characterized by a more specific readership, namely, individuals with relatively high incomes and education (Bakker & Scholten, 2019, p. 16). Moreover, Van der Eijk (2000, p. 320) suggests that *De Volkskrant* is oriented towards values such as education, multiculturalism, and socioeconomic equality. *Trouw* is progressive and Christian in nature, first starting as a Protestant newspaper in 1943, and currently focuses on in-depth articles about issues such as religion and climate change (Smouter & Boersema, 2024; Van der Eijk, 2000, pp. 315–319).

These outlets differ in journalistic styles, ideological orientation, and target audiences, which makes it possible to analyse how issues are framed differently across the media landscape. By comparing these outlets as representatives of distinct editorial identities, I can examine whether, and how, the interpretive resources available to citizens differ depending on their media consumption.

Data Collection

This thesis uses a longitudinal sample to analyse how media framings of religious schools have shifted over the last five decades. A longitudinal design is especially valuable in news framing, because it makes it possible to trace how frames and their underlying assumptions change in response to broader social changes (Brimeyer et al., 2012, pp. 1–2). The longitudinal approach allows the analysis to examine how interpretive resources have shifted from the 1980s to the 2020s. Although, the aim is not to generalise about entire decades but instead to analyse framings as selected moments in time that can make shifts visible. Similarly, Neale (2020, pp. 8–11) uses qualitative longitudinal research to capture changes and social phenomena rather than analysing entire periods.

To capture developments across the five decades, the halfway point of each decade was selected as the sampling year: 1985, 1995, 2005, 2015, 2025. These years were chosen to have evenly spaced intervals across the study period, which allows for a systematic comparison of framing patterns over time while also including recent data. However, two of the years needed to be adjusted due to data constraints. For 1995, articles from *De Telegraaf* were not available in a database I could access, which is why I sampled from 1994 for all three newspapers. Neither 2015 nor 2014 produced enough *De Telegraaf* articles that fit the selection criteria and 2016 was used instead. Despite this change, the adjusted years are still capturing the same decade and broader debates. The final sampling years are: 1985, 1994, 2005, 2016, and 2025.

Two databases were used to retrieve the data: Delpher for articles from 1980 to 2000 and Nexis Uni for articles from 2000 onwards. To find relevant articles, the following search terms were used in both databases: “Religious schools” or “denominational education” or “denominational schools” or “freedom of education” or “special education” or “special schools” or “Article 23” (translated from Dutch). These terms were selected because they can include both broad references to religious schools, as well as more specific references to debates surrounding the constitution or policies.

However, these search terms also returned articles where religious schools were only mentioned briefly, so additional inclusion criteria were applied. An article needs to meet at least one of the following criteria: 1) The first two paragraphs introduce religious schools as the main topic; 2) the headline explicitly mentions one of the search terms; and 3) at least a third of the article discusses religious schools. These inclusion criteria ensure that the dataset reflects meaningful and relevant coverage. The data consists of articles written by the newspapers’ journalists and of op-eds, which are opinion pieces written by external authors. These are all relevant to the study because decisions about whose articles to include determine how legitimacy is constructed, actively shaping the range of frameworks available to readers.

Within each selected year, the search results were sorted chronologically and systematically sampled at intervals scaled to the number of articles produced in that year. For example, if I want to collect the five articles from *Trouw* in 2005, I enter the search terms, select *Trouw*, sort on ascending, and filter for 01/01/2005 to 31/12/2005. This produces 109 results. Since only five articles will be selected across this year, 109 is divided by five and approximately

every 21st article is selected. If an article did not meet the inclusion criteria, the next relevant article was selected. With this systematic sampling, feasibility can be achieved while also capturing variation across each year. The final sample consists of 75 articles in total, five per newspaper per year, which is large enough to identify framing patterns while also remaining manageable for a qualitative analysis.

Method

This study adopts Van Gorp's (2010) constructionist framing approach to analyse how newspapers discursively construct legitimacy of religious schools from the 1980s to now. Frames are not seen as fixed categories, but as culturally embedded patterns constructed through recurring combinations of framing and reasoning devices, which take shape in the form of frame packages (Van Gorp, 2010, pp. 10–12). These packages demonstrate how the frame functions to represent particular issues. Framing devices are demonstrable indicators of a frame in a text, such as metaphors, types of actors, and appeals (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 11). Reasoning devices are the underlying logical structures, based on Entman's (1993) four functions of framing: problem definition, causal analysis, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

Through Entman's (1993) framing functions, media do not just describe institutions but actively position them in evaluative frameworks. In doing so, they shape the conditions under which institutions appear legitimate, contested, or problematic, and this connection between framing and legitimacy is central to the thesis. The framing and reasoning devices together constitute the interpretive package a frame offer to its readers, shaping what an issue is about, who is responsible, what is at stake, and what should be done. By analysing which framing and reasoning devices occur across the newspapers, it becomes possible to study how legitimacy is constructed and what interpretive resources become available to citizens.

To keep the analysis transparent and systematic, this study follows Van Gorp's (2007, pp. 16–18) steps of performing a framing analysis, with one additional step to facilitate the systematic comparison of frames across newspapers and years. Although the steps are presented in order, it is important to note that the method is inherently iterative, and the data will be repeatedly examined to allow the frame packages to take shape (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 13). Additionally, all the excerpts and quotes used from the newspaper articles in the analysis, are translated from Dutch to English by me.

The first step consists of gathering the selected texts, as was described in the data collection section, this forms the basis for the analysis (see Appendix A). In the second step, “the different elements of the strategically collected set of texts are compared to make an inventory of empirical indicators that may contribute to the readers’ interpretation of the text” (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 15). During this phase the focus is not on what a text is about but on how the story is told (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 15). For each article, I created an overview of framing and reasoning devices with short notes to clarify coding choices and to ensure transparency. In the third step, I compared the framing and reasoning devices across articles and decades to identify recurring combinations. This adds a level of abstraction to avoid writing merely a description of the individual articles. Instead, it makes it possible to identify interpretive patterns that appear across newspapers and over time. These recurring combinations form the basis for creating the preliminary frame packages.

During the fourth step, the preliminary frame packages are refined and organized into a frame matrix (see Appendix B). Each row represents a frame package, and each column lists the framing and reasoning devices through which the frame is expressed (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 13). Once the frames have been established, Van Gorp (2010, p. 18) points out three questions that need to be answered: Is the list of frames complete and are these frames the most dominant ones? This was evaluated by revisiting the dataset to check if anything had been overlooked and if the frames were consistent across the dataset.

After establishing the frame packages, I compared them across the three newspapers and the five time periods to analyse how constructions of legitimacy shift over time and differ between outlets. The comparison was guided by the frame matrix, for each article, the dominant frame was identified by examining which frame package’s reasoning devices were most present in a text. When articles drew on multiple frames simultaneously, which is a common feature of media texts, the secondary frame was noted following Linström and Marais (2012, p. 30). They distinguish between a dominant frame that reflects the main theme and a secondary frame reflecting the supplementary idea. The comparison consists of two parts, shifts in framing over time and variation across outlets. This step is essential as it makes visible how the range of legitimacy constructions available to citizens has shifted across newspapers and time.

Limitations and Reflexivity

Inductive and constructionist framing approaches have been criticized for their subjectivity, because the process of identifying frames involves interpretive judgements (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 259). Van Gorp (2010, pp. 24–25) acknowledges this, arguing that some subjectivity is inevitable when inductively analysing meaning making processes in media texts. He suggests using intercoder reliability to minimize subjectivity, however, as this thesis is conducted by one researcher that is not possible. The frame packages reflect only my interpretations of the data, as different researchers might recognize or emphasize different patterns. To minimize this limitation, I maintained transparent throughout the analytical process through documentation of the coding and through the iterative comparison of the articles. This does not remove subjectivity, but it does make sure the process is consistent and systematically documented. Additionally, this thesis relies exclusively on framing analysis without triangulation through other methods such as interviews or audience research (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 155). However, since the aim is to examine the structure of interpretive resources and not how citizens actively engage with them, a single method is appropriate for this thesis.

Moreover, there are a few other limitations that should be addressed. First, the sample of 75 articles does not capture the full range of coverage within each decade. It may miss significant debates that fall outside the sampling years, such as the establishment of the first Islamic schools in 1988. Second, only three newspapers are analysed, while missing other large outlets and diverse forms of media. The frameworks of understanding that Dutch citizens have available to them are more than just the three newspapers. Third, this thesis studies the structures of the interpretive resources, and not how citizens actually engage with them.

Despite these limitations, the analytical contributions of the thesis remain meaningful. The aim has never been to provide a complete picture of all media coverage of religious schools in the Netherlands, but to examine how legitimacy is constructed and contested across a range of newspaper over time. By focusing on three newspapers, all with distinct ideological orientations, across five decades, this study offers insights into the interpretive resources available to citizens.

Analysis

Through the steps outlined in the method section, four frame packages were identified from the 75 articles. They are called *Religious schools as socially problematic*; *Freedom of education as a constitutional right*; *State responsibility for regulation*; and *Religious schools as a site of democratic tension*. Each frame package constitutes a specific interpretive resource through which citizens can understand the debate surrounding religious schools, freedom of education, and government involvement. Article 23 on freedom of education is often legitimized or contested in the various frames. The article organizes freedom of education, meaning anyone can establish a school and educate based on their own conviction while receiving government funding.

The four frames all construct legitimacy differently, showcasing Beetham's (2013) three dimensions to legitimize or delegitimize religious schools, the government, and democratic principles. Beetham's (2013, pp. 15–18) three dimensions are conformity to established rules, justifiability by reference to shared values, and evidence of public consent. The frame packages do not provide readers with a single truth about religious schools in the Netherlands, instead they give a range of different interpretive structures. Using Van Gorp's (2010, pp. 10–11) framing analysis, frames consist of visible framing devices such as metaphors or catchphrases, and underlying reasoning devices which are based on Entman's (2007) four framing functions.

The analysis first examines both the framing and reasoning devices per frame package, which is followed by a section discussing the legitimacy and interpretive resources of the frame. Lastly, the analysis has a comparative section to study how the frames differ across *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*, and *Trouw* over time, assessing the interpretive resources this creates for civic learning. When using quotes or excerpts from the newspaper articles, the following format is used: name of the newspaper, year, number of the article. For instance, when discussing the third article from *De Volkskrant* in 1985, it is cited as [Volkskrant/1985/3]. Appendix A provides a numbered list of analysed newspaper articles.

Religious Schools as Socially Problematic

The first frame package *Religious schools as socially problematic* constructs religious schools as a source of division, inequality, and harm in society. In this frame, the values associated with religious schools are presented as incompatible with democratic standards

such as equality and inclusion. Moreover, the schools are positioned as outdated institutions that are undesirable for Dutch society. The frame suggests the strengthening of state regulation of religious schools, as well as to reform, restrict, or abolish Article 23 on freedom of education. The most prevalent framing devices consist of personal testimonies that function as exemplars, charged catchphrases, and satirical language. Together, the framing and reasoning devices construct an interpretive framing package in which the existence of religious schools is framed as incompatible with the Dutch modern and secular democracy.

Framing and Reasoning Devices

Religious education is problematized within this frame because it is seen as promoting discrimination and exclusion, which is framed as ultimately leading to a segregated society. The framing expresses a concern that religious schools teach values incompatible with democratic norms, particularly regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Oftentimes, there is a notable difference between the perception of Islamic schools and Christian schools, where Islamic schools are more often portrayed negatively.

Recurring framing devices are exemplars such as personal and emotional stories, that are used to make concerns about religious schools more concrete and real. Often, these exemplars are accompanied by narratives about children's vulnerability and safety. This can be exemplified through an excerpt from a Trouw article:

Read 'Haram' by Fenny Brinkman and shudder. This teacher worked for years at the Islamic school As Siddieq, and described in her book how small, innocent students were gradually cut off from this society. [Trouw/2005/4]

The metaphor of children being "cut off from society" evokes ideas of isolation and segregation, because they are not confronted with a society in which people may have different thoughts and ideas. This kind of reasoning positions religious schools as potentially dangerous institutions. Moreover, other concrete examples are used as proof of discrimination within religious schools. For instance, one article uses teaching materials from a religious school to show how children are being taught discriminatory ideas about LGBTQ+ people. It describes how a politician bought an information booklet used in several schools:

It very clearly states Allah forbids homosexuality, but the Islam says you cannot use violence against homosexuals. Though apparently, you are allowed to call them names, you could almost call it funny. [Telegraaf/2025/5]

The use of irony invites the reader to share the implicit delegitimization of Islam. It calls upon the shared value of equality, invoking Beetham's (2013) justifiability dimension. Additionally, the problem of exclusion is not only framed as a social divide, but also as impacting children's wellbeing and upbringing.

The debate about Article 23 often gets stuck in abstract concepts such freedom and identity, while in essence it concerns something very concrete: the question who we want our children to grow up with. A child who is surrounded only by peers with similar beliefs, celebrations, and a way of thinking, does not learn how rich the world can be in beliefs and worldviews. [Volkskrant/2025/4]

Through contrasting "abstract concepts" with the concrete reality of children's upbringing, the focus is shifted from purely legal arguments to more developmental ones. These examples showcase how the frame constructs religious schools as harmful environments for children, that isolate them and strengthen divisions in society.

Moreover, the frame attributes the issue to three causes: the longstanding pillarization in the Netherlands, non-cooperative schoolboards, and Christian political parties who are sustaining Article 23 on freedom of education. The following excerpt illustrates how a political party is framed as perpetuating the problem:

The SGP is mostly attached to Article 23 out of self-interest, for the sake of schools based on orthodox reformed principles. This opportunistic argument can also be heard within ChristenUnie. The Muslim schools are accepted as a necessary evil.
[Trouw/2025/5]

By attributing these Christian parties' motive as self-interest, it delegitimizes them in defending Article 23. They are not being portrayed as motivated out of principle, but instead as making strategic decision that suit their political interests. In Beetham's (2013) understanding, because their position is no longer based on shared beliefs, the justifiability of their position is being dismissed.

The moral evaluation is quite clear, as this frame consistently positions religious schools as socially undesirable and potentially anti-democratic. They draw on norms of equality, social cohesion, and inclusion, and frame the Netherlands as a secular society in which religion should be confined to the private sphere. This corresponds to Kamphuis and Bertram-Troost's (2023, p. 6) discussion of how secular norms are treated as the default in democratic life.

Furthermore, religious schools are frequently presented as outdated institutions that we have outgrown as a society. Satirical or critical headlines such as “Girl in pants calls down the wrath of God upon herself” [Volkskrant/1994/4] and “Politics are still stuck in the last century” [Trouw/2016/4] construct religious education as out of place and no longer fitting modern democratic life. Another passage makes this more explicit:

Faith is a private matter, a personal conviction. At school, you learn that core values, such as the democracy, the rule of law, equality for all, and the right to freedom of expression take precedence over personal convictions. [Volkskrant/2016/4]

This exemplifies the exclusive view of religion, where religion is considered to be a private matter that should not enter politics or public institutions (Loobuyck, 2007, pp. 24–28). By framing this as self-evident and rational, the article normalizes a particular understanding of religion. However, as cautioned by Ahdar (2013, pp. 418–425), secularism may appear as a neutral position, but it actually reflects an active ideological framework.

The treatment recommendations in this frame package further reinforces problematization of religious schools, through arguing institutional change is needed to improve as a society. These recommendations include strengthening state regulation, and reforming, restricting or abolishing Article 23 that protects freedom of education. This is illustrated in the following headlines “Pillarized education in need of revision” [Volkskrant/1994/3], “Stricter rules for new schools” [Telegraaf/2005/4], and “Abolish the pillarized education system” [Volkskrant/2016/4]. The government is positioned as the key responsible actor for resolving the identified problems and aligning the education system with contemporary democratic values. Religious schools are delegitimized while the legitimacy of government authority is reinforced.

Legitimacy and Interpretive Frameworks

In terms of Beetham’s (2013) understanding of legitimacy this ‘problematic schools’ frame primarily functions to delegitimize. It challenges the normative justifiability of religious schools by depicting them as opposing democratic values, it questions Article 23 on freedom of education by framing it as outdated, and it constructs consent against religious education through interviews and public opinion. For instance, De Telegraaf uses reader polls demonstrating Beetham’s (2013) dimension of evidence of consent:

Many readers advocate for the abolition of denominational education. One respondent believes schools should be neutral: “As far as I am concerned, stop with denominational education. Religion is personal and should be kept out of public spaces.” The reader is not alone in this. Over 80% of the respondents believe religion should be practiced solely in places of worship and behind closed doors.

[Telegraaf/2025/3]

By using statistics and readers’ statements, public consent is created against religious schools. It is illustrated how media framing actively participates in constructing legitimacy instead of just reflecting attitudes.

As an interpretive resource, this frame narrows the conditions available for civic learning. Religious schools are constructed as problematic institutions not fit for a democratic society, leaving little room for questioning these beliefs or the people that speak on it. Therefore, it does not offer citizens the deliberative engagement with competing values and frames that Porto (2007) links to rich civic conditions. Readers that encounter this frame are provided with a clear moral evaluation: religious schools do not meet democratic standards, and the state should intervene to a certain extent. Therefore, articles are less likely to offer complex and nuanced insights into the conflict. However, the frame does draw attention to important issues such as discrimination of queer people, social cohesion, and the role of education in a democracy.

In short, the problematic schools frame portrays religious schools as unwanted and harmful to social cohesion in the Netherlands. Therefore, religious schools, and in particular Islamic schools, are problematized and positioned as outdated institutions. However, this perspective is not shared by everyone which leads us to the next identified frame, in which values such as freedom of religion and freedom of education are emphasized.

Freedom of Education as a Constitutional Right

The second identified frame package is *Freedom of education as a constitutional right*. It provides a counterpart to the previous frame, arguing the issue is not the religious schools, but instead the criticisms and the threats to their existence. It emphasizes how freedom of education is established in the constitution and needs to be protected in order for the Netherlands to maintain a free and diverse society. In this freedom of education frame, religious schools are constructed as legitimate and valuable institutions that contribute

positively to pluralism, diversity, and parental autonomy. Criticism of these schools is framed as a threat to fundamental rights, and it is not framed as a necessary critique to modernize the education system. Framing devices include appeals to authority, interviews to improve schools' images, and creating contrasts between state intervention and individual freedom.

Framing and Reasoning Devices

In this frame package religious schools are viewed positively and as benefitting Dutch society. Therefore, the problem is not the schools themselves, but the perceived threat to these schools. Proposals to reform or restrict Article 23 on freedom of education are constructed as negatively impacting religious freedom and plurality. Around election times in 2016, a political party called GroenLinks voted for a proposal that was framed as “dropping a bombshell on freedom of education” [Trouw/2016/2]. This metaphorical framing device portrays a reform as a violent explosion instead of it being a part of a deliberative democracy. The journalist criticizes GroenLinks' actions and disagrees with the sentiment that religious school are outdated. The following statement makes this clear:

All in all, the plan affects two-thirds of all schools in primary and secondary education, the vast majority of which are of excellent quality. It would mean the end of the freedom of choice that parents are currently so satisfied with. Appalling.
[Trouw/2016/2]

The passage showcases several framing devices, such as using statistics (two-thirds, the vast majority), evaluations (excellent quality, satisfied, appalling), and absolutist language (the end of freedom of choice). Parents losing their right to choose the school for their children and schools losing their autonomy are constructed as problems, not any flaws that might be present in religious education. Criticism of religious schools is further problematized by linking it to broader patterns of discrimination toward minority groups, particularly Muslims. Islamic schools are sometimes portrayed as being unjustly targeted or stigmatized within public debates. For instance, there was a lot of attention surrounding the Haga Lyceum in Amsterdam, which was described as “wrongly branded as anti-democratic by the state” [Volkskrant/2025/5]. The government's role is shown as impeding on freedom of education.

The threat to the freedom of education is often attributed to public opinion, proposed policies, and political debates that treat religion as inherently incompatible with a democratic society. The following excerpt exemplifies this:

In other words: because we live in a secular society, freedom of religion and education are under pressure – due to government policy, public opinion, and cultural trends. Still, we must ask ourselves: Why do these freedoms remain essential, even – or especially – now? The answer lies in what they protect: the human search for truth and the preservation of a moral compass in a free, diverse society. [Trouw/2025/5]

The rhetorical question, “why do these freedoms remain essential, even – or especially – now?”, directs the readers to think about religious freedom and diversity, and why it must be protected even in a secular country. This shifts the justification from the schools to those who criticize them. Moreover, it aligns with Ahdar (2013, pp. 411–412), who argues that secularism is not neutral but has the dangerous capacity to impose its ideology on others.

Religious schools are evaluated positively, since they are portrayed as contributing to diversity, social cohesion, and identity formation. One article within this frame is titled: “Hilversum actually embraces its Islamic school” [Trouw/2025/1]. It uses an interview to humanize the religious school, talking to a teacher who discusses Islamic education as a source of social values.

He [the teacher] believes that the fear he senses in Dutch society is unnecessary. “Children learn things like respecting the elderly and treating each other nicely here through their Islamic identity.” [Trouw/2025/1]

The problematic schools frame is challenged by presenting Islamic schools as a site of learning and identity, constructing legitimacy through Beetham’s (2013) justifiability by referencing shared beliefs dimension. Both parental autonomy and diverse identities are consistently positioned as important democratic values in this frame package. Religious education is not framed as exclusionary but as a source of social cohesion, societal development, whilst also giving religious children a sense of belonging. Identity is an important feature of this frame, as religious schools are seen as contributing positively to a diverse and multicultural society. For instance, through strengthening children in their cultural identity, whether it be Christian or Muslim. This view fits with the strong inclusive view of religion (Loobuyck, 2007).

Comparable to the previous frame, the freedom of education frame calls upon constitutional rights to strengthen its narrative. However, it does so by calling for the preservation and protection of Article 23 on freedom of education instead of Article 1 on equal treatment. It protects pluralism and diversity in Dutch society, and the freedom for parents to choose what they think is best for their children. In contrast to the problematic schools frame package,

freedom is implicitly positioned as the main democratic principle, consequently, creating tension between the two frames.

Legitimacy and Interpretive Frameworks

This freedom of education frame constructs legitimacy on all three dimensions of Beetham's (2013) legitimacy framework. In terms of rules and legality, the frame calls on Article 23 as a fundamental basis for religious schools' existence. In terms of justifiability through referencing shared beliefs, religious schools are presented as aligning with democratic values of freedom, diversity, and autonomy. It opposes the 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame's claims that religious schools are harmful to democratic values. In terms of Beetham's (2013) third dimension of public consent, the frame makes references to the satisfaction and demands of parents. Thus, constructing a counter argument to the delegitimizing polls in the previous frame.

The frame package treats freedom of education as a democratic achievement in itself, as it is protecting the autonomy of religious parents and children. As an interpretive resource, the frame contributes to civic learning by offering citizens standards for evaluating institutions based on the constitution. However, similarly to the problematic schools frame, it has a strong emphasis on one side of the debate. It highlights freedom but does not always acknowledge the tension between religious freedom and principles of equality, or how discriminatory ideas against the LGBTQ+ community might impact children. It emphasizes freedom and autonomy, but equality and non-discrimination disappear to the background. Therefore, like the first frame, the interpretive conditions for civic learning remain relatively narrow.

In both the problematic schools frame and the freedom of education frame, the attention remains on the individual schools. However, often issues or conflicts surrounding religious schools are caused by overarching rules or structures that are not functioning correctly. Therefore, another frame present in the data does not identify religious schools themselves as inherently problematic, instead, it is the broader education system and the government's role in it that needs to be addressed.

State Responsibility for Regulation

While sharing similarities with the 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame, the focus of the debated is shifted in the third frame package *State responsibility for regulation*. Religious schools are not presented as inherently problematic but instead the frame places

responsibility on the government. The frame package shows how the government's shortcomings become visible, for instance through regulation, oversights, and policy implementation. The main concern is that the existing interventions and government actions are insufficient to ensure fair, safe, and high-quality education. Framing devices include exemplars through testimonies from parents and teachers, showing the perceived governmental failures.

Framing and Reasoning Devices

This problem definition is constructed through framing devices that emphasize shortcomings in policy and governance. Articles within this frame often refer to insufficient oversight or the delays in decision making, and the issue is framed as an administrative and institutional problem instead of a moral one. The following excerpt referring to government inaction illustrates this:

They have been sending warnings for years, but no one listens. "Help us!" The members of the participation councils of three Islamic primary schools in Amsterdam are waving all the letters and pleas they have sent over the past few years.

[Volkskrant/2005/4]

The language used here, "waving the letters and pleas", makes the lack of government's responsiveness especially visible. The government is tasked with ensuring quality education for all but is here shown as not fulfilling its duty. A different example showcases contradictory policy demands that are placed upon teachers. The article discusses the debate surrounding schools and the imposed neutrality.

I call upon the new cabinet and researchers: abandon the illusion of absolute neutrality and hold a debate on what workable, pedagogically sound neutrality actually could be. As long as that conversation is not held, teachers remain trapped in a task that is impossible: activating without providing direction, and steering without being allowed to acknowledge it. [Volkskrant/2025/1]

This emphasizes that neutrality is an abstract concept, and unworkable for teachers without a clearer definition. It is not a moral failure on the teachers, or more broadly the schools' side, but a problem that the government is responsible for. Moreover, the discrepancy between parents' wishes for religious school and the actual number of religious schools is also portrayed as a government failure, as sixty percent of schools were religious in 1994, while

only 30 percent of parents wanted their children to attend them [Trouw/1994/1]. Through this, the legitimacy of the existing school system is questioned through Beetham's (2013) evidence of consent dimension, but not the legitimacy of the individual religious schools.

Problems surrounding religious schools are explained through the government's passive behaviour or ineffective responses. This includes referring to the government responding too slowly or allowing problematic situations to continue. For instance, in discourse regarding the anti-discrimination law in relation to religious schools, both Trouw and De Telegraaf attributed the delay in policy to a lack of political will. De Telegraaf stated: "It remains a mystery why the cabinet was unable to find the proposed solution itself" [Telegraaf/1985/5]. Similarly, Trouw declared that the law equal treatment could become a reality, provided "there is the political will" [Trouw/1985/4].

Moreover, governance issues are also mentioned at a more local level. A Trouw investigation from 2025 reports that municipalities frequently attempt to block the establishment of new Islamic schools, using legally invalid arguments. The article notes "Even if the municipalities are not proven right, the damage has already been done" [Trouw/2025/1]. Parents receive the message that the schools, and thus their culture or beliefs, are not welcome. The problem is attributed to the way authorities implement or interpret policy, which reinforces that idea that government practices are the root of the issue.

Entman's (1993) moral evaluation framing function is mostly directed at the government. Rather than condemning religious schools as inherently problematic, the frame criticizes the government for failing to uphold its responsibility to guarantee equal and high-quality education for all children. Government inaction, inconsistency, or a lack of responsiveness is portrayed as problematic. It is assumed that the government needs to ensure certain standards, and its failure to do so is criticized. This criticism often remains implicit and is, for instance, embedded in criticizing the effectiveness of policies or executive practices. Therefore, this state regulation frame delegitimizes the performance of the state while simultaneously reinforcing the principle of state responsibility.

There is no real moral evaluation of religious schools in this frame, as they are neither condemned nor defended. They are often portrayed as institutions that need regulation to function properly and within acceptable boundaries. This results in a form of conditional legitimacy, where the acceptability of religious schools depends on the effectiveness of the government. The following passage illustrates this well:

The duty of the government to protect its citizens – and especially minors – against restrictions imposed on their freedom by others. That religious schools, just like public schools, may exist is an important liberal principle and is established in the constitution. However, that such schools subsequently judge how people shape their private lives or with whom they live is another matter. That is precisely not liberal. [Volkskrant/2025/3].

The inherent morality of religious schools is separated from their conduct and thus legitimizes them on constitutional grounds while also remaining critical. The treatment recommendation that follows from the framing focuses on improving government action instead of restricting or abolishing religious schools themselves. This can be done through stronger regulation, more timely intervention, or clearer policies. In this way, the frame both criticizes current government performance while also reinforcing the idea that the state should play a central role in organizing and maintaining high-quality education.

Legitimacy and Interpretive Frameworks

In terms of legitimacy, this frame is especially interesting because it both delegitimizes and legitimizes the government, but in different ways. This can be understood through Beetham's (2013) three dimensions of legitimacy. Firstly, the frame engages with the first dimension of established rules, by highlighting how the government is using legally invalid arguments. Secondly, it points out the government is failing their duty to ensure good quality and equal education, not meeting this shared belief. Lastly, it discusses how the government is failing to listen to parents and teachers, thus, weakening evidence of consent. At the same time, the frame reinforces the principle of government authority by describing them as the responsible actor in these situations.

The frame package creates unique civic learning conditions by giving voice and visibility to actors such as parents and teachers, instead of focusing on political or institutional actors. Through this, the frame expands who is treated as a legitimate actor in public discourse on education, and further questions accountability and government performance. This connects to Benson's (2008, p. 19) statement that media actively shape who counts as a legitimate actor in the public sphere, therefore, shaping whose claims about problems surrounding religious schools are taken seriously in public discourse. Moreover, it informs citizens of duties that are attributed to the state and how to be critical of government institutions.

However, the focus on government performance does mean that the frame offers less rich conditions for evaluating the value conflict.

Religious Schools as a Site of Democratic Tension

The last frame package, *Religious schools as a site of democratic tension*, is different from the previous frames in that it does not construct an issue with a clear solution. Instead, it presents religious schools as a site where democratic principles, like freedom of education and equality, clash and cause conflict or tension. The most apparent framing device is creating contrast between freedom and equality, autonomy and inclusion, and pluralism and integration. The frame does not have one dominant perspective, but it incorporates multiple viewpoints and emphasizes the difficulty of reconciling these different values in a diverse society. Moreover, it consistently defines the problem as a value conflict, in which no principle can be fully realized without constraining another. Religious schools are not portrayed as just legitimate or just problematic, they are presented as part of broader tensions in a democratic society.

Framing and Reasoning Devices

Unlike the first two frames, ‘religious schools as socially problematic’ and ‘freedom of education as a constitutional right’, this democratic tension frame is characterized by including multiple perspectives. Religious schools, the government’s actions, or the threats to constitutional rights are not presented as the problem in this frame package. Instead, it is the coexistence of competing democratic principles that causes the issue. Articles in this frame emphasize that principles such as freedom of education and the equal treatment can come into direct conflict, particularly in the context of religious education. The issue is illustrated in an article from De Volkskrant, which presents opposing political positions:

De VVD’ers argue that Article 1, the anti-discrimination article, was not put first for nothing. The CDA ministers, among whom minister Deetman of Education, dispute that and state that fundamental rights such as freedom of education and religion are equal. [Volkskrant/1985/1]

The frame presents several sides of the conflict as valid and coherent, showing how the issue arises from the fact that Article 1 and Article 23 can be incompatible. Similarly, a Trouw article acknowledges the persistence of such tensions: “Freedom of education will continue to

cause friction” [Trouw/2025/3]. It highlights how this conflict is not an issue that can easily be resolved, but a structural part of a diverse democratic society.

The cause in this frame is attributed to the pluralistic nature of Dutch society and the competing values that come with it. There is not a specific actor that is seen as responsible, but the tension is an outcome of a democracy that aims to accommodate and represent diverse identities, beliefs, and rights. Furthermore, this is reinforced by acknowledging legal and institutional mechanisms as tools for managing these tensions. However, they are not discussed as meaning to resolve the issue, they are meant to prevent situations from escalating. For instance, when discussing the balance between these two principles, one article notes: “The judge and the inspectorate can intervene” [Trouw/2025/3].

The conflict is presented as complex and not easily resolvable, requiring balance and negotiation. Articles within this frame present several perspectives as legitimate and do not condemn either side of the debate, thereby, often avoiding clear judgements. Therefore, the moral evaluation in this frame is more ambivalent, with the difficulty of the democratic tension becoming the central moral point. By presenting both freedom of education and equality as valid and important, the frame is implicitly affirming the legitimacy of multiple democratic principles. At the same time, it acknowledges these principles clash in practice and neither value is fully prioritized or legitimized.

This frame engages most strongly with the dimension of justifiability through reference of shared values (Beetham, 2013). It does not reject the legitimacy of institutions or principles, but instead highlights how multiple, competing norms can all be justified. Therefore, legitimacy is not presented as fixed or singular, but as something that should be continuously negotiated. Peters' (2007, p. 98) distinction between rational and non-rational legitimacy is particularly relevant, as religious communities refer to identity, tradition, and faith which are non-rational. While those criticizing religious schools argue based on rationalist grounds such as constitutional rights and democratic equality. Similarly, Habermas (2006, pp. 10–11) notes that citizens can use a different vocabulary based on their religious beliefs and values.

Rather than proposing a simple and definite solution, this democratic tension frame emphasizes the importance of deliberation, negotiation, and maintaining the mechanism through which conflict can be mediated. The lack of a concrete solution reflects that the frame assumes there are no possible or desirable solutions, because these tensions are part of a diverse democratic society. This understanding aligns with Dewey's (1997, p. 72)

conception of democracy as a shared way of life that is continuously negotiated through communication and participation.

Legitimacy and Interpretive Frameworks

This frame differs from the others by not clearly legitimizing or delegitimizing specific actors or institutions. It highlights the coexistence of multiple sources of legitimacy, which can come into conflict despite being legitimate. In terms of Beetham's (2013) dimension of conformity to established rules, the frame package points out the equal standings of Article 1 on equal treatment and Article 23 on freedom of education. Both are presented as valid principles without one being more important than the other. In terms of justifiability by reference to shared values, the frame highlights different values through the use of multiple perspectives. It showcases different political parties' arguments, the opinions of religious people, as well as teachers and parents. Evidence of consent is presented through acknowledging that public opinion is divided as it reflects a pluralistic society. Therefore, legitimacy is constructed as dynamic and contested, not something institutions simply possess or do not possess. Similarly, Peters' (2007, pp. 97–98) argues legitimacy is grounded in citizens' beliefs which are shaped through communication.

As an interpretive resource, this frame package offers its readers the richest conditions for civic learning out of all four frames. It presents the tension between freedom and equality as a valid constitutional conflict without resolving it. The frame provides citizens with the conditions for evaluating competing legitimacy claims on their own. As Porto (2007, pp. 310–311) argues, civic competence depends on the availability of diverse interpretive frames. While the newspapers do use various frames, this frame package offers the most diversity on its own.

Citizens encounter multiple problem definitions, causal attributions, and moral evaluations, while it is simultaneously acknowledged that there is no simple single solution. By showing how different democratic principles are both invoked and problematized, the frame illustrates how legitimacy is negotiated within public discourse and constructs is as contested and dynamic. This creates conditions that are more similar for the kind of reflective engagement with public issues that Dewey (1997) associated with democratic life.

Zooming Out: Shifts in Legitimacy and Interpretive Resources

Before heading into the comparative sections, the four frame packages will be briefly summarized. First, the ‘religious schools as socially problematic’ frame, also shortened to the problematic schools frame, was discussed. It frames religious schools as socially undesirable institutions that oppose social cohesion in Dutch society, therefore, it argues for strengthened state regulation and for reforming, restricting, or abolishing Article 23 on freedom of education. The second discussed frame was ‘freedom of education as a constitutional right’, or more simply the freedom of education frame. Opposing the previous frame, it positions Article 23 as an important right that needs to be defended to protect religious freedom inherent to a pluralistic society.

The last two frames are different in that they do not give a clear evaluation of religious schools. The third discussed frame, ‘state responsibility for regulation’ or simply the state regulation frame, shifts the focus from specific religious schools to the role of the government. The government is tasked with ensuring all schools to provide fair and good quality education, and they are responsible for possible issues regarding religious schools. The frame suggests reforming Article 23 but also improving oversights or modernizing regulations. The fourth frame is called ‘religious schools as a site of democratic tension’, shortened to the democratic tension frame, and does not make a clear evaluative judgement or solution. Instead, it presents the tension between different values as an inherent part of a democratic society.

As has now been established, each frame constructs legitimacy in its own way. However, how these frames are made available to citizens changes across newspapers and over time. Therefore, the next sections analyse and compare the shifts across newspapers and over time, to study how this changes which interpretive resources citizens have available.

Shifts in the Debate Over Time

The frame packages, while all taking a significant place in the data, are not equally divided over the different years. Their appearances reflect broader shifts in culture and politics over the decades, changing the interpretive resources that are available to citizens. Although Islamic and Christian schools were consistently framed differently, which shaped how each frame constructed legitimacy. This corresponds with Bracke’s (2011, pp. 43–44) discussion

of how while the Netherlands constructs itself as a progressive place, it uses this image in exclusionary ways in debates regarding multiculturalism.

Religious schools were not widely framed as socially problematic in any way in 1985, making the state regulation and democratic tension frames more common. Religious education was seen as an established part of a bigger system that was legitimated through history and the constitution, although there were some references to religious schools needing governance. The anti-discrimination law debate in the newspapers illustrates this, journalists point out the tension between Articles 1 and 23 without consistently condemning one, although the freedom of education frame did appear at times. Criticism was primarily directed at politicians' inability to resolve the conflict. The interpretive frameworks of understanding in this year were quite diverse, as multiple legitimacy dimensions were engaged with and the tension between freedom and equality was balanced instead of favouring one over the other. Notably, this was before the first Islamic schools were established three years later, which added a new dimension to the debate (Vermeulen, 2007, p. 38).

Across the frame packages in 1994, secularization played a central role and themes that become more prominent in the later years were introduced. For instance, there was more attention for parents' decreased interest in religious schooling. This discrepancy engages Beetham's (2013) third dimension of legitimacy, evidence of consent, by questioning whether the school system reflects the public's needs. The power is attributed to school boards and pillarized organizations, which are presented as continuing a system that does not have public support anymore. Consequently, this complicates the freedom of education frame's use of parental autonomy as a source of legitimacy. When the school system does not reflect parents' wishes, the consent dimension of the parents' choice is weakened.

In 2005, the problematic schools frame became noticeably more prominent. Van der Valk (2017, p. 7) stated that Islamophobia, expressed through violence against mosques, increased in frequency and intensity in the Netherlands after specific events took place. She discusses how the following two events each led to an increase in negativity; the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001 and the murder of Theo van Gogh, an outspoken public figure who often made controversial statement regarding religion and culture. These events were also linked to a more general increase in negative perception of the Islam in Dutch public discourse (Van der Valk, 2017, p. 29). This aligns with the increased prominence of the

‘religious schools as socially problematic’ frame, as Islamic schools in particular were more frequently framed as anti-democratic institutions not fitting a modern liberal society. The negative shift is demonstrated in the following passage, where the scrutiny of Islamic schools is discussed:

“In this day and age,” says Said Beneyad, chairman of the umbrella organization for Islamic schools ISBO, “I can understand it. Society has been in turmoil since 2001 – I can imagine that it is necessary to ground Dutch norms and values in a school plan.”
[Volkskrant/2005/1]

This statement suggests that Islamic schools are no longer automatically accepted and legitimate. The schools now have to justify themselves and demonstrate that they meet secular democratic standards.

All four frames are present in 2016 and 2025, although in a slightly intensified way. Frame one is more explicit in its call to abolish pillarized education and links religious education to a democratic failure. However, the criticism is mainly directed towards Islamic schools. One of the articles acknowledges this after the investigation by Nieuwsuur regarding discriminatory messages in Christian and Islamic schools.

Nieuwsuur also identifies such incidents at Reformed schools, but these seem to have been dragged in primarily to legitimize the criticism of the state of affairs within Islamic education. [Telegraaf/2025/2]

The criticism of Reformed schools is portrayed as being used to keep up appearances. Similarly, another article notes how two Christian political parties only defend Article 23 to protect their own Christian schools, and Islamic schools are accepted as “a necessary evil” [Trouw/2025/5]. The uneven evaluation between the two types of schools creates a tension in the problematic schools frame’s legitimacy construction, as the normative justifiability claim is applied selectively.

The tension caused by this selectivity is challenged through the freedom of education frame, which is most strongly present in De Volkskrant’s 2016 coverage. Frame two defends religious schools based on constitutional grounds, and on the fact that the explicit criticism towards Islamic schools is a form of racism. By framing criticism of religious schools as racially motivated, it delegitimizes the evaluative framework of frame one. This can be most clearly illustrated through the following passage:

Subsequently, the behaviour of the people in this group is explained on the basis of a dystopian view of Islam, which is supposedly by definition intolerant, aggressive, and incompatible with the ideal of the liberal and/or Judeo-Christian West.

[Volkskrant/2016/1]

Overall, the problematic schools frame and the freedom of education frame intensified in the later analysed years, while the state regulation frame and the democratic tension frame continued to offer nuanced deliberative alternatives. However, they appeared less frequently in 2016 and 2025 as the debated seemed to become increasingly polarized.

Differences Across the Three Newspapers

De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf, and Trouw have different patterns in their use of frames, which reflect their different editorial identities in the Dutch democratic corporatist media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 67–68). These differences in styles directly impact the interpretive frameworks each newspaper provides to their readers. Notably, the different framings of Islamic and Christian schools manifests itself differently across the outlets, reflecting how this unevenness is actively constructed.

De Volkskrant is typically associated with progressive reporting and being oriented towards values such as education, multiculturalism, and socioeconomic equality (Van der Eijk, 2000, p. 320), and shows the strongest presence of the problematic schools frame across all analysed years. Some characteristic framing devices include the use of satire and using secular democratic norms as self-evident standards. At the same time, De Volkskrant acknowledges most explicitly how the difference in the representation and perception of Islamic and Christian schools is discriminatory. There is a higher degree of variation within De Volkskrant's articles than in the other newspapers. Moreover, the Volkskrant reflects the most engagement with the democratic tension frame, by discussing competing legitimacy claims in individual articles. This suggests a style of journalism that values both critical commentary and nuanced perspectives.

The newspaper most connected to religion is Trouw, which has its roots in Reformed Protestantism (Smouter & Boersema, 2024). The coverage reflects the freedom of education frame strongly, for instance, through mentioning the way freedom of education got established in the constitution in 1917. Although, the other three frames are also present across the years, articles give nuanced understandings and some shift the focus to government responsibility. Several articles feature members of religious communities, portraying them as

legitimate civic actors. Importantly, Trouw treats Christian and Islamic schools more symmetrically than the other two outlets, and it is more likely to apply the same evaluative standards across religions.

Lastly, De Telegraaf is characterized as a popular newspaper and contains a relatively higher level of amusement messaging (Schaap & Pleijter, 2012, pp. 75–76). It shows the most prominent use of the problematic schools frame in recent years, especially in its coverage of Islamic schools. For instance, by using reader polls to provide evidence of consent against them. The treatment of Islamic schools reflects a form of populist framing in which Islamic schools are positioned as threats to the Dutch culture, while the freedom of education frame is not present at all. Using Beetham's (2013) framework, De Telegraaf constructs the consent dimension of legitimacy selectively, it uses public opinion as evidence against Islamic schools but often remains silent in regards to Christian schools. Furthermore, De Telegraaf also criticizes government actions, engaging with the frame 'state responsibility for regulation'.

The differences between the newspapers demonstrate Benson's (2008, p. 19) argument that journalists, and thus media, actively shape who is considered as a legitimate actor in the public sphere. The visibility and portrayal of Islamic and Christian communities, government officials, parents, and teachers vary across the outlets, which shapes how Beetham's (2013) dimensions of legitimacy are engaged.

Citizens who consume news from just one newspaper encounter constrained interpretive conditions. A reader of De Telegraaf in 2025 is likely to encounter articles in which Islamic schools are delegitimized through secular democratic and populist framing, while a Trouw reader might encounter a more complex and nuanced image in which several perspectives are employed. Porto (2007, pp. 310–311) argues that civic learning relies on having access to and being exposed to diverse interpretive frames. Therefore, media plurality is important for democratic engagement, but diversity within a newspaper also matters since it shapes the range of interpretations readers have available.

Interpretive Resources in Dutch Newspapers

The four frame packages and their distribution across the analysed years and newspapers create a discursive environment in which legitimacy is continuously being constructed, challenged, and negotiated. Each frame provides readers with different interpretive resources. The 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame provides individuals with a critical

perspective that challenges institutions and compares them against democratic values. The ‘freedom of education as a constitutional right’ frame bases its reasoning devices on constitutional rights to defend religious freedom and the autonomy of minority groups and parents. Moreover, it discusses the importance of the history that led the Netherlands to freedom of education. The ‘state responsibility for regulation’ frame offers a framework for evaluating government accountability and amplifies the voices of those that are affected by potential government failures. Finally, the ‘religious schools as a site of democratic tension’ frame gives a nuanced and deliberative approach that balances competing values trying to resolve the tension.

There are three main findings. First, the interpretive resources constructed by Dutch newspaper coverage of religious schools have become less pluralistic and more polarized over time. The tension between freedom and equality that the democratic tension frame discusses as inherent to a democratic society has become less balanced and more often a clear solution is presented. Second, the different representations of Islamic and Christian schools is structural across newspapers and present in all frames, albeit in diverse ways. For instance, through delegitimizing Islamic schools but not Christian ones, or by portraying Islamic schools as needing government regulation more so than Christian schools. Third, the three newspapers create different interpretive resources for their readers, meaning that the range of legitimacy constructions made available to citizens is dependent on the outlets they engage with.

These findings matter for how citizens can engage with the debate regarding religious schools. When a newspaper has multiple frames present and consistently evaluates religions based on the same standards, a richer interpretive environment is created for citizens to encounter and evaluate legitimacy. When it heavily leans towards one dominant frame, or holds Islamic and Christian schools to different standards, that environment becomes considerably less rich and potentially distorting. However, this does not mean that diverse coverage automatically leads to better civic learning, aligning with Howells’ (2001) and Livingstone and Markham’s (2008) cautioning that complex issues without any form of guidance can make it difficult to navigate public issues. However, it does mean that the structure of available interpretive resources matters for the potential to function as civic education. Moreover, the increasingly polarized character of Dutch newspaper coverage of religious schools has consequences for both the legitimacy of these institutions, and the quality of the public discourse through which legitimacy is evaluated and contested.

Conclusion

The aim was to answer the overarching research question of how media framing constructs legitimacy surrounding religious schools in Dutch newspaper coverage. Research on civic education has largely focused on formal schooling (Crittenden & Levine, 2007), while it is a lifelong process in which people continuously encounter public discourse and participate in democratic life (Dewey, 1997; Howells, 2001). Through studying how media framing constructs legitimacy, this thesis examined the interpretive resources made available to citizens, through which they encounter and evaluate democratic issues.

In this conclusion, I will first answer the three sub-questions, connecting the findings to the literature. Second, I will turn to the main research question and discuss the implications for civic education. Following this, I end with a critical reflection of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge.

RQ1: How are religious schools represented and evaluated in newspaper coverage?

In the first frame, religious schools as socially problematic, it becomes apparent that secularism is treated as a neutral and dominant perspective. Religious schools are positioned as outdated and not being compatible with democratic values, reflecting the secular standpoint. Moreover, this frame often uses examples of queer discrimination to highlight the conflict caused by religious education. Opposing this is the ‘freedom of education as a constitutional right’ frame that argues against the secular view, framing it as a phenomenon that is being imposed on religious communities in a way that threatens freedom of religion and education. Religious schools are constructed as contributing to a pluralistic society in which everyone is owed their own beliefs.

These frames reflect Kamphuis and Bertram-Troost’s (2023, p. 7) research, where they state that the arguments dominating discourse surrounding religious education in the Netherlands, are shaped by normative assumptions that treat secular norms as self-evident in democratic life. In the problematic schools frame, secular norms are treated as self-evident, while in the freedom of education frame, they are seen as the dominant perspective that causes a threat to religious schools. Secularism is treated as the neutral and superior perspective, which is exactly what Ahdar (2013, pp. 418–425) argues against. Just like other ideologies, secularism is embedded in subjective ideals, norms and values that can disadvantage religious worldviews. The exclusive view of religion as Loobuyck (2007, pp. 27–28) discussed it

corresponds with this, where he describes religious beliefs are perceived as a private matter that should not interfere in public life. Therefore, while secularism does function as the dominant framework through which citizens evaluate, it is both reproduced and contested depending on the frame.

Another pattern across the frame packages is the distinction that is made between how Islamic and Christian schools are represented and evaluated. While both are central to the conflict, Islamic schools were consistently under more scrutiny and faced more delegitimization. The ‘religious schools as problematic’ frame makes this the most visible, because Islamic schools are often criticized while Christian schools receive a softer treatment or are only mentioned to validate the broader critique of religious education. Bracke (2011, pp. 43–44) argues that the Netherlands constructs itself as a progressive and tolerant society, but uses this image in exclusionary ways in discourse on multiculturalism, which is reflected in the newspaper coverage I analysed. Islamic schools are positioned as threats to democratic values in different ways from Christian schools, even when issues such as teaching non-democratic values apply to both types of schools. This suggests that the unequal evaluation of Islamic and Christian schools is not incidental to these articles, but part of a structural pattern in Dutch public discourse.

Together, the four frame packages provide a range of interpretive resources through which religious schools are evaluated differently. Peters (2007, p. 98) argues how legitimacy claims can either be rational, grounded in reason and legal principles, or non-rational, grounded in beliefs and identity, which is reflected across the four frames. The problematic schools frame and the state regulation frame primarily draw on rational arguments, discussing the constitution, democratic equality, and government accountability as the evaluative standards. The freedom of education frame combines rational constitutional arguments with more non-rational claims that are rooted in religious identity, cultural belonging, and parental autonomy. The ‘religious schools as a site of democratic tension’ frame is unique in that it acknowledges both types of claims as valid and presents their coexistence as a symptom of an unresolvable democratic tension. Overall, the newspaper coverage constructed religious schools through competing frames, reflecting the broader democratic tensions in Dutch democratic discourse.

RQ2: How do the frame packages relate to Beetham's (2013) three dimensions of legitimacy?

Beetham's (2013) first dimension concerns the conformity to established rules, which in the case of religious schools mostly refers to how frames engage with the constitutional and legal standards. Frames do not simply apply the standards; they actively construct which constitutional articles should be considered most important. The 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame does so through constructing religious schools as not compliant with Article 1 on non-discrimination and equal treatment, while simultaneously questioning the validity of Article 23 on freedom of education. Conversely, the 'freedom of education as a constitutional right' frame defends Article 23 as a fundamental right that needs to be protected from interference. The 'state responsibility for regulation' frame shifts the focus away from religious schools themselves and to the government. It argues that the state is failing to uphold its obligations to ensure fair and good quality education for all students. The 'religious schools as a site of democratic tension' frame presents both articles as valid and legally established, while acknowledging they are in conflict with each other. Beetham's (2013) first dimension of legitimacy is not a stable standard, instead it is actively constructed and contested depending on which constitutional principle is prioritized.

The second dimension is on justifiability, referring to how frames appeal to shared values to either justify or delegitimize institutions, principles, and actors. Each frame draws on a particular set of values, which reveals how the debate can be evaluated through varying perspectives. The problematic schools frame appeals to equality, inclusion, and social cohesion to position religious education as a threat to democratic values. The freedom of education frame draws on freedom, diversity, and parental autonomy, constructing schools as protecting these values instead of undermining them. The state regulation frame uses government accountability and the right to equal good education as the shared values, thus, delegitimizing the government's actions while also legitimizing its authority. The democratic tension frame presents multiple values as valid without presenting them in a hierarchical order, reflecting the complexity of a democratic society.

Evidence of consent is Beetham's (2013) third dimension, referring to how a frame constructs or contests public support for religious schools. The problematic schools frame builds consent against religious schools through reader polls or calling on public opinions, often actively constructing the impression that the majority opposes religious education. The

freedom of education frame counters this by discussing parents' satisfaction and the demand for religious schools, presenting this as evidence of public support. The state regulation frame calls upon parents' and teachers' dissatisfaction to argue that the education system does not reflect their needs, thus weakening consent of the current education system. Finally, the democratic tension frame acknowledges that public opinion is divided on the issue, presenting this as a reflection of a pluralistic society.

As argued by Beetham (2013), the three dimensions of legitimacy do not operate separately, which becomes evident across the frame packages. The analysis reveals that media framing does not just report on legitimacy, but actively constructs it through combining Beetham's (2013) legitimacy dimensions. The frames show that legitimacy is not a fixed property institutions have or do not have, instead it is continuously constructed, contested and negotiated through media discourse.

RQ3: How do framings differ across the three newspapers and over time?

The Netherlands belongs to the democratic corporate media system, and is characterized by a history of political parallelism in which outlets have distinct identities (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 67–68). While secularization caused political parallelism to decrease, there are still several media outlets that can be traced back to their political or religious pillars (Vermeer & Kormelink, 2024, p. 96). The newspapers reflect this through their different framings, showcasing the diverse editorial identities and ideological orientations. De Telegraaf tends to use the 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame heavily, especially to criticize Islamic schools and construct consent against them while the freedom of education frame is largely absent. Trouw uses the freedom of education frame most and treats Islamic and Christian schools more equally, aligning with the newspaper's Protestant roots to protect religious freedom. De Volkskrant shows the most internal variation, engaging with all four frames and acknowledging the unequal treatment of Christian and Islamic schools. As Benson (2008, p. 19) argues, journalists shape who counts as a legitimate actor, and each newspaper makes different choices in which perspectives to make visible, constructing the views available to their readers.

The frames were reflected differently across the decades, with the problematic schools frame and the constitutional right frame becoming more apparent as time passed. 1985 reflected the state regulation frame and the democratic tension frame most heavily. In this year, government action and the tension between Articles 1 on equal treatment and 23 on freedom

of education were often discussed. Readers were offered a relatively balanced understanding of the debate through the coverage. In 1994, themes of secularization were introduced, questioning whether the education system still reflected parents' wishes. The problematic schools frame became more prominent in 2005, reflecting the increase in negative perceptions of Islamic following events such as the attacks on September 11th and the murder of Theo van Gogh (Van der Valk, 2017, p. 29). In 2016 and 2025, the problematic schools and freedom of education frames increased in appearances and became more intense, while the state regulation and democratic tension frames appeared less. This suggests that public discourse on religious schools has become less deliberative over time.

The findings show that the worldviews made available to citizens varies significantly based on which newspaper they read and at what moment in time they do so. A reader of De Telegraaf in 2025 will encounter mostly delegitimizing claims against Islamic schools, while a Trouw reader is more likely to encounter a balanced framing of Christian and Islamic schools. The increasing polarization of the frames over the five decades means that the diversity of legitimacy construction decreased. The state regulation and democratic tension frames, which offer the most nuanced understandings of the debate, are used less and public discourse has become more contested.

Legitimacy and Civic Learning

Considering the discussed sub-questions, it is now time to return to answering the main research question: *How is legitimacy surrounding religious schools constructed through media framing in Dutch newspaper coverage?* One important finding is that legitimacy is not something newspaper neutrally report on, it is actively constructed through framing choices. As stated by Peters (2007, pp. 97–98), legitimacy is dynamic and lives in people's beliefs, it is not a set property of an institution. This is illustrated through the four frames: each one selects specific constitutional principles to emphasize, makes different actors visible, and presents diverse values as self-evident.

The 'religious schools as socially problematic' frame engages Beetham's (2013) dimensions to delegitimize religious schools and to frame them as not being compliant with the rules, as being harmful to Dutch society, and as having no public support. Conversely, the 'freedom of education as a constitutional right' frame constructs legitimacy of religious schools through reversing the dimensions of the problematic schools frame. The 'state responsibility for regulation' frame, and the 'religious schools as a site of democratic tension' frame are more

nuanced. The state regulation frame directs the focus to government accountability while the democratic tension frame is interesting in that it makes no judgements and presents the tension as an inherent part of a democratic society. The frame packages showcase how the same institutions can be portrayed as legitimate or illegitimate based on which values and principles are highlighted.

This becomes especially visible when comparing the difference in framing of Islamic and Christian schools. In the problematic schools frame, Islamic schools are consistently delegitimized more than Christian schools, which has only increased over time and especially in *De Telegraaf*. Therefore, media framing does not just construct abstract legitimacy of institutions, it constructs the legitimacy of specific communities in the Netherlands. Based on the analysed data, a citizen who primarily reads discourse on Islam in *De Telegraaf*, does not encounter a neutral environment. Instead, they come across framing that positions Islamic religious practices as not being compatible with democratic life.

Framings of religious schools have become more polarized over time, meaning that citizens encounter a smaller but clearer range of legitimacy constructions through media frames. As Porto (2007, pp. 310–311) argues, civic competences depend on factors such as individual knowledge, but also on access to diverse interpretive frames to compare and reflect on. When newspaper coverage primarily has one or two frames that both have clear moral judgements, as is increasingly the case in 2016 and 2025, there is less room for alternative voices and engagement with competing values. For example, a *De Telegraaf* reader will mostly encounter the ‘religious school as socially problematic’ frame and will not be exposed to the other frames. The reader might encounter only a small set of interpretive resources through which they can make sense of the debate, meaning they will not be informed by values such as freedom of religion or hear perspectives from religious people. Therefore, these narrowed framings have implications for how citizens can engage with the debate surrounding religious schools and democratic values more broadly.

Dewey (1997, p. 72) discussed democracy not as a fixed set of institutions but as a shared way of life that is continuously negotiated through communication and participation. The findings suggest that the increasing polarization in the newspaper coverage is not just a media issue but a democratic one as well, because media shape the communicative environment through which citizens encounter and evaluate public issues. As Howells (2001, pp. 160–161) argues, after finishing schooling, we spend most of our lives being educated by media.

Therefore, the diversity in frames available in newspapers is particularly significant for civic learning. When coverage becomes narrower in their framings, so do the available interpretive resources through which citizens can make sense of complex democratic issues and tensions.

The uneven treatment of Islamic and Christian schools across outlets and over time has the potential to distort people's understanding of the institutions or communities that are considered legitimate in the Netherlands, which can have consequences for how Islam is perceived and evaluated in public discourse. More broadly, this points to a concern about the relationship between media framing and democratic life. When a citizen encounters a narrow range of legitimacy constructions, the environment through which they learn and evaluate can possibly become distorted and uneven. Civic learning is partly dependent on encountering diverse perspective through which democratic tension can be understood and negotiated. As Benson (2008, p. 19) argues, media actively shape who counts as a legitimate actor in the public sphere, which is reflected through the uneven treatment of religious schools in this thesis.

The findings suggest that the structure of newspaper coverage matters not just for how religious schools are represented, but for whether citizens encounter a range of arguments that is necessary to critically engage with different legitimacy claims. Future research might study these implications through an audience studies approach, to explore how readers across different newspapers use the legitimacy constructions, and if exposure to a narrower range of frames corresponds with a less nuanced understanding of democratic tensions.

However, because of the interpretive nature of Van Gorp's (2010) framing approach, the four identified frames reflect only my analysis of the data, while another researcher might have constructed them differently. It is important to acknowledge this, as the analysis represents only my interpretation of the patterns. Moreover, the data consisted of 75 articles in total, making it enough to identify patterns but creating the risk of missing important events or debates surrounding religious schools. The findings regarding the shift in newspaper coverage to becoming more polarized is based on a limited dataset. Therefore, while the research reveals a tendency in the newspaper coverage, it does not prove a structural shift across the Dutch media landscape.

The thesis contributes to existing knowledge in two ways. First, the study brings together the concepts of media framing, legitimacy, and civic education to argue that framing constructs legitimacy. The analysis then demonstrates how this legitimacy construction shapes the

interpretive resources available for civic learning. Second, the longitudinal analysis has shown how the uneven legitimacy construction of Islamic and Christian schools is structural across the newspapers and over time, illustrating how frames construct legitimacy differently depending on which religious community is being evaluated.

Media are central to our everyday civic learning, and the diversity and consistency of frames that citizens encounter shape the conditions through which they understand democratic life. This thesis has shown how these frames are not neutral or stable, as they are constructed and contested and have become increasingly polarized over time. Democratic tensions are not unique to discourse surrounding religious schools and the tensions cannot be resolved through media coverage. However, the diversity of the frames citizens encounter shapes the communicative environment through which, as Dewey (1997, p. 72) argues, democratic life is continuously negotiated. As long as citizens encounter public issues through media, the frames that they have available are not just a reflection of democratic life but a part of how it is constructed and contested.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview Newspaper Articles

Year	Newspaper	Date	Headline	Op-eds	Number
1985	Volkskrant	27/04/1985	Openbare scholen kosten meer dan bijzondere		1
		03/06/1985	Openbaar onderwijs verwijt Deetman Achterstelling		2
		27/09/1985	Wetgeving tegen discriminatie		3
		17/10/1985	Ginjaar wil onderzoek naar keuze ouders voor school		4
		27/12/1985	CDA ontevreden over concept anti-discriminatiewet VVD		5
	Trouw	27/04/1985	Openbaar onderwijs is duurder uit dan bijzonder		1
		25/05/1985	Advies onderwijsraad bevat indirect kritiek op beleid Ginjaar - Maas		2
		13/05/1985	CDA blijft tegen meer invloed gemeenten bij onderwijs oude wijken		3
		28/10/1985	Wel onderscheid naar godsdienst, niet naar seksuele voorkeur		4
		28/12/1985	Commentaar: Het 'achterlijke' christelijke onderwijs		5
	Telegraaf	12/02/1985	Financiering basisonderwijs moet veel doelmatiger worden		1
		26/04/1985	Ondoelmatig beheer maakt openbare scholen duur		2
		23/07/1985	Klein verschil over non-discriminatiewet		3
		22/10/1985	Minister Deetman: VVD zet coalitiepartner buitenspel in gevoelige zaken		4
		28/12/1985	Lof		5
1994	Volkskrant	23/02/1994	Senaat akkoord met Wet Gelijke Behandeling		1
		05/04/1994	Commotie over zwart scholen wekt verbazing		2
		28/07/1994	Verzuiling onderwijs aan revisie toe		3
		07/10/1994	Meisje in broek roept toorn Gods over zich af		4
		12/12/1994	Ouders moeten richting onderwijs bepalen		5
	Trouw	23/02/1994	Ouders realiseren zich beperkingen in schoolkeuze niet'		1
		23/04/1994	Conservatisme, relativisme en christelijke waarden	X	2
		21/05/1994	Bijzondere scholen misbruiken hun eigen onderwijsvrijheid'		3
		07/11/1994	Leraar islam als brug moslimpupil en school		4
		01/12/1994	Christelijke identiteit in het onderwijs moet weer herkenbaar zijn		5
	Telegraaf	05/04/1994	Voorstel Kok: Allochtonen spreiden over alle wijken		1
		16/04/1994	"Bij het CDA is de 'C' in het verdomhoekje geraakt"		2
		13/09/1994	Heemskerkse school aarzelend akkoord met hoofddoekjes		3
		29/11/1994	Gedrens		4
		17/12/1994	Nationale code tegen discriminatie op scholen		5
2005	Volkskrant	21/02/2005	Waarom altijd eerst wijzen naar islamitische scholen?' ; Voorstellen Van der Hoeven kalm ontvangen		1
		24/03/2005	Democratie kan voordeel doen met bijzonder onderwijs ; Juist het geloof inspireerde vaak tot vrijheid	X	2
		24/05/2005	VVD op tweesprong		3
		09/11/2005	Minister betaalt falend onderwijs'; Personeel en ouders van drie islamitische basisscholen naar de rechter		4
		16/12/2005	Linkse oppositie en D66 willen af van selectierecht bijzondere school		5
	Trouw	05/03/2005	Wiegel: Handen af van moslimschool		1
		27/05/2005	Geruisloze beheersing		2
		22/09/2005	Oude angstige cultuur heerst op islam-school	X	3
		24/11/2005	Bevries artikel 23 van de Grondwet		4
		03/02/2005	ChristenUnie: De islam is het probleem niet		5

	Telegraaf	30/03/2005	PvdA: Minder moslimscholen		1
		24/06/2005	Zwarte school geen optie witte ouders		2
		04/10/2005	Bekostiging bijzonder onderwijs afschaffen'		3
		10/11/2005	Drie islamischolen liggen onder vuur		4
		20/02/2005	Strengere regels nieuwe scholen		5
2016	Volkskrant	07/05/2016	Waarom islamofobie wel degelijk racistisch is	X	1
		14/05/2016	Nederland is echt niet zo racistisch		2
		20/08/2016	Turkse schoolstrijd		3
		03/09/2016	Schaf het verzuilde onderwijs af		4
		25/11/2016	Het tolerante Nederland		5
	Trouw	20/05/2016	De tijd is rijp voor een nieuwe schoolstrijd		1
		07/09/2016	Moeten we de onderwijsvrijheid afschaffen?		2
		15/09/2016	Het is niet alleen rekenen en taal		3
		29/10/2016	'De politiek zit nog vast in de vorige eeuw'		4
		24/12/2016	Vrijheid van onderwijs afschaffen en dan willen samenwerken?	X	5
	Telegraaf	04/07/2016	'Vrijheid van onderwijs niet meer van deze tijd'	X	1
		05/07/2016	'Geen geloof op scholen'		2
		02/09/2016	Geachte lezer		3
		03/09/2016	Politiek weren uit de klas		4
		29/09/2016	Nieuweling in de aanval		5
2025	Volkskrant	06/10/2025	In burgerschapsonderwijs is neutraliteit een illusie, voer eens goed debat daarover	X	1
		07/10/2025	Een school die verkondigt dat homoseksualiteit zondig is: het is kindermishandeling		2
		25/10/2025	Liberalisme vereist juist bescherming van leerlingen	X	3
		30/10/2025	Wat beschermen we met Grondwetsartikel 23? De vrijheid om je kinderen af te schermen van alles wat onbekend, eng of anders is?		4
		22/03/2025	Van banken tot kinderopvang: discriminatie van moslims is 'hardnekkig' en 'ontwrichtend'		5
	Trouw	17/05/2025	Hilversum heeft haar islamitische school juist omarmd		1
		11/10/2025	De VVD rechtser? Nee hoor, wij zijn echte liberalen'		2
		27/10/2025	Vrijheid van onderwijs zal blijven schuren	X	3
		29/11/2025	Liberalen voeren weer een beetje Schoolstrijd		4
		19/12/2025	Kinderen zijn van de ouders, niet van de (liberale) staat	X	5
	Telegraaf	3/5/2025	Echt waar, we zijn in oorlog tegen moslims; in vrijheid		1
		02/10/2025	Discriminatie		2
		23/10/2025	Afblijven van grondrecht'; Lezers: Bontenbal zakt met zijn uitspraak door het ijs		3
		27/10/2025	Tolerant land moet worden beschermd	X	4
		26/02/2025	Besprek lhbtiq+ ook op reli-scholen'		5

Appendix B: Frame Packages

Frame package	Problem definition	Causal attribution	Moral evaluation	Treatment recommendation	Framing devices
Religious schools as socially problematic	Religious schools are associated with division, exclusion, discrimination, and/or (outdated) segregation	School boards, religious separation, long-standing school structures maintain the patterns, Christian political parties	This is seen as socially undesirable, unequal, and/or potentially anti-democratic	Strengthen state regulation, reform, restrict, or abolish Article 23	'Divisive', 'exclusive', critical/satirical portrayals, personal narratives, extreme cases, 'outdated pillarization'
Freedom of education as a constitutional right	Freedom of education/religion is seen as threatened by restrictive policies and/or criticism	State intervention and criticism religious schools (policies or public pressure) are seen as threatening autonomy	Constitutional rights, pluralism, and parental choice are treated as valuable and important	Protect school autonomy, parental choice, and Article 23	Language based on rights, 'freedom', 'parental choice', 'autonomy', references to threats
State responsibility for regulation	Existing policy is seen as not solving the problems around religious schooling, funding, oversight, or school quality	The government is too passive and fails to respond effectively	The government is failing its responsibility to guarantee fair, safe, and high-quality education. Government inaction portrayed as ineffective/irresponsible	Reform Article 23, improve oversight, and/or introduce or modernize regulation	Policy criticism, narratives of government inaction, discussion of accountability, depictions of parents or teacher not being heard
Religious schools as a site of democratic tension	There is a clash between freedom of education, equality, inclusion, and diverse identities	Competing democratic principles, diverse identities and communities generate value conflict	The conflict is complex and not easily resolvable	Encourage negotiation and debate, seek balanced solutions	Contrasts such as freedom vs equality, inclusion vs autonomy, pluralism vs integration, depictions of conflict or tension