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Individual Wrong or Systemic Failure? Moral Judgements About the Integrity of Politicians in the Wake of Dutch Integrity Scandals

Willianne Van Ginkel-Kempenaar [1,2] and Toon Kerkhoff [3,*]

[1] Stichting Landmerk, Herenstraat 43, 3512 KB Utrecht, The Netherlands; willianne.kempenaar@landmerk.nl
[2] PhD Candidate Philosophy of Culture, Politics and Organisation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[3] Institute of Public Administration, Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University, Turfmarkt 99, 2511 DP The Hague, The Netherlands
* Correspondence: a.d.n.kerkhoff@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract: This article focuses on moral judgements about the integrity of politicians expressed by various actors in public opinion in the wake of Dutch integrity scandals. The research assesses the link between a supposed act on the one hand and moral judgements of the actors involved on the other in an effort to improve our understanding of how political integrity is perceived and how it is used in public and political debate. This exploratory study takes three Dutch case studies of supposed conflicts of interest. Each case offers a view on judgements concerning political integrity from various media outlets, focused on three different levels: judgements of personal integrity, role integrity and political system integrity. This novel theoretical construct serves to see whether and, if so, how moral judgements about political integrity are linked to systemic (dis)satisfaction with government and politics. In addition—and focusing on the Dutch context only—the article assesses how people's supposed place on a political ideological spectrum from left to right might influence their moral judgement. The article underscores the theoretical notion that the meaning of political integrity is inherently subject to varied interpretation and context of place and time. This also has important practical implications for managing and improving political integrity.

Keywords: moral judgements; political integrity; integrity violations; integrity scandals

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Citation: Van Ginkel-Kempenaar, Willianne, and Toon Kerkhoff. 2024. Individual Wrong or Systemic Failure? Moral Judgements About the Integrity of Politicians in the Wake of Dutch Integrity Scandals. *Administrative Sciences* 14: 331. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14120331

Received: 10 October 2024
Revised: 28 November 2024
Accepted: 1 December 2024
Published: 6 December 2024

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1. Introduction: Judgements of Political Integrity in the Wake of Scandal

Although most would agree that politicians need to have integrity, it often remains unclear what this entails. Huberts (2018, p. 20) offered a definition of integrity as "the quality of acting in accordance or harmony with relevant moral values, norms, and rules". Although suitable (and employed as such in this paper), it cannot be sharp enough to settle its exact meaning, if that is even feasible or necessary at all of course. After all, one could ask which values, norms, and rules are relevant according to whom. For example, illegal behavior can be considered morally proper (e.g., when one is fighting unjust laws, such as segregation legislation). The reverse can equally be the case, for instance, when politicians are morally condemned while lawfully declaring their expenses. This means integrity is at best a contested concept as well as an umbrella term referring to wholeness, coherence, professional responsibility or moral reflection (Huberts 2014). Furthermore, political integrity specifically is somewhat of a contradiction in terms. After all, are politicians not always essentially 'conflicted' due to serving various interests? And should, for example, "honesty" (according to many, an integral part of integrity) always be expected from politicians? In politics, telling a lie (or at least withholding a part of the truth) can also be considered a good thing. When a Ukrainian politician lies to or withholds truth from the press which would aid Russian intelligence concerning the Ukraine war, (s)he would most likely be considered to actually have much integrity.

This is to say that different meaning and moral judgment are often attributed to specific acts, depending on context, time, place and person and that the meaning of (political) integrity is inherently fluid. This is particularly visible during (alleged) integrity scandals (Mancini 2018a; Moodie 1989). During such moments of intense moral disagreement, different actors voice various and often opposing ideas on what it means to have integrity (Kerkhoff and Overeem 2021). Debate then arises between conflicting moral judgments by political allies or opponents, legal or other scholars, the media and—last but certainly not least—the general public and its various subgroups. These debates are crucial to understand what is considered right or wrong at any given moment in time by different and possibly opposing actors. Integrity scandals therefore serve as a mirror to understand differing normative positions on good and bad government.

This research focuses on moral judgements of political integrity as expressed by various actors in public opinion in the wake of Dutch political integrity scandals. It does so to gain greater insight into judgements about supposed moral misconduct by politicians, how political integrity is used in public debate and what the link is between the supposed act on the one hand and moral judgements of the actors involved on the other. It is not the aim of this present research to offer reasons for changes in political behavior as such or a view on changes in how political behavior is perceived over time. Instead, the aim is to investigate to what extent and how political behavior (or rather, perceived lack of political integrity) is judged differently by a variety of actors in political and public debate, seemingly characterized by increasing societal and moral heterogeneity. As will be explained in more detail below, to do so, this exploratory study looks at accusations and opinions concerning the integrity of politicians in various media outlets as focused on three different levels: judgements of personal integrity, role integrity and political system integrity. In addition, it is assessed how one's supposed place on the political ideological spectrum might play a part in this.

Such an inquiry is relevant for four main reasons. First, it adds to existing research (Kerkhoff and Overeem 2021) by creating more insight into how political integrity is perceived and gains meaning in context in the wake of scandal. Second, by including a variety of opinions, also those on online media platforms (see below), the inquiry adds important but often overlooked actors in societal integrity debates. By and large, the general public (in all its variety) seems to be often ignored in political debate (and scholarly research) on integrity, if only because it is often quite difficult to get a view on how 'regular' citizens perceive the morality of elected officials. This could point to a gap between government and citizens in how integrity and 'good governance' are perceived, which may well be considered a democratic deficiency since democratic discussions on integrity and good governance are likely served by being open and inclusive.

Third, the focus on judgments about persons, roles and/or political systems is a novel theoretical distinction that helps to turn (perceived) lacking integrity into an indicator of (dis)satisfaction with government or politics in general. Distinguishing between these three levels creates the opportunity to better understand differences in satisfaction with politics in general (i.e., the political system) as opposed to politicians as professionals (i.e., their role) or individual persons regardless of their political role (i.e., their person). Such an analysis can clarify whether people regard politicians as mere extensions of their role or also the system they are a part of.

Fourth, and finally, the paper has a methodological aim to further enhance research of judgements of political integrity with an exploratory case study design and qualitative analysis of various media sources concerning three (Dutch) integrity scandals. This design (discussed more below) furthermore links people's presumed ideological position on a rough left/progressive, right/conservative scale to their judgement of political integrity. To be sure, this is a highly contested and context-specific discussion and the inquiry here reflects the Dutch context only. Still, it offers a way to assess such dynamics elsewhere too.

2. Moral Judgements on Political Integrity

Existing research, e.g., McGraw (1990, 1991) and Schönbach (1990), has confirmed a clear relation between political behavior and people's judgment. In addition, there is ample research to show how perceptions of lacking public integrity affect both the internal functioning of public organizations (Hoekstra 2022; Maesschalck 2004) as well as—more broadly—trust in and legitimacy, credibility and reliability of government as a whole, which affect levels of (dis)satisfaction. This is compromised when citizens perceive public officials to be abusing their functions or otherwise acting without integrity (Bachman 2018; Blind 2006; Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001; Uslaner 2018) because of the real or perceived injustice that it creates (Feldman 1983; Kubbe 2013; OECD 2022; Rothstein 2011; Spirina and Maximova 2023).

It is therefore known that perceptions of lacking integrity matter for trust, legitimacy, etc., regardless of their factual basis. What seems to be missing, however, is work that pays specific attention to how and by whom these perceptions are shaped. The specific theoretical model proposed here (see Figure 1) allows for a more nuanced measurement and understanding of this. The model consists of three key elements. First, it assumes a relation between a perceived act and the perception of (lacking) political integrity. It is assumed here that it matters what politicians do or say, especially when it concerns perceived acts of lacking integrity. Second, the model breaks up the concept of political integrity by distinguishing between three types of moral judgment: aimed at an individual person, that person's professional role and the political system (s)he is a part of. A judgement of the first type concerns the behavior of the politician as an individual and private moral agent, i.e., a judgment that is not explicitly connected to the specific role as a politician. Judgements of the second type focus on specific behavior that is or is not deemed befitting the role or political officeholding as such, let us say as a member of parliament as opposed to a minister. Judgements of the third type focus on how supposedly lacking political integrity is believed to reflect deeper systemic political problems, such as in the process of obtaining political office or in the role played by political parties.

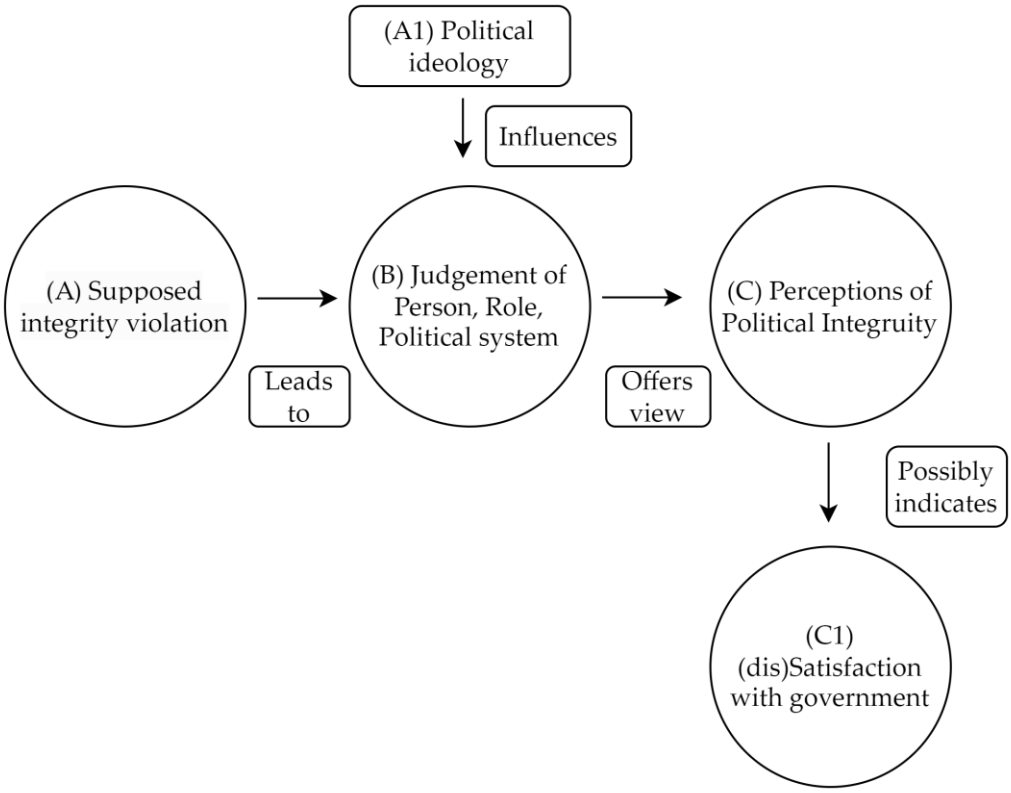

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Thirdly, the model in Figure 1 hypothesizes how differences in perceptions of political integrity (i.e., person, role or political system) are potentially connected to people's political ideology and that this in turn can be taken as an indicator of (dis)satisfaction with government as such. In other words, one's place on the political–ideological spectrum on a (admittedly rough, see below) left/progressive–(far) right/conservative scale can in theory be linked to perceptions of political integrity and to attitudes towards and/or sense of (dis)satisfaction with government. Of course, much has been written on left–right scales. At the very least, they tend to differ per country and are big and contested categories. Still, it is commonly accepted that the distinction has an economic as well as a cultural component. For the Dutch context (and this can be markedly different elsewhere), left/progressive typically means being more favorable to the state's economic intervention in the public sphere and a generally more progressive attitude towards 'contested' policy issues such as abortion or increasing the number of refugees allowed to enter the country. Right/conservative would be the opposite of this. Importantly, research consistently shows how Dutch right-leaning voters generally distrust government more than left-leaning voters (*VU Verkiezingsonderzoek Tweede Kamerverkiezingen 2021* n.d.). It is therefore hypothesized here that because people more towards the (far) right of the political spectrum tend to be more critical of government and are more dissatisfied with politics as a whole, they are therefore more likely to regard individual (supposed) political integrity violations as a symptom of something larger, i.e., the corruption of a professional role and/or 'the political system'. Conversely, it can be argued that people more on the left are generally more satisfied with (and have more trust in?) politics and government and are thus more likely to see an individual transgression as just that or, at most, as the corruption of a specific role.

In a nutshell, the conceptual model underlying this research (see Figure 1) hypothesizes that a supposed political integrity violation (A) in combination with one's place on the political–ideological spectrum (A1) informs integrity judgements focused on person, role and/or the political system (B). This offers a possible link between specific perceptions of political integrity (C) on the one hand and possible (dis)satisfaction with government (C1) on the other. In other words, a focus on role, person and/or political system integrity can be linked to more/less satisfaction with government. As the analysis will show, this model serves to better understand moral judgments about and public discussions on political integrity. It can as such be hypothesized that for the Dutch context at least, people who are by and large less satisfied with government are also more likely to see (perceived) individual integrity violations as symptoms of systematic political integrity problems or of a "corrupted" political system (i.e., as they refer to "corrupt" parties, structures and processes of decision making, etc.), rather than personal or role flaws.

3. Design and Method

Political integrity scandals are often in themselves important catalysts for societal normative change (Kerkhoff 2011; Mancini 2018b; Moodie 1989; Van Eijnatten et al. 2008). While this remains a somewhat contentious issue (compare Allern and von Sikorski 2018; Sass and Crosbie 2013), scandals can even be considered *functional* in reinforcing and rejuvenating the polity, democratic institutions and the democratic process, rather than being "anathema to democratic politics, a cause of public distraction or a sign of institutional degradation" (Sass and Crosbie 2013, p. 851). For this reason, scandals of supposed lacking political integrity are taken to test the conceptual model of this research.

In addition, the design has more functions. First, this article offers a brief qualitative analysis of three empirical cases from the Dutch political context that all revolve around supposed conflicts of interest, i.e., situations in which personal or private interests seemingly collide with the public interest during the execution of one's public duties. Although other integrity violations could have been researched (see Lasthuizen et al. 2011 for a typology), conflicts of interest seem especially interesting as they are often subject to debate and disagreement. Conceptually and in line with the literature (see Di Carlo 2013; Heres et al. 2021), it is important to keep in mind that conflicts of interest are regarded as distinct from

conflicting interests. The latter denotes only the possibility or the risk of a potential conflict of interest, while the former denotes the (perceived) occurrence of an actual conflict (i.e., an integrity violation) where the public interest is harmed through private gain (monetary or otherwise).

Secondly, while the main protagonists in the cases below are all politicians, they hail from different political arenas (see Table 1 for an overview). This is due to a lack of comparable qualitative case material and might lead to some bias as people may simply know more about certain roles than others (e.g., a minister versus a provincial administrator). At the same time, however, considering different public offices also helps to see potential differences and commonalities. What is more, the theoretical assumptions and methodological considerations of this exploratory paper can still be tested just as well.

Table 1. Search strategy and operationalization.

	Van Rey (VVD Party)	**Duthler (VVD Party)**	**Tichelaar (PvdA Party)**
Relevant time period	9/1/2011–9/1/2019	1/1/2011–5/21/2019	2/25/2017–9/30/2017
Main protagonist (level and function)	Jos van Rey, local politician (alderman), senator	Anne-Wil Duthler, senator	Jacques Tichelaar, regional politician (CdK)
Examples of relevant search terms (in Dutch)	Jos van Rey, Van Rey, Jos van Rey corruptie, Jos van Rey belangenverstrengeling	Duthler, Anne-Wil Duthler, VVD Duthler, Duthler brieven	Tichelaar "Huize Tetrode", Jacques Tichelaar, Vergadering PS Drenthe 1 maart 2017
Source for judgments by *newspapers*	NRC Handelsblad, Telegraaf	NRC Handelsblad, Telegraaf	Volkskrant, Telegraaf
Source for judgments by *politicians*	Twitter, national and local newspapers, official political documents	Twitter, national newspapers, official political documents	Twitter, national and local newspapers, official political documents
Source for judgments by *relevant public(s)*	GeenStijl, Joop	GeenStijl, Joop	GeenStijl, Joop

Thirdly, cases were selected that led to considerable media attention and public opinion to unearth as much debate as possible. Public opinion was operationalized in three ways, as expressed in (1) newspapers (including a variety of articles, such as op-eds and editorials, news items, and columns), (2) judgments of fellow politicians in newspapers, parliamentary debates and on X (still Twitter at the time of research) and (3) attentive publics and mass audiences (see Price 2008) on distinctive journalism or news platforms. Judgments among and within these segments of public opinion are expected to differ, which offers a view on a rich public debate concerning how political integrity is perceived and judged.

To account for the possible link between one's place on a left–right political spectrum and judgments of political integrity, three large and politically–ideologically distinct Dutch national newspapers were chosen. De Telegraaf on the one hand and NRC Handelsblad and De Volkskrant on the other generally cater to quite different audiences. Research by Bos et al. (2016) has shown how De Telegraaf—the biggest tabloid newspaper in the Netherlands—is generally read by a more conservative and right-leaning audience. The NRC Handelsblad, on the other hand, is considered a newspaper for more highly educated and more elite echelons of Dutch society. It is also generally read by a more progressive, academic and central-leaning audience. The same is true for De Volkskrant, which is, however, considered to be more left-wing than NRC Handelsblad (Domevscek 2006, p. 77). In short, people who vote left are less likely to read De Telegraaf and more likely to read NRC Handelsblad and/or (especially) De Volkskrant (Mitchell et al. n.d., pp. 4, 6) and vice versa.

Similarly, judgments by attentive publics were taken from two online (partly participatory) news platforms GeenStijl and Joop.nl. Although these platforms cannot be said to constitute a representative sample of Dutch society or the Dutch mediascape, including them adds an interesting layer to existing research of public opinion and views on political

integrity. Furthermore, much like the newspapers mentioned, these platforms can equally be regarded as ideologically distinct, situated as they are on quite opposite ends of the political–ideological spectrum. The website GeenStijl, an initiative by three former Telegraaf journalists, tends to be regarded as more right-leaning (Mitchell et al. n.d., p. 8). Its motto ("tendentious, unfunded and needlessly hurtful") provides somewhat of a clue already. In televised form, it furthermore broadcasts as PowNed, a right-wing 'satirical' outlet for news and commentary, most popular among right-wing populists (Bos et al. 2016). Joop.nl on the other hand is generally regarded as a more left-leaning platform. In part this is because of its origins as a platform erected by the Dutch social democratic broadcaster BNNVARA. Joop.nl regards itself as a progressive and left-leaning news site, "striving towards diversity, inclusivity, sustainability, social equity and emancipation" (*Mediamakers Voor Kansengelijkheid. Beleidsplan BNNVARA 2022–2026* 2021, p. 6).

The three cases in this exploratory study have been qualitatively analyzed by means of word-by-word analysis in a detailed search strategy (see Tables 1 and 2). An analysis was conducted of a sizeable sample of statements related to each case. These were then categorized as positive, negative or ambiguous judgments of person, role and/or system integrity. Of course, it was not always possible to clearly distinguish between individual, role or political system judgments. In fact, some perceptions often remained quite general. Where it was impossible to see, statements were left out. In addition, while positive and negative statements were generally more easily spotted, an ambiguous category was reserved for judgements that were unclear, for example, when people did not clearly define whether and, if so, why something was right or wrong. Furthermore, people sometimes simply chose to withhold judgment, for example, while a case was still in court.

Table 2. Quantitative information on data collection.

	Van Rey (VVD)	**Duthler (VVD)**	**Tichelaar (PvdA)**
Newspaper: NRC	20 articles	24 articles	n/a
Newspaper: Volkskrant	n/a	n/a	15 articles
Newspaper: Telegraaf	10 articles	19 articles	10 articles
Politicians: Twitter	10 tweets	4 tweets	4 tweets
Politicians: newspapers	10 articles	9 articles	6 articles
Politicians: official parliamentary documents	4 contributions	1 contribution	10 contributions
General public: GeenStijl	100 comments (to 5 articles)	100 comments (to 5 articles)	20 comments (to 1 article)
General public: Joop	100 comments (to 5 articles)	55 comments (to 3 articles)	17 comments (to 1 article)

Items in public opinion (see Table 2) were also coded to some extent (see Table 3). Coding was deductively based on the three key categories of person, role and political system integrity but thereafter occurred inductively, grounded in the data collected. Table 3 shows examples of statements that clearly refer to person, role or political system integrity in all the latter's variety. With only a reference to person, rather than a specific role or the wider political system, statements would be categorized as being focused on person integrity, and similar for the other two. The category of political system was inductively coded, based on elements that were mentioned from the wider political arena (see above). As such, the codes that inductively emerged helped to develop a rich description of varying perceptions of political integrity, without needing to indicate precisely how often a code was applied.

Table 3. Coding (translated from coding in Dutch).

Category	Main Code	Subcodes	Examples (Translated from Dutch)
Person			"Born and raised in Roermond, this butcher's son was not virtuous already. He is a *Draufgänger* (daredevil)."
Role			"An experienced manager like Tichelaar should know that his integrity is at stake when he acts for the benefit of relatives"
Political system			
	Political party	VVD, PvdA	"It is in the genes of PvdA members to be involved in affairs like this."
	Local governance		"The issues around Van Rey are harmful towards the reputation and functioning of local governance"
	Trust in politics		"Integrity violations like this form the basis for our (negative) thought about politics and bureaucracy"
	Democracy and legitimacy		"The democracy in The Netherlands is corrupt."
	Rule of law		"The 'Trias Politica' is wasting millions of euros and Van Rey gets away with 240 h of community service. The state is protecting itself."
	Province	Limburg, Drenthe	"The province [of Drenthe] is infamous for integrity affairs like this"
	Voters		"It says much about the voters, if he yields 7 or 8 seats in the local council"
	The media		"Media don't tell us anything about this [integrity violation] because they're all focused on Baudet's latest fever"
	The senate		"All these senator just sit there to enrich themselves . . ."
	Politicians		"Strange guys, these politicians. They're like crocodiles: large mouth, little sense"

Three points must be emphasized before proceeding to cases and analysis. First, this paper serves as an exploratory study only, in order to test the conceptual model and to explore the methodological merit of this type of research. Three cases—and just for the Dutch context alone at that—are obviously too limited a number to offer general conclusions. Still, detailed analysis of these three does allow one to (a) test the use of a distinction between personal, role and system integrity and (b) the possible relation between people's ideological political stance on judgements of political (mis)behavior and satisfaction with government as such.

Secondly, it is important to recognize that people might not only fail to make distinctions between personal, role and political system integrity at all, but can also pick multiple ones simultaneously when offering moral judgement. It can furthermore be argued that the category of role integrity in particular can easily be misunderstood since people may not know what different roles in government (e.g., senator, governor, minister, etc.) actually entail or what rules and procedures are in place.

Thirdly, 'systemic political integrity' in particular is an inherently broad category, open to interpretation and impossible to delineate beforehand. Rather (and as the cases will also show) different things can be considered (part of) a political system in specific cases when it comes to integrity perceptions. By political system, this article means to denote something that is open to interpretation and therefore—importantly—not easily defined. It is precisely the vagueness of "the political system" as perceived by various actors in integrity debates that sets it apart from the categories of person and role integrity. The "political system" can mean many different things to different actors, e.g., referring to observable political organizations (such as parties) or the (supposed) process of making official government

decisions given specific legal, social and cultural qualities. Even more broadly, it can refer to complex systems involving the questions of who should have authority and what the government influence on its people and economy should be. For example, people might refer to "the political system" when they mention the political party a politician belongs to, or his or her social circles, and/or government as a whole. The key point to consider is the possibility that in public perception, individual public official behavior can be linked to something larger (i.e., role or system). Simply put, the act of a single politician can be taken as a sign of wider failure of either the role or the system. In addition, despite people's knowledge of government or their (in)ability to distinguish between different integrity categories, it can reasonably be argued that *whatever* they choose to focus on during an integrity scandal has much to say about their expectations towards political behavior, politics and government. In other words, perceptions matter and people's focus on either or all categories of political integrity is likely to be indicative of their view on and satisfaction with government and politics.

4. Cases of Supposed Conflicts of Interest

4.1. Jos van Rey: Charges of Corruption in the City of Roermond

4.1.1. The Case

On 1 October 2011, Jos van Rey was accused of having a conflict of interest in the regional newspaper het Limburgs Dagblad (Goossen and Sniekers 2011). At that time, Van Rey was alderman in the municipality of the city of Roermond, and a member of the Dutch Senate. As a result of the accusation, the mayor of Roermond appointed an investigation committee. In 2012, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service also started an investigation. The newspaper article accused Van Rey of having conflicting interests due to his friendship with project developer Piet van Pol. Van Pol was an investor in various building projects in and around Roermond, ranging from industrial areas to shopping malls. As alderman, Van Rey was responsible for decisions about such projects, as he was charged with spatial planning, economic development, and city center management. Van Rey and Van Pol also socialized, as they visited soccer games together and went out for dinners. They traveled together numerous times and visited real estate fairs. To the journalists, it remained unclear how much Van Rey had paid for these visits and vacations, as both Van Pol and Van Rey were not willing to comment. Furthermore, although Van Rey reported the visits and vacations to the municipality as he was supposed to, the journalists concluded that this did not, however, end the appearance of conflicting interests. Van Rey, for example, also chaired some meetings in which representatives from Van Pol's company, aldermen and civil servants came together to discuss both planned and future developments. In addition, Van Rey also owned his own real estate in Roermond. According to the newspaper article, the different interests of Van Rey, both as a private person and as alderman, hindered his independence and impartiality. Shortly after the article was published, the mayor of Roermond appointed a research committee, which concluded that Van Pol had benefited from his friendship with Van Rey. Van Rey had, however, not gained any monetary benefits himself, nor did he financially disadvantage the municipality. The committee also emphasized that Van Rey had always been open about his friendship with Van Pol. The committee did point to cases of the appearance of conflicting interests and lamented the lack of checks and balances in the municipality. Van Rey was also guilty of two conflicts of interest due to having his own realestate portfolio (Frissen and Sorgdrager 2012, pp. 44–48).

In 2012, the Dutch Public Prosecution Office (OM) also launched an investigation into Van Rey. In a taped telephone conversation, Van Rey had shared confidential information with a candidate for the position of mayor of Roermond about an upcoming job interview. The OM raided Van Rey's home and office. Three days later, Van Rey resigned as alderman and senator. Next to leaking confidential information, the OM also brought other charges of corruption due to allegedly accepting gifts in exchange for granting contracts and projects to his friend Van Pol. He was also charged with election fraud for illegally recruiting votes for municipal council elections. A third charge was for accepting bribes from another

developer and from a security company. He was also, finally, charged with money laundering of EUR 175.000. Van Rey was found guilty on the charge of sharing confidential information, and for accepting gifts/bribes from people about whom he could reasonably have predicted they would expect some benefit from him in return. However, there was not enough proof for the other charges (court rulings 12 July 2016: ECLI:NL:RBROT:2016:5277; ECLI:NL:RBROT:2016:5280; ECLI:NL:RBROT:2016:5272). After appeals by both the OM and Van Rey in 2019, the verdict against Van Rey was kept in place. He had to pay a fine, do 240 h community service, and there was a provisional prison sentence of one year and a two-year ban from any administrative or political function (Hoge Raad 2019). In 2022, Van Rey would, however, return as an alderman to the municipality of Roermond.

4.1.2. Results

Politicians on Van Rey

Fellow politicians were overwhelmingly negative about the actions of Van Rey (see Figure 2A). There was more nuance though in their judgments about Van Rey vis a vis person, role or system. As a person, one former colleague found it unlikely for Van Rey to be corrupt, as van Rey was already rich, so why would he illegally enrich himself? Others found him a Hercules, a hero. Judgments by his peers mostly focused on his role (Figure 2B). Some politicians especially claimed Van Rey's political career did not fit with his activities as a project developer. Others found it naïve for a politician to accept gifts from people or companies who could later expect something in return. Only a few people judged him more positively. One fellow VVD member remarked that the close ties Van Rey had to the local community made him an excellent representative, as people and companies knew where to find him when they had problems or propositions. Some also praised how much Van Rey had done for Roermond and the province of Limburg. The local VVD party and the municipality council, however, no longer wanted to collaborate with Van Rey. Regarding judgments about the system, there was some disagreement. While some politicians pointed to the negative effect of Van Reys actions on trust in the (local) political–administrative system in general, others explicitly denounced such a connection. After all, the court's decision about Van Rey had been about the individual and not about the system.

Newspapers on Van Rey

Both *NRC Handelsblad* and de *Telegraaf* exclusively issued negative judgments about Van Rey's actions. In terms of person, role and system, differences can, however, be observed. There were relatively few judgments about Van Rey as a person (see Figure 2C,D). Both newspapers more readily issued (quite similar) judgments about Van Rey in his role as a politician. One article called Van Rey 'the sovereign of the swamp of conflicting interests', while another stated that Van Rey continuously abused his role, ignoring rules about what he may and may not do. The largest part of the judgments in both newspapers was aimed at the system Van Rey was supposedly a part of. His alleged lack of integrity was often connected to either his political party (VVD), or the general political system and culture in the province of Limburg. Many people pointed out that it was 'again' a member of VVD with an integrity problem in this particular province, following other scandals in recent years (Dohmen 1996).

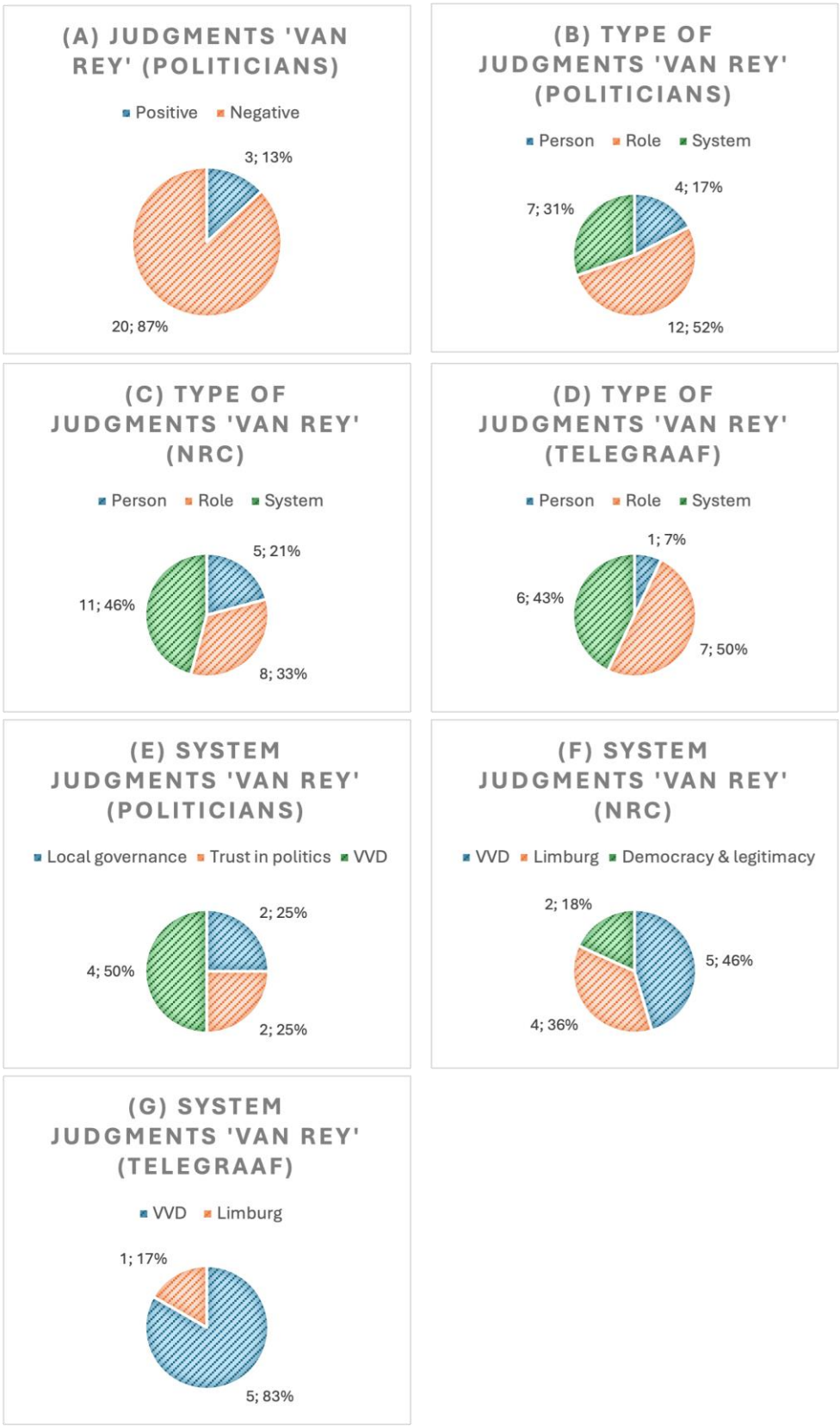

Figure 2. Judgments of Van Rey by politicians and in newspapers (absolute and percentages).

Attentive audiences on Van Rey

As Figure 3A,B show, the majority of the opinions on GeenStijl.nl and Joop.nl were negative. The few people with a more neutral stance mostly pointed to the supposed ubiquity of corruption, conflicting interests or nepotism, e.g., "others are bad too, so Van Rey should not be judged too harshly". Some also emphasized that the court's decision should be awaited. Those who positively judged Van Rey commonly argued that he was an able politician and businessman who had done a lot for the city and the region. Some arguments went along the lines of 'every politician is corrupt, at least Van Rey contributed something to the city of Roermond, so let him be'.

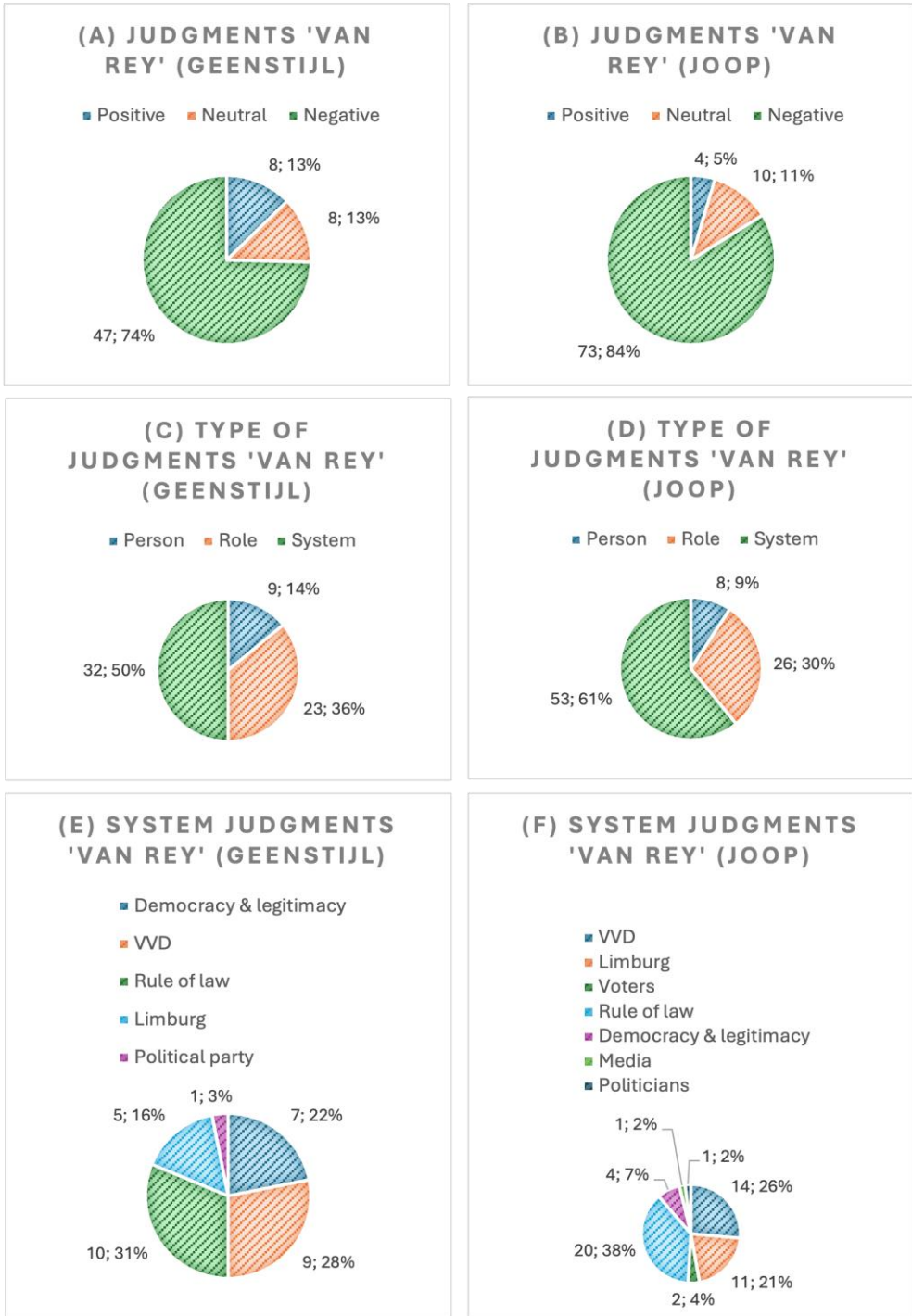

Figure 3. Judgments of Van Rey by attentive audiences (absolute and percentages).

Judgements on person, role and system were more diverse. While some judged Van Rey as a person and a politician (see Figure 3C,D) the most significant number of comments found on GeenStijl and Joop concerned the system, interpreted in various ways (see Figure 3E,F). Common were references to a general corrupt and nepotistic political system. It was also common to relate Van Rey's behavior to the political party he was a member of (VVD). For example, it was bluntly stated that many if not all members of VVD lacked integrity. Quite a few systemic judgments were also aimed at what could be called the 'rule of law'. Various people found Van Rey's sentence too lenient and accused the OM and judges of bribery or offering special treatment to politicians. Interestingly, many judgments again pointed to the province of Limburg, a region with supposedly different standards for integrity. People said not to be surprised, as if Van Rey's behavior was to be expected in Limburg. On Joop, some people wondered why people kept voting for Van Rey. However, some also blamed the 'leftist media' for sentencing Van Rey before the court had reached its decision.

4.1.3. Concluding Remarks on Van Rey

There are a few noteworthy differences between the sources examined. Few politicians connected Van Rey's behavior to the political system at large, unlike many among the general public on GeenStijl and Joop. Perhaps politicians were reluctant to make such a connection because they themselves are part of the political system? Another remarkable feature of the case was the lack of any positive or neutral judgments in the newspapers, whereas the other sources did contain some. Perhaps newspapers, because of their function as a 'watchdog', were more likely to negatively judge any appearances of possibly conflicting interest in this case?

4.2. Anne Wil Duthler: Conflict of Interests by a Dutch Senator

4.2.1. The Case

In 2018 and 2019, two online magazines *Quote* and *Follow the Money* accused senator Anne Wil Duthler (VVD) of a conflict of interest (e.g., Kuijpers and Keken 2018). A senator is a part-time position in the Netherlands, which means that most if not all senators combine it with other jobs. This was also true for Duthler who, together with her husband, owned several companies, all based at the same location, and all relating to the topic of privacy, although addressing different aspects: law, IT, consultancy, and education. *Quote* and *Follow the Money* pointed out how Duthler as senator had continuously emphasized the importance of privacy protection measures. According to the magazines, Duthler asked detailed questions during debates about privacy products (i.e., so-called privacy impact assessments), which her companies also offered. She had allegedly also emphasized the importance of a law on the obligation to report data breaches. On the day this law was established, Duthler's company sent out a message in which they offered businesses 'a check' regarding possible data breaches. The magazines thus accused Duthler of having conflicting interests. As a senator, she was making decisions about topics that would provide new business opportunities to her own companies. Moreover, they argued, this was not the first time Duthler was involved in activities that offered the appearance of conflicting interests. Her company had been involved in the design of the law *Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning* (Social Support Act) and an automatization project for the Dutch central tax office. Duthler attempted to force the magazine to rectify the article with a lawsuit. The judge, however, decided against it. Based on the article and the judge's decisions, the VVD removed Duthler from the party in the Senate.

4.2.2. Results

Politicians on Duthler

Generally, politicians either negatively judged Duthler's behavior or gave neutral comments (see Figure 4A). No positive judgments were found in the items examined. Because of the judge's verdict, the VVD expelled Duthler from the party. The chair of

the Senate (also a member of the VVD), however, remarked that Duthler's behavior in her role as senator should be viewed with the organizational structure of the Senate in mind. According to her, in an apparent attempt to suggest that rules surrounding alleged conflicting interests are different for senators, the integrity of a senator should be understood against the background of the position being part-time.

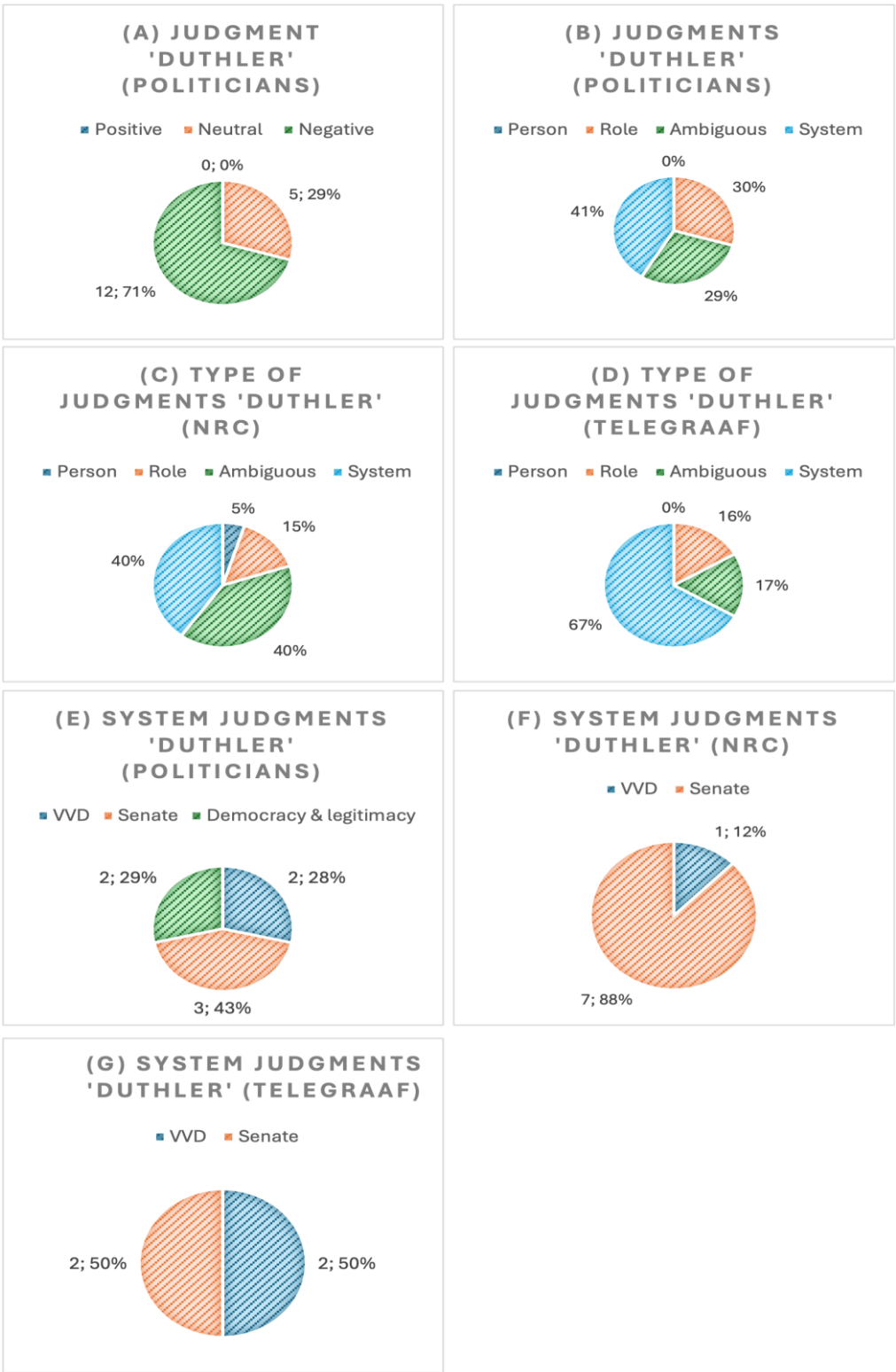

Figure 4. Judgments of Duthler by politicians and in newspapers (absolute and percentage).

Politicians' judgments concerning person, role and system again offer interesting variation (see Figure 4B). As in the case of Van Rey, only a very limited number of comments from politicians were about Duthler as a person. A bigger part pertained to Duthler in her role as a senator. Judgments also often referred to the system or were ambivalent. Various politicians remarked that Duthler's behavior was harmful to citizens' view of politics in general and the Senate more specifically. Some also questioned the integrity of the VVD party. The amount of ambivalence in this case is striking and likely stems from the fact that senators are expected to have ancillary positions. Politicians are likely to agree that this is an asset rather than a liability or are not sure where to position themselves in this discussion (Kerkhoff and Timmermans 2018).

Newspapers on Duthler

Judgments found in both newspapers were unanimously negative. Concerning person, role or system (see Figure 4C,D), it is furthermore clear that the person of Duthler was hardly ever discussed. Comments on her role were slightly more prevalent. The main argument was how Duthler should not have been giving advice about laws she would later vote on. One person also blamed Duthler for a lack of 'sense for integrity'. She should have known better and should not have participated in debates about privacy. In both newspapers, the most significant number of comments was aimed specifically at the system. Still, as in the other cases discussed so far, there was variety in how the system was perceived. *NRC Handelsblad* and *Telegraaf* hardly addressed the 'VVD' as the system when compared to the other sources of public opinion (see below). Rather, these newspapers tied Duthler's behavior to the functioning of the Senate in general.

Attentive audiences on Duthler

Judgments from attentive audiences were also overwhelmingly negative (see Figure 5A,B), mostly stating that Duthler was guilty of conflicts of interest, corruption and/or a lack of integrity. Only a few viewed Duthler's behavior more neutrally; some thought her behavior was not reason enough to worry, because there were bigger fish to fry. Judgements concerning person, role or system (see Figure 5C,D) were oftentimes ambivalent as it remained unclear whether judgements were aimed at Duthler as a person or as a senator (i.e., in her role). The majority of judgments were again aimed at the system (see Figure 5E,F) and again offer much variation. The largest share of these 'system judgments' addressed the 'VVD system'. First, people would accuse the VVD of not dealing with integrity scandals well enough and/or of not caring at all about the topic. Second, people would find the VVD to be bad in general, illustrated by such judgments as "if you search for 'nepotism' in [an encyclopaedia], you find a picture of the VVD logo. It is a morally inferior clique". Some also referred to politicians in general or democracy, for example, when they judged all politicians to be "self-enriching people clinging to their power and privileges" (in Dutch: *op het pluche blijven zitten*).

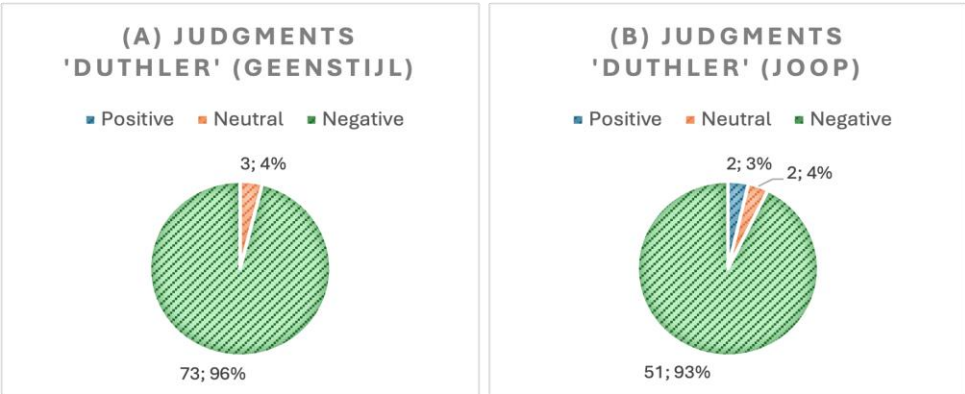

Figure 5. *Cont.*

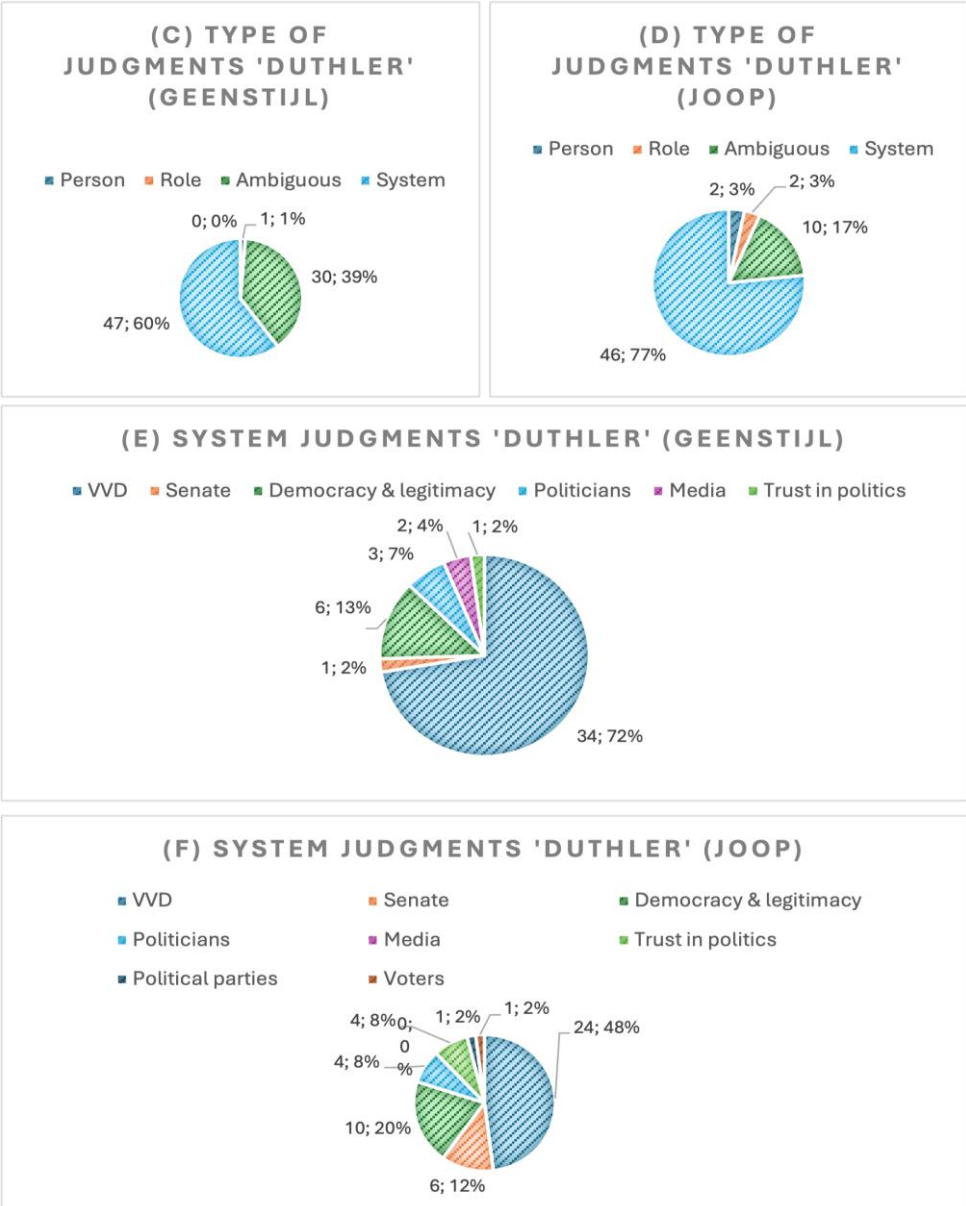

Figure 5. Judgments of Duthler by attentive audiences (absolute and percentage).

4.2.3. Concluding Remarks on Duthler

In the case of Senator Duthler, judgments were either negative or ambivalent. Relatively few people viewed Duthler as an individual (as a person) or in her role and most aimed for the system by regarding Duthler as exemplary of things going wrong with (party) politics and government in general and the senate in particular. As such, the case of Duthler clearly shows how the individual and his/her behavior can fade into the background while focus is directed towards the system. At the same time, Duthler was not excused for her behavior and was fired from her party. During the next election, she was not re-elected. Being part of a flawed system apparently did not mean she was not responsible for her own actions anymore.

4.3. Jacques Tichelaar: Nepotism and the Renovations of a Stately Home

4.3.1. The Case

On 25 February 2017, newspapers *De Volkskrant* and *Dagblad van het Noorden* published an investigation into the redecoration of a mansion house 'Huize Tetrode', a national monument, property of the province of Drenthe, and situated in its capital city Assen (Berg

2017; Berg and Bodde 2017a). In 2015, the province wanted a redesign of its interior. At that time, the building's user 'Projectenbureau Drenthe' appointed an interior designer from Assen to offer a redecorating design. This advice was presented on 2 November 2015, after which this designer signed a contract for the job.

A few days later, however, on 5 November, the Projectenbureau Drenthe received an email from the housing coordinator of the province, stating that the Commissioner of the King (CdK) of the province of Drenthe, Jacques Tichelaar of the Dutch Social Democratic party (PvdA), had appointed a different interior designer for the job. Although he was politically responsible for the building's management, it was and is highly unusual that the CdK interferes in such a way. More troubling was the fact that Tichelaar appointed his sister-in-law Karin Klinkenberg for the job. In the end, the sister-in-law received EUR 3.105 for the advice. The designer who had initially been appointed received a compensation of EUR 3.500 (van den Berg and Bodde 2017b). Naturally, the appearance of conflicting interests through family relations and nepotism was immediately created.

It was not the first time that Tichelaar caused the appearance of a conflict of interest. In 2013, he had mediated in a conflict between the municipality of Coevorden and Jos Wijland. Here too, accusations of nepotism were made, since Wijland, an entrepreneur in the catering industry, was Tichelaar's brother-in-law. Confronted with this case, Tichelaar stated that he only acted as a facilitator in a sincere way. In addition, he said that he had not interfered with the content of the matter and that his familial relationship with Wijland was irrelevant (van den Berg and Bodde 2017b). This appeared to be untrue after an investigation by *De Volkskrant* and *Dagblad van het Noorden*. Several sources had told them that Tichelaar pressured the municipality outside of the conversations to compensate his brother-in-law. In addition, a letter by Tichelaar to the Provincial Council from 2013 emerged in which he admitted that his interference had not been correct and promised never to act as an intermediary again in the future where a family member may be involved (van den Berg and Bodde 2017b). Mounting pressure from opposition and coalition parties in Drenthe after the Tetrode affair, in the context of his earlier similar transgression with his brother-in-law, forced Tichelaar to step down as CdK on 1 March 2017, despite the fact that he eventually admitted he had acted wrongly.

4.3.2. Results

Politicians on Tichelaar

Judgments by fellow politicians were overwhelmingly negative (see Figure 6A), despite some more neutral comments in the provincial council meeting leading up to his resignation that Tichelaar should not be judged until he had had a chance to explain things. Judgments were also primarily aimed at his role as CdK (see Figure 6B). Some wondered how an experienced politician such as Tichelaar could make the same mistake twice. Others emphasized the exemplary function of Tichelaar as CdK and found such conflicts of interest unbecoming for his position. Most political parties pointed out that their trust in Tichelaar as CdK had been damaged too much for him to continue his work. His lack of integrity was openly questioned. Relatively few judgments were specifically aimed at the system (see Figure 6B). Some fellow politicians pointed out how such perceived lack of integrity of the CdK undermined the trust in the political system in general, and the province of Drenthe in particular. D66 party leader in Drenthe Marianne van der Tol, for example, said how "this is yet another case that shows how this small province is big in nasty affairs" (Berg and Bodde 2017b).

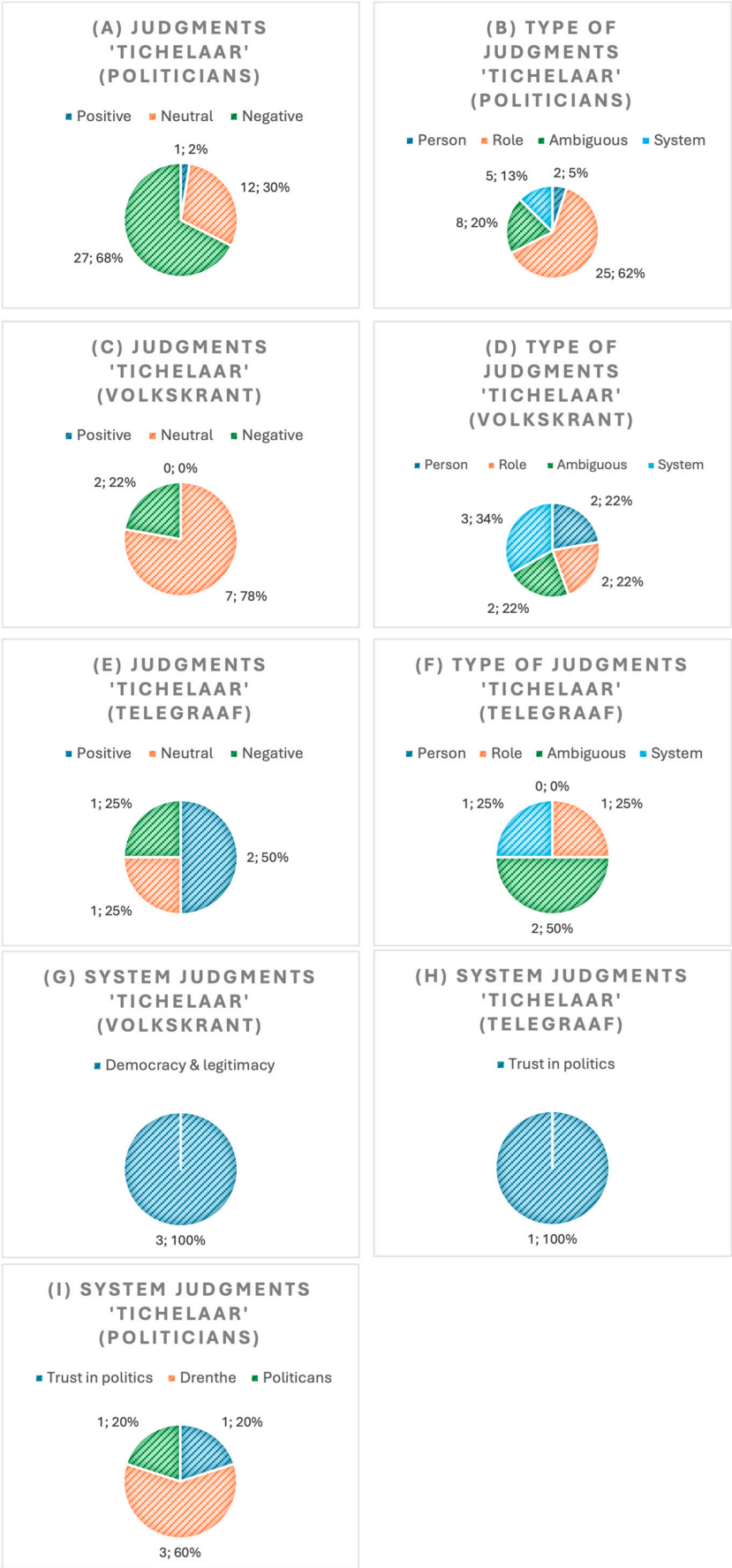

Figure 6. Judgments of Tichelaar by politicians and in newspapers (absolute and percentages).

Newspapers on Tichelaar

Quite a difference can be seen in the judgments found in the two newspapers. In *De Volkskrant,* the affair was perceived negatively or it was apparently downplayed, as various comments remained more neutral (see Figure 6C). One commentator called Tichelaar's conflicting interests a "nepotistic insignificance". Another similarly stated how "*on television I see more shameless nepotism than this*." Someone else wondered if Tichelaar had really had any bad intentions because the sum of money paid to his sister-in-law was so little. Regarding Tichelaar in his role as CdK, some furthermore argued that such conflicting interests should not happen to such an experienced politician. Others, similar to the politicians discussed above, accused Tichelaar of making the same mistake twice. Considering judgments about the system, newspaper commentaries seemed to mostly point at the misbehavior of higher public officials in general. It was often implied that Tichelaar's behavior was not an individual incident, but part of a rotten system in which others like him behaved just the same. Some differences can be observed between newspapers. Comments in *De Telegraaf* were more often positive than those found in de *Volkskrant* (see Figure 6C,D), which had no positive comments but rather a high percentage of neutral opinions. On the person, role or system divide, differences can be seen as well (see Figure 6E,F). While, for example, The *Volkskrant*, had opinions on the person, de *Telegraaf* had none. *De Telegraaf* also offered more ambivalent positions. System judgements were few. *De Volkskrant* mentioned democratic and legitimacy deficits, targeting politicians serving their own instead of public interests. The one system judgement in *De Telegraaf* referred to lacking public trust as a result of Tichelaar's transgressions.

Attentive audiences on Tichelaar

None of the sources investigated for attentive audiences contained positive judgments. *Joop.nl* only offered slightly more neutral positions than de *Telegraaf* (see Figure 7A,B). With regard to person, role and system, distinct variation can be observed. A few comments were aimed at the integrity of Tichelaar as a person. Much more than *Joop*, *Geenstijl* predominantly focused on the system. Some seemed to focus primarily on Tichelaar's political party (PvdA), e.g., "integrity violations are in their genes". Others called Tichelaar "a typical manager" who "is not ashamed of anything", thereby apparently distinguishing between politicians and managers, and expecting the first to be of better behavior. Tichelaar's behavior led some to question the rule of law in the Netherlands: "in a democratic rule of law state, these (the established political parties) should be called criminal organizations. In the Netherlands it is called respectable. Taint of treason…" Others also wondered whether Tichelaar's alleged integrity violations could really be considered incidents, or if they reflected a party culture of clientelism and corruption, and seemed to imply that the Dutch political system was fundamentally flawed.

Interestingly, comments on *Joop* were predominantly aimed not at the system but at Tichelaar's role as CdK. Some implied that Tichelaar's alleged behavior did not fit with his role since he apparently "rages through the provincial house as a potentate". Others accused the CdK of thinking he was above the law, "like a regent from another caste". Quite a few commentators explicitly wrote that Tichelaar should resign from his role as CdK, also considering his previous integrity violation. On *Joop,* there was also a substantial number of comments aimed at the integrity of the system in various forms, mostly the political system as such and the PvdA party. In a typical comment, someone pointed to the political party PvdA as the source of all evil, "unsurprisingly taking community money". Another judged the province of Drenthe, but also Limburg, to be corrupt on the whole: those "Banana Republics, for and by family and supporters".

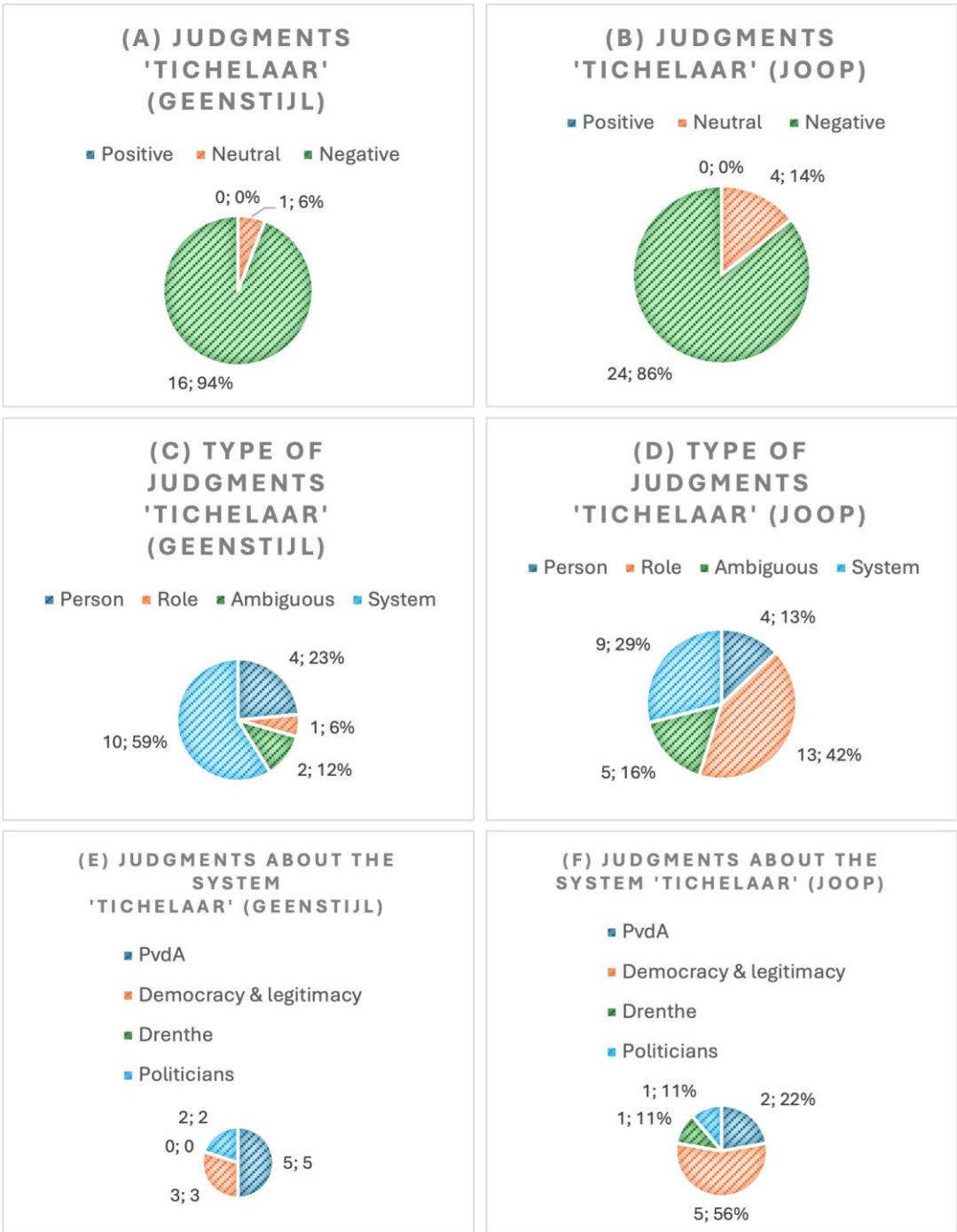

Figure 7. Judgments of Tichelaar by attentive audiences (absolute and percentages).

4.3.3. Concluding Remarks on Tichelaar

In the case of Tichelaar, similar elements were discussed as we have seen in the other cases. Judgements were overwhelmingly negative. Furthermore, politicians did not focus on the person but rather on the integrity of the role, whereas the general public also by and large ignored the person and predominantly focused on the system. In the judgments by attentive audiences, both the person of Tichelaar and his role as CdK faded to the background. Instead, commenters judged the system to be corrupted as they referred to his political party, the province or politics in general. Fewer systemic judgments were found in the newspapers and among fellow politicians. When these issued systemic judgments,

they were usually more neutrally phrased, for example, when it was stated that Tichelaar's behavior hurt the reputation of the province of Drenthe.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The core question of this research was to what extent moral judgements concerning political integrity in various media outlets by different groups in the public domain show attention for different levels of integrity, i.e., judgements of personal integrity, role integrity and political system integrity. In addition, the article assessed the link between one's supposed place on the political–ideological spectrum and one's perceptions of (lacking) integrity and what that might imply about (dis)satisfaction with government or politics in general.

This explorative exercise has arguably furthered insight into how the concept of political integrity gains meaning in context and how it is used in public debate in the wake of scandal. In addition, the inclusion of a variety of opinions has added important but often overlooked actors in societal debates concerning political integrity. This offered a connection between political–ideological stance on the one hand and perceptions of political integrity and political (dis)satisfaction on the other. After all, the extent to which people view an incident of lacking integrity as a personal, role or systemic failure tells us something about this.

The previous analysis of the debates surrounding the three case studies of supposed conflicts of interest has underscored that while the vast majority of comments were negative, different meaning and moral judgment were indeed often attached to specific acts of supposedly lacking integrity, depending on context. As it turns out, different actors (i.e., politicians, newspapers and attentive audiences) tended to have quite different views on what political integrity was or should have been. The analysis suggests there is indeed a gap between politicians on the one hand and citizens and commentators on the other. Fellow politicians mostly focus on role integrity. This makes sense. Politicians are likely reluctant to make other connections because they like to separate personal and professional roles, because they are part of the political system themselves and because they actually know the roles better than most. Newspapers and attentive audiences, on the other hand, focused much more on person and especially political system integrity. There, an individual transgression was much more often seen as a personal character flaw. This also makes sense. Person and role are less likely separated by media and, especially, attentive audiences where there is generally much in-depth knowledge of what certain roles actually entail.

Especially striking, furthermore, is the conclusion (for now at least) that the further removed people are from the actual business of politics (i.e., in newspapers and by attentive audiences), the more likely it is that individual integrity violations are regarded as signs of systemic failure or 'political corruption', broadly understood. In addition, when the distinction between the three levels of integrity is coupled with people's presumed ideological position on a rough left/progressive and right/conservative scale, this opens the theoretical possibility that differing perceptions of lacking integrity are a viable indicator of general (dis)satisfaction with government. The exploratory analysis has shown (for the Dutch context of course) that the further people are situated towards the right/conservative scale, the less satisfied they seem to be with government and the more inclined they are to regard politicians as mere extensions of a 'corrupted system'. People on the left/progressive side of the scale instead tend to focus relatively less on political system integrity. They seem to be more satisfied with the political system to begin with. In short, supposed political integrity violations, in combination with right/conservative political ideology, lead to specific moral judgements that tell us something about general (dis)satisfaction with politics and government. Concerning these political system judgments, variety can furthermore be seen in what this 'system' supposedly consists of. This catch-all term seems to denote different things to different people and groups. Common elements, however, were the political party of the person involved (twice VVD and once PvdA), the region (s)he operated in (e.g., the province of Limburg) and of course, government, politics or politicians in general.

Naturally, the limited number of cases explored here, the sole focus on the Dutch context as well as the choice for one particular type of integrity violation do not allow for general conclusions. In addition, data collection has been limited to published statements concerning different cases. As such, adding more advanced coding and more rigorous legal analysis could be worthwhile. However, we argue this is not necessary for the purposes of this essentially explorative study, which does show the value of potential future larger-scale quantitative and qualitative comparative case study research on the topic. This could, for example, further test the distinction between person, role and political system integrity as a theoretical construct. In addition, word-by-word measurement of debates surrounding more cases would allow one to unearth yet more contextualized moral judgement about political integrity. The link between integrity judgements and political ideology is also worth further exploration in order to better gauge levels of public (dis)satisfaction with politics and government among different sections of societies and the role played in this this by perceptions of political integrity. Finally, in such further research, it would be worthwhile to explore the options of AI or other tools to analyze cases on a much larger scale, although this would also require even more cases to first be qualitatively described and mapped (Kerkhoff and Overeem 2013).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, W.V.G.-K. and T.K.; Methodology, W.V.G.-K. and T.K.; Formal analysis, W.V.G.-K. and T.K.; Investigation, W.V.G.-K.; Data curation, W.V.G.-K.; Writing–original draft, W.V.G.-K. and T.K.; Writing–review & editing, W.V.G.-K. and T.K.; Visualization, W.V.G.-K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study since case descriptions consist solely of material that is already publicly available in various media. Furthermore, the article does not weigh in on the legal nature and/or (im)morality of the acts described.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was waived since all case material is taken from publicly available source material and no additional interviews were held.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article can be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank the participants, and Christoph Demmke in particular, of the 2024 IRSPM panel "From Intentions to Impact: Integrity antecedents and anti-corruption policies" for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper (Van Ginkel-Kempenaar & Kerkhoff, 2024).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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