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Imitating the newcomer. How, when and why established political parties imitate the policy positions and issue attention of new political parties in the electoral and parliamentary arena: the case of the Netherlands

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Chapter 1: Why care about new political parties?

“That is why the plan was hatched to form the Party for the Animals in 2002. A party that in the first place would act as a 'pacer in the marathon' and remind established parties of the many good intentions in their election manifesto.” - Marianne Thieme, leader of the Party for the Animals (2006, 83 translation SO).

1.1 Why care about new political parties?

New political parties may have a special role in party politics. They may influence the attention that established political parties devote to certain issues and the positions that these parties take on these issues. This idea can be found in both theories of prominent political scientists and the statements of the leaders of actual new political parties. Marianne Thieme, leader of the Dutch PvdD (*Partij voor de Dieren*/Party for the Animals), states that her party was formed specifically to try and change the policies of established parties in parliament, as is evident from the quote above. The party does not seek to implement its policy goals directly but instead hopes that its participation in the parliamentary arena will force established parties to take over its policy priorities. In the 1990's, the founders of the pensioners' party U55+ (*Unie 55+*/Union 55+) shared Thieme's goal of influencing policy indirectly through their influence on the established parties. They stated that they realised they would remain a small party but that they would force established parties to take over their policy positions (Politieke Unie 55+ 1994, 14). The founders of D66 (*Democraten '66*/Democraten '66) had greater ambitions, but these were still put in terms of *influencing* the existing political system: in D66's first election campaign party leader Hans van Mierlo stated that “D66 will disappear when we have helped the existing political system explode” (Van der Land 2003, 36; Rogmans 1991, 54). There is a whole range of effects that founders of new political parties have sought to provoke: from bringing new issues on the political agenda, via forcing established parties to change their positions, to changing the main patterns of the political system.

Off course, founders of new political parties often have greater expectations: on one occasion, Pim Fortuyn, the founder of the eponymous party LPF (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*/List Pim Fortuyn), announced: "I will become the next prime-minister, make

no mistake!"¹ New political parties can influence government policies in two ways: new political parties may use motions, parliamentary initiatives or amendments to steer government policy. If they participate in government, ministers may themselves propose policies that were included in the coalition agreement by the new party. In doing so, parties are able to influence policy directly (Minkenberg 2001, 14; Rydgren 2004; Van den Brink 2006, 153; Hainsworth 2008; Deschouwer 2007).

New parties can also influence government policy indirectly: they may influence the positions that established parties take or change the priority they give to issues. This means that new parties can also have an indirect effect on policy: they influence policy through their effect on established parties. There are good theoretical reasons to examine the indirect effects of new political parties, even though the direct effects of new political parties may also be interesting. Classical studies in political science have proposed that new political parties have a special role to play in politics (Downs 1957; Daalder 1966; Lijphart 1968). Downs, Daalder and Lijphart each recognise the role that new (and often small) parties can play in influencing the positions of established parties. This effect has however not been studied extensively: it is the goal of this thesis to examine these claims.² According to Downs, some political parties may be formed with the explicit goal to "influence already existing parties to change their policies or not to change them" (Downs 1957, 127 emphases removed SO). Daalder and Lijphart have attributed this function to small political parties. According to Daalder (1966, 226) the small political parties in the Dutch system "have served as gadflies, forcing the larger parties not to stray too far from their ideological positions lest they lose votes." Lijphart (1968, 175-176) has used a similar metaphor: the fact that small political parties can easily enter the Dutch parliamentary arena means that they can operate as a pressure valve in the political system: leaders of established parties can use the support for small parties to get an indication of the political dissatisfaction in their constituencies and change their course accordingly. In the Belgian political context scholars often speak of whip

¹ Pels, D. (2009) "Pim Leeft! Zeven jaar na de moord op Pim Fortuyn" *De Groene Amsterdammer* 6/5/2009

² There are also theoretical reasons: As many new political parties disappear from parliament after a few years, remain very small, and are confined to the opposition, focusing only on these direct effects would mean that one neglects many smaller new parties.

parties (*zweeppartijen*): They put established parties under electoral pressure to change their policies (Lucardie 2004; Coffé 2005).

Political parties are, in general, conservative organisations unlikely to change their political positions unless electoral incentives force them to: every vote that the new party gains, is lost by an established party (Janda 1990). So even when these new parties remain small and stay out of government, they can still influence the positions of established parties and therefore their cabinet policies: rather than seeking to implement their own policy positions directly from parliament or government office, new parties may seek to influence the policy positions of established parties in order to see their policy goals realised - albeit indirectly.

New political parties may not only influence established political parties through electoral incentives. In parliament, different mechanisms may play a role (Bardi & Mair 2008). Decision-making in parliament tends to be fixed: the nature of conflict is defined, the lines of conflict are drawn, therefore the majorities are determined and therefore the policy outcomes are set. On the one hand the institutionalised, structured decision-making in parliament may marginalise new political parties. But on the other hand, if new political parties are able to exploit these mechanisms they may have a very strong effect on the patterns of political decision-making. New political parties may form an external shock to the institutionalised decision-making in parliament. They may bring new issues to the agenda, influence the policy positions of established political parties and may even redefine the political conflict. In this way the entry of new political parties may have a marked effect on the way politics is conducted in parliament.

According to Mair (1997a, 1997b), new political parties play a special role in political competition. Mair follows Schattschneider (1960) and proposes that political competition is as much between the established parties on the established lines of conflict, as it is between those parties that have an interest in maintaining the established lines of conflict and those outsiders that have an interest in changing the lines of conflict. The major parties on the left and right compete on the existing left-right dimension. They owe their position to the fact that this conflict exists. New parties have an interest in introducing new lines of conflict and displacing the political conflict. This may, however, also mean that established parties have a particular interest in co-opting new political parties into political alliances. Mair (2001) and following his lead, Bale (2003), propose that the co-optation of new political parties

into political alliances of the left or the right reinforces tendencies towards bipolar cooperation already visible in West-European party systems. In those cases the entry of a new party may actually cause a reduction in the number of lines of conflict.

New political parties may be important forces of change. There is considerable reason to look at the effect of new political parties: some new parties explicitly set out to influence established political parties and established parties may have a good reason to monitor the development of new political parties. New political parties may influence the patterns of electoral competition or patterns of parliamentary cooperation. According to Harmel (1985), there is only a limited number of studies into this subject. Norris (2005, 264) cited the case study of Harmel and Svåsand (1997), as the most systematic study of the effects of new parties. Since then a number of studies of specific cases (Harmel & Svåsand 1997; Pellikaan, De Lange & Van der Meer 2007; Gauja 2010; Slagter & Loewenberg 2009) or on specific party families have been published (Van Spanje 2010; Meguid 2007).³

One may ask the question: why care about political parties at all? At the end of the previous century the idea that political parties had lost their traditional function, had taken root in political science (for an overview of this debate see Koole 2002). Scholars argued that political parties had lost their traditional functions of aggregating public interests and articulating the public's claims. They argued that political parties are relics of the past, not agents of change. The rise of new political parties such as the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn has muted these voices somewhat and has reinvigorated the study of party politics. This study is an attempt to provide an answer to the question whether political parties have lost relevance in the political process, by examining whether new political parties can be agents of political change.

1.2 Main claim of this study

This study will attempt to bring new insight into the study of the reactions of established political parties to new political parties. The main research question of this study is to what extent and under what conditions new political parties influence established political parties and party systems. This study will take a broad look: it will examine reactions of established parties both in terms of attention that established parties devote to certain issues and in terms of the positions that they take on these

³ The only study cited in the literature that looks at new parties in general is Huibregts (2006, cited in Krouwel and Lucardie 2008).

issues. It will examine the reactions of established parties in both the electoral arena and the parliamentary arena. Finally, this study will take a close look at the effects of new parties at the level of both the individual established parties and the party system. This study will look exclusively at the indirect effect of new parties on policy. Their direct effect on government policy through their participation in parliamentary and governmental decision-making may be considerable, but is not the focus of this study.

This study will define new political parties as organisations that have elected representatives in parliament for the first time, except those organisations that were formed as a transformation or a merger of one or more parties that had representatives in parliament.

The study will focus on the reactions of all established parties on all new parties entering parliament in a single country, the Netherlands, since the Second World War. The study will focus on a single country because this way systemic factors that may influence to what extent established parties react to new parties, are kept constant. Because the Netherlands has such an open political system, especially in terms of the electoral system (Krouwel & Lucardie 2008), there is a considerable number of new and established parties to study. The study concerns the effect of nineteen new parties on, on average, nine established parties. This includes "flash parties" like the NMP (*Nederlandse Middenstandspartij*/Dutch Business Party), which was in parliament for little more than a year (Converse & Dupeux 1962), as well as parties that became a vital part of the party system like D66, a party that has been in parliament for over forty years.

The fact that this study focuses on a single country does not mean that its results do not have meaning beyond the borders of that country. The Netherlands has been selected as a likely case to observe the effects of new political parties. With the high number and the great diversity of new political parties, it is likely that if new political parties have an effect on established political parties, one can observe it here. The goal of the study is to test the established theories about new political parties. If one does not find marked reactions of established parties on new parties here, it is unlikely that new parties have a marked effect elsewhere.

The main finding of this study is that, when looking at the effects of new parties on established parties, there is a marked difference between the effect found in the parliamentary arena on the one hand and in the electoral arena on the other hand. While in the parliamentary arena the entry of a new party in general leads to a marked

change in established parties' policy priorities, the effect in the electoral arena is much less clear: while it is possible to identify patterns for individual new parties, it seems impossible to identify patterns in general. On the whole, new parties have more effect on the established parties in the parliamentary arena than in the electoral arena. The different natures of these two arenas might be a decisive factor here: in the parliamentary arena there is a "party-system agenda" which parties have to follow (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010), while in the electoral arena established parties have an incentive to focus on their own issues and not discuss issues that other parties raise. The effect of new political parties in the parliamentary arena is linked to the activity and nature of these parties. In the electoral arena, however, one finds that - for as far as there are mechanisms behind the weak and unstructured responses - electoral considerations prevail: if established parties lose seats, they are (marginally but significantly) more likely to imitate new political parties.

The effects of new parties on the party system are studied only within parliament, because if new parties are able to influence the interaction between parties it is most likely that one can observe it there. The new political parties that are studied are not associated with the introduction of new lines of conflict, for as far as changes in the dimensionality of party systems can be attributed to the entry of new political parties, new political parties tend to be associated with a reduction of the number of lines of conflict. This can be explained by two mechanisms: these new parties tend to introduce issues on which parties are positioned in a left-right fashion; and because new parties are co-opted into leftwing or rightwing political alliances, they reinforce the existing left-right division.

1.3 What this study offers

As stated in section 1.1, the number of studies on the effect of new political parties in the existing literature is very limited. Compared to the publications at hand, this study is innovative in three respects: first and foremost, most previous studies of the effects of new parties have been single or comparative case studies or they have focused on a particular subset of new parties, such as niche parties or radical rightwing parties (Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Gauja 2010; Meguid 2005, 2007; Pellikaan, De Lange & Van der Meer 2007; Van Spanje 2010). Several studies have selected only those new parties that were particularly successful in electoral terms, which makes it impossible to observe the effects of new parties in general: one can

only test whether indeed the size of a new party matters for the response of established parties, which is assumed in many studies, by comparing the effect of new political parties that remained at the electoral margins to the effect of those parties that have become major players themselves. To say something about new political parties in general, one must observe niche parties that focus on new political issues and challenger parties that seek to revive established ideologies.

The second innovative characteristic of this study is that it includes all established parties, whether they are mainstream or not. Many studies of new political parties have neglected certain established parties. They have focused on those two parties that are seen as important system parties, often the main party of the left and the main party of the right (Huijbrechts 2006; Meguid 2005, 2007). However, some new political parties may have an effect outside of those mainstream parties: for instance, this study examines how the Dutch leftwing green party GL (*GroenLinks*/GreenLeft) responded to the entry of the PvdD. It may be interesting to see how this green party responded to the entry of a party that is greener than itself and which claimed that the other established parties, including said green party, had neglected the environment. Moreover, the assumption that many of these studies make, namely that there are only two main parties in every system, does not hold in many Western European party systems (Otjes 2011). With, on average, nine established political parties responding to the entry of each new political party, there is considerable variance in the characteristics of established political parties and in their reactions.

The third innovation that this study makes is that it focuses on both the electoral and the parliamentary arena. Previous studies have almost exclusively focused on the electoral arena (with Gauja (2010) and Slagter and Loewenberg (2009) as exceptions). This study proposes that there is a difference in the way that established parties respond to the entry of a new political party in the parliamentary arena and the electoral arena. As this study will show, the specific characteristics of the different arenas make it much more likely for new parties to influence established parties' policies in the parliamentary arena than in the electoral arena (Bardi & Mair 2008).

1.4 Plan of the study

The study will set out to show the reactions of established political parties in eight chapters. After this first introductory chapter, the second chapter will introduce a number of theoretical distinctions that will help to understand the nature of new political parties, their effect and the conditions under which they are more or less likely to influence established political parties. Chapter 3, the methodological chapter, will translate these theoretical notions into observable variables. This chapter will also elaborate on the research strategy and case selection. The fourth chapter will introduce the *dramatis personae*: the nineteen new parties that will be the focus of this study. The chapter will put the nineteen individual cases in their historical context and discuss their development. These nineteen parties will be classified in terms of how they were founded, which goals their founders had and what their distinctive issues were. This chapter will be purely descriptive and will serve as a preliminary to the empirical, explanatory chapters.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are three empirical chapters that will examine the effects of the new political parties. Chapter 5 will focus on the effect of new political parties on the positions that political parties take and the attention that they devote to certain issues in parliament. Chapter 6, which examines the electoral arena, will focus primarily on reactions, but will also examine the possibility of anticipation. The choice to study parliament first is informed by methodological concerns: one would expect that the first chance established parties have to respond to the entry of a new political party is in parliament. Established parties can only change their manifestos in reaction to the entry of a new political party in parliament at the end of the new party's first parliamentary period. Therefore, it seems reasonable to study the effect of new parties *within* parliament before studying their effects on the electoral arena and on the party system. Chapter 7 examines the effect of new political parties on the parliamentary party system. The concluding chapter (chapter 8) will evaluate the tenability of the hypotheses, examine the generalisability of the results and consider perspectives for further research.