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The Informed Electorate: Political Perceptions and Party Behaviour

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Abstract

A necessary condition for political representation as conceived by the responsible party model is that voters know where parties stand. In order to assess to what extent Dutch voters are aware of party positions, their aggregate perceptions of such positions are confronted with party positions determined on the basis of parties' legislative votes. Also, comparisons are made between the political perceptions of groups of voters distinguished on the basis of their political knowledge. Dutch voters' perceptions of party positions on a number of concrete issues turn out to have been very accurate in the 1970s and 1980s, even those of the least knowledgeable citizens. This is explained by the fact that party political conflicts were structured predominantly by a left-right dimension, which made it relatively easy for citizens to recognize and comprehend party positions, even when they lacked concrete information on party policies. The least informed citizens appear to rely most on left-right as a cue to assess party positions on concrete issues. The implications for political representation are discussed.

1 Introduction

The responsible party model – the normative assumptions of which implicitly underlie most contemporary studies of electoral processes – defines a number of criteria that must be met for meaningful democratic representation. One of these criteria is that voters are aware of parties' policy positions (APSA 1950; Luttbeg 1968; Converse and Pierce 1986; Thomassen 1994).² In the complex world of imperfect information, we cannot expect *all* voters to know where *all* parties stand on *all* issues. That should not worry us too much. Limited degrees of uncertainty among voters about party positions, producing some variation in perceptions, do not do much harm to the quality of representation, because the effects of such variations on electoral outcomes will largely cancel out at the aggregate level. However, some situations may conceivably exist in which uncertainty among voters harms the electoral process. This article focuses on two of these situations, and assesses the extent to which these occur in the Netherlands.

The first potentially harmful situation is when voters collectively misperceive party positions on policy dimensions they themselves consider important. This is likely to result in voters giving an effective mandate to policies they do not support. Also, collective misperceptions may lead to large scale misunderstandings in mass-elite communication. Aggregate misperceptions may not be commonplace: when the public's (aggregate) political perceptions are confronted with other information about policy stands of parties or candidates, often a close correspondence is observed between perceptions and "political reality" (Page 1978; Granberg and Brent 1980; Markus 1982; Granberg 1985). Yet, this correspondence cannot be taken for granted. Many cases have been reported in which the public as a whole had inaccurate perceptions of the positions of candidates or parties (e.g., Converse 1975; Page 1978; Granberg 1985, Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 1997). The first part of this article assesses to what extent Dutch voters' aggregate perceptions of party positions correspond to where these parties "really" stand.

A second situation which is potentially harmful to electoral processes is one in which only a small elite of well-informed citizens has adequate perceptions of party positions. Policy voting would then be a "privilege" of this minority, while the majority would be unable to use their ballot to express policy preferences. This would have serious ramifications for our evaluation of the way elections function, in particular because some scholars have argued that the politically least-informed citizens are most likely to change their party preferences between two elections, and thus decide who wins at elections (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Berelson et al. 1954).

The literature on public opinion and voting behaviour provides ample reason to expect that majorities of voters will be largely unaware of where parties stand on even the most important policy dimensions. The general impression that emerges from the work of (mostly North American) scholars of public opinion and voting behaviour, is that large groups of citizens have little interest in, and knowledge and comprehension of politics (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964, 1975; Conover and Feldman 1984; Kinder and Sears 1985; Neuman 1986; Zaller 1992; Sniderman 1993). Some of these scholars have argued that only the "top-strata" (in terms of levels of political information) are able to recognize policy positions of parties and candidates (Berelson et al. 1954; Neuman 1986).

The second part of this article assesses the extent to which differences exist between the political perceptions of voters with different levels of political knowledge. For this purpose three aspects of perceptions of groups of voters with different knowledge levels will be compared. First, the extent of variations in perceptions for groups of citizens with different degrees of political knowledge are compared. Large variations in perceptions (or low degrees of perceptual agreement) indicate that the perceptions of a specific group of

citizens are not very clear (see also: Pomper 1972; Granberg and Holmberg 1988; Listhaug et al. 1994; Van der Brug 1997a). Second, the adequacy of median perceptions of groups of voters with different levels of knowledge are assessed. Therefore, the perceptions of Dutch citizens with different levels of knowledge are confronted with the parties' "true" positions, in the same way as for the entire electorate.

Finally, the differences in the way voters with various levels of political information perceive relations between issues are explored. In the literature on public opinion the concept of political sophistication is often used to describe the extent to which a person's cognitions are organized, i.e., whether cognitions are linked, rather than separate "parts" (e.g., Converse 1964; Luskin 1987). The more politically sophisticated would be better able to perceive structures in the jumble of political decisions, stands of parties, etcetera. It may therefore be expected that party positions on separate issues will be least strongly related in the perceptions of the least informed citizens.

This article focuses on voters' perceptions of party positions on six policy dimensions: income differences, nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, abortion, euthanasia, and left-right. The first five have been some of the most prominent issues in Dutch party politics since the early 1970s. Left-right is included because it is widely acknowledged that this ideological dimension structures party and electoral behaviour in the Netherlands to a large extent (Klingemann 1972, 1979; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983, 1992; Niemöller and Van der Eijk 1985; Dittrich 1987; Andeweg and Irwin 1993; Pennings and Keman 1994). To the extent that party behaviour is indeed structured by left-right, this ideological dimension will "assimilate" concrete issues (e.g., Inglehart 1984; Sani and Sartori 1983; Dalton and Wattenberg 1993). This, in turn, allows voters to orient themselves on the party system through left-right ideology. As left-right positions summarize positions on a large number of concrete issues, voters may also use ideology as a "cue" or "schema" to assess where parties stand on concrete issues (see also: Fuchs and Klingemann 1990).

In order to examine the adequacy of voters' perceptions of party policies, such perceptions will be confronted with an "objective" indicator of these policies: parties' legislative behaviour. The study employs the analytical and theoretical framework provided by spatial models, which involves a comparison of party positions based on perceptions with such positions derived from their legislative behaviour.

2 Analysing legislative behaviour

To derive information about the "actual" policy positions of Dutch parties, their legislative behaviour – as indicated by parliamentary votes – in the

Second Chamber of Dutch Parliament will be analysed. As indicators of party positions, parliamentary votes have the advantage over other conceivable measures in that they can be observed without ambiguity. A representative either supported a proposal, or abstained, or voted against it. Moreover, parliamentary votes may be regarded as unambiguous statements of policy positions. Politicians rarely make absolutely unambiguous statements in order to prevent such statements backfiring when they appear inconsistent with subsequent actions. Consequently, politicians usually frame their sentences with so many subtle nuances that they cannot easily be accused of "deceiving the voter". Parliamentary votes are exceptional in the ambiguous world of politics, because they force politicians to make explicit "statements".

The Second Chamber of Dutch Parliament has 150 members. Because the distribution of seats in parliament is highly proportional to the distribution of votes won at the election, it is relatively easy for small parties to gain parliamentary representation. This leads to a relatively large number of parties. At all times during the last three decades between 9 and 13 parties occupied seats in parliament. Members of parliament not only decide upon bills proposed by the government, they also have the right to propose bills, amendments (to bills), and motions. The relationship between the legislative and executive body can best be described as "limited dualism" (Andeweg and Irwin 1993:136), as coalition bargaining results in governing parties committing themselves to the policy programmes of the government. Parliamentarians of governing parties may further influence decision-making through amendments and motions, but it is very rare for them to vote against a bill proposed by their "own" government (Wolters 1984; Andeweg and Irwin 1993).

In the Dutch parliament, fractions (parliamentary parties) normally act as unitary actors (Wolters 1984; Van der Brug 1997a). Parliamentary behaviour is therefore analysed at the level of fractions, not of individual politicians. The following 17 parties will be included in (some of) the analyses: CPN, PSP, PPR, GLI, PVDA, D66, DS'70, BP, ARP, KVP, CHU, CDA, VVD, RPF, GPV, SGP, CP/CD.³ Although MPs who propose a motion, bill, or amendment are allowed to request a roll call, this happens only rarely. Normally votes are cast by raising hands, or by standing up. The chair announces how the fractions (parliamentary parties) voted. The Proceedings of the Second Chamber normally record only the fractions which "were on the winning side" of the vote. When the proposal is accepted, only the parties that voted in favour are recorded; if the majority voted "against", the Proceedings only mention the "nay" fractions. Except on the few occasions when roll calls are taken, abstention is not recorded. Parties only effectively abstain from voting when all the members of the fraction are absent from the plenary session.

The procedure to derive party positions from these parliamentary votes consists of three steps. First of all, votes (from fractions) on motions, bills and

amendments were coded. A "nay" vote is coded as -1; a "yea" as +1. If the record shows that the party was internally divided, its vote is coded as 0, no matter what the pro-con ratio was. Abstention is also coded as 0. When the whole fraction was absent during a plenary session, its votes are also coded 0 (indicating abstention). Abstention and internal division constitute only a minor problem, as 94 to 99 percent of the votes in the datasets (to be discussed below) are either "yea" or "nay". The second step was to compute distances between parties on the basis of these codings, using the distance measure presented in formula 1:

$$d(a, b) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n |a_i - b_i|}{2n}$$

where:

$d(a, b)$:	Distance between party a and party b
a_i :	Vote of party a on proposal i (i.e., -1, 0, or +1)
b_i :	Vote of party b on proposal i (i.e., -1, 0, or +1)
n :	Number of parliamentary proposals
i :	Index of parliamentary proposals

The distances defined by formula 1 range between 0 and 1. The distance between two parties voting identically on all parliamentary proposals is 0. When they vote opposite on all proposals, their distance is 1. In all other circumstances the distance is somewhere between 0 and 1.⁴

As a final step to determine positions of parties from these distances, multidimensional scaling (MDS) is used. Before presenting the results of these analyses, I will first discuss the policy dimensions for which voters' perceptions of party positions will be compared with party positions derived from legislative behaviour, as well as the datasets used for the analyses.

3 Datasets

For the analyses in this article two kinds of data were needed: survey data and codings of parliamentary votes. Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies have been used to obtain information about voters' perceptions of party positions.⁵ These studies are surveys conducted among representative samples of Dutch adults at the time of every general election since 1967. Since 1977 these surveys have contained items that measure voters' perceptions of party positions on

the six policy dimensions that are being studied here, although not each of the dimensions is included in each of the surveys. The following list shows in which election years each of the policy dimensions was included:

- Income differences. Measured in 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, and 1994.
- Nuclear energy. Measured in 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, and 1994.
- Nuclear weapons. Measured in 1981, 1982, 1986, and 1989.
- Abortion. Measured in 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, and 1989.
- Euthanasia. Measured in 1986, 1989, and 1994.
- Left-right. Measured in 1976, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, and 1994.

Perceptions of left-right positions of (almost) all parties represented in parliament were measured on 10-point rating scales of which only the extremes were labelled ("left" and "right"). Similar (7-point) rating scales were used to measure perceptions of the positions of the four largest parties - PvdA, CDA, VVD, and D66 (D66 only since 1981) - on four issues: income differences, nuclear energy, abortion, and euthanasia. Perceptions of party positions on nuclear weapons were measured differently. In 1981 and 1982 four separate items were presented to measure respondents' own attitudes on this issue. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed with each of the items. In 1986 and 1989 a fifth category was added. These groups of items formed a strong cumulative scale, which means that they can be interpreted as a unidimensional construct.⁷ Perceptions of party positions were measured with the same items (four in 1981 and 1982, and five in 1986 and 1989). Respondents were asked to indicate for each of the four major parties, which of the policy alternatives (represented by the items), best described their positions on nuclear weapons. These items are treated here as 4-point rating scales (5-point rating scales since 1986), with which all positions are labelled.⁸

Voters' perceptions of the position of a party in some election years are made up of a sample distribution of responses. In this article two measures will be used to describe (and summarize) aspects of these distributions. The interpolated median will be used to describe the core of these distributions. In the remainder of this paper it will be called the median (see also: Page 1978; Van der Brug 1997a). To describe variations in perceptions, Van der Eijk's (1997) A, a coefficient of perceptual agreement, will be used.⁹

The purpose of the analysis of legislative behaviour, is to derive party positions which can be compared with voters' median perceptions of that behaviour. Therefore, data are required of parties' legislative votes on the same issues for which voters' perceptions are measured. These data are contained in two datasets, which are described in more detail elsewhere (Van der Brug 1997a: Appendix C). The first set of data was collected by the author. It contains parliamentary votes on motions and bills in the period 1975-1989 concerning four specific policy domains, i.e., "socio-economic policies", "nuclear energy",

“nuclear weapons”, and “abortion”.¹⁰ For the sake of comparability, these policy domains were defined so that they optimally coincide with four of the five issues for which survey data is available. In the remainder of this paper I will use the term “socio-economic policies” when referring to parties’ legislative behaviour and to “income differences” when referring to voters’ perceptions of positions on this issue. For the other policy dimensions the terminology is the same for legislative behaviour and for voters’ perceptions.

The second dataset which will be used was kindly made available by the *Parlementair Documentatie Centrum* (PDC). It contains all parliamentary votes that have been cast on all amendments in the years 1963 to 1985, and may therefore be regarded as representative for the entire parliamentary agenda in this period. The dataset of amendments allows a comparison between party positions based on the entire agenda on the one hand, and voters’ perceptions of left-right positions on the other. To the extent that voters’ perceptions of left-right positions are linked to the behaviour on the entire parliamentary agenda, electoral choices based on these perceptions are likely to lead to meaningful representation.

The two datasets differ in terms of the periods covered, and in terms of the kind of parliamentary proposals they contain. The reasons for this are mundanely practical: the study uses the information that could be obtained at reasonable costs. The main difference between the three types of proposals (motions, amendments and bills) which are used as indicators of party positions, is that governing parties seldom vote against government bills, whereas they are less restricted when voting on amendments or motions. Another difference is that motions can be used to propose certain policies, but also to express discontent with the actions of government, whereas bills and amendments (to bills) cannot be used for this latter purpose.

Distances between parties are based on parliamentary votes cast during certain periods. A decision must therefore be made about the intervals for which distances are to be computed. For the sake of comparison with the survey data, distances between parties were computed for intervals ending on the day of national elections. The length of the intervals for which votes were used to calculate distances was not set at a fixed magnitude, but as the entire period between two general elections. Table 1 presents the number of parliamentary votes on the respective issues in the different periods of time.

Table 1 contains two different counts of motions and bills concerning nuclear energy for the period 1982-1986. The number between brackets (19) refers to all motions put to the vote before the Chernobyl accident. Between this accident and the general elections 10 additional motions were introduced, yielding a total of 29. Two separate analyses were carried out for this policy area and this period. One analysis was performed on a distance matrix based on the first 19 motions, the other one based on the total of 29 motions. The reason for doing

Table 1 Number of parliamentary votes in specific policy areas

		1963	1967	1971	1972	1977	1981	1982	1986
		-1967	-1971	-1972	-1977	-1981	-1982	-1986	-1989
First dataset	abortion	-	-	-	3*	6	0	11	0
	nuclear energy	-	-	-	4*	70	7	29 (19)	14
	nuclear weapons	-	-	-	2*	18	6	90	16
	socio-economic	-	-	-	25*	148	37	217	65
Second dataset	entire parliamentary agenda	258	606	256	1021	1975	296	1168**	-

* Parliamentary proposals between 1975 and 1977.

** Amendments between the elections of 1982 and the spring of 1985.

this is that the survey material also contains information about perceived party positions on nuclear energy immediately before as well as shortly after the Chernobyl accident.

Table 1 displays large differences between the numbers of parliamentary votes included in the two datasets. This is not so surprising, as the first dataset contains a selection of only those motions and bills that refer to specific issues. As the second dataset contains all amendments, not specified according to their content, there are necessarily more votes. The more narrowly an issue is defined, the smaller is the number of parliamentary votes included in the first dataset. For some occasions only few parliamentary votes were available to compute distances between parties. Consequently, parties’ votes on a single proposal may then greatly affect distances between parties. To mitigate this problem it was decided to perform MDS-analyses only for those periods with at least 6 parliamentary votes. In general, one has to bear in mind when interpreting MDS-analyses that the resulting configurations may occasionally be affected by the small number of votes on which distances were based.

4 MDS-analyses of legislative votes

Multidimensional scaling (MDS) is a class of algorithms designed to determine positions of stimuli in a multidimensional space while using their proximities (or distances) as empirical information. The input for an MDS-analysis consists of a matrix of distances between objects (in this case parties). The analyst specifies the dimensionality of the space in which the objects are to be represented.

The MDS-algorithm iteratively maximizes the fit between the original distances (the input) and the distances between the objects as represented in the configuration. Naturally, the fit increases with the dimensionality of the space: in a "larger" space, there is more "room" to fit the distances. The appropriate dimensionality to fit the distances, depends partially on statistical criteria and simulation studies, but is also a matter of substantial interpretability of the resulting dimensions (Kruskal and Wish 1978).¹¹

Table 2 Squared product moment correlations of input distances between parties and represented distances for a unidimensional and a two-dimensional space

Issue	Year	1 dim	2 dim	Issue	Year	1 Dim	2 Dim
Abortion	1981	0.96	0.98	Socio-economic policies	1977	0.54	0.95
	1986	0.99	0.96		1981	0.95	0.97
Nuclear energy	1981	0.97	0.96		1982	0.87	0.96
	1982	0.99	0.98		1986	0.98	0.96
	1986 BC*	0.99	0.98	1989	0.97	0.98	
	1986 AC**	0.99	0.99	Entire parliamentary agenda	1967	0.88	0.96
1989	0.99	0.94	1971		0.95	0.94	
Nuclear weapons	1981	0.96	1.00		1972	0.99	0.98
	1982	1.00	1.00		1977	0.94	0.94
	1986	1.00	0.98		1981	0.93	0.97
	1989	0.99	1.00		1982	0.76	0.88
				1986	0.97	0.98	

* BC = Before Chernobyl (distances based on the 19 parliamentary votes between the elections of 1982 and 30 April 1986, when the news of the Chernobyl accident became known).

** AC = After Chernobyl (distances based on all 29 parliamentary votes on nuclear energy, between the elections of 1982 and the elections of 1986).

One of the first decisions to be made is the minimum number of dimensions needed to describe distances between parties while not losing too much precision. For this purpose Table 2 presents squared product moment correlations between the inter-party distances in the input matrix on the one hand, and in the configuration, on the other hand, for one- and two-dimensional solutions.¹² Table 2 shows that the distances between the parties are generally well represented by one dimension. Out of a total of 23 one-dimensional MDS-solutions, 21 have an R^2 larger than 0.85. In other words, the distances in these configurations share over 85 % of the variance with the distances calculated from the empirical data.¹³ The distances of the unidimensional MDS-solution

of votes on amendments between 1981 and 1982 only share 76 % of the variance with the distances of the input matrix. This means that in this specific case, the distances computed with formula 1 are not represented very accurately in one dimension. This is even more true for the analysis of party positions on socio-economic issues in 1977. The distances as represented in the unidimensional solution share only 54 % of their variance with the original proximities. In this specific case, the poor fit of the unidimensional solution can be explained by the outlier positions of the Communist Party (CPN) and of the Farmer's Party (BP) in that year. When these two parties are excluded from the analysis, the shared variance increases to a very acceptable 90 %. An explanation for these "outliers" is probably a combination of party characteristics and the specific government in power. Between 1973 and 1977 a centre-left coalition cabinet of KVP, ARP, PVDA, D66, and PPR was in office. This coalition gained a reputation for being the most progressive Dutch government ever, primarily because of its explicit dedication to accomplish a more equal distribution of wealth. The coalition raised certain taxes, (such as duties on liquor and tobacco), to help finance the costs of its social programme. The contents of the motions in this period on socio-economic issues either express discontent with the fact that taxes were raised, or with the questions related to income distribution. The communists (CPN) supported several motions from right-wing parties on taxes, while they supported a more equal distribution of incomes. Although the Farmer's Party voted in most cases with the right-wing opposition, it also supported a number of motions proposed by parties from the other side of the political spectrum.

The unidimensional solution for *amendments* (representing the entire parliamentary agenda) in the period 1973-1977 yields an R^2 of 0.94. How can we account for the fact that legislative behaviour on socio-economic policies does not fit a unidimensional space, whereas the legislative behaviour on the amendments does? Parties can use *motions* to express discontent with a government. Even if a party system is essentially unidimensional, parties at opposite ends of the spectrum may support a motion directed against the government. *Amendments* (to bills), on the other hand, cannot be used to express discontent, but propose a concrete, alternative line of action. Ideologically distinct parties are unlikely to agree upon such an alternative line of action, and are therefore unlikely to support the same amendment. So, parties at the two extremes of a dimension may sometimes vote identically on *motions*, but for opposite reasons; yet they are unlikely to vote identically on *amendments* or *bills*.¹⁴

Voters' perceptions are measured on bipolar rating scales. To the extent that legislative behaviour can also be represented on unidimensional continuums, perceptions and legislative behaviour can easily be compared. As the one-

dimensional MDS-solutions yield a satisfactory fit in 21 out of 23 cases, the unidimensional solutions are presented here. However, it was decided to present the unidimensional MDS-solution for party positions on socio-economic issues for the period 1973-1977 without the two "outliers", CPN and BP, as together they occupied only 6.7 % of the seats in parliament. Moreover, the survey data do not contain information about voters' perceptions of these two parties' positions on income differences. Therefore, it is not very important to establish their positions for the purpose of this study. The analyses yield 23 unidimensional configurations. It serves no purpose to present all of them here. Instead Table 3 presents the 1986 solutions (computed on the basis of the period 1982-1986), which may be considered illustrative for all others.¹⁵

Table 3 Results of unidimensional MDS-analyses of the period 1982-1986. Entries in cells are positions (coordinates) on these single dimensions.

	Entire parlia- mentary agenda (amendments)	Socio- economic policies	Nuclear weapons	Nuclear energy BC* AC*		Abortion
CPN	-1.23	-1.19	-1.17	-1.15	-1.09	-0.85
PSP	-1.24	-1.50	-1.20	-1.15	-1.09	-1.02
PPR	-1.23	-1.22	-1.19	-1.15	-1.24	-0.85
PvdA	-0.77	-0.82	-1.08	-1.14	-1.19	-1.02
D66	-0.90	-0.51	-0.75	-0.84	-0.68	-0.85
CDA	0.83	0.99	0.53	0.92	1.15	0.84
VVD	1.05	1.04	0.89	1.05	1.22	0.06
RPF	0.98	0.93	1.05	0.92	0.63	1.39
GPV	0.98	0.94	1.05	0.96	0.62	1.39
SGP	0.98	0.99	1.05	0.97	1.17	1.39
CP	0.56	0.34	0.80	0.61	0.49	0.48

* The abbreviations BC and AC stand for 'before Chernobyl' and 'after Chernobyl'. See note to Table 2 for explanations.

The results in Table 3 show that relative party positions on socio-economic policies, nuclear energy, and nuclear weapons are very similar. The CPN, PSP, PPR, PvdA, and D66 are usually located to one side of the centre of each of the continuums, whereas the CDA, VVD, DS'70, RPF, GPV, SGP, BP and CD appear on the other side of the spectrum. The party positions based on their votes on amendments are also highly similar to the party positions on these three concrete issues. The correspondence between these policy dimensions is

reflected in the strong linear correlations between them (between .94 and .98). A somewhat deviating case is abortion, which is considerably less strongly correlated with the other four policy dimensions (between .82 and .86). This is predominantly due to the fact that the VVD, in contrast with its stands on the other issues, occupies a centre position on abortion. These high degrees of correspondence between the separate policy dimensions suggest that parties position-taking on separate issues is structured by a generic dimension of conflict, which conceivably is the previously mentioned left-right dimension.

5 Voters' perceptions and legislative behaviour

Now that party positions have been determined on the basis of their legislative behaviour, these will be compared with party positions as perceived by voters. The surveys contain perceived left-right positions of all parties represented in parliament, and perceptions of issue positions of the four largest parties. We have already discussed the hypotheses that the left-right dimension structures the behaviour of Dutch parties and voters to a great extent, and that it integrates policies on various concrete issues. This would allow voters to use the left-right dimension as a cognitive tool to structure their perceptions of party policies. In view of this hypothesis and in view of the similarity of party positions on the various substantive dimensions (see Table 3) the analyses in this section commence with an assessment of the extent to which voters' perceptions of left-right positions of parties are related to parties' legislative behaviour. After that the link between parties' issue positions (determined by their legislative actions) and how voters perceive these, will be examined.

5.1 Perceived left-right positions and legislative behaviour

Voters' perceptions of parties' left-right positions are measured on bipolar (i.e., one-dimensional) scales. In the previous section it was demonstrated that parties' legislative behaviour is basically structured by one single dimension. This makes a comparison between voters' perceptions of left-right positions and parties' legislative behaviour straightforward: by means of squared product moment correlations. It should, however, be noted that these correlations do not describe the relationship between *absolute* but between *relative* party positions. A strong linear correlation indicates that voters perceive the positions of parties vis-à-vis each other highly similar to their relative positions based on their legislative behaviour. There are, however, no anchor-points or baselines that can be used to interpret positions

Table 4 R²s (squared product moment correlations) of perceived left-right positions with parties' 'true' positions*

MDS-solution based on:	1977	1981	1982	1986	1989
Socio-economic policies	.49	.98	.90	.89	.93
Nuclear energy	**	.91	.94	.86	.85
Nuclear weapons	-	.97	.92	.96	.98
Abortion	-	.70	-	.62	-
Entire legislative agenda	.86	.94	.89	.91	n.d.a.**

* The 'true' positions of parties are derived from the unidimensional MDS-solutions of distances between parties computed with formula 1.

** Wherever a cell contains a '-', this reflects the fact that an insufficient number of legislative votes were coded to render MDS-analyses sensible.

*** n.d.a. = no data available.

of parties in absolute terms. Parties may become more or less supportive of, e.g., nuclear energy, and may therefore move to the right or to the left: as long as they do this in unison, their *relative* positions are not affected.

Table 4 presents the squared correlations between perceived left-right positions and the unidimensional MDS-configurations. Party positions on all these continuums are strongly related to the perceived positions in terms of left-right. This relationship is somewhat weaker for abortion, which means that voters' perceptions of parties' left-right positions give less information about parties' stands on abortion than in the other areas of conflict. The most deviating case is the relationship between left-right perceptions in 1977 and party positions on socio-economic policies. The poor fit for this year is in fact to a large extent due to the perception of the position of DS'70. When DS'70 is excluded from the analysis, the correlation increases to 0.88 (which means that the R² is 0.77). Voters tended to perceive DS'70 as moderately left-wing, probably because it originated from the pvdA. However, judging by its legislative behaviour – as well as by the content of its election programmes (Van der Brug 1997a, 1997b) – DS'70 was closer to the vvd than to the left-wing parties. The apparently right-wing stands of this party, combined with a left-wing origin, may have led to some confusion among voters about the left-right position of DS'70. Wolters (1984) and Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) even argue that its poor electoral results were partially the consequence of its failure to present itself clearly in terms of left-right.

The main conclusion is that in the 1970s and 1980s, in general, legislative behaviour of parties was strongly related to voters' perceptions of the left-right positions. From the previous section we know that the legislative

behaviour of parties was structured in this period predominantly by a single dimension. In view of the correspondence between the left-right perceptions of voters and the position-taking of parties, the dominant conflict dimension, can be defined, for all practical purposes, as left-right. The left-right dimension was not only a largest common denominator for a wide variety of issues, it was also the predominant structure within many issues themselves. This, in turn, allowed voters to use their knowledge of parties' ideological positions to arrive at a sensible impression of their relative positions on issues even when lacking concrete information about these latter positions. Various authors have argued (and supported this claim with empirical evidence) that such usage of left-right perceptions as a cognitive tool does indeed occur (e.g., Downs 1957; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Granberg and Holmberg 1988; Van der Brug 1997a).

5.2 Perceived issue positions and legislative behaviour

Now that party positions determined for the separate policy areas have been compared with how voters perceive parties in left-right terms, comparisons will be made between perceptions of issue positions and party positions determined on the basis of legislative behaviour in each respective policy area. A problem is that these perceptions were only measured for the four largest parties, which constitutes too narrow an empirical base for calculating statistics with any confidence. The disadvantage of the small number of data-points (parties) from which to calculate correlations can be alleviated by basing comparisons not on positions, but on distances, and by "pooling" the distances from different periods and election years in a single analysis.¹⁶

For each specific issue, distances between the four parties for which data are available, computed for different periods, are "pooled" together in one vector. This yields four (issue) vectors containing distances between parties (computed with formula 1), and four vectors containing distances (i.e., absolute differences) between perceived party positions. For the issue of abortion, for example, these vectors contain 12 distances (the 6 distances existing between 4 parties, times two periods for which a sufficient number of motions existed to sensibly compute distances). For nuclear weapons 24 distances are attained (4 parties, 4 election years),¹⁷ for nuclear energy 30 distances (4 parties, 5 election years), and for income differences 27 distances (3 parties in 1977 and 4 parties in each of the subsequent 4 election years).

For each issue correlations are computed between these two "pooled" vectors. Table 5 presents these correlations, which are moderately strong, and therefore weaker than those reported in Table 4. This does not mean that left-right perceptions are more strongly related to issue positions of parties than are issue

Table 5 Correlations between "true" and perceived distances on four issues**

	correlation	R ²	N*
Socio-economic policies /income differences	.68	.46	27
Nuclear energy	.81	.65	30
Nuclear weapons	.76	.57	24
Abortion	.68	.46	12

* N = the number of distances over which the correlations are computed.

** "True" distances are computed with formula 1, perceived distances are distances between the sample medians of the party placement scores.

perceptions. The correlations in Table 5 cannot be compared with those in Table 4, because the former relate to distances, whereas the latter relate to positions. Elsewhere, some ramifications of differences between the two types of analyses are discussed, and additional evidence is presented showing that those differences depress the magnitude of observed relationships (Van der Brug 1997a:103-5). As the results in Table 5 cannot be compared to those in Table 4, they must be evaluated on their own terms. Table 5 shows a moderately strong relationship between issue perceptions and legislative party behaviour on these issues. Voters are evidently quite capable of not only perceiving parties' issue positions, but also the distances that separate them from one another.

6 Voters with different levels of political knowledge

Although the results of the analyses so far are quite reassuring for those concerned with electoral representation, one could object that the strong link between aggregate perceptions of voters and legislative behaviour of parties may be produced by only a relatively small group of well-informed citizens. Even if the political perceptions of a majority of the Dutch citizens would be uniformly distributed, the median perceptions could still be accurate if there is a sufficient number of voters who are well-aware of party policies. An example of such distributions of perceptions is provided by Powell (1989) in her study of citizens' perceptions of ideological positions of congressional candidates. She found mean placements to be very accurate, although individual perceptions, in particular those of "unsophisticated" voters, were highly inaccurate.

The analyses in this section purport to assess the extent to which differences in levels of political information correspond with differences in political perceptions. Three kinds of conceivable differences will be examined: 1) differences in degrees of perceptual agreement; 2) differences in the extent to

which the median perceptions of different groups of voters correspond with parties' actual positions; and 3) differences in the way voters with different levels of political information perceive various issues to be related. To assess the extent to which degrees of political information are related to political perceptions, comparisons will be presented between the perceptions of groups of Dutch citizens with different levels of political information (or knowledge). Before presenting these analyses, I will briefly discuss the concept political knowledge, and how it is measured.

6.1 Political knowledge

The analyses reported below compare political perceptions of citizens with different degrees of political knowledge. Consequently, political knowledge as used in this text does not refer to perceptions of party positions. It is defined in the most narrow sense, i.e., to refer only to neutral factual knowledge of contemporary politics, such as recognition of politicians, knowledge of constitutional laws and arrangements, etcetera. Being aware of such facts is also evidence of a certain degree of attentiveness, as such knowledge could not be acquired without. At the individual level political knowledge and attentiveness must not be confused, however, because people differ in their capacity to process, store, and recall information. At the aggregate level, on the other hand, such individual differences will largely cancel out. Therefore, it may be assumed that the least informed group of citizens is, on average, also the least attentive.

Political knowledge is operationalized by groups of items in each survey of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies. They consist of series of photographs of prominent Dutch politicians. Respondents are asked to identify the politician in question by name, party, and political function.¹⁸ From the responses to these questions composite scores are constructed which are used as indicators of respondents' political knowledge.

In each of these surveys a different set of photos was used to measure political knowledge because of the need to update the questions so that they, on every occasion, refer to sufficiently prominent politicians. This generates the problem that the measurements are comparable but not equivalent in each survey. To a certain extent, this problem may be circumvented by creating groups that are sufficiently large, and that comprise approximately equal proportions of the electorate in the different election years. It was therefore decided to divide each sample into three groups of respectively high, medium, and low political knowledge. Although this ensures that the sub-samples are reasonably large (each containing more than 300 respondents in each of the studies), their relative sizes vary considerably over the different years. Consequently, one must

be careful with over-time comparisons. Appendix A reports how the subsamples were created, and presents their absolute and relative sizes in the different election studies.

6.2 Differences in perceptual agreement

As a first step to assessing how clearly the three different groups of voters (with low, medium, and high political knowledge) perceive party positions, degrees of perceptual agreement within each of these groups will be compared. A high degree of perceptual agreement among a group of voters (i.e., little variations in perceptions) indicates that the separate members of this group are well aware of the position of a party (unless collective misperceptions exist; a matter to be resolved in the next section). Van der Eijk (1997) developed a measure for perceptual agreement in ordered rating scales, which is bound between -1 and +1. It attains its minimum of -1 when maximum disagreement (in terms of the rating scale) exists about the position of a party, i.e., when half the sample places a party at the one extreme and the other half places it at the other. When all respondents place a party in the same category of a rating scale the measure attains its maximum value (i.e., +1). A uniform distribution yields an agreement coefficient of 0.

The datasets contain information on voters' perceptions of positions of the 4 largest Dutch parties in 7 surveys, for 6 different rating scales (5 issues and left-right). Also, the data yield information about perceptions of left-right positions of all parties represented in parliament in 5 election studies. As voters may have less information about the smaller parties than about the four largest ones, separate analyses will be done for perceptions of the positions of the four largest parties (in terms of the issues and in terms of left-right), and of perceptions of all parties (just in left-right terms). Because not all items were included in all surveys the total number of placement items for the four largest parties is less than 168 (i.e., 4 x 7 x 6), but amounts to 121. The total number of left-right placements is 56. It does not make sense to present coefficients of perceptual agreement for all these items. Instead I present, as a summary, the means of the agreement coefficients for each group of respondents.¹⁹ As these coefficients may be compared across different issues, election years, and parties, these means were computed in three different ways. These are presented in Table 6. Table 6 contains three panels, divided by double lines. The top one presents mean agreement coefficients for each issue separately, summarizing all different parties in the various election years. The middle panel presents such values for each party, summarizing all issues and all years. The bottom panel presents these values for each year, computed over all parties and all issues.

Table 6 Mean values for perceptual agreement about party positions for respondents with different levels of political knowledge.

	Political knowledge			N*
	Low	Medium	High	
Income differences	.39	.50	.59	27
Nuclear energy	.30	.40	.49	27
Nuclear weapons	.39	.50	.60	16
Abortion	.36	.44	.56	19
Euthanasia	.33	.46	.59	12
Left-right 4 major parties	.45	.55	.65	20
Left-right all parties	.39	.53	.67	56
.....				
PvdA	.42	.54	.65	31
CDA	.37	.46	.53	31
VVD	.31	.43	.58	31
D66	.36	.46	.54	28
.....				
1977	.29	.36	.46	9
1981	.36	.46	.56	20
1982	.34	.45	.55	20
1986 first wave	.40	.49	.61	24
1986 second wave	.42	.54	.60	8
1989	.37	.49	.60	24
1994	.37	.49	.60	16

* N refers to the number of issue positions perceived by the three groups of citizens.

A comparison between low, medium and high knowledge groups in Table 6 demonstrates that (regardless whether we focus on the separate years, the separate issues, or the separate parties), the degree of perceptual agreement increases monotonously with knowledge. Yet, the differences between the mean agreement coefficients of the different groups of citizens are quite moderate, particularly when bearing in mind that each represents a large number of agreement coefficients. Very low agreement coefficients for one or several of the perception scales can occasionally be found for the low knowledge groups, and more than for medium and high knowledge groups. This indicates that for some of the scales, the perceptions of this group are nearly uniformly distributed, which depresses the mean for this group. Yet, where this is not the case, the agreement coefficients for the low knowledge group are much more in line with those of the other two groups. This shows

that low knowledge voters are in some instances well aware of the policy positions of political parties, but in a number of cases they display a distribution that is almost uniform.

An important concern from the perspective of democratic representation is whether uninformed voters have systematically insufficient information to vote on the basis of their policy preferences. If the group of voters with little political knowledge consisted largely of voters who were unable to understand any political information, little variations in agreement scores among this group would be observed. The fact that in some cases large degrees of perceptual agreement exist for low knowledge voters, indicates that they are more selectively informed about party policies than others. Evidently, they are not incapable of understanding and processing relevant political information, otherwise nearly uniform distributions of their perceptions would have been found in all cases. Rather, it seems that these voters require a higher degree of saliency of an issue to develop informed perceptions.

The values presented in the top panel of Table 6 show that the differences between the issues are highly similar across the different groups of respondents. To highlight this similarity the issues were ranked by the strength of perceptual agreement among voters with medium political knowledge. This yields the following order:

1: Left-right (4 parties); 2: Left-right (all parties); 3: nuclear weapons; 4: income differences; 5: euthanasia; 6: abortion; 7: nuclear energy.

For the low and high knowledge voters, almost the same rank-orders are obtained:

high knowledge:	2, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
low knowledge:	1, 2, 4, 3, 6, 5, 7

The similarity of the rank orders indicates that agreement is partially a function of the amount of information that becomes available to citizens. Moreover, it suggests that people with different levels of political knowledge become informed *in a similar* way about party positions on these issues, albeit that for low knowledge voters a higher threshold has to be overcome to generate informed perceptions than for those with higher levels of knowledge.

Table 6 also demonstrates that within each group of respondents more agreement exists about the positions of parties in terms of left-right than in terms of concrete issues. To the extent that the left-right dimension is a cognitive cue that citizens use as an instrument to order their perceptions, this applies to all groups of respondents. Moreover, strong perceptual agreement about left-right positions is not limited to the four largest parties.

Let us now focus our attention on the middle panel of Table 6, i.e., on the differences between perceptual agreement for the four largest parties. Across the board, (for these issues and these years), the PvdA evidently made the best job of informing each group of voters about its positions. Low and medium knowledge voters agree most about the positions of the PvdA, next about those of the CDA, then D66, and least about those of the VVD. The pattern for the voters with high levels of political knowledge is somewhat different. They agree more about the positions of the two liberal parties, VVD and D66, than about those of the CDA. Apparently, the VVD and D66 are better than the CDA at informing the better informed. The previous (tentative) conclusion, that different groups of voters become informed about party positions in a similar way is thus not entirely without exceptions.

Finally, an over-time comparison shows a quite robust pattern across the different groups of respondents. When interpreting these findings, it must be realized that in the different election years different selections of issues were included, which partially contaminates the over-time comparison. In spite of these problems, these analyses show that all groups of voters were relatively uncertain about the positions of the four largest parties on the various issues in 1977 and 1982, whereas 1986 was a year that generated relatively strong perceptual agreement among each group. The results presented in the top panel do not conflict with those presented in the bottom panel of Table 6, i.e., both display patterns that are quite robust across the three groups. This demonstrates that the underlying dynamics that cause variations in agreement affect all types of respondents in similar ways. It also indicates that the results of the analyses are not seriously affected by the fact that in each election year a somewhat different instrument was used to measure political knowledge.

6.3 Differences in adequacy of perceptions

The analyses presented so far are reassuring for the way electoral processes function in the Netherlands. In view of the fact that even the least knowledgeable voters are quite well aware of party positions on salient issues, most voters are capable of processing political information. As this conclusion is based on a comparison of differences between degrees of perceptual agreement, one matter still needs to be resolved: whether median perceptions of each group of voters are accurate. To assess the extent to which this is the case, the same strategy is used as for the entire electorate (see Table 5). Distances between political parties were derived from their legislative behaviour regarding specific issues (with formula 1). Then distances were computed between median perceptions of the positions of parties on the different issues. These two sets of distances were correlated. Here the same procedure will be used,

Table 7 Squared product-moment correlation of "true" and perceived distances, for groups of respondents with different levels of political knowledge

	R ²			N*
	Low political knowledge	Medium political knowledge	High political knowledge	
Socio-economic policies	.47	.52	.46	27
Nuclear energy	.48	.77	.74	30
Nuclear weapons	.51	.61	.54	24
Abortion	.50	.54	.35	12

* N = the number of distances over which the correlations are computed.
 ** "True" distances are computed with formula 1, "perceived distances" are absolute differences between the medians of perceived party positions of the respondents in each group.

but now for each of the different groups of voters separately. The squared correlations between "perceived distances" and "legislative distances" are presented in Table 7.²⁰

The analyses presented in Table 7 demonstrate that the (median) perceptions of each group of respondents are quite adequate. Again, these analyses demonstrate that even the group of Dutch voters with the lowest level of political knowledge receives sufficient information to acquire reasonably adequate perceptions of the positions of parties on important political issues. The R²s display an interesting non-linear pattern. The political perceptions of respondents with medium political knowledge are most strongly correlated with the legislative behaviour of parties. This is somewhat puzzling, as one would expect this to be the case for respondents with the highest political knowledge.

The answer to this puzzle lies probably in a combination of the kind of cues respondents use and the different information channels on which they base their perceptions. Voters with the lowest level of political knowledge may be expected to base their perceptions more than other voters on "cues". Because of the simplicity and wide applicability of the left-right representation, this is a cue that has probably the lowest information costs. As the left-right dimension structured to a large extent the legislative behaviour of parties in the 1970s and 1980s, the perceptions of citizens who rely on left-right as a cue will be quite adequate. Better informed citizens will be more aware of the idiosyncrasies of party policies on separate issues. This leads to perceptions that are more strongly related to the legislative behaviour of parties. At a high level of political knowledge, there apparently is a point where perceptions become less strongly related to parties' legislative behaviour. How can this be explained?

In their legislative behaviour parties are, to a large extent, constrained by – among other things – the desire not to jeopardize existing coalitions. As a result, parties' legislative behaviour is more "tightly" structured by a dominant conflict dimension (which in the Netherlands is left-right), than their behaviour in different arena's. Partially as a result of compromises that must be made to influence political decisions effectively, there is (almost necessarily) some discrepancy between what party representatives *say* and what they actually *do*. As a result, perceptions of party policies that are based predominantly on what parties say (in their manifestos or in statements made in the media by their representatives), may be less strongly related to the legislative actions of parties than perceptions that are based on cognitive cues, such as left-right. The most well-informed respondents probably follow the political news most intensively, and may therefore base their perceptions more than the other voters on what parties and their representatives say, rather than on what they do.

6.4 Differences in perceived relationships between issues

The fact that voters with little knowledge of politics do often have accurate perceptions of where parties stand on concrete political issues, was explained in previous sections by the fact that these voters use ideology as a "cognitive shorthand" or a "cue". From their knowledge of the generic (ideological) positions of parties, voters "deduct" where parties stand on concrete issues. To the extent that people do so, their perceptions of issue positions of a party will more closely resemble their perceptions of parties in terms of these cues (such as, e.g., left-right) than otherwise. Differences in the extent to which voters rely on cues may thus generate differences in how separate issues are perceived to be related; the more so when parties' positions vis-à-vis each other in terms of the cue deviate more from their issue specific position. As a result of differences in the extent to which groups of voters rely on cues, the relationships between issues will also be perceived differently.

Paraphrasing Zaller's (1992:20) theory on the non-linear relationship between opinion change and political awareness, it may be hypothesized that the extent to which voters make use of cues such as left-right is non-linearly related to their political knowledge.²¹ The most poorly informed voters lack the minimum extent of knowledge required to make the cognitive connection between various policy dimensions. The most informed voters have sufficient concrete information on issues to not need such cues. We may, therefore, expect the moderately informed voters in particular to rely on cues.

To compare how each of the groups of voters perceive relations between various issues, six policy dimensions are taken into account on which perceptions

of party positions were measured repeatedly in various Dutch Parliamentary Elections Studies: income differences, nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, abortion, euthanasia, and left-right. To assess the extent to which each group perceives a relation between these policy dimensions, squared correlations were computed between the perceived party positions on the different scales (computed for each group separately). The squared product-moment correlations (R^2 -values), for each group, between the medians of their perceptions on these 6 scales are presented in Table 8.²²

Table 8 Squared product-moment correlations (R^2) of medians of perceived party positions on different scales. Separate analyses for groups of respondents with high, medium, and low political knowledge scores.

Items	Political knowledge	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V1 Abortion	High	1.00					
	Medium	1.00					
	Low	1.00					
V2 Euthanasia	High	.98	1.00				
	Medium	.97	1.00				
	Low	.89	1.00				
V3 Nuclear energy	High	.25	.15	1.00			
	Medium	.43	.27	1.00			
	Low	.51	.31	1.00			
V4 Nuclear weapons	High	.25	.19	.95	1.00		
	Medium	.46	.31	.97	1.00		
	Low	.55	.34	.91	1.00		
V5 Income differences	High	.18	.07	.92	.95	1.00	
	Medium	.26	.12	.86	.93	1.00	
	Low	.36	.20	.79	.93	1.00	
V6 Left-right	High	.28	.14	.96	.96	.96	1.00
	Medium	.53	.26	.96	.97	.94	1.00
	Low	.72	.39	.92	.94	.88	1.00

The squared correlations in Table 8 are ordered in two clusters (the shaded cells). Within each of these two clusters the R^2 -values are very high, whereas they are much lower between the two clusters (the non-shaded cells). So,

perceived locations of the four major parties on abortion and euthanasia are exceedingly similar, as are those on nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, income differences, and left-right. The positions of the 4 major parties vis-à-vis each other in each of the two issue domains are apparently quite different. This shows that all three groups of respondents perceive the positions of the 4 major parties on these six scales as ordered by two separate dimensions, which are correlated with one another (as indicated by the positive correlations in the non-shaded cells), particularly via the left-right dimension. To a large extent the two-dimensional structure in these perceptions is probably due to the fact that this selection of four parties includes the vvd. As discussed in Section 4, the vvd is the only party positioned substantially different vis-à-vis other parties on issues belonging to the two clusters (see also: Van der Brug 1997a:82-6).

Although the perceptions of each group of respondents are structured very similarly, the differences display an interesting pattern. Within each of the two clusters the magnitudes of the R^2 -values of the different groups of respondents differ only slightly. For low knowledge respondents these correlations are always somewhat lower than for the other two groups, which hardly differ from each other at all. In the light of the results of the MDS-analyses of legislative positions, this result is not unexpected. In terms of parties' legislative behaviour, party positions on these issues were almost perfectly correlated. Respondents with more political knowledge may be expected to be more aware of this "reality" than respondents with less political knowledge.

The correlations between issues from different clusters (between abortion and euthanasia on the one hand, and nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, income differences, and left-right on the other), display a pattern that is exactly the opposite of that within the two clusters. Much larger differences exist between the R^2 s from the different groups of respondents. Even more important, the magnitude of the R^2 s turns out to be inversely related to the level of political knowledge. Citizens with low political knowledge perceive a stronger relationship between the ordering of party positions on "abortion" and "euthanasia" on the one hand, and on the other four scales on the other hand than citizens with high knowledge. This is particularly obvious with respect to how the issues abortion and euthanasia are perceived to be related to left-right.

The most likely explanation for these differences between the various groups is that the low knowledge group consists of citizens who are, on average, least attentive toward political news. Those who are not very attentive derive their cognitions of policy positions of parties partly from their knowledge of the more generic elements of what parties stand for, i.e., cues. As left-right positions reflect to a large extent the generic ideological principles of Dutch parties, left-right positions are such cues. Lacking more issue-specific information, low knowledge voters depend more on cues than more knowledgeable ones.

As a result, the relationship between left-right perceptions and issue perceptions increases for this group.

This does not yet explain why such "cue" effects are so much stronger for abortion than for euthanasia. For a long time, abortion was a strongly politicized issue that bitterly divided ruling coalitions, and even divided one of the major parties (the VVD) internally. Euthanasia has, until now, been less strongly politicized along party lines, and consequently has not generated important struggles between parties. Because left-right (the dominant dimension of party conflict) only becomes a relevant, or salient, cue when issues generate clear conflicts between political parties, the cue effect is more pronounced for abortion than for euthanasia.

Earlier I referred to Zaller's (1992) work on public opinion, and derived the hypothesis that "reliance on perceptual cues" would be non-linearly related to political knowledge. Instead the extent to which citizens rely on left-right positions as "cues" to form perceptions of parties' issue positions decreases as the level of Dutch citizens' political knowledge increases. Those with the lowest levels of political knowledge depend most heavily on the simplified representation provided by the left-right dimension. The fact that no non-linear relationship was found does not invalidate the general hypothesis, however. That is because the measurements do not allow one to observe what the absolute level of the Dutch population is on a political knowledge continuum. The patterns observed in Table 8 seem compatible with a comparatively high level of knowledge among the Dutch population. That would place low knowledge voters in the middle of Zaller's continuum, and explain why cue-taking from left-right decreases with higher levels of knowledge. How can such comparatively high levels of knowledge among Dutch voters be accounted for? A plausible explanation is that this results from the fact that the behaviour of Dutch parties was structured in this period by one overarching ideological dimension on which party positions were highly stable. Consequently, the party system provided a low threshold for obtaining political information.

7 Conclusions

In this paper a simple question was asked: do voters know where parties stand? Simple as the question may seem, it is too broad to answer comprehensively in one paper. When answering the question one does not only face the problem of determining the "true" positions of parties; all kinds of interesting facets (such as variations between political systems, issues, parties, periods, and voters) may conceivably be taken into account. This paper is limited to one party system (the Dutch), and to perceptions of groups of voters of party positions

on six policy dimensions that have been prominent in Dutch politics during substantial periods over the last two decades.

The research consisted of three steps. First, party positions in various separate policy areas were determined on the basis of legislative actions. These were used as "objectified" indicators of party positions. Second, median perceptions of the Dutch electorate in its entirety of party positions on these policy dimensions as well as on the left-right dimension were compared with these "objectified" positions. Third, the political perceptions of groups of voters with different levels of political knowledge were compared on three accounts: 1) the extent of variations in perceptions within each group; 2) the extent to which median perceptions are adequate; and 3) the extent to which perceptions of party positions on separate issues are related (i.e., structured).

The single most important conclusion of this study is that Dutch voters have adequate perceptions of party positions on prominent party political issues. Even the political perceptions of the least informed citizens are strongly linked to the actual (legislative) behaviour of Dutch parties. Somewhat larger degrees of variation in perceptions exist among the least informed citizens than among others, but even the least informed sometimes acquire highly accurate perceptions of party positions. The least informed voters, therefore, are also capable of understanding and processing relevant political information. For them to acquire accurate perceptions, a higher degree of saliency of an issue is needed. This might explain why the results of the analyses presented here appear inconsistent with those of Powell (1989). She found differences in perceptions of American voters of the ideological positions of congressional candidates to be strongly related to degrees of political sophistication, whereas this study shows that rather small differences exist between the political perceptions of Dutch voters. Neither the distinction between liberal and conservative ideologies, nor the elections for congressional candidates, may be very salient to American voters. In the Netherlands, being such a small country, the national level is by far the most salient one (judging, for instance, by levels of turn-out at elections). Moreover, the policy dimensions analysed in this article, represent some of the most important (salient) conflicts in Dutch party politics.

The conclusions of this study differ quite radically from many American studies of public opinion, which seem to emphasize "minimalism", or a lack of awareness (Sniderman 1993). Comparative studies of electoral behaviour in European countries and the U.S. have repeatedly demonstrated that European voters behave more rationally than American voters, and that the former are better informed (e.g., Granberg and Holmberg 1988; Listhaug et al. 1994). Although this study is confined to one system, and the effect of characteristics of party systems on political perceptions were not analysed, three such characteristics do probably account for the fact that the findings in this study

appear inconsistent with those found in the U.S. The properties of the Dutch party system that are possibly relevant for the extent to which voters can form adequate perceptions of party positions are: (1) party discipline; (2) the fact that parties presented clear choices on the issues considered here; and (3) the fact that positions on different issues coincide.

With respect to the third aspect, I emphasized the significance of legislative party positions on most issues being strongly related to their left-right positions during at least the period 1977 to 1989. To the extent that political conflicts are presented to the voters in terms of a left-right conflict, the costs for interpreting and retaining information are drastically reduced (Downs 1957; Sartori 1976; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983; Enelow and Hinich 1984). The analyses in this chapter provided confirmatory evidence for the significance of left-right as a cognitive tool, especially for the least informed voters. This implies that in the 1970s and 1980s left-right provided a low threshold for Dutch citizens to make sense of politics. The left-right imagery may not have helped them to acquire a detailed understanding of party competition, but it particularly helped the ill-informed citizens to make some sense of politics. Converse (1975:97) argued that political information is of the type "them what has, gets." Those who are well-informed about a topic find it easier to interpret new facts. For those without prior knowledge, new information is meaningless and is likely to be forgotten (see also: Zaller 1992). As the left-right dimension provided a low threshold to understand and interpret the actions of politicians, there were relatively few Dutch citizens for whom political information was entirely meaningless.

These notions should be evaluated in the light of some other recent findings. Analyses of contents of election programmes demonstrated that the left-right division has become less prominent for structuring the behaviour of Dutch parties, in particular in the period between 1989 and 1994 (Van der Brug 1997a, 1997b). These findings do not necessarily contradict the results of parties' legislative behaviour, which shows that until 1989 the legislative behaviour of Dutch parties was primarily structured by a left-right dimension. Conceivably, as parties are more constrained in their legislative work than in their campaigning activities, changes in such structures become visible earlier in party programmes than in legislative behaviour. Moreover, a combination of parties formed a government coalition in 1994 that is not "connected" when only considering the left-right dimension. We can expect, therefore, that the linkage between left-right perceptions and legislative behaviour has become less strong since 1994 than it was in previous periods.

However, (perceived) proximity on the left-right dimension remains a very strong predictor of party choice in elections (Tillie 1995; Van der Eijk 1995; Oppenhuis 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). This indicates that Dutch voters continue to orient themselves to the party system in terms of the left-

right division, while this ideological dimension has become less prominent for structuring the behaviour of parties. Citizens in general – and the least attentive voters in particular – depend on such cognitive shortcuts, or cues, to facilitate information processing. In view of this, a decreasing importance of the left-right dimension will probably have important ramifications for the extent to which Dutch voters are able to adequately perceive party positions.

Appendix A: Sub-groups "political knowledge"

In this study comparisons were made between political perceptions of respondents with high, medium and low political knowledge. For these comparisons Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies were used from different election years since 1977. Table A.1 provides a description of how respondents were classified in these three sub-groups.

Table A.1 How respondents were selected for sub-samples of high, medium and low "political knowledge"

year	Sub-sample low political knowledge			Sub-sample medium political knowledge			Sub-sample high political knowledge		
	How selected?	N	% of sample	How selected?	N	% of sample	How selected?	N	% of sample
1977	(pol. kn. < 3)*	670	36.1%	(3 ≤ pol. kn. ≤ 5)*	553	29.8%	(pol. kn. > 5)*	633	34.1%
1981	(var334 < 3)	544	30.0%	(3 ≤ var334 ≤ 5)	614	34.0%	(var334 > 5)	654	36.0%
1982	(var1140 = 0)	325	21.1%	(1 ≤ var1140 ≤ 2)	610	39.6%	(var1140 > 2)	606	39.3%
1986	(var258 = 0)	343	25.3%	(1 ≤ var258 ≤ 2)	511	37.7%	(var258 > 2)	502	37.0%
1989	(var201 = 0)	488	32.4%	(1 ≤ var201 ≤ 2)	684	45.5%	(var201 > 2)	334	22.1%
1994	(var355 = 0)	605	39.6%	(1 ≤ var355 ≤ 2)	597	39.1%	(var355 > 2)	325	21.3%

* The 'political knowledge' variable in 1977 was constructed from variables V169 through V179. These variables were dichotomized, so that only respondents who mentioned the correct name, party, and function in the party of the respective politician, get a positive score. The 'political knowledge' variable is a 12-point scale (scores ranging from 0 to 11), that is obtained by adding up all positive scores on variables V169 through V179.

Notes

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2. Naturally, some other conditions must exist as well. First of all, at least two political parties should participate in an election. These parties should be internally coherent, offer distinct political programmes, and be dedicated to actually carrying out their programme once they are elected. Empirical research in various contemporary democracies shows that public policies significantly reflect the political programmes of incumbent parties (Castles 1982; Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Hofferbert and Klingemann 1990; Klingemann et al. 1994). A second condition is that voters have policy preferences and choose rationally, i.e., vote for the party that offers a package of policy proposals with which they agree most. Several studies of electoral behaviour have presented empirical evidence which indicates that voters in the Netherlands do indeed vote rationally. Attitudes toward public policies – particularly as summarized by broader ideological positions – are important determinants of party choice in the Netherlands (Van Cuilenburg et al. 1980; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983, 1992; Middendorp et al. 1993; Oppenhuis 1995; Van der Eijk 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

3. CPN, PSP, and PPR are three small parties of the radical left, which, together with the religious splinter (EVP), merged into GLI (Green Left) after the 1986 elections. The PvdA (labour party) is the largest party of the left. D66 is a left-leaning liberal party. DS'70 is a small labour party founded by former members of the PvdA who were discontented with PvdA politics. BP (Farmers Party) is a small party, which evolved from farmers' protest against policies initiated by the EEC. ARP, CHU, KVP are the three largest Christian Democratic parties, which merged into the CDA in 1977. The VVD is the largest (right-wing) liberal party. RPF, GPV, and SGP are three small Christian fundamentalist splinter parties. The CP (Centre Party), which later changed its name to CD (Centre Democrats), is a small party, often considered extreme right-wing because of its racist views.

4. Mokken and Stokman (1970, 1985) provide elaborate discussions on the properties of this distance measure. As discussed above, being absent at a vote is interpreted as abstention and coded as 0. This decision is based on the concept of the *converse of a vote*. Mokken and Stokman argue that a desirable property of this distance metric, is that it is *invariant for converses*. In other words, the distance between two actors is invariant to the "format" in which the proposals voted upon are formulated, "positively" or "negatively". The distance metric is invariant for converses, when abstention is coded as 0, or when treating these votes as missing data. The latter solution has the drawback that the information contained in the votes from the other parties on this proposal cannot be used. "Pairwise" deletion of missing data (i.e., computing each distance

between two parties over those proposals in which both parties participated) may result in violating a property *all* distance metrics must have, namely *triangle inequality* (see also: Stokman 1977:117).

5. Details about these studies can be obtained from the codebooks of the Dutch Parliamentary Elections Studies 1977 through 1994 (Irwin et al. 1978; Van der Eijk et al. 1981, 1983, 1988; Anker and Oppenhuis 1993, 1995). The data can be obtained from the Steinmetz Archive.

6. Left-right positions of all parties represented in parliament were measured in 1976 in wave 11 of the "continuous survey" of the Department of Political Science (ESW-A) of the University of Amsterdam. The continuous survey was a project that consisted of a series of surveys of independently drawn samples of the Dutch population (for more details, see: Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983:393). Left-right positions were measured in this survey with 7-point rating scales, whereas in subsequent years 10-point scales were used. To make the measures comparable across time the former were transformed to a 10-point scale by linear interpolation, which involves the following formula: (10-point score) = 1.5 * (7-point score) - 0.5.

7. To test the unidimensionality and cumulativity of the scale, a scaling model known as "Mokken scaling" has been applied (Mokken 1971), which is a stochastic variant of the deterministic Guttman scale. The results of these analyses are presented in the codebooks of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, and demonstrate that the items form a strong scale in all of these years (Van der Eijk et al. 1981, 1983, 1988; Anker and Oppenhuis 1993). The H-coefficients equaled .56 in 1981, .66 in 1982, .66 in 1986, and .47 in 1989.

8. To make these measures comparable across time 4-point scales were transformed to 5-point scales with linear interpolation, which involves the following formula: (5-point score) = 1.33 * (4-point score) - 0.33.

9. A brief description of how the coefficient is computed can be found in Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996:433-4).

10. The dataset includes votes on 640 motions and on 128 bills, categorized in these four policy domains.

11. Table 2 presents the results of linear MDS with an intercept. It was decided to perform linear MDS because distances derived from legislative behaviour are considered sufficiently reliable to allow for this. The intercept is included so that a distance of 0, computed with formula 1, does not necessarily have to be represented by a distance of 0 in the party space. Parties that are close together on an issue may cooperate to have a better chance of getting a favourable outcome. The intercept is included in the analysis to allow for the possibility that distances measured with Formula 1 are represented by larger distances in the MDS-configuration.

12. The party positions presented in this paper are denoted by the election year that marks the end of the intervals over which distances are computed. For instance, party positions in 1981 are computed on the legislative behaviour of parties between the elections of 1977 and the elections of 1981.

13. In a few cases the R^2 of the one-dimensional solution is higher than the R^2 of the two-dimensional solution. This is for two reasons. First, an iterative procedure is used by the programme to find the best configuration. It stops iterating if the next

iteration gives only a marginal improvement on the fit. It then uses the coordinates on the first axis of the two-dimensional solution as starting values for the analysis of the unidimensional solution. If the "fit" of the one-dimensional solution is already almost perfect, one extra iteration may yield a slight improvement. Second, instead of maximizing the R^2 , the algorithm used by the MDS-programme (KVST) minimizes (and reports) the "stress". The R^2 -values were computed by the author. Although metric-MDS was applied, the stress is a measure for non-metric associations between the input distances and the distances in the configuration. The solutions may hence not be quite the optimum, although most of the configurations yield such high R^2 -values that we can have a reasonable amount of confidence in the adequacy of the representations.

14. This resembles the phenomenon in surveys, where two respondents both respond negatively to a stimulus but for opposite reasons. This occurs when the data are proximity data in the terminology of Coombs (1964). The appropriate method to analyze these type of data (unfolding) cannot be applied, however, to the analysis of legislative votes. This is because such scaling techniques require that items measure only preference and not aversion. As the wording of the motions is beyond the investigator's control, unfolding provides no solution to this measurement problem..

15. The other configurations are presented elsewhere (Van der Brug 1997:80-1). The same volume contains analyses demonstrating that relative party positions on these policy dimensions were highly stable in the 1970s and 1980s (p. 86-9), which is why it suffices to present only the results for 1986.

16. One could also increase the number of observations by pooling party *positions* from different years. Each party would then yield multiple datapoints, one for each year for which relevant data are available. This would obviously increase the number of observations for correlational analysis. Unfortunately, this is not a valid approach, because each separate MDS-solution is standardized. Therefore, the metrics of the scales of the separate MDS-solutions and hence the positions of parties therein are not comparable. An additional problem is that the mean of each MDS-configuration is 0, so that the separate configurations are invariant to changes in the political agenda. Voters' perceptions of party positions, on the other hand, may very well reflect such changes. This renders a pooled over-time comparison between perceptions and party positions derived from MDS-solutions problematic. As motions, amendments, and bills represent the content of the parliamentary agenda, distances are more comparable over time than MDS-positions. Therefore, it was decided to "pool" distances instead of positions.

17. In 1981 and 1982 perceptions of party positions on the nuclear weapons issue were measured on a 4-point scale, whereas a 5-point scale was used in 1986 and 1989. In order to make the measures more comparable over time, distances in 1986 and 1989 were multiplied by 0.75.

18. Mokken scaling – a stochastic method for testing unidimensionality of cumulative scales – showed that these items represent a latent single dimension, so that the summation of correct answers provides valid scores. The respondent's score on the political knowledge scales is determined by the number of politicians for whom the respondent can correctly mention his/her name, party, and function within the party.

Tests of unidimensionality of the scales are documented in the codebooks of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies.

19. This is a valid way of summarizing, because for all practical purposes the agreement coefficients can be considered to be measured at interval level (Van der Eijk 1997).

20. Because of an insufficient number of legislative proposals pertaining to euthanasia, "legislative distances" could not be determined for this issue.

21. Zaller (1992:20-2) argues that attitudes of low informed citizens are not likely to change as a result of persuasive messages, because these people lack the knowledge required to understand such communication. The most informed citizens, on the other hand, are the most critical recipients, and their attitudes are therefore not likely to be affected either. Consequently, the attitudes of citizens with intermediate levels of knowledge are most prone to be affected by persuasive communication.

22. Perceptions of positions on issue scales are only measured for four parties. To attain a sufficiently large number of observations for computing the R²s presented in Table 8, a datamatrix was created in which the units of analysis are party by year combinations, and in which the variables are the median perceptions of each group of voters of party positions on the six policy dimensions. So, six variables pertain to each of the three knowledge groups; each of these 6 variables contains the median perceptions of that specific group of citizens of party positions on the respective policy dimension.

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