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Political parties and the democratic mandate : comparing collective mandate fulfilment in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On 18 May 2010, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Witney, David Cameron, spoke for the first time in the House of Commons as the nation's prime minister. This was a special day for British politics. After 13 years of Labour government the prime minister was once again a member of the Conservative party. However, television viewers were confronted with an even more remarkable sight. Behind Cameron, the front bench was packed with politicians from not one, but *two* political parties. The May 2010 election had failed to provide one party with an overall majority of seats, which had resulted in this Conservative-Liberal coalition. Deputy prime minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, smiled to the camera: he had managed to get his relatively small party into office by forging a coalition government with the Conservatives. It was the first time since the Second World War that a Liberal politician, or politicians from any two parties for that matter, had sat on that bench.

The coalition government of 2010 was the exception to the rule of single-party government in Britain. The United Kingdom is the origin of the aptly-called *Westminster*-style of government. In this system, the electoral system usually provides one party with an overall majority of seats in parliament. That party automatically forms the government, leaving its contenders in opposition. How different is the process of government formation in countries with proportional electoral systems. In the Netherlands, for example, which had elections only a month later, the question was not so much whether one party could form a government, but whether a three-party coalition was at all possible. Usually, lengthy coalition negotiations are necessary to form a government after the elections. These are two different models of democracy in action: majoritarian versus consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1999).

These two political systems are similar in at least one respect: they are representative systems. The system works through the democratic election of popular representatives. These representatives have to ensure that power (*kratos*) is held by the people (*demos*), not directly, but indirectly. From a democratic point of

view, the representative relationship between people and elected politicians is crucially important. The legitimacy of the system depends on this representative link. In contemporary politics, the representative task is preformed by parties, rather than individual politicians. The question whether parties represent the people well, is one of the central questions in the debate on political legitimacy.

One way to establish a representative link between citizens and political parties is by providing political parties with a mandate. This practice is very common in most established democracies. Political parties write election manifestos in which they offer a programme for parliament. Some parties make explicit pledges to its electorate, while the programme of other parties is quite vague. Voters have the opportunity to take these manifestos into account when casting their ballot. If they vote for a party of which they like the manifesto, they increase the chance that parliament and government will take decisions that they like. Thus, the election manifestos are a mechanism through which voters are linked to political parties' parliamentary behaviour. This system is called the party mandate model.

A central requirement in the party mandate model is that parties fulfil their mandate. Usually party mandate fulfilment is studied by looking at individual parties' pledges: have they done what they promised? The mandate model is, however, eventually a system of linkage between elections and parliament. This implies that the system of party competition from which voters make their electoral choice should be similar to the system of party competition in parliament after the election. A party should compete on similar issues and its opinions about these issues should be similar during the elections and in parliament. This study looks at parties' parliamentary mandates, rather than government policy output. This allows for the study of both government and opposition parties' mandates.

1.1 Research questions

This book considers the question of party mandate fulfilment from an institutional perspective. This is apparent in the way the party mandate is studied, namely at the party system level rather than the individual party level. This builds on Pitkin's idea that political representation is not an atomized relationship between a citizen and a representative, but an institutionalized arrangement between many citizens and groups (Pitkin, 1967: 221-222). In practice this means that instead of looking at specific promises of individual parties, I compare the configuration of party preferences and priorities during the elections (the 'electoral space of competition') with the configuration of party preferences and priorities in parliament (the 'parliamentary space of competition'). Thus, mandate fulfilment is defined here as *the level of congruence between the electoral party competition and the parliamentary party competition*.

The institutional focus of this study is also apparent in the explanatory vari-

ables that are studied. The main research question focuses on the explanatory power of the model of democracy: majoritarian democracy or consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1999). The way in which mandates are fulfilled by political parties differs between countries. In majoritarian systems single party government is the rule. Under normal circumstances one party is provided with a majority of seats in parliament¹. This party is 'mandated' to implement its manifesto commitments in government. The other parties are in opposition and have very limited opportunity to influence the government policy output, which has consequences for their parliamentary behaviour. In consensus democracies, characterized by proportional electoral systems, it is quite unusual to find a single party majority government. The proportionality of the electoral system results in a parliament with multiple larger and smaller parties. Coalition governments are forged after the elections. Thus the translation from manifesto to policy output is indirect: the government's policies are a compromise between the coalition parties. These dynamics influence parties' behaviour in parliament. Thus, the way in which parliament and government work differs strongly between different types of political systems. The main research question of this study is whether these different mechanisms of linkage lead to differences in mandate fulfilment: *What consequences do the differences between majoritarian and consensus democracy have for mandate fulfilment?*

The description of mandate fulfilment in majoritarian and consensus democracies includes a second important explanation: the difference between government and opposition parties. In majoritarian democracies, government parties have ample opportunity to implement their mandates both in parliament and in government. The opposition parties, on the other hand, have little alternative but to oppose the government's policies. In consensus democracies, it is the government parties that have to compromise in order to participate in government. Opposition parties do not have to compromise and have incentives to stick to their own policy programme, because there are usually multiple opposition parties. Thus, the dynamic of mandate fulfilment of government and opposition parties differs between consensus and majoritarian democracies. The question *whether this leads to different levels of mandate fulfilment for government and opposition* is the second research question of this study.

Has mandate fulfilment changed over time? Although the period since the Second World War has been one of stability for most Western democracies, there have been many societal changes that have affected how politics is practised. Whereas in the past political parties had more or less stable bases of support, nowadays many voters change their party preference between elections or even decide what to vote in the polling booth. Parties themselves have also changed, from mass organizations that catered to a specific subsection of society to professional institutions that aim to catch as many voters as they want. *Has this resulted*

¹Although there are exceptions, such as the practice of minority government in Canada, which has become rule rather than exception in recent years.

in lower levels of mandate fulfilment?

The last set of explanations of the variation in mandate fulfilment points at the extent to which issues matter to parties and the extent to which they take extreme positions on issues. If issues matter a lot to parties, one could expect that their position in the parliamentary competition will be very close to their position in the electoral competition. Issues can be said to matter for a party if they talk a lot about it (high issue saliency) or when they take an extreme policy position on the issue. The last research question is thus *To what extent do differences in issue saliency and policy position extremism explain differences in mandate fulfilment?*

1.2 Societal and scientific relevance

Most people will say that they do not need a book-length analysis to answer the question whether parties do what they promise. The answer is plain and simple: no². While a majority of respondents of the 2005 British Election Study believes that the party they voted for does fulfil its promises, only few believe that the other major party honours its electoral commitments³. The Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (2006) paints a similar picture: only 7% (fully) agrees with the statement that ‘Politicians keep their promises’, while 45% (fully) disagree (almost 50% choose for the ‘agree nor disagree’ option). Thus, popular belief in party mandate fulfilment is low.

Previous studies into the party mandate, which usually look at fulfilment of electoral pledges by governments, suggest that all is not so bad. Government parties manage to translate about 60% to 80% of their pledges into government policy (Petry and Collette, 2009). Even 20% to 40% of opposition parties’ pledges are translated into policy (Mansergh and Thomson, 2007). This discrepancy calls for an explanation. Are people simply too negative about party mandate fulfilment? Or does the way in which the party mandate is studied paint too positive a picture of mandate fulfilment? Below I will argue that existing studies are limited in a number of respects. This study offers a different approach to the party mandate which may shed some light on the discrepancy between popular belief and the scientific study of the party mandate.

From a societal perspective it is perhaps most important to learn how pledge fulfilment can be improved. If we better understand how institutions influence mandate fulfilment, the organization of political systems might be adjusted to create optimal circumstances for pledge fulfilment. For example, if mandate fulfilment would be higher in majoritarian democracies, countries might opt for a

²This is at least my own experience when explaining the nature of my research to people outside of academia. Naurin (2007) reports to have had similar experiences.

³The percentage of Conservative voters who believe that the Conservatives do not honour their commitments is 31.9%, for Labour voters the percentage who believe that Labour do not honour their commitments is 46.6% (British Election Study, 2005).

more majoritarian type of democracy. These insights have become increasingly important, because trust in politics has declined in many Western democracies. Although people's support for the idea of democracy is still high, they are not particularly impressed by political parties and politicians. If particular institutional arrangements can foster party mandate fulfilment, this can also help to ensure public trust in politics. At least it is important to know what explains mandate fulfilment, because sometimes democratic reforms are proposed arguing that they lead to more responsible parties and politicians, while in fact little is known about these effects.

The scientific relevance of this study is its contribution to the understanding of the party mandate at an institutional level and its functioning under different models of democracy. The approach taken here offers a more inclusive study of parties' mandates than existing studies provide, by comparing the structure of the electoral and parliamentary party competition. Where other studies have looked at policy output, this study looks at parties' parliamentary behaviour. This helps to understand the *process* of political representation. It also offers the possibility to look at the mandate of opposition parties, which have largely been ignored in the study of the party mandate thus far. Differences between majoritarian and consensus democracies have been central to many studies of political representation. Some authors find that consensus democracies outperform majoritarian democracies when it comes to the link between citizens and politicians (Powell, 2009), while others point at the merits of majoritarian democracy in terms of government party pledge fulfilment (Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Klingemann et al., 1994). A third group of authors does not find many differences between the two types of systems (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010). This calls for clarification and further study. The approach taken here will bring new evidence to the scholarly debate on the difference between consensus and majoritarian democracy. In addition to its contribution to the theoretical debate on the party mandate, this study will also contribute to the method of studying party positions and mandate fulfilment in particular, by applying recently developed content analysis techniques to the question of the party mandate (Slapin and Proksch, 2008).

1.3 Outline of the book

The first two chapters of this book outline the theoretical background of this study. The second chapter focuses on the conceptual understanding of the party mandate model. It presents the party mandate model as a theory of political representation. The main objections to the party mandate from a normative and rational choice perspective are discussed. This study is concerned with one particular aspect of the mandate model: the extent to which parties fulfil their mandates. Research into this question can be subdivided into two approaches: the pledge and saliency approach. These approaches offer partial insight into the

mandate, but a few arguments can be tabled against these approaches. The application of spatial theory to the question of the party mandate is proposed as an alternative approach. Spatial modelling has been extensively used before in the study of party issue positions and offers an attractive alternative to the pledge-focused studies that dominate current studies into the party mandate.

Chapter three discusses the hypotheses of this study: how can we explain variation in mandate fulfilment? The main explanatory factor is the type of democracy: majoritarian or consensus democracy. Contrary to the findings of previous studies, I hypothesize that a consensus democracy shows higher levels of mandate fulfilment than a majoritarian democracy. This is the result of the different conceptualization of and approach to the party mandate that is taken in this study. Three other explanations of variation in mandate fulfilment are also tested. First, the difference between government and opposition is explored. It is expected that the effect of being in government on mandate fulfilment depends on the type of democracy. Secondly, changes in party mandate fulfilment over time are studied. Based on the literature on the changing role of political parties, I formulate the expectation that party mandate fulfilment has dropped over the last fifty years. A third set of explanations is sought at the party level: whether issues that parties find very important or that they have strong feelings about make them fulfil their mandate better.

The methodological issues of this study are explored in chapter four. In the first part of this chapter I outline the basic research design involving two cases: the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In each of the two countries six elections and subsequent parliaments were selected. In the second part of the chapter I explore the techniques to measure the congruence of the structures of electoral and parliamentary party competition. In particular the methods to estimate party issue positions are discussed. In the third part of this chapter I describe how the chosen method has been applied to the two countries and how information on parties' issue priorities and issue positions has been used to construct spatial representations of party competition.

The four remaining chapters provide the empirical results for each of the research questions. In each of the chapters I look at mandate fulfilment in two respects. Firstly, congruence of parties' issue priorities: whether they talk about similar issues in their election manifesto and in parliament. Secondly, congruence of parties' issue positions, that is whether they say the same things in both arena's. The fifth chapter discusses the main research question: whether there is a difference in mandate fulfilment between majoritarian and consensus democracies. In chapter six, I focus on the difference between government and opposition parties. Chapter seven provides a detailed historical analysis of variation of mandate fulfilment through time. In chapter eight, the party-level explanations of issue saliency are put to the test.