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EDITORIAL

Parliaments in the Low Countries: Representing Divided Societies

*Benjamin de Vet & Tom Louwerse**

1 Parliaments in the Low Countries

Parliaments do not constitute the true epicentre of policymaking in traditional consociational democracies like Belgium or the Netherlands. Historically, consensus seeking by the political elite has been a key remedy against the threat of immobilism and instability in these countries with deep-rooted cleavages based on religion, class and language (Lijphart, 1977). In Belgium, in particular, parliament has been “the victim of the subtle equilibrium that is constantly needed for governing a divided society” (Deschouwer, 2009, p. 188). Major political conflicts have typically been appeased through reforms or pacts negotiated by (extra-parliamentary) party leaders in more secluded environments rather than in the conflictual parliamentary arena (Deschouwer, 1999; Dewachter, 2002). But also in the Netherlands, consociational logic long implied a “top-down approach to politics” (Andeweg, 2019, p. 413) that included a depoliticisation of controversial issues and government’s right to govern without too much interference from parliament (Koole, 2018; Lijphart, 1975).

During the past decades, moreover, both countries became characterised by comparatively high levels of party system fragmentation and electoral volatility (De Winter, Swyngedouw & Dumont, 2006; Mair, 2008), which severely complicated (and prolonged) coalition negotiations and increased the risk of governmental instability (De Winter & Dumont, 2021; Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021). Progressively elaborate coalition agreements gained importance in preventing later conflicts by outlining detailed policy intentions in an early phase of the legislative term (Timmermans & Moury, 2006). These agreements, which are much longer in the Low Countries than in most other countries with multiparty cabinets (Müller & Strøm, 2008), constrain the behaviour not only of coalition parties’ ministers but also of their parliamentarians, who are expected to loyally pass these package deals into legislation – which they typically do (Depauw, 2005; Louwerse et al., 2018). Strict party unity and frequent (informal) consultations within party

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groups, between party leaders¹ and the party's ministers, and between leaders of the coalition parties, aimed at coordinating policy agendas and positions, further confine the policymaking role of parliament and blur the traditional separation of powers (Andeweg, Irwin & Louwerse, 2020; De Winter & Dumont, 2006). In the specific case of Belgium, moreover, the autonomy of parliamentary actors is further narrowed down by the constant need for multilevel coordination between the country's federal entities (each with their own coalition cabinet and elected assembly), a role that is typically taken up by extra-parliamentary party elites (De Winter & Dumont, 2006).

Even under circumstances where they play a rather reactive role as formal policy- and lawmakers, however, parliaments still fulfil many other functions that are essential to the functioning of modern democracy (e.g. Loewenberg, 2015; Norton, 1993). This is, of course, no less the case in the Low Countries. Most importantly, parliaments provide democratic linkage. Being the sole representative agents that are directly accountable to the electorate, members of parliament (MPs) provide democratic legitimacy to political decisions and to the political system as a whole, by debating, reviewing and formally approving proposed policies (Strom, Müller & Bergman, 2003). In highly proportional systems like those of the Netherlands and Belgium, parliaments are the arena where the wide array of potentially opposing societal views clash and where voters' diverse values, interests and preferences are voiced, represented and channelled into the decision-making process (Hakhverdian & Schakel, 2017; Lindeboom, 2012; Pitkin, 1967). Because of their (exclusive) direct, electoral mandate, furthermore, parliaments also bear important responsibilities in holding the executive accountable. Although parliamentary oversight mechanisms sometimes have been critiqued for being ineffective (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), it is clear that Dutch and Belgian MPs (from both opposition and majority sides) increasingly make use of the various instruments of control they have at their disposal to extract information from cabinet members, monitor their behaviour and signal personal involvement (Andeweg et al., 2020; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Wauters, Bouteica & de Vet, 2021). Other roles that parliaments fulfil that lie beyond the traditional core democratic functions of representation, legislation and oversight but that are still functional to the Dutch and Belgian political system, include providing a forum where new issues may reach the political agenda (e.g. Vliegthart et al., 2016) or acting as a recruitment pool for the training and selection of members of the executive (e.g. Dumont, Fiers & Dandoy, 2008).

Over the past years, how legislatures and their individual members fulfilled their democratic tasks gave rise to a dynamic subfield of (also Dutch and Belgian) political science. This field of study will most likely continue to produce highly relevant insights in the future, given that expressions of discontent with established political processes and the success of anti-establishment parties raise questions about the degree to which parliaments still fulfil their representative functions.

2 Data and methods in legislative studies in the Low Countries

'Legislative studies' have become characterised not only by thematic diversity (with studies focusing both on the internal organisation of parliament and on its external relations with other political institutions and the public) but also by a strong methodological pluralism. Traditional methods of data collection such as elite surveys, interviews and archival research are increasingly being complemented by the statistical analysis of parliamentary behaviour as documented in digitised parliamentary records as well as experiments with elites.

There has been a long tradition of structured interviews with MPs in the Netherlands, since 1968 (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2007; Andeweg & van Vonnö, 2018). In Belgium, various projects conducted MP surveys since 1967 (De Winter, 1992; Debuyst, 1967; Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014; Loewenberg & Kim, 1978). Surveys among parliamentary candidates have also been conducted in both countries (Lutz et al., 2020; Vandeleene, De Winter & Baudewyns, 2019). Elite surveys among MPs provide important longitudinal insights into their characteristics and attitudes. In-depth, semi-structured interviews have also long been a part of the study of political elites and provide insights into what happens behind closed doors and the causal mechanisms underpinning associations found in large-N studies (Bailer, 2014; Celis & Wauters, 2010; de Vet, 2019; Severs, Celis & Meier, 2014). Archival materials have been used extensively in the historical-qualitative tradition, particularly by parliamentary historians (e.g. Aerts, van Baalen, Oddens, Smit, & te Velde, 2015; Verleden, 2015).

The systematic study of parliamentary behaviour based on parliamentary records was, for a long time, very resource intensive (De Winter, 1992; Visscher, 1994). Owing to the increasing availability of parliamentary records in digital form, this type of analysis has become much more feasible, also in covering longer periods. Researchers have published data sets on parliamentary voting (Louwerse et al., 2018; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014), questions (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Walgrave, Joly & Sevenans, 2019) and speeches (Marx & Schuth, 2010; Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020) in the Netherlands and Belgium. Advances in quantitative text analysis have allowed for the large-scale analysis of the textual content of this information, even though validation of these methods remains pivotal (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; van Attevelde, van der Velden & Boukes, 2021).

Another relatively recent development is the increasing use of experiments with legislators. This involves both survey (Helfer, 2016, pp. 69-102; Sheffer, 2019) and field experiments (Magni & de Leon, 2020). Experiments are superior to observational research in terms of causal identification and may also mitigate problems of biased answering by politicians in regular surveys. However, they may suffer from lower levels of external validity, and the research ethics of correspondence field experiments have been a subject of debate (Zittel, Louwerse, Helboe Pedersen & Schakel, 2021).

The methodological toolbox of legislative scholars is thus filled with a wide-ranging set of tools. One potential pitfall of the increasing availability of data is a focus on the type of questions that we can answer on the basis of the available data or on an a priori preference for a particular set of research methods. Espe-

cially under these circumstances, researchers should ask important, relevant research questions first and subsequently select appropriate methods and data to answer these questions.

3 About the contributions

The four contributions in this special issue represent the diversity of functions of parliaments in the Low Countries, as well as the methodological diversity in this subfield. The collection of articles provides an overview of the diversity of research interests in legislative studies and political representation in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

The contribution by **Tim Mickler** analyses the legislative and oversight functions of the Belgium and Dutch parliaments by comparing the assignment of MPs to parliamentary committees. The author makes use of a detailed data set of MPs' committee assignment to specialised committees over the last two decades, combined with data on MPs' educational and occupational backgrounds, external ties and other institutional and personal characteristics. The comparison of the two parliaments is motivated by the fact that committees in the Belgian *Chamber of Representatives* are, at least on paper, more powerful than those in the Dutch *House of Representatives*. Contrary to expectation, Mickler does not find a difference between the two parliaments concerning the presence of stable patterns of committee assignments. In both countries, prior knowledge through education or occupation is a good predictor of being assigned to a committee. While party groups are heavily involved in the committee assignment process, no evidence is found for party leaders' putting high-ranking, ideologically close and senior MPs on important committees.

Using survey data collected from among both Belgian voters and legislators, **Awenig Marié and David Talukder** explore whether citizens' political trust may be linked to their substantive representation. The authors find that voters with a lower level of policy-opinion congruence with their party's representatives display lower levels of trust in parliament, except among those who have very high levels of political interest. As such, their article provides novel insights into how and to what extent political trust may be responsive to the representation of citizens' preferences in the legislature.

Agenda setting and parliamentary oversight are the focus of the contribution by **Simon Otjes and Roy Doedens**, who discuss the cancellation of proposed minority debates in the Dutch *House of Representatives*. These debates can be requested by one fifth of MPs (30 MPs), but owing to agenda constraints only 21 per cent of the requested debates are actually held – many are retracted by the proposers. On the basis of an analysis of parliamentary records, the authors find that anti-elitist parties are less likely to retract their requests for a debate while issue ownership has only limited explanatory value. While these types of debates are specific to the Dutch parties, the analysis contributes to our understanding of how different types of parties use different parliamentary tools.

Finally, in a research note, **Richard Schobess** discusses how innovative peer assessment surveys can complement other data sources, such as behavioural data, to evaluate the work of MPs. Drawing on the experience of gathering such peer assessment data among members of three Belgian parliaments, Schobess discusses how these data may provide important insights into less visible and more qualitative aspects of MPs' parliamentary performance. He also shows, however, that scholars interested in using peer assessment data should account for potentially lower response rates (among certain MPs) and control for systematic rater bias.

Note

- 1 Note that while in the Netherlands the leaders of the parliamentary parties are important in this regard, in Belgium, particularly, the extra-parliamentary party presidents are powerful players in aligning the policy positions and agendas of the party-in-parliament, the party-in-government and the party-in-central-office (de Vet, 2019).

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