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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 8: Why care about new political parties?

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact it is the only thing that ever has." – Source unknown, widely but without verification, attributed to Margaret Mead (Keyes 2006)

8.1 Why care about new political parties?

This study has examined the effect of new political parties on established political parties. New political parties are formed as small groups of citizens seeking to change society. As seen in this study, many new political parties sought to change the positions of established parties, and the attention that established parties devote to issues or the party system. This is of course not the goal of a new party: the goal is to change society, by changing the priorities of the government, by changing the party positions and policy priorities of the established parties. The effect of new parties examined here is indirect.

The extent to which new political parties could play this role depends upon the specific features of the political arena: the study found marked differences between the parliamentary and the electoral arena. Even when new political parties remain small, as long as they were focused, they could put new issues on the parliamentary agenda. Especially when established political parties lost votes in the election in which the new party entered, these established parties were inclined to change their positions in the electoral arena. Moreover, when new parties were able to change the attention that established political parties devote to issues, and when they were co-opted into political alliances of established political parties they influenced the interaction between established political parties. Especially the findings in the parliamentary arena pointed to the ability of new political parties to shape the activities of other political parties and the party system. This provides corroboration for the thesis that is often attributed to Margaret Mead, "that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens" can cause significant social change. While one cannot say on the basis of this study that it is the *only* thing that ever has, the small groups of citizens that formed new parties such as the PvdD, D66, the LPF and the PVV have influenced the way politics is done in the Netherlands. There is good reason to care about new political parties. They form an important impetus of political change.

The central finding of this study is that there is a fundamental difference between the parliamentary and the electoral arena. In these different arenas, parties have different incentives and work under different constraints. This means that the extent to which and the conditions under which they react to the entry of new political parties differs: in the parliamentary arena decision-making is structured by the party system agenda, which constrains the issues new parties can address. If new political parties are able to influence this agenda, however, the established political parties must follow. In the electoral arena, parties can focus on the issues that they think are important. This means that they can ignore new political parties, unless electoral considerations force them to do otherwise. In the parliamentary arena, established political parties react more to new political parties than in the electoral arena. The conditions under which parties change in the parliamentary arena and in the electoral arena differ. In the parliamentary arena, the characteristics of the new parties matter; in the electoral arena, for as far as there is a consistent pattern, the electoral performance of the established party matters. The central conclusion of this research would have to be that new political parties matter, but that their effect is mediated by the characteristics of the electoral and the parliamentary arena.

8.2 Comparing patterns

In chapter 2 several hypotheses were formulated. These have been tested extensively in the empirical chapters. The results are briefly summarised in table 8.1. Several larger patterns have not been discussed in-depth: these concern especially the differences between the parliamentary and the electoral arena proposed in the political arena hypothesis, the new party activity hypothesis and the electoral considerations hypothesis. The extent to which new political parties influence established political parties and the conditions under which they do so, differs between the electoral arena and in the parliamentary arena. The political arena hypothesis concerned the difference between the parliamentary and the electoral arena with regard to how new political parties influence established parties. In these different arenas, party positioning is structured by different constraints and is subject to different incentives (Bardi & Mair 2008). While decision-making in the parliamentary arena is structured by a parliamentary agenda that constrains what parties can talk about, parties are free in the electoral arena to focus on the issues that they think will benefit them electorally. On the basis of the saliency theory of party competition (Budge 2001),

Table 8.1: patterns per hypothesis

#	Hypothesis	Attention		Position	
		Electoral Arena	Parliamentary Arena	Electoral Arena	Parliamentary Arena
1	Presence	0	+	n/a	n/a
2	Arena	+		n/a	n/a
3	New party activity	0 ^b	+	n/a	n/a
4	Electoral considerations	+		n/a	n/a
5	Challenged	0	0	0	0
6	Mobiliser	- ^c	+	0	0
7	Distance	0	0	+ ^c	-
8	New party size	0	+	+ ^c	- ^a
9	New party organisation	0	+	-	-
10	New party in government	0	+ ^a	0	0
11	Established party performance	+ ^c	0	+	0

+: in expected direction;

0: no consistently significant relationship;

-: in opposite direction than expected;

^a: statistically significant, but not substantively meaningful;

^b: corroborated that there was no relations;

^c: relationship only present for anticipatory behaviour.

one would expect that parties would focus on their own issue in their election manifestos. By focusing on the issues that voters trust these parties on, established parties seek to make the election a referendum on their own issue. Parties have no interest in talking about the issues that new parties bring to the agenda in their election manifestos. They may be still forced, however, to address these issues in other fora during the election campaign. On the basis of the notion of a parliamentary or party system agenda, one would expect that parties devote attention to the issues that other parties put on the agenda in parliament (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010). Parties are expected by other parties and the media to join in all the parliamentary discussions. Moreover they have an interest in joining every discussion, because otherwise they leave the definition of the conflict to another party. This structured nature of parliamentary decision-making gives an advantage to new parties if they are able to exploit it. In general, new parties have more effect in the parliamentary arena than in the electoral arena. In the parliamentary arena the presence of a new party has a significant effect on the attention that established parties devote to issues, while this

is not the case in the electoral arena. This corroborates the political arena hypothesis (hypothesis 2 in table 8.1).

One may question to what extent election manifestos are a good measure for the attention that parties spend on issues and the position that they take on issues in the electoral arena. Election manifestos are written before the elections and serve as one of the inputs for the election campaign. They are however the only collection of party positions for the elections and the only texts on basis of which one can reasonably assess party priorities without the interference of other actors such as the media. They do however have a static quality. They do not capture the dynamic of the electoral campaign, where parties react to each others expressions during the campaign. In part, this may explain the lack of reaction by established parties to new parties in the election: as stated, election manifestos are the only document in which parties can express their views without the interference of the media, other parties and parliamentary officers. The evidence for anticipatory behaviour, however, shows that election manifestos can show marked responses to new political parties.

In addition to this effect on the extent to which new political parties influence the attention that established political parties devote to issues, one would also expect that the conditions under which new political parties have an effect differ from arena to arena. The new party activity hypothesis proposed concerns the effects of a new party's attention to its own issue on the attention that established parties would devote to that issue. One would expect this effect to be different in the electoral and in the parliamentary arena. The structured nature of parliamentary decision-making means that if a new party is able to set an issue on the agenda through its own activity, it forces other parties to engage in that issue. In the electoral arena, a new party's focus on its own issue should not have a marked effect on the attention that established parties devote to that issue. This is indeed the case, supporting the new party hypothesis (numbered 3). This pattern can be illustrated by the example of the PvdD: a party that focused on animal rights both in the parliamentary and the electoral arena. Through its activity in the parliamentary arena, it focused the attention of the entire parliament on agriculture. In contrast: its own focus on agriculture in its election manifesto did not elicit such reactions in the election manifestos of other parties. This means that new parties that refuse to follow the parliamentary agenda are actually able to set it. If one wants to set the parliamentary agenda, one must not follow it. This does not hold in the electoral arena.

Moreover, the electoral considerations hypothesis posited that electoral incentives play a different role in the electoral and the parliamentary arena. One would therefore expect that the electoral performance of an established party does matter for its reactions to new political parties in the electoral arena, while it does not in the parliamentary arena. This is indeed the case: the electoral performance of the established party was one of the few factors consistently influencing the different reactions of established parties to new parties in the electoral arena. In contrast, the electoral performance of the established party had no significant effect in the parliamentary arena. Electoral incentives do not play a role in the parliamentary arena, but the evidence suggests that they do play some role in the electoral arena. As hypothesised in the electoral considerations hypothesis (number 4), the electoral and the parliamentary arena differ in both the extent to which established political parties react to new political parties and in the conditions under which they do so.

In addition to these general hypotheses about the parliamentary and the electoral arena, and about new party attention and established party electoral performance, several hypotheses were posited about the conditions under which established political parties would react to new political parties independent of the arena. These concerned the relationship between the new and the established party, the characteristics of the new party, and the characteristics of the established party. While these results were discussed extensively in the empirical chapters, it may be useful to briefly summarise the results here and relate them to the bigger picture.

The basic notion behind the challenger hypothesis (number 5) is that, if parties feel challenged by a new party, they will respond to it and otherwise they will ignore it. In the different analyses of specific parties' reactions, in some cases imitation from challenged parties was observed, but sometimes they reacted less than all other parties. Therefore, this hypothesis has to be rejected in every analysis. New parties may also feel challenged when a new party enters that shares a similar programme. This is the basic notion behind the ideological similarity hypothesis (number 7). This relationship only holds for the positional anticipatory behaviour of established parties in the electoral arena, but in parliament it is the parties at the other side of the political spectrum that show most reactions. This can be explained by the notion that Meguid (2005, 2007) proposed: established parties at the opposite side of the political spectrum can benefit electorally from engaging with a new party that challenges another party. The opposite of a challenger is a mobiliser: a party that focuses on a

new issue, which seeks to address an unaddressed constituency and that does not focus on a particular party. The mobiliser hypothesis (number 6) holds that these parties should elicit imitation from more parties than challengers. In general, mobilisers do elicit more imitation in terms of reactions in the parliamentary arena. When studying anticipatory behaviour in the electoral arena, however, the opposite pattern was found: the often unknown mobilisers elicited less anticipatory behaviour than other parties. This means that, indeed, these parties mobilised on issues that were not addressed by established parties.

One may also hypothesise that the size (number 8), level of organisation (number 9), and the government participation of new parties (number 10) matter for the reactions that they elicit. The main finding here is that in parliament parties that are larger, that are better organised and that are in government, elicit more effect of established political parties. This corroborates the idea that in the parliamentary arena, new political parties themselves are able to set the agenda. In addition to their own activity, the coherence and strength of a new party may strengthen its ability to effectively set the agenda. The effect of government participation may be statistically significant, but the case-by-case shows that is not substantially meaningful. In the electoral arena, new party size does matter for the extent to which they are anticipated by established parties in terms of position (number 11). This fits the assumption that electoral incentives play a role here. In contrast to the hypotheses, the organisation of new political parties has a negative effect on the reactions of established political parties in terms of positions, in both the electoral and the parliamentary arena. This indicates that several poorly organised parties were able to elicit more reactions.

The evidence points to a structural difference between the electoral and the parliamentary arena. As expected, in the parliamentary arena the presence of a new political party matters significantly for the attention that established political parties devote to issues. This effect is not present in the electoral arena. Due to the structured nature of parliamentary decision-making, new parties have a significant effect there. Moreover, as expected, the factors that matter in the parliamentary arena are characteristics of the new party (its attention to its own issue, its type, its size, its organisation), while in the electoral arena, for as far as one is able to discern meaningful, significant patterns, these are related to electoral considerations (most prominently the electoral performance of the established party).

8.3 Comparing countries

This study started with explicit expectations. Basing themselves on theories about political parties, authors have ascribed a special role to new political parties. According to Mair (1997b, 1997a), the real competition in the party system is between those who benefit from the established lines of conflict and those who want to introduce new lines of conflict. Daalder (1966) and Lijphart (1968) believed that new parties served as important sources of information about the dissatisfaction of the electorate for established political parties. In the view of Harmel and Svåsand (1997), the entry of new political parties could wake established parties up from their conservative, self-sufficing slumber. This was further reinforced by the claims that new parties made: they would change the way politics is done, they would show established parties what the real priorities were, and they would force established parties to change their positions.

The results of this study are more cautious, however, and therefore echo to some extent the conclusions of Huijbregts (2006). Specific new political parties have had an effect on established parties. On the whole, however, the effect of new political parties is limited: it is constrained by the political arena, as new parties elicit more reactions in the parliamentary arena than in the electoral arena; it is constrained by electoral considerations informing parties in the electoral arena and by mechanisms of agenda-control in the parliamentary arena; it is constrained in the electoral arena by timing with parties imitating more in anticipation than in reaction; and finally it is constrained because new parties tend to be co-opted into pre-existing alliances of the left and the right.

The question arises what these conclusions mean beyond the borders of the Dutch case. The Netherlands was selected as a most likely case. If new political parties would have an effect in any political system it would be here. The positive results found here do not mean that these mechanisms and patterns are likely to occur in other cases. In relatively closed systems there may still be mechanisms that ensure that established parties do not have to engage with new political parties. More important than the positive findings are the negative findings. The effect of new political parties was much more limited in the electoral than in the parliamentary arena. That means that it is unlikely that in other countries other parties will react to new parties in the electoral arena. Every new party that was studied was actually able to enter parliament, even if it won only two-thirds of a percent of the vote. And even

this electoral incentive did not cause established parties to react to new parties in general. Contrariwise, one may expect that new political parties in other countries are unable to create new lines of conflict in other parliaments, which completely upset parliamentary interaction between established political parties. It seems more likely that these new lines of conflict will remain weak and subjugated to the established lines of conflict.

There are two important caveats however. One may contest the extent to which the Netherlands is actually a most likely case. There are clear individual examples of new political parties that have led to more marked effect than the effects observed here: for instance in the Italian 1994 elections, when *Forza Italia* replaced DC (*Democrazia Christiana*/Christian Democracy) as the dominant party in Italian politics. Its entry influenced the Italian party system at a more fundamental level than any Dutch political party studied here. These are only individual cases: they say nothing about the effect of for example the PD (*Democrazia Proletaria*/Proletarian Democracy).

A more important problem has to do with the nature of the Dutch political system. It is well established that the Dutch political system is open to new political parties both in terms of the electoral system and the process of government formation (Mair 1997b). The openness of the electoral system (combined with the structured nature of decision-making in parliament) may actually benefit the ability of new political parties to influence the attention that established parties devote to issues in the parliamentary arena. The openness of the government formation procedures may benefit new political parties in terms of getting into office, but it constrains their ability to change the patterns of interaction in the parliamentary arena and therefore to upset the party system. As seen in the case of the LPF and D66, and to lesser extent for the PPR, PVV and DS'70, these threats to the stability of the party system were co-opted into alliances of the right and left. This hindered their ability to change the lines of conflict and instead reinforced the existing lines of conflict. In a system with more closed patterns of government formation, where new parties are left out, they may actually be able to create a new line of conflict, perhaps partially informed by the division between those who are in power and those who are outside of power. By co-opting new political parties into alliances of the left and right, Dutch political parties effectively diffuse these new conflicts and maintain the existing left-right dimension. This means that in terms of the systemic effect, the Netherlands may actually not be a

most likely case, and that if new parties get into parliament in other systems, they may potentially influence the party system more. Therefore, the Netherlands does not convincingly disprove the Schattschneider-Mair thesis, but it does provide considerably corroboration for the Mair-Bale thesis.

8.4 Further research

When considering avenues for further research, one needs to distinguish two different types of follow-up research: one can follow this research in a theoretical way and in a methodological way. First, this study found effects of new political parties on the attention that parties devoted to issues, but it also found that the consistent incorporation of new political parties into the existing left-right division influences their ability to change the established lines of conflict. As shown in section 8.3 the positive findings are not an end point. The Netherlands was selected as a most likely case. Whether in other countries, with more closed political systems, new parties have similar effects, is an open question. And even the negative findings are -to some extent- open for further examination. If the open process of government formation in the Netherlands may actually limit the ability of new political parties to create new lines of conflict, one should examine cases where new parties are more likely to have an effect to effectively disprove this hypothesis. The methods and hypotheses devised here can be extended to other cases, to examine the extent to which and the conditions under which new political parties in other systems influence established political parties.

A second finding that merits elaboration is the fact that some new parties follow and other new parties lead the political agenda. In the study of the attention in the parliamentary arena, the results showed some parties are able to set the parliamentary agenda after their entry, while others actually enter the parliamentary arena *after* there has been considerable attention to their own issue. A similar pattern was found in the electoral arena: on the whole, no evidence was found that established parties markedly change their election manifestos after the entry of new political parties. Instead, considerable evidence was found for the possibility of anticipatory behaviour. This evidence may however also indicate that new parties actually *enter* parliament because established parties devote attention to them: that the increased attention is actually not the effect of the entry of the new party but its cause. Lowery et al. (forthcoming) similarly found that the attention that established parties devote to

issues may actually benefit new political parties. Follow-up research is necessary to determine more precisely why some new parties are able to set the political agenda and others follow it.

There is a last reason for follow-up research. This research has shown that for studying the effects of new political parties, the strength of the political agenda or the patterned interaction between political parties, the parliamentary arena is more important than the electoral arena. The day-to-day politics in parliament may be much more informative of how established political parties master changes in their environment or are led by them. The focus of scholars of party politics on the short period of interaction between political parties in the elections, and related to that, the idea that in their election manifestos parties lay down their actual policy positions, is a weak point in the study of party politics. As Bardi and Mair (2008) have rightfully pointed out, the parliamentary and the electoral arena influence party strategies in those arenas, because these have their own mechanisms, incentives and constraints. The parliamentary arena should be regarded as just as important for the study of party politics as the electoral arena. Moreover, the structured nature of the parliamentary arena, the clear position-taking of parties in their parliamentary votes, and the host of instruments that parties have at their disposal, mean that from a methodological point of view, the parliamentary arena is an extremely rich source of data, which due to the internet and computer technology, has become more easily available to political scientists. Too little has been done to exploit the richness of this data to understand what politicians actually do. This study examined only the tip of the iceberg of what is actually possible. If further research takes anything from this study, it should be a greater interest of scholars of party politics to actual behaviour in the parliamentary arena.