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Aarts, K.; Semetko, H.A.

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Representation and Responsibility: The 1998 Dutch Election in Perspective

Kees Aarts & Holli A. Semetko

1 Introduction

The May 6, 1998 election of the Dutch Second Chamber may go down in history as one of the least exciting and most predictable parliamentary elections of the last three or four decades of the twentieth century. Yet, at the same time, it is a most interesting and puzzling election for political scientists. This paradox can be rephrased in a variety of ways. Here is a sample of four facts that deserve further consideration:

- The Dutch electorate had never been so well-educated and informed about politics, yet so little inclined to go to the polls. Turnout reached an all-time low in 1998 (for parliamentary elections) of 73.3%.
- For the first time ever, the political parties used (paid) television advertisements and the Internet, in addition to a large number of more traditional campaigning methods; the total amount of money spent on the campaigns was higher than ever before. Yet, the campaign was characterized as almost void of any issue content (cf. *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 May 1998; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1998).
- An outgoing coalition that had been for most people unthinkable and in fact only existed in some adventurous minds just a decade earlier, (because it included the traditional antagonist parties pvdA on the left and vvd on the right), received one of the highest policy competence evaluation ratings ever recorded in public opinion surveys.
- On the main socio-economic policy dimensions, the largest opposition party of the 1994-1998 parliamentary period, the Christian Democratic CDA, was usually placed on the left-right issue position scales in public opinion surveys right in the middle of the governing coalition of pvdA, vvd and D66.

This list can easily be extended. However, that is not our purpose here. The point is that behind the facade of a boring campaign and a predictable election result, there lurks a series of challenges to commonly held notions and ideas about how democratic politics works in a modern Western society. Is turnout negatively associated with education and information? Do campaigns lose their issue contents in the course of becoming more professionalized? What

does support for the policies of the outgoing coalition signify? What is the meaning of 'government' and 'opposition' in this country?

This special issue of *Acta Politica* deals with these and other related questions pertaining to the 1998 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. A number of Dutch specialists in the field focus on certain aspects of those elections, from one or another comparative perspective to contrast with past practice here or developments abroad. These aspects include the policies and record of the outgoing government, the election campaign and its dynamics, the composition of the parties' policy platforms, and the major issues and political developments in the 1998 election. We begin this special issue with a discussion of the more or less familiar image of the Netherlands as a consociational system, and continue with some of the amendments to this in light of recent developments.

2 Present-day Dutch politics

2.1 A case for political science: Against the pluralist belief

Dutch politics and the challenging of ideas received about the functioning of modern democracy have been paired before. Twentieth-century politics and society in the Netherlands has often served as the prototypical instance of consociational democracy (Lijphart 1975). The present-day theory of consociational democracy was developed in the 1960s as an account for the survival of democratic political systems that were characterized by deep and overlapping societal cleavages. The seemingly unproblematic existence of several of such systems in Western Europe was paradoxical from the perspective of the 'accepted' pluralist theory.¹ According to those accepted ideas about the survival and breakdown of democracies (developed in the light of Nazism, Fascism and Communism), societies characterized by deep and overlapping cleavages stood little chance of surviving for long. The odds were even worse when such societies had adapted a proportional representation system for electing representatives, a unitary state rather than federalism, and a fragmented party system rather than a two-party system (Lipset 1959: 90).

During the better part of the twentieth century, the Netherlands displayed all the aforementioned vices and more. Yet, the democratic system appeared to be very stable, although that is not to say immovable. A clue to this paradox, Lijphart and others have contended, is to be found in the conciliatory behaviour of the political elites in the beginning of the twentieth century. How did this conciliatory behaviour come about? While this is not the place for an extensive historical account, it seems important to go back a little further in time, and sketch the contours of the setting in which conciliatory behaviour was called for in the first place.

Lipset, as a 'representative' of the dominant pluralist school of the 1950s, referred to four factors that would threaten the survival of democratic politics in a society:

- the mutually reinforcing structure of cleavages in the society;
- the unitary, rather than federal structure of the state;
- proportional representation rather than territorial representation;
- a multiparty system rather than a two-party system.

One of these, the structure of social cleavages, pertains to the society. Two factors, the structure of the state and the electoral system, pertain to the political institutions. Finally, the fourth factor, the party system, refers to a characteristic of the intermediary system between society and politics. During most of the twentieth century, all four factors were present in the Netherlands. But, rather than belonging to some state of nature, they were man-made, from the first till the last. Moreover, they came at particular and distinct points in time.

2.2 Origins of the modern political system

The list of four factors just presented, may serve as a framework for summarizing the origins of the present-day Dutch political system.

1. *A unitary state.* The Dutch republic of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces, was a federal state with a number of confederal elements, but anything but a strong unitary state.² Established against the background of a religiously inspired struggle between local followers of Calvin and the central authority of the Spanish king, the Republic resembled the practical side of Johannes Althusius' (1563-1638) political theory. This theory regards the state as a pyramidal structure of free *consociationes*, characterized by sovereignty from below (Daalder 1966: 191; Kingdon 1997). It stands in stark contrast with the view of the Frenchman, Jean Bodin, on the indivisibility of sovereignty, which was taken as a justification of the absolute power of kings.

The unitary state came to the Dutch provinces only after the French invasion of 1795. It was one of the many novelties the French carried with them, others being, for example, the written constitution, the formal separation of state and church, and the foundation of government ministries. Most of these novelties, including the unitary state, eventually survived the French period, and returned in the Kingdom of the Netherlands that was proclaimed in 1813. From the constitutional reform of 1848, the Netherlands emerged as a decentralized unitary state, with specific tasks for the provinces and municipalities, and it has preserved this structure till the present day.

In terms of political power, the nineteenth-century Kingdom saw a gradual development from royal absolutism under William I, via the constitutional

reform of 1848 (which included direct elections for the representative bodies including the Second Chamber of parliament), towards the rule of parliament in the late 1860s. This development was not always smooth. Dutch cabinets have always been, and still are to some extent, King's (or Queen's) cabinets, rather than extensions of parliamentary power, and the primacy of parliament over the cabinet could only be established after a political struggle that lasted several years (1866-1868).

Together with the growing importance of the parliament, especially its Second Chamber, the way in which its members were elected became a salient issue. The Second Chamber was elected through variants of territorial representation throughout the nineteenth century, until 1917. Two aspects stood out: first, the suffrage, and second, the electoral law. As for the suffrage, this was very gradually extended from almost 11% of the total male population of 23 years and over in 1853, to almost 71% of the male population of 25 years and over in 1917 (*Compendium Politiek en Samenleving*, A1200-31-32). These extensions were entirely due to more lenient taxation requirements for getting the right to vote. As for the second aspect, the electoral law remained a variant of district representation, albeit with several modifications introduced over time.

2. *Proportional representation.* The electoral system was changed drastically in 1917. Adult male suffrage became practically universal, followed a few years later by the enfranchisement of women. At the same time, the electoral law was changed into proportional representation, for all practical purposes in one nationwide district. Turnout became compulsory, and remained so until 1970. Thus, just as in the case of the unitary state more than a century earlier, proportional representation was also introduced in the Netherlands as a novelty.

Now, with regard to elections, the nineteenth century in Western Europe may be characterized as a grand movement towards universal electoral participation and proportional representation. The Dutch experience was in tune with this movement. However, the introduction of both universal suffrage and proportional representation, together with a number of other constitutional reforms in 1917, had a broader significance here than just catching up with the *Zeitgeist*. The package deal of 1917 is known as the Pacification, and it marked the beginning of a structured way of conducting politics.

The Pacification of 1917 was the outcome of a process of reflection by the political elites – catalyzed by World War I – on a series of developments that had occurred since the rule of parliament had been established in the late 1860s. Daalder (1966: 200-213) provides an insightful account of the emergence of political parties, as agents of social movements, and of the clear distinction between government and opposition that came to the fore in those decades. In the beginning of this period, politics was still dominated by the liberals, and religion was only beginning to dominate the political agenda. From 1888 onwards, the Orthodox-Calvinists and the Catholics regularly formed the

governing coalition together. The last (minority) government dominated by the liberals disappeared by 1918. This change in the political balance of power, to which the rise of the socialists contributed as well, reflected the emancipation of parts of the population that had had little say in politics before. The Orthodox-Calvinists were the first to be effectively organized in a party, founding their own newspaper, university, and eventually church. They were followed by Catholics and Socialists. The latter, however, had not yet participated in government, and was not to participate until 1939.

3. *Multiparty system.* The Orthodox-Calvinists and the Catholics, however separated their popular bases were at the time, found each other at the elite level on issues such as the demand for state subsidies for denominational schools. On other issues, other party coalitions were formed. But all four or five main political groupings (Orthodox-Calvinists in the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij ARP, Catholics in the Rooms-Katholieke Staatspartij [founded only in 1926], Socialists in the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, Dutch-Reformed in the Christelijk-Historische Unie CHU, and the liberals in various progressive and conservative parties) were minority groupings with no reasonable hope of becoming a majority. Moreover, there have always been challengers ready for each of these main parties, whenever their policies, in the eyes of the righteous, turned too far towards the centre. Therefore, while the leaders never failed to see the need for cooperation at the top level, they always felt a pressure to maintain their identity. The more recent political movements of Orthodox-Calvinists, Roman Catholics and socialists typically handled this tension by stimulating the internal organization and inward orientation of their subculture.

4. *Mutually reinforcing cleavages?* This brings us to the fourth factor, which is actually the first Lipset discussed, but one that we question. The mutually reinforcing cleavages Lipset was thinking of, were related to the way in which societies had handled the three most prominent political issues of the nineteenth and early twentieth century: “[F]irst, the place of the church and/or various religions within the nations; second, the admission of the lower strata, particularly the workers, to full political and economic ‘citizenship’ ... ; and third, the continuing struggle over the distribution of the national income” (Lipset 1959: 83). Problems were to be expected “[w]hen a number of historic cleavages intermix and create the basis for ideological politics” because “by definition such politics does not include the concept of tolerance” (Lipset 1959: 85).

It is questionable whether this description has ever been valid for the Netherlands. Daalder (1966) has highlighted the traditional tendency towards cooperation among the political elites, and their shared sense of responsibility. The social phenomenon of *verzuiling* (pillarization) was thus to a considerable extent the result of elite strategies aimed at political survival.³ On this pillarization strategy, Daalder (1966: 203) observes:

This gave the Dutch party system considerable stability, especially after proportional representation was introduced. But the potential automatism of the expression of electoral opinion led at the same time to some degree of dissociation between electorate, Parliament, and government.

The politics of accommodation (Lijphart 1975) was built upon political institutions that, on the one hand, produced a relatively pure reflection of popular preferences in parliament, but, on the other hand, left the link between those preferences and the formation of government power largely undefined. Traditionally, governments should have the support of a majority in parliament. But electoral gains and losses tend to be dampened or even dissolved in the stage of coalition formation. A familiar adage in Dutch politics is that getting into government is more important than winning in the elections.

2.3 Parties and governments since 1967

Why so much attention to what some might consider ancient history? The answer is because this is how the Netherlands functions today. Although the society itself has changed – the Netherlands has developed quite rapidly from a highly segmented and traditional society to integrated and modern – the institutions of consociational democracy have not changed (cf. Lijphart 1989). Church membership declined dramatically, and the linkages between social background and political behaviour became much weaker (*Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport* 1998; *Compendium Politiek en Samenleving*). Politics has also changed, for a variety of reasons, ranging from technological developments to the process of European unification. Nevertheless, the rules of the game and most of the players are still the same in Dutch politics as they were more than thirty years ago.

As a consequence, Dutch politics appears to have moved from the consociational model (politics of accommodation in a segmented society) to what Lijphart has termed the 'depoliticized democracy': elite cooperation in a homogeneous society. Elite cooperation is no longer needed to prevent the political system from falling apart, since the subcultural segmentation has to a large extent disappeared. By continuing their compromise-seeking behaviour, the political elites seem more and more interchangeable.

Efforts to adjust the rules have invariably been wrecked on the resistance of some or most of the established political parties (Andeweg 1997). Many of such efforts have been undertaken since the 1960s, when the system of pillarization began to crumble and the political institutions accordingly started to float. Among the proposed measures were: direct election of the prime minister, territorial representation, a corrective (obligatory) popular referendum. None of these has been successful so far.

The latter of these proposals, the corrective referendum, provides a timely illustration. In 1994, when PvdA and VVD needed the participation of D66 in order to obtain a majority coalition, part of the price they paid was the inclusion in the government's policy programme of a corrective referendum (which the VVD had previously opposed strongly). A proposal for a constitutional amendment to that effect, which required a high number of citizens' signatures on petitions before any corrective referendum could be called, obtained a simple majority in both chambers of parliament on the first reading. In May 1999, however, in the First Chamber, it lost by one vote the necessary two-thirds majority on the second reading, because one VVD senator refused to cooperate. This threw the government into crisis. The entire cabinet offered its resignation to the Queen, and there was a period of time when it was thought that there might be new parliamentary elections in September 1999, only a year and four months after the May 1998 elections. However, all the coalition partners were reluctant to have another parliamentary election so soon, for various reasons. After some weeks they made a new agreement to prepare legislation on a non-obligatory referendum, one which needed no constitutional amendment or change (and consequently, did not require a two-thirds majority in each Chamber). Having thus agreed, the governing parties renewed their pledges to each other, and the purple coalition could resume its business.

The fate of the referendum in the Netherlands is telling because at one and the same time it makes clear that politics, in what French Canadian political scientist André Blais calls 'the Kingdom of Postmaterialism', can at times be very conservative, and that the existing political institutions tend to assimilate challengers to those institutions. The reasons for this assimilation may be found in the practically unparalleled 'openness' of the existing institutions – many new parties can only survive in a system like the Dutch one. The downside of this, namely weakly controlled formation of executive power, is taken for granted.

In 1999, most of the players, i.e., the political parties, were the same as in the 1960s, or could easily be traced back to predecessors from those years. The main parties were:

- Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA) – Labour Party, founded in 1946 as the heir of the pre-war Social Democrat Party SDAP.
- Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA) – Christian Democratic Appeal, founded in 1980 after a merger of the three main religious parties KVP (Catholics), ARP (Orthodox-Calvinists) and CHU (Dutch-Reformed).
- Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD) – People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, founded in 1948 as a successor to pre-war liberal parties. Market-oriented liberalism.
- Democraten '66 (D66) – Democrats '66, founded 1966 as 'a bomb under the established system' and since the mid-1970s proponent of social liberalism.

- GroenLinks (GL) – Green Left, founded 1990 after a merger of communists (CPN), pacifists (PSP), radicals (PPR), and progressive Christians (EVP).
- Socialistische Partij (SP) – Socialist Party, founded in 1971 after a process of fragmentation in extreme left parties and movements. Radical left party.
- Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) – Political Calvinist Party, founded in 1918 as a theocratic splinter of the ARP.
- Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond (GPV) – Calvinist Political Alliance, founded in 1948 as another splinter of the ARP.
- Reformatorische Politieke Federatie (RPF) – Reformatory Political Federation, founded in 1975 in a protest of Calvinists against the planned merger of ARP, CHU and KVP.

These nine parties obtained seats in the 1998 elections for the Second Chamber. The parties that were voted out of the Second Chamber in that election were:

Table 1 Turnout and results of elections for the Second Chamber, 1967-98

Year	1967	1971	1972	1977	1981	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998
SP	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	2	5
CPN	5	6	7	2	3	3	0	-	-	-
PSP	4	2	2	1	3	3	1	-	-	-
PPR	-	2	7	3	3	2	2	-	-	-
GL	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	5	11
PvdA	37	39	43	53	44	47	52	49	37	45
D66	7	11	6	8	17	6	9	12	24	14
ARP	15	13	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
KVP	42	35	27	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
CHU	12	10	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
CDA	-	-	-	49	48	45	54	54	34	29
VVD	17	16	22	28	26	36	27	22	31	38
RPF	-	-	-	-	2	2	1	1	3	3
GPV	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
SGP	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3
AOV	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	0
Unie55+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0
CP/CD	-	-	-	-	0	1	0	1	3	0
Others	7	11	10	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
Turnout	94.9	79.1	83.5	88.0	87.0	81.0	85.8	80.3	78.7	73.3

-- means that the party did not participate in this election.

Turnout is defined as the percentage of the enfranchised population appearing at the polling booth. This was compulsory until 1970, although the sanctions were not carried out.

- Algemeen Ouderen Verbond/ Unie 55+ (AOV/Unie55+) – General Alliance of the Elderly/Union 55+, by 1998 actually a number of parliamentary parties/lone representatives resulting from a series of schisms after the overnight success of AOV and Unie55+ in the 1994 election.
- Centrumdemocraten (CD) – Centre Democrats, the 1986 successor of the Centrumpartij, an extreme right party, with a very misleading name.

Before and after 1967 – the election year that is often regarded as the turning point between the age of pillarization and the present days⁴ – many other parties have sought and sometimes gained seats in parliament. These are disregarded here.⁵ The election results for the parties mentioned above, in the period 1967-1998, are summarized in Table 1. This table also includes the turnout percentages. Table 2 presents the coalition governments that have been formed in the same period.

2.4 Dynamics of the party system

The transition from a consociational democracy to a depoliticized democracy (see above) is not a natural process. Parties have to adapt their strategies, since they can no longer count on the votes of their segment of the society. Moreover, in the new situation they are continuously confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, in order to obtain votes they have to be clear on issues – if not, they

Table 2 Government Coalitions, 1967-1998

Election	# Ministerial Posts and Parties	Prime Minister (Party)
1967	6 KVP, 3 VVD, 3 ARP, 2 CHU	De Jong (KVP)
1971	3 ARP, 6 KVP, 3 VVD, 2 CHU, 2 DS'70	Biesheuvel (ARP)
1972	7 PvdA, 2 PPR, 1 D66, 4 KVP, 2 ARP	Den Uyl (PvdA)
1977	10 CDA, 6 VVD	Van Agt (CDA)
1981	6 CDA, 6 PvdA, 3 D66	Van Agt (CDA)
1982	8 CDA, 6 VVD	Lubbers (CDA)
1986	9 CDA, 5 VVD	Lubbers (CDA)
1989	7 CDA, 7 PvdA	Lubbers (CDA)
1994	5 PvdA, 5 VVD, 4 D66	Kok (PvdA)
1998	6 PvdA, 6 VVD, 3 D66	Kok (PvdA)

The first government coalition formed on the basis of the election result is mentioned. In all cases except 1971 and 1981, these coalitions remained in office until the next elections.

Source: Compendium Politiek en Samenleving, A0500

run into the danger of losing votes to challengers from the right or left. The system of proportional representation directly translates successful challenges into parliamentary seats. On the other hand, in order to obtain office, they cannot be too clear about issues – if they are, they run into the danger of losing the coalition formation game. The system of majority coalition government requires players who are willing to compromise. Steering a middle course between clarity on issues and willingness to cooperate with others in office is not easy. The election results for the major parties attest to this.

Since the late 1960s, the Dutch party system has been in a kind of turmoil. To some extent this can be seen from the election results (Table 1). The 1967-1998 period shows some trends, such as the long-term decrease in support for the Christian Democrat parties and the increase of support for the VVD, but also a lot of short-term fluctuations, notably in the results for D66. The Christian Democrats (KVP, ARP, CHU and later CDA) started with 69 seats in 1967, dropped to 45 seats in 1982, got better results during the rest of the 1980s, but fell sharply to 34 seats in 1994, and 29 seats in 1998. The VVD, with notable fluctuations, saw its number of seats increase from 17 in 1967 to 38 in 1998. Support for the PvdA shows some fluctuation but generally appears to be rather stable between a low of 37 seats (1967 and 1994) and a high of 53 (1977). D66 was close to political suicide in the mid-1970s, when it fell back to 6 seats after a good start in 1967 and 1971. In the early 1980s this party jumped to 17 seats, and a year later fell back to 6 seats again. Its best result so far was in 1994 (24 seats), half of which were lost again in 1998.

The small, religious right-wing parties SGP, GPV and RPF have always had very stable support. In 1998, they together obtained a record number of 8 seats. The small left parties sought cooperation in the late 1980s, after the CPN, for the first time since 1918, had failed to win a single seat. The election results in 1989 and 1994 for the new Green Left were rather disappointing; only in 1998 was the tide turned for this party (11 seats).

The party strategies towards competitors also show some interesting developments. The PvdA found itself in a process of radicalization in the late 1960s, after the party had been removed from government office in 1966. Initially, it proclaimed that it would no longer cooperate in government with the KVP. In the early 1970s, its cooperation with D66 and PPR came very close, up to the presentation of shadow cabinets and a common election programme. Only after 1986, when it failed again to obtain office after a clear gain in seats, did the PvdA abandon its strategy of polarization.

The Christian Democrat parties stepped over the historical gaps that separated them, and formed a new party that competed for the first time in the 1977 election. Until 1994, the CDA, like the former KVP, was in a position to select its coalition partners, as PvdA and VVD had become antagonists since the 1950s. The record-breaking time Ruud Lubbers held the office of prime

minister (1982-1994) was followed by a dramatic crisis in the party's leadership and an unprecedented loss of 20 seats in the 1994 election. The CDA has not yet recovered from either.

2.5 The 1998 elections in perspective

The party locations on some representative issues show the initial polarization just referred to, followed by convergence of the party system. Table 3 summarizes data from Dutch election studies, which are available for every election since 1971.⁶

The trend is especially clear for ideological placement on a left-right scale, but can also be seen on the other issues. From 1971 until 1986, the main parties (as measured by the mean party placement by the respondents) tend to take more extreme positions. Taking the left-right dimension as an example, the PvdA can be seen to move from -1.41 to -1.89, the VVD from 1.09 to 1.53. The CDA and its predecessors tend to be on the right. D66 was allied to the PvdA in

Table 3 Party and respondent locations on selected Issues

	1971	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998
Left-right						
PvdA	-1.41	-1.64	-1.89	-1.59	-1.19	-0.83
D66	-0.82	-0.39	-0.56	-0.86	-0.37	-0.29
DS'70	0.04	-	-	-	-	-
ARP	1.07	-	-	-	-	-
KVP	1.21	-	-	-	-	-
CHU	1.38	-	-	-	-	-
CDA	-	1.37	1.41	1.02	0.63	0.49
VVD	1.09	1.49	1.53	1.25	1.17	1.12
Respondent	0.30	0.04	0.01	-0.05	-0.06	-0.09
Income differences¹						
PvdA	-1.65	-1.75	-2.01	-1.90	-1.43	-1.49
D66	-1.06	-0.54	-0.70	-0.83	-0.44	-0.52
DS'70	-0.31	-	-	-	-	-
ARP	0.15	-	-	-	-	-
KVP	0.02	-	-	-	-	-
CHU	0.51	-	-	-	-	-
CDA	-	1.03	0.49	0.48	0.40	-0.26
VVD	1.20	1.73	1.55	1.47	1.41	1.26
Respondent	-1.14	-0.46	-0.83	-0.81	-0.53	-0.96

	1971	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998
Abortion						
PvdA	-1.60	-1.85	-1.63	-1.50	na	na
D66	-1.68	-1.26	-1.29	-1.32		
DS'70	-0.87	-	-	-		
ARP	1.28	-	-	-		
KVP	1.54	-	-	-		
CHU	1.66	-	-	-		
CDA	-	1.32	-1.50	1.34		
VVD	-0.84	-1.07	-0.83	-0.95		
Respondent	-0.83	-0.99	-0.97	-0.99		
Nuclear power						
PvdA	na	-1.46	-1.75	-1.29	-1.04	-1.08
D66		-0.62	-0.64	-0.96	-0.83	-0.90
CDA		0.84	1.42	0.50	0.51	-0.44
VVD		1.02	1.48	0.86	1.02	0.32
Respondent		-0.99	-0.61	-1.26	-1.17	-1.37
Euthanasia						
PvdA	na	na	-1.42	-1.28	-1.00	-0.96
D66			-1.17	-1.46	-1.28	-1.24
CDA			1.38	1.54	1.13	1.38
VVD			-1.09	-0.92	-0.95	-1.03
Respondent			-0.60	-0.92	-1.36	-1.16

All issues are scaled to range from -3 to +3; where appropriate, poles have been interchanged so as to correspond to a left-right ordering.

1. The wording of the income differences question changed between 1982 and 1986.

Sources: for 1971-1994, Aarts, Macdonald & Rabinowitz 1999: 76; for 1998, Dutch parliamentary election study 1998.

the early 1970s (see above), but afterwards took a more independent stance, which can be seen in the form of a movement towards the centre.

After 1986, there is a distinct movement towards the centre that by and large continues into the 1998 election. On the left-right dimension, the pvdA moves a full unit (on a 7-point scale) towards the right, which is a lot, and the vvd moves 0.4 unit to the left. Noteworthy as well is the step to the left by the cda, after the austerity policies of the first Lubbers cabinet (1982-1986). The impact of issues on voting behaviour are studied more extensively by Van Wijnen in his contribution to this issue of *Acta Politica*.

The rightward movement of the pvdA on the left-right dimension and on the issue of income differences indicates the socio-economic reorientation of this

party that took place after 1986. Rather than emphasizing the difficult position of the unemployed, the handicapped and other disadvantaged groups in the society, as it had done in the economic recession of the early 1980s, the Labour Party put more emphasis on getting the state finances under control again, and, most importantly, stimulating the creation of jobs. This change in orientation made the party attractive again as a coalition partner for the cda, which had championed serious cutbacks from 1982 onwards. In the first half of the 1980s, the unemployment figures had hit record levels, unparalleled since the depression of the 1930s. An agreement between the main union organizations and those of employers, reached in 1982, ensured that the union demands for wage increases would be practically absent in the years to come – the employers' organizations, in turn, offered reduction of working hours. Together, these measures would lead to the creation of jobs. While this direct effect may not have been strong, the moderation of wages eventually contributed to the improved international economic position of the Netherlands.

Thus, at both the party level and the level of intermediary organizations a foundation was created for a highly successful economic recovery. This is evident from the public's view on the most important problems the Netherlands has to deal with. Table 4 summarizes some key figures from the Dutch parliamentary election studies. Not all categories of problems are presented, and the percentages refer to those who named problems of this type as a first answer. Table 4 shows that unemployment, which had long dominated the political agenda, had lost much of its importance from the public's viewpoint by 1989. Environmental problems, top priority in 1989, were no longer very salient by 1994. In 1994, issues regarding (ethnic) minorities and (especially) refugees seeking asylum in the Netherlands dominated public opinion. In 1998, this was still the case, but to a lesser extent. Most references under this heading are to problems related to the relief of asylum seekers. Other types of problems that were seen to be important by the Dutch public in 1998 include crime (and broader issues of public order) and public health. The latter very often refers to the negative consequences of financial cutbacks in the public health sector. The contribution to this issue by Hoogerwerf deals with the policies of the 1994-98 government in detail.

At the outset of this introduction, it was noted that the 1998 parliamentary elections were regarded as predictable and dull. In this respect, they stand in sharp contrast with the previous elections that took place in 1994. We have already referred to some of the circumstances of those elections. The pvdA had returned to power by forming a coalition with the cda since 1989. This coalition eventually became very unpopular, for a variety of reasons, notably the cutbacks in social provisions and benefits which were supported by the pvdA. According to the polls, the position of the pvdA had improved slightly by the beginning of 1994, but the cda received serious new blows (Irwin 1995).

Table 4 Most important national problems – selected categories

Year	1967	1971	1972	1977	1981	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998
Minorities/Refugees	0	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	26	19
Unemployment	29	3	11	57	52	62	41	17	24	7
Social provisions	3	3	3	2	2	2	5	3	11	5
Economy/Finance	6	4	3	3	11	14	9	4	7	3
Public order/Crime	4	3	2	3	3	3	6	6	6	17
Environment	1	22	18	4	3	1	2	45	5	5
Political problems	11	4	12	3	2	5	4	3	4	2
Town and country planning	4	4	3	2	1	0	1	0	2	1
Public health	0	3	1	4	2	0	5	5	2	17
Incomes and prices	8	7	15	7	4	1	2	3	1	5
Housing	21	28	15	6	6	1	0	1	1	1
Other/No problems	13	17	15	6	13	11	25	10	11	18
n =	4882	2236	1418	1771	2231	1507	1593	1673	1790	1995

The entries are percentages of the valid response, only for the first mentioned problem (in all studies, several answers have been coded). The data for 1967 are not fully comparable with those for the other years; cf. De Nederlandse kiezers in 1967 (1967), Amsterdam: Agon Elsevier, 51-52. The high percentage in the category 'Other/No problems' in 1986 is to a large extent due to people referring to problems of nuclear armament. Source: Dutch parliamentary election studies, 1967-1998.

The election results, presented in Table 1, show the unprecedented loss for both coalition partners in 1994: minus 12 seats for the PvdA, and minus 20 seats for the CDA. In this issue, Irwin and Van Holsteyn present a detailed analysis of the road the parties travelled between 1994 and 1998, and of their competitive position vis-à-vis each other; and Brants and Van Praag discuss the 1998 election campaign from an internationally comparative perspective.

The coalition of PvdA, VVD and D66 that was formed in 1994 was unprecedented as well, although not greatly surprising given the outcome of the elections. For the first time since 1918, no Christian Democrat party participated in the government. In the first paragraph of this introduction, we referred to the seemingly odd situation that the largest opposition party since 1994, the CDA, is usually placed in the middle of the governing coalition of PvdA, VVD and D66. The data in Table 3 supported this view for all issues except the euthanasia issue. However, that data was derived from perceptions of parties by the public. What about the party programmes? In her contribution to this issue, De Vries shows that a content analysis of the party platforms of the five main parties in the 1998 election, followed by a spatial analysis of coalition preferences, actually predicts that the PvdA-VVD-D66 coalition will be formed.

2.5 Representation and opposition

If politics matters, present-day Dutch politics has been successful in helping to bring about and maintain one of the most affluent societies in the world. The Netherlands achieves the highest ratings on indicators of liberty, happiness, optimism about the future (e.g., *Sociale en Culturele Verkenningen 1999*). But the turnout in elections has declined since the mid-1980s. The 1998 elections for the Second Chamber showed a turnout rate of 73.3% (Table 1).

There are no indications that people decline to vote because they are satisfied. When asked what ideas they themselves have for improving the turnout in elections, more than half of the respondents (in May/June 1999) spontaneously referred to various communication problems between politics and citizens: the distance between politics and citizens should be reduced, politicians should live up to their promises and listen to citizens, political parties should take clearer stances, etc.⁷ More indications of dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of differences between the main political actors can be found in the media. Newspapers frequently refer to the absence of political debate between the main parties.

The data in Table 4 do not point to a single, or even a couple of problem areas that were perceived to be the most urgent in 1998. Unemployment and the environment had been such problem areas previously. Moreover, the most frequently cited problem areas of 1998, minorities/refugees, public order/crime, and public health, did not differentiate very much between the main parties. Table 5 presents the average perceived importance that six parties attach to these three problem areas, which were formulated as valence issues.

Table 5 shows that the five main parties of the Netherlands (all parties in the table, except GPV), on the three issue areas perceived as most important by the public, receive average perceived importance ratings within a range of 0.74

Table 5 Mean perceived importance attached by parties to three issues

	Fighting crime	Refugees	Healthcare
CDA	7.84	7.06	7.64
PvdA	7.62	7.55	7.78
VVD	7.93	7.04	7.10
D66	7.40	7.10	7.87
GroenLinks	7.19	7.45	7.57
GPV	7.60	6.63	7.15

Entries are the average ratings on a scale of 1-10 by respondents of the perceived importance parties attach to the issues mentioned.

Source: Dutch parliamentary election study 1998 (Aarts, Van der Kolk and Kamp 1999).

(fighting crime), 0.51 (refugees) and 0.77 (healthcare) respectively. The inter-party variation is thus small – in all cases considerably smaller than the variation in the ratings for each party separately.

It is noteworthy that the conclusion just drawn also involved the two main opposition parties, CDA and GroenLinks. Moreover, as Table 5 shows, the opposition parties do not get a higher average importance rating than the coalition parties anywhere. Apparently, the government-opposition divide did not extend to issue profiles.

2.6 The media-politics connection

Changes in the Dutch party system, and in the system of *verzuiling*, over the past decades have been accompanied by changes in the media system which have had consequences for the ways in which politics is perceived and treated in the Netherlands. Three important structural changes in the country's media system include: (1) a shift in orientation of some major national newspapers from what was more heavily partisan and pillarized catering to smaller homogeneous readerships in the early 1960s, to a less overtly partisan press designed to reach larger, more heterogeneous audiences with corresponding increases in readership; (2) an increasing number of Dutch broadcast outlets on television and radio, with many new Dutch commercial channels since the late 1980s, further fragmenting broadcast audiences; and (3) with the vast majority of households on cable, there are also, for those who are interested, indigeneous channels from Germany, Britain, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, the US, Morocco and Turkey, and with the increasing use of satellite dishes there has been an even further fragmentation of audiences because many immigrant households in Dutch cities view almost exclusively Arabic or Turkish channels from abroad.

Accompanying the first two of these structural changes has been an increasing attention by mainstream Dutch media outlets to attracting and maintaining larger audiences in the face of depillarization and increasing competition in the media market place (cf. Semetko 1998). In 1997, for example, the new commercial broadcasting channels devoted only one-quarter of their time to information or news and current affairs programmes in comparison with about 43% of time on the public service channels (*Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport* 1998: 702, Table 16.15). With such opportunities for viewers to avoid politics altogether, in the run up to the 1994 national election political parties' campaign strategists actually envisaged "an electorate zapping away from TV programs with heavy political content, forcing the parties to try to win voters in a 'nonpolitical way' in 'nonpolitical' program genres" (Brants & Neijens 1998: 150). In the six weeks prior to the 1994 election, politicians filled the screen for more than 67 hours which is 'quite substantial' when one

considers that 'television spent only 20 hours on soccer, the most popular sport in the country' (ibid.: 154). The average voter, who spent just over a couple of hours per day in front of the TV set, viewed politicians over that six week period for two hours and forty-two minutes (162 minutes), and this ranged from 103 minutes for those with low political interest, to 177 minutes for those in the middle category and up to 245 minutes for those with high political interest (ibid.: 155). In 1994, the vast majority of politicians' appearances (78%) nevertheless remained in traditional news and current affairs programmes, and only 22% were in entertainment or 'infotainment' programmes, though this varied by party. The Labour Party leader who had the 'specific image problem' of being too distant from the public and socially not a warm person, actually spent forty per cent of his time on the 'soft' TV talk shows trying to change his public image (ibid.: 162). A study of the effects of the news on public opinion in the 1994 election campaign revealed that being a regular viewer of daily TV news actually had a significant positive effect on the image of and trust in the Labour Party leader (Van Praag & Van der Eijk 1998).

3 Conclusion

As the 1998 national election approached, there were increasing complaints, aired in the press, about the so-called 'Americanization' of politics. Dutch politics was charged with having become too preoccupied with conflict and drama. Both the politicians and the media were blamed, but the politicians bore the brunt of the criticism. Dutch politics was criticized for being overly personalized, with too much emphasis on party leaders and their personalities: "Poppetjes was the cynical term used by some to refer to the impression that politicians, like puppets, are superficially the same, concerned more with making media appearances than actual matters of policy and governance" (Semetko 1998: 146).

This perceived similarity or lack of distinction between politicians, and more generally between government and opposition, is a reformulation of the perceived lack of differences between the main parties referred to earlier in this essay. It points to the problem Daalder already noted in 1966 (235-236): "[I]t seems that only a definite and powerful Opposition in Parliament can secure regular accountability and guarantee the openness of the system. It is on this point that the Dutch situation seems most vulnerable."

The 'opposition' to which Daalder refers requires a change in party strategies that under the present circumstances appears unattractive for any of the main political parties, because it would reduce their chances of being part of the next coalition. In the near future, therefore, we can expect persistence of the paradoxes that characterize democratic politics in the Netherlands.

Notes

1. A relatively recent reference to the significance of pluralist theory for the emergence of consociational theory is the *Review Symposium* (1995) on King, Keohane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry*, especially the contribution by Rogowski and the reply by King, Keohane and Verba.
2. Often, however, the Republic has been labelled as a confederation of provinces. Moorman van Kappen (1997: 173 ff.) argues why this label is, at the very least, doubtful.
3. It would, however, be misleading to regard pillarization exclusively as an elite-directed phenomenon. There are at least two other useful broad approaches to this phenomenon, namely theories of emancipation and protection, and theories of modernization and national unification. See, for example, Pennings 1991: chapter 1, and Ellemers 1996.
4. The 1967 election followed a parliamentary period (1963-1967) during which, on the basis of one and the same composition of parliament, three successive coalitions had been formed of different political colours. The pvdA, which was part of the second of these coalitions but left out of the third, moved towards a strategy of polarization afterwards – see the text. In the 1967 election, the last to which compulsory voting applied, some new (D66) and anti-system (Farmer's Party) parties were very successful, whereas the 'big' five parties of the pillarization age obtained their worst collective result so far.
5. For an overview, see for example *Compendium Politiek en Samenleving*, A1100.
6. The Dutch parliamentary election studies are available from the major social science data archives. The latest, 1998 study, and the accompanying non-response study and extensive documentation, can also be downloaded directly from the Internet: <http://www.bsk.utwente.nl/skon/>
7. The data referred to forms part of a new wave of interviews with the respondents of the Dutch parliamentary election study of 1998, which was held during the fortnight before the European elections of 10 June 1999. For more information, contact the first author.

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