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Summary

Links or Obstacles? Dutch political parties and the cohesion, division and representativeness of party members

Approximately 2.5% of the electorate in the Netherlands is member of a political party. As of 1 January 2014, this amounted to just over 300 000 people. In a quantitative sense, thus, party members comprise a modestly sized group, but this group nevertheless plays an important role in representative democracies such as that which exists in the Netherlands. In this study, the members of Dutch parties are central. The study focuses on members in a formal sense: those individuals that are registered members of political parties and have rights and responsibilities associated with membership.

Research question: do party members make a contribution to representative democracy?

Western European democracies are *de facto* party democracies. Political parties make representative democracy possible by functioning as a link in various ways between voters and the government and government policy. They do this by competing with other parties during elections for representative bodies and representing the views and wishes of voters and translating these into policy among other things. Based on these functions of competition and representation, at least three conditions must be met in order to allow representative democracy to function. In order to generate meaningful competition it must, first of all, be clear to voters what parties stand for, which requires a certain degree of cohesion or unity *within* parties. Secondly, parties must *differ sufficiently from one another*, such that voters have something to choose between. Thirdly, the substance of competition should reflect or coincide with the wishes and desires of voters: there must be a certain degree of congruence between the views of the voters and the standpoints of the parties.

The structuring of competition and the representation of voters require parties to have a certain degree of organization. For by far most parties in Western European democracies this organization includes a membership structure. Most political parties are membership parties in which members, by talking to people in their day-to-day lives about politics and being active within and on behalf of their party, function as intermediaries between voters and elected officials. In this way, they contribute to representation by and competition between political parties. This is, at least, the positive perspective.

There is, on the other hand, scholarly and societal debate as to the role of party members within their party and in representative democracy at large. Some critics are negative about this role because they are of the opinion that, in principle, a 'true' democracy is a direct democracy in which there is no room for intermediary organizations like political parties and their members. Others express a more

practical, empirically grounded critique of the claim that members make a positive contribution. For example, they refer to the fact that there are simply increasingly fewer and possibly too few members to make a contribution, or claim that due to societal and technological changes, members are no longer necessary to the fulfillment of the functions attributed to parties. Another objection relates to the backgrounds and positions of members. The impression exists that members of the same party are internally divided over important political issues, and/or that members of different parties form a political caste and that it is largely impossible to distinguish between them substantively, and/or that members differ (strongly) in terms of views and backgrounds, and thereby drive a wedge between voters and elected officials. This has led some, like Geert Wilders, to argue that party members largely interfere with the communication between party elites and voters.

Party members are the focus of this study. The key question is **the extent to which members of Dutch parties contribute to the functioning of political parties in representative democracy in terms of cohesion, division and congruence**. A membership that on the one hand enjoys internal coherence and on the other hand differs from the membership of other parties and in which the members' views and backgrounds are similar to those of their party's voters and MPs, contributes to the ability of parties to shape competition and represent voters. An internally divided and externally insufficiently differentiated membership that differs in terms of demographic composition and substantive viewpoints from the voters and MPs puts that ability under pressure.

In order to investigate how internally cohesive, externally different and congruent in terms of membership Dutch parties are, this study makes use of the 2008 *Leidse Partijledenonderzoek (LPO)*, a mail survey of members of *GroenLinks*, the PvdA, D66, *ChristenUnie*, the CDA, the VVD and the SGP. For the PvdA, D66, the CDA and the VVD, party membership surveys from 1986 and 1999 are also used in addition to information from Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (*Nationale Kiezersonderzoeken*) and Dutch Parliamentary Studies.

Parties and party members in the Netherlands – the context of the study

Before focusing on the central research question, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the context in which this study takes place and address the Dutch party system, the rights and responsibilities of party members, the reason(s) why they became members and the extent to which they are active within or on behalf of their party.

Since the rise of modern political parties at the end of the 19th century, the Netherlands has been a fragmented party system. In the last decades, this fragmentation has been paired with a high degree of electoral volatility. Since the inception of national political parties, there have been two cleavages that have divided both society and politics: one religious and the other socio-economic. As of the beginning of the 21st century, academics have begun to refer to a 'new' cultural conflict dimension that divides people with a more international orientation from those with a more protectionist, nationalistic one.

Of the ten parties that were elected to the lower house of parliament (Second Chamber or *Tweede Kamer*) in 2012, nine are membership parties. The PVV is the exception and has only a single individual party member (the party leader). As

regards the other parties, in order to become a member one must be of a certain age, in most cases must be a Dutch resident and must subscribe to the goals of the party. The obligations of members consist first and foremost of the payment of membership dues.

Differences exist between parties in terms of the distribution of power between the national executive committee, congress, local branches and individual members. One of these differences relates to the question of whether or not rank-and-file members have a direct say at the highest level of the party (via membership congresses and closed party primaries) or if this influence is indirect (via local branches or regions). In many Dutch parties, there is a trend toward more direct influence of individual party members.

Increasingly fewer people are members of a political party. Since the Second World War, both the absolute and relative share of party members has decreased: in 1948, 13.9% of the voting public was a member, in 2012 it was 2.5%. Whereas the decline in membership in the Netherlands between 1960 and 2000 was more pronounced than elsewhere, after 2003 the Netherlands distinguished itself from most other European countries in terms of seeing a stabilization of the absolute and relative number of members – albeit at a relatively low level.

Party members are more often male, on average older than 50, and are more often highly educated. There are, however, differences between parties on this point. *GroenLinks*, the PvdA and D66 have more female members than the other parties, members of the CDA are the oldest and the Christian parties, in particular the SGP, have relatively less-highly-educated members than the secular parties.

People have diverse motives for becoming party members. Ideological and collective motivations (contributing to a collective goal) are for Dutch party members, not unlike members in most other Western European countries, the most important. Many people become members to support the principles or ideology of their party and to work toward achieving the party's political goals. Personal gain is identified less often as a motive for becoming a member. And when it is identified, it most often reflects motives related to the process of participation and less so to results, like a job or function.

More than three quarters of Dutch party members say that they are not (very) active as members. About three quarters say that they spend no time at all on the party. That someone is a less active party member does not necessarily mean that he does not contribute in any way to the linkage function members are supposed to have. In the case of most members, people around them know that they are party members, most members talk about their party at work and many members are active elsewhere in civil society. Comparisons to the reported activism in 1986 and 1999 indicate that in 2008 there is no clear evidence of an increase or decline in the degree of activism.

Cohesion within parties: a high level of agreement amongst members

In order for representative (party) democracy to function well, it is important that parties adopt recognizable and clear positions. A certain degree of internal cohesion is, thus, an important prerequisite and contributes to a party being recognizable to voters, being able to translate standpoints into policy and, in multiparty systems

like the Dutch, being able to engage in stable cooperation with other parties. The literature, however, fueled by examples of internal disunity in the day-to-day practice of politics, offers reason to question the internal cohesion of parties. The literature on party models suggests that today's membership parties lack substantive coherence and it is even expected that established parties will become more strongly divided internally due to the emergence of a new conflict dimension in Dutch politics.

In order to gain insight into the degree and nature of cohesion amongst members of Dutch parties, we look at their views on eight specific political issues and the overarching left-right orientation. On not a single issue members of the same party were divided into substantively opposing camps. Party members, thus, prove to be relatively cohesive in their positions on several salient questions in Dutch politics. On some issues the degree of cohesion is even very large, e.g., with regard to euthanasia in the secular parties and the SGP. On other issues there are nuanced differences between the positions of members within parties, but ultimately the members are generally in favor of pursuing the same approach. This is true of most parties in terms of issues related to income distribution, social benefits, crime, military missions and the overarching left-right orientation. With respect to the integration of ethnic minorities the degree of cohesion is lower, however. With respect to European integration and the building of new nuclear power plants, one can even observe a certain degree of disunity. Members of the PvdA, *GroenLinks* and the *ChristenUnie* and to a lesser degree those of D66, CDA and VVD are not particularly cohesive with regard to the integration of ethnic minorities and are divided over the ongoing European integration. This disunity has grown in the period between 1999 and 2008.

The disunity within parties with respect to specific issues cannot be simply or unambiguously linked to differences in background, activism or membership motivation of individual members. It is not the case that young people are structurally opposed to older people, that more active members have strong differences of opinion with less active members or that ideologues and pragmatists are at odds with each other. There are also no structural, substantive demarcations to be found within parties, which would be the case if disunity on one theme were related to disunity on other themes and the same groups remain pitted against one another.

Considering the relatively high level of internal cohesion amongst party members, they should be expected to be able to contribute to the unified appearance of their party. Members of the same party seem to be quite cohesive in terms of most questions and, in broad terms, are in favor of the same possible solutions or policy positions. There are only a few issues within parties that have the potential to diminish the appearance of unanimity: this applies to the latent question of nuclear energy and to the nowadays much discussed questions of integration of (ethnic) minorities and the ongoing European integration.

Differences between parties: members of different parties are distinguishable in terms of substantive positions

A second prerequisite for a well-functioning (party) democracy is the existence of difference between parties. Parties that are distinguishable from one another are recognizable to voters and make meaningful competition and choices possible. In both the academic and societal discourse, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, there is debate over the question of how distinguishable parties and their members actually (still) are.

On the basis of the views and priorities of the members of the parties researched in 2008, it can be argued that party members *are* distinguishable from one another and that their substantive preferences are diverse. Each party has a 'unique' position such that either the views of members differ from those of members of other parties or that the members of different parties deem other topics to be salient. This unique profile does not only apply to the parties that occupy the flanks of the political spectrum, such as *GroenLinks* and the SGP. Also, even members of the larger, governing parties such as the PvdA, the CDA and VVD manage to maintain distinguishable viewpoints. Furthermore, a comparison of the average positions of members in 1986, 1999 and 2008 indicates that, unlike what is often suggested, there is no evidence of a clear, substantive convergence of member parties.

Despite this general evidence of substantive differences between membership parties, there are a number of issues upon which the differences between the positions of members of the researched parties in 2008 were relatively small. For example, it is difficult to distinguish between the positions of the secular parties with respect to euthanasia; the positions of the CDA and D66 on economic matters do not differ substantially; and the range of viewpoints on European integration expressed by *GroenLinks*, the PvdA, D66, the CDA and the VVD is quite narrow. And, with the exception of members of the SGP, in 2008 the majority of members of *all* parties identified the integration of ethnic minorities as being the most pressing. For all of the questions researched, there is considerable substantive similarity between the *ChristenUnie* and the CDA; the PvdA and *GroenLinks* and the PvdA and D66. If a lack of differentiation in terms of view"points of members is a problem, it must then be with respect to these parties, even though the parties in these 'couples' still do differ from each other. Members of the *ChristenUnie* and the CDA differ in terms of their opinions on the question of euthanasia; members of *GroenLinks* find the environment to be much more important than members of the PvdA do; members of D66 value the EU and individual freedom most, while members of the PvdA put socio-economic issues at the fore.

If and insofar party members are able to exert influence on the course and the candidates of the party, they should be expected to be able to contribute to substantially differentiable and profiled parties, each with its own unique profile.

Representativeness: members more often not the most divergent segment

A third prerequisite for a well-functioning representative (party) democracy is substantive agreement between voters and elected officials (i.e. MPs) such that the viewpoints of voters are represented and translated into their preferred policy. In other words, there needs to be a certain degree of congruence between the views of voters and parties. Members play a role in this. With their influence over the course and candidates, they are able to ensure that parties remain in touch with the desires of voters. If, however, their backgrounds and views differ too substantially from those of voters, they can serve to alienate the voters from the party. An assumption made in the literature and in the societal debate is that this last scenario is what is actually happening. The distribution of opinions of voters, members and elected representatives is expected to follow a *curvilinear* structure in which the viewpoints of voters and elected representatives are relatively close together, while members are 'radical' and have relatively divergent viewpoints. At the same time, (demographic) similarity and (substantive) congruence are considered to be important to the fulfillment of the members' linkage functions: members that resemble voters are likely better at functioning as sensors in society on the one hand, and as party ambassadors on the other.

The demographic composition of the parties' membership appears to differ greatly from that of the voters of the same party: members are older, on average; more often male and across all parties, with the exception of the SGP, more highly educated. Also, in comparison to MPs, members are older and more often male (with the exception of the SGP members), however the share of highly educated members is lower than that of MPs. In broad terms, voters appear to resemble MPs more closely than members in terms of gender and average age, but resemble party members more closely in terms of level of education and the entire age distribution. Overall, if we look at the (demographic) similarity between members, voters and MPs, there is no indication that members always constitute the most divergent segment.

The (substantive) congruence between members, voters and MPs is relatively high. Admittedly, voters, members and MPs of the same party rarely share exactly the same (average) opinion or distribution of opinions, but there are no issues (of those included in this study) for which they support a substantially different position or policy direction. There are also no indications that congruence has diminished over time. With only a few exceptions, the congruence between members and voters is high and members reflect the diversity of opinions voters of their own party maintain. They do this considerably better than MPs. Furthermore, although members do have (slightly) different views than voters, the congruence between members and voters is still higher than that between voters and MPs. If the views of members differ from those of voters, this does not necessarily mean that members are the weakest link in the chain of representation.

View of party members as obstacles is exaggerated; potential problems on the cultural dimension

To which insights do these analyses and findings lead in terms of the role party members play within (Dutch) representative (party) democracy? Should members be required to function as useful *links*, or should we see them as annoying *obstacles*?

This study's findings suggest, at least for the Netherlands, that the view that party members are obstacles is factually incorrect or at least strongly exaggerated. In general, party members are internally quite cohesive and adopt a shared, substantive position that differentiates from the position of members of other parties. Although their demographic profile deviates, members' substantive views are congruent with those of the voters and MPs of their party. In the cases in which members have slightly different viewpoints than the voters of their party, members still appear to resemble the diversity of the opinions of voters better than MPs of their party do. This means that even if members have different views than voters, it does not automatically mean that they are obstacles: even then their influence on the course and selection of candidates can bring party candidates closer to their voters. Members *can* make a positive contribution to the performance of their party in a representative democracy.

However, a caveat must be placed with respect to the claim that members contribute to internally cohesive, externally diverse, representative parties. This caveat relates to the so-called cultural dimension in Dutch politics. The internal cohesion related to the issue of the integration of ethnic minorities appears to be relatively low, particularly within *GroenLinks*, the PvdA and the *ChristenUnie*; with respect to European integration, there is evidence of a lack of cohesion in all of the parties included in this study, with the exception of the SGP. The opinions on these issues are, admittedly, not strongly polarized, but there is considerable diversity. Although the different memberships are not interchangeable when it comes to views on integration of minorities and European integration, the degree of disunity between members of different parties particularly in terms of the ongoing European integration is relatively low. European integration is also an issue for which the congruence between voters, members and MPs is relatively low. However, it appears to be the case that the *average* viewpoints of members and voters are often more divergent than the underlying opinion distributions: members appear to be able to reflect the diversity of opinions of voters. Furthermore with respect to these issues they do this better than MPs. Internal disunity may be problematic from the perspective of cohesion within parties; from the perspective of members as links between voters and elected officials, it is perhaps less problematic.

The new conflict dimension in Western European politics is, at least potentially, problematic for established (governing) parties. The issues that relate to this dimension do not fully coalesce with the fundamentals of the old parties and their underlying dimensions. In so far as there are problems with the linkage function of members or if these problems arise, they will likely be related to this so-called cultural dimension, first and foremost with respect to European matters.

Reevaluation of the role of party members

While the literature on party members sketches an image of members that, at least in theory, contribute to the functioning of parties and, as such, representative democracy, the dominant vision of members in the literature is clearly less positive. It is often suggested that party members play no meaningful role whatsoever in representative democracy. Their number is very limited, they do not really do anything and those that are active do not matter because their power is marginalized by the party elite. There is another stream in the scholarly debate that argues that members are indeed influential, but their influence on representative democracy is largely negative. In this perspective, members do matter, but embody what is wrong with politics. Members are self-interested; party membership is only an access point for jobs and members form an out-of-touch caste or political sect. The tragedy of party members is that they either do not matter or do no good.

This study shows that this negative judgment is not correct. If members are to be expected to actually make a contribution to competition and representation by parties, it is necessary to reevaluate their role in party democracy more generally. Independent of the question of how *desirable* a change like this would be, it is important to note that a representative (party) democracy with parties *without* democratic member organizations would function differently. Parties with member organizations promote the existence of a party system in which parties are accountable for their actions and are responsive to citizens (during elections and the time in between) and thereby contribute to the continuity and stability in politics and democracy. The conclusion that members make a positive contribution to the performance of their party, in any case, opens the door to a more nuanced discussion about the question what the importance and the contribution of membership parties are in terms of representative democracy and what the plausible or likely consequences would be of alternative organizational forms, of which it remains to be seen whether they would perform better than membership parties.

Contribution and future research

This study has attempted to open the 'black box' of parties as membership organizations by shedding light on the composition and the substantive character of members of Dutch political parties. The purpose of the study was to make an empirically grounded contribution to the ongoing debate on the functioning of membership parties, more specifically on the question of the extent to which members, in light of their demographic characteristics and substantive views, (can) make a contribution to representative democracy. The largely positive main conclusion with respect to party members may promote a more balanced debate and a more nuanced treatment of the role of party members by academics, politicians and political commentators, as well as by parties and by citizens.

In addition, this study sought to contribute to our understanding of party members by exploring relatively new or, at least, as yet insufficiently empirically studied subjects (internal cohesion and external difference) and studying an 'old' subject (members as ideologically divergent) again. This study sought to chart developments amongst party members in the period between 1986 and 2008.

Developments over time are often neglected in member research, primarily because there is only a relatively short history of systematic, empirical membership research. In terms of Dutch research on party members, this study is novel in the sense that it also includes members of *GroenLinks*, *ChristenUnie* and the SGP in a comparative study, at least for 2008.

A limitation of this study is that it does not include all of the (membership) parties that were in parliament; the SP and the *Partij voor de Dieren* did not participate in the 2008 study and neither did the 'member-less' PVV. A second limitation is that the survey upon which much of this study is based was carried out in 2008, at the time of writing five years ago. A third limitation is that the study is based on secondary research: information was not gathered with the specific intent to answer the central research question.

To chart the role of members of various parties and changes in membership, it is very important to continue to survey party members, preferably from all parties or at least as many as possible. In order to make comparisons over time, questions from previous member surveys must be used again. In addition, member surveys and member research in general should include new questions and subjects. A subject for future research is the question of how cohesion, division and representativeness work in two-party systems. This study was carried out in the context of a multiparty or even an extreme multiparty system and it is theoretically very possible that the findings might be different in a two-party system. In addition, attention could be paid to the question of how members fulfill their linkage role and how they themselves see their role in the context of representative democracy; to the relationship between the (in)formal influence of members and their actual influence; and to the public image of parties and party membership. For party member research, it is of the utmost importance that (more) international comparative research is conducted.

