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## Election Pledges and Coalition Agreements in The Netherlands, 1986-1994

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### Abstract

This article endeavours to revise the view held by many political scientists that the formulation of election pledges is a peripheral aspect of parties' electoral appeals. The arguments presented are based on a re-evaluation of the saliency theory of party competition, and on an analysis of the election programmes published by the four main Dutch parties prior to the 1986, 1989 and 1994 parliamentary elections. It will be demonstrated that parties formulate specific policy proposals in important policy areas. One of the research questions raised by this phenomenon concerns the conditions under which these election pledges are supported in the coalition agreements negotiated by the prospective coalition partners after the elections. It is concluded that the formulation of coalition agreements involves real policy negotiations in which the prospective coalition parties have a unique opportunity to impose their policy priorities on the government's policy agenda.

### 1 Introduction

The substance of parties' electoral appeals is the focus of much research in political science. A commonly held view is that specific pledges do not constitute an important element of these appeals: "specific pledges are made in peripheral or unimportant areas of policy which are easy to alter. On central areas of policy such as the economy, for example, no specific commitments are made" (Hofferbert & Budge 1992: 153; see also Klingemann et al. 1994: 25). This view has been stated by, among others, the proponents of the saliency theory of party competition. According to the saliency theory, the central mechanism through which parties express their electoral appeals consists of the amounts of emphasis they place on various policy themes relative to one another. Parties are said to be associated with particular policy themes. For example, social democratic parties are associated with redistributive themes, such as the maintenance of social security programmes, while conservative parties are associated with themes such as the expansion of free market enterprise. The central propositions of saliency theory have received impressive

empirical support, and thematic emphases have been used to map the shifts in parties' ideological positions in many countries over a long period of time (Budge et al. 1987). Furthermore, the research programme associated with saliency theory has produced valuable insights into coalition formation (Laver and Budge 1992), and the levels of congruence between electoral appeals and subsequent government spending patterns (Klingemann et al. 1994). Like any research programme, the one associated with saliency theory involves a number of propositions and assumptions that are central, and others that are less so. Statements expressing the view that 'pledges do not matter' fall into the latter category. Saliency theory is not falsified by the existence of pledges of societal importance on central areas of policy. On the contrary, it will be argued that central propositions of saliency theory lead to the expectation that election pledges constitute an important element of parties' electoral appeals.

It will be shown that parties do devote considerable attention to the formulation of election pledges in important policy areas. One of the research questions raised by this finding is the following: under which conditions are election pledges more likely to be supported in the coalition agreements signed by the prospective coalition partners? In the literature on coalition agreements, there are two general views on the interactions between parties that take place prior to the formulation of coalition agreements (Timmermans 1998). The first is that these interactions are real negotiations that offer parties a real opportunity to influence the incoming government's policy agenda. The second is that the formulation of these documents is a 'ritual dance' of primarily symbolic value. These two general views lead to specific expectations regarding the levels and types of congruence between election pledges and statements in the coalition agreements.

### 2 Electoral discourse

#### 2.1 Election pledges as an element of electoral discourse

Saliency theory is said to be a modification of the positional theory of party competition elaborated by Anthony Downs (1957). According to Downs's conceptualization, parties' sole interest in politics lies in the pursuit of government office, and they will adopt any policy position in order to secure more votes. According to saliency theory, parties are not as free to change their policy positions as Downs suggests. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that, contrary to Downs's assumption that parties are office seekers, parties are also policy oriented. Politicians would not be willing to adopt any policy position in order to appeal to voters. The second reason has to do with the long-term credibility of parties: a party's pre-election promises will be per-

ceived to be credible by voters only if they are consistent with the policies it supported previously. The proponents of saliency theory do not, however, hold the view that competition between parties is rigid. Instead, they maintain that this competition occurs in an indirect and implicit manner. Parties are said to indicate shifts in their policy positions implicitly, by selectively emphasizing and de-emphasizing policy themes relative to one another. For example, social democratic parties that move toward the centre do not argue explicitly for a retrenchment of social security programmes, or a restriction of employment rights. Instead, they de-emphasize these policy themes and pay more attention to themes traditionally not associated with leftist parties, such as the encouragement of free market enterprise. This mechanism allows policy-oriented politicians in historically rooted parties to alter their policy appeals over the years. According to this theory of party competition, much of what passes for competition between parties consists of parties 'talking past' each other. Instead of addressing the policy statements made by their competitors directly, parties concentrate their attention on other policy themes on which they are considered to have a relative advantage.

A closer examination of the arguments contained in saliency theory's critique of Downs's theory of party competition leads to the expectation that parties do make pledges on important policy matters. Take the argument that shifts in parties' policy positions are constrained by the fact that they are motivated at least partly by the enactment of particular policies: 'policy-seeking' parties. Saliency theory posits that parties are faithful to these policy preferences, at least in the sense that they are unwilling to abandon them in return for votes, as is suggested by an 'office-seeking' model of party competition. These preferences are assumed to endure from one election to the next. Therefore, they are at a level of abstraction above that of specific policy proposals or election pledges. Given that these preferences are of such concern to parties, they will surely search for ways in which they can be translated into policy actions. Policy actions are the subject of election pledges. To say that parties are policy oriented but that they do not present concrete policy proposals is tantamount to claiming that parties conceal their policy intentions from the electorate. This is not, however, a proposition found in saliency theory. Furthermore, such a hidden agenda is incompatible with the broader theory of democracy held by the proponents of saliency theory, in which parties are viewed as mediating institutions in an open interplay between societal demands and government policies (Klingemann et al. 1994: 8). Consider also the argument that parties would not be believed by voters if they were to adopt policies that are inconsistent with their past electoral appeals. It is assumed that the electorate would punish parties, or that parties believe they would be punished at elections, for repudiating their previously held policy stances. There is a strong tension between the proposition that the credibility

of parties is at stake at elections, and the proposition that parties attempt to win votes by emphasizing policy themes without specifying policy proposals relating to these themes. In order to maintain these two statements simultaneously, the following argument would have to be made. Voters are critical and alert enough to punish parties for repudiating their previously held policies. However, they can be persuaded to vote for a party that confines its discussion of important policy themes to general statements, without specifying its policy intentions in these policy areas. This is hardly a plausible argument. Certainly, former British Prime Minister Heath did not consider rhetorical policy statements, unsubstantiated by specific proposals, to be an effective way of winning votes. He commented that "people today are so cynical and sceptical about the whole machinery of government that detail is needed to convince them that you really intend to carry out your promise" (quoted in King 1972). The following hypotheses on election pledges can be derived from the above re-evaluation of saliency theory.

The propositions that parties are policy seekers and that the credibility of parties is at stake at elections both imply that parties will elaborate their support for general policy themes by specifying the policy actions they intend to take relating to these themes. In other words, parties are compelled to substantiate their support for general policy themes by formulating specific election pledges. This conjecture leads to the following hypothesis on the distribution of election pledges across the policy themes featured in each election programme:

*H<sub>1</sub>: The numbers of election pledges associated with each of the policy themes featured in an election programme correlate positively with the levels of saliency parties attach to these themes.*

The expectation that parties make substantively important policy pledges in areas of policy they present as being of particular saliency is supported in all existing studies of election pledges (Pomper & Lederman 1980: 138-139; Rose 1980: 65; Royed 1996). For instance, with regard to the election programmes published by British and Canadian parties, Rallings noted that "[p]arties clearly feel under some obligation to make promises of action in those matters to which they have given general prominence in their manifestos" (1987: 5). In this article, quantitative data on the saliency of policy themes will be used to investigate the distribution of election pledges more systematically. Note that this hypothesis is the antithesis of the claim reported in the introduction: that pledges are confined to peripheral areas of policy. If that were true, negative correlations between the frequency of pledges and the importance of policy themes would be expected.

Another central proposition of saliency theory is that parties avoid direct

confrontations with each other, whereby they concentrate their electoral appeals on different policy areas. This proposition has a clear implication for the relationships between election pledges made by different parties:

*H<sub>2</sub>: A high proportion of the election pledges made by any party is not related directly to pledges made by other parties.*

In other words, it is expected that parties 'talk past' each other. Existing research on election pledges contains strong empirical support for this hypothesis. For example, in both the US and the UK, it was found that most pledges (on average 85 per cent) made by one of the main parties did not relate directly, either in a positive or negative sense, to pledges made by the other main party (Royed 1996; see also Pomper and Lederman 1980: 169). It might be expected that parties in multiparty coalition systems address the policy statements of their competitors more directly. Whether or not a party enters government office in a coalition system depends not only on the election result, but also on its ability to bargain its way into the coalition. It is reasonable to assume that parties will be sensitive to this fact, and that this will be reflected in their electoral appeals. Parties may increase their attractiveness as potential coalition partners by making the same or similar policy proposals as their competitors, whose help they will need in the near future. Furthermore, parties may anticipate the future policy negotiations in which they will have to engage if they are to become part of the coalition. This anticipation may consist of an identification of which of the prospective coalition partners' policy proposals are unacceptable. In short, it is certainly worthwhile to re-evaluate this hypothesis in the context of a coalition system of government such as that in the Netherlands.

If election pledges are indeed an important element of the political discourse that takes place prior to elections, we would expect the relationships between election pledges to tell us something about the relationships between the parties. To say that there is more agreement between parties is to say that these parties are closer together in a policy space. This point was made by Pomper and Lederman on the subject of the US election platforms (1980: 168). The proportion of related pledges made by the Republicans and Democrats that were conflictual increased substantially during the particularly intense presidential election campaigns of 1952 and 1964. This finding implies that the subset of pledges on issues addressed by more than one of the parties deserves particular attention. A further investigation of the relative amounts of direct consensus and dissension between parties, as expressed in their election pledges, can be conducted in a multiparty system. Here, the expectation is the following:

*H<sub>3</sub>: The relative amounts of direct consensus and dissension between parties in terms of their election pledges reflect the political distances between them.*

Note that this third hypothesis is not derived from the saliency theory of party competition. However, the substantive implication of the hypothesis, that pledges are an important element of electoral discourse, is certainly consistent with the main arguments contained in that theory.

## 2.2 The coalition agreements

The question to be addressed in this section is why certain election pledges are supported in the coalition agreement while others are not. Two general views of the formulation of coalition agreements can be found in the existing literature (Timmermans 1998). The first view is that the formulation of the agreement offers parties a real opportunity to influence the future government's policy agenda (Peterson et al. 1983; Peterson & De Ridder 1986). The second view is that it is no more than a 'ritual dance', that is carried out to ease the transition from election campaign competition to inter-party cooperation in government (Luebbert 1986). These two general views will be referred to when discussing the variables that are expected to influence the likelihood of election pledges being supported in the coalition agreement. For ease of presentation, the first three hypotheses in this section will be formulated in accordance with the view that the coalition agreement provides parties with an opportunity to engage in real policy negotiations. It is, of course, possible that elements of both views contain some empirically verifiable elements. This will be reflected at least to some extent by the support for pledges in the coalition agreement that conform to the expectations of both views.

If the coalition agreement is a result of real policy negotiations between the prospective coalition partners, this will presumably be reflected in the types of pledges found in these documents. One of the expectations resulting from the assumption that 'real policy negotiations' are taking place is that negotiating parties are intent on obtaining explicit commitments to as many of their own policies as possible. This implies that less attention will be devoted to the policy demands of parties not involved directly in the negotiations.

*H<sub>4</sub>: Election pledges of the prospective coalition parties are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than those of parties not involved in the negotiations.*

Of course, there are perfectly democratic reasons why there should be congruence between what parties propose and what governments intend, even

when the parties concerned are not directly involved in the coalition formation. Parties respond to societal demands, and these demands continue to exert influence on decision-makers, even when the parties concerned are not immediate candidates for inclusion in the governing coalition. Nevertheless, assuming that real policy negotiations are taking place, it is to be expected that pledges made by the parties involved directly in the negotiations are more likely to be transformed into the coalition's policy intentions.

It was stated in the previous section that direct dissension between parties is a relatively rare event, at least in terms of explicit disagreement on the same specific policy issues in their election programmes. Despite their scarcity, these are the issues that could damage the stability of the coalition at a later stage if left unresolved. If the formulation of the coalition agreement is understood as a real negotiation process, the parties will be concerned with drawing up a policy programme that provides a basis for the duration of the next governing period. Therefore, these conflictual issues are the ones on which the prospective coalition partners will concentrate.

*H<sub>5</sub>: Election pledges on issues on which the prospective coalition parties disagree are more likely to be mentioned in the coalition agreement than those on which there is no such disagreement.*

If the coalition agreement is viewed as the product of serious policy negotiations, it is to be expected that 'important matters' will be featured in these documents. What exactly constitutes an important matter is perhaps subject to debate. The importance of an election pledge could refer to two different concepts: the amount of policy change involved in the proposal, or the level of saliency that the party attaches to the proposal in question. These two concepts are clearly distinguishable. It is, for example, possible for a party to attach a high level of saliency to an election pledge to maintain the status quo, in the sense that it would defend this position vigorously if challenged to do so (see Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1985; Bueno de Mesquita & Stokman 1994). There are clear expectations associated with each of these concepts of importance. Coalition agreements are generally about what parties intend to do when they form a coalition together, rather than what they do not intend to do. It is for this reason that most of the hypotheses in this section are presented in terms of the likelihood of 'support for' rather than 'opposition to' pledges in the coalition agreement. Consequently, pledges that do not involve any policy change at all – i.e., status quo pledges – are unlikely to be supported explicitly in the coalition agreement. If the formulation of the coalition agreement consists of real policy negotiations, then it is reasonable to assume that each of the negotiating parties is intent on obtaining an explicit commitment to as many of their own policies as possible. Each of the negotiating

parties faces a number of constraints on their ability to secure such commitments. These constraints include the relative bargaining power of the prospective coalition partners, and the extent to which the negotiating parties are willing to put into effect their bargaining power during the negotiations. In the presence of such constraints, it is reasonable to assume that a prioritization occurs, whereby parties seek to obtain commitments on those proposals to which they attach higher levels of saliency:

*H<sub>6</sub>: Election pledges to which parties attach higher levels of saliency are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than pledges to which they attach lower levels of saliency.*

### 2.3 The sceptical view

The previous three hypotheses are based on the presupposition that election pledges are, at least to some extent, supported in the coalition agreement. According to the sceptical view of the formulation of coalition agreements, election pledges do not feature prominently in these documents. The agreement is said not to be concerned primarily with policy-making. Instead, a number of *general principles* are formulated that each of the prospective coalition parties, and in particular the party members, can interpret as being congruent with their own policy preferences. Discussions of specific policy issues, the subject of election pledges, are avoided. If that is the case, why is the formation of the agreement typically so long in duration and presented as being so highly complex and difficult? Luebbert answers:

[This is] due to the fact that negotiations must appear the way they do in order to satisfy the [party] members whose orientations are still largely attuned to the vocal, symbolic, and ideological aspects characteristic of each respective political subculture. It is wrong to assume that because inter-party negotiations take a long time, much is being negotiated (1986: 52).

Therefore, the two views differ in terms of the extent to which they suggest that election pledges will be mentioned in the coalition agreement. It is, however, far from clear how many election pledges must be mentioned in the coalition agreement in order for one of the views to be vindicated.

Proponents of the sceptical view have also stated that "[v]ery often the easiest way to get agreement is to omit contentious matters altogether, [and] to stress minor ones where there is agreement" (Klingemann et al. 1994: 33). Here, a number of variables are mentioned: dissensus and consensus between parties, and the 'importance' of the election pledges. In relation to these variables, the two general views do lead to different expectations regarding the types of election pledges that are more likely to be mentioned or supported in

the coalition agreement. For example, the fifth hypothesis posits that parties attempt to resolve the issues on which they disagree. The sceptical view disputes this by suggesting that such issues are avoided, and that the 'negotiating' parties focus disproportionately on the issues on which there is a consensus between them. This contention will be tested empirically by investigating the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>7</sub>: Election pledges on which a consensus exists between the prospective coalition partners are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than pledges on which there is no such consensus.*

If, as is the case according to the sceptical view, minor matters are featured in the coalition agreement, there are two clear expectations. First, status quo pledges should, contrary to the above mentioned expectation, be featured disproportionately in the coalition agreements. Second, the sixth hypothesis, which states that salient pledges are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement, should not be supported empirically.

A particular variant of the sceptical view of the formulation of the coalition agreement is contained in the portfolio allocation model of coalition formation (Laver and Shepsle 1996). According to this model, parties will only participate in a coalition if they believe it to be credible in terms of policy. This means that each participating party must have a guarantee that the coalition agreement to which it lends its name is the one that will be followed in terms of government actions. This guarantee is said to be effected by the distribution of ministerial portfolios. It is assumed that cabinet ministers have a substantial amount of control over policy-making within the jurisdictions of their departments of government, and that they remain party politicians, in the sense that they attempt to realize their parties' preferred policies.

All of this results in the forecast, shared by each of those involved in building and maintaining a government, that government policy outputs in any given policy area are best predicted by looking at the position of the party in control of the portfolio with jurisdiction over the policy area concerned (Laver and Shepsle 1996: 42).

The clear implication of this statement, in combination with the above mentioned assumptions, is that a policy proposal supported in the coalition agreement will not be perceived to be credible unless a party that supported that proposal receives the relevant ministerial portfolio. Assuming that parties are only willing to sign up to coalition agreements that are credible:

*H<sub>8</sub>: Election pledges are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement if the party that made them receives ministerial responsibility for the relevant policy area.*

The above argument implies that the formation of the coalition agreement is subject to the distribution of ministerial portfolios. In other words, there may be real negotiations between parties on policy issues. However, these negotiations are structured by the division of policy areas into ministerial jurisdictions. It is therefore the distribution of ministerial portfolios, rather than the formulation of the coalition agreement itself, that is of primary importance to these policy negotiations. It is for this reason that this argument is incompatible with the view that the formulation of the agreement is an opportunity to influence the policy agenda of the government.

### 3 Research design

#### 3.1 Selected cases

The empirical focus of this research consists of the election pledges made by the four main Dutch parties in their election programmes for the 1986, 1989 and 1994 national parliamentary elections for the lower house (*Tweede Kamer*). These pledges were compared with the policy proposals supported in the coalition agreements signed by the prospective governing parties after these elections. This comparison gave particular attention to the level of correspondence between election pledges and government policy intentions in the area of socio-economic policy. The parties selected for analysis are the Labour Party (PvdA: *Partij van der Arbeid*), the Democrats 66 (D66: *Democraten 66*), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA: *Christen Democratisch Appel*), and the Liberal Party (VVD: *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*). These parties were selected because they are generally considered to be the ones with 'governing potential'. That is to say, some combination of these four parties is expected to form the governing coalition. At least as far as the elections studied here are concerned, the ideological positions of these parties are generally summarized on a left-right dimension in the following order: PvdA-D66-CDA-VVD (Van der Eijk & Niemöller 1983; Pennings & Keman 1993; Laver 1995; Van der Brug 1998). Together, these parties received an average of 88 per cent of the votes cast at these elections. After the 1986 election, the CDA/VVD coalition that had governed since 1982 remained in office. Like its predecessor, this cabinet attempted to curb the growth of the large public sector. The early termination of the CDA/VVD cabinet in 1989, a year before the next regularly scheduled election, was precipitated by a disagreement between the parliamentary Liberal Party and the government on taxation policy. A coalition consisting of the CDA and PvdA was formed after the 1989 election. This cabinet was plagued by a sharp downturn in the economy and rising numbers of welfare recipients that led to painful retrenchments in social security programmes. Coupled with the

fact that the PvdA entered the coalition after a long period in the opposition, this cabinet period was a trying one for the PvdA in particular. After the 1994 election, the so-called purple coalition, consisting of the PvdA, D66 and VVD, was formed. This meant that, for the first time since 1917, the governing coalition did not contain a Christian Democratic party (the CDA or one of its predecessors).

### 3.2 Measurement of concepts

Pledges are defined as statements in which parties express unequivocal support for proposed government policy actions that are testable. Such proposals may include, for example, the reduction of a particular rate or type of taxation, or certain adjustments to welfare benefit programmes. The inclusion of a 'testability' requirement is important for obtaining reliable measurements of the enactment of election pledges: not a research question addressed in this article. The reliability of the measurements of election pledges was tested and found to be strong.<sup>1</sup>

The measurements of five of the other concepts referred to in the previous section require some explication: consensus, dissension, support and rejection in the coalition agreement, and saliency. The pledges from each manifesto were compared with those found in each of the manifestos of the other parties for the same election year. This comparison identified whether each pledge was 'consensually', 'dissensually' or 'not' related to one or more pledges from the other manifestos. Pledges that are consensually or dissensually related to each other refer to the same policy issues. Consensually related pledges proposed the same or similar policy actions. Pledges were categorized as consensually related if the enactment of one pledge would mean, by definition, that another pledge would have to be described as at least partially enacted. This definition accords with the definition of 'bipartisan' pledges provided by Pomper and Lederman, as pledges on the same specific subject on which "the parties were essentially in agreement" (Pomper & Lederman 1980: 240). Dissensually related pledges refer to alternative courses of action on the same issue. A common example of a dissensual relation is the situation in which one party expresses its support for the status quo on a particular policy issue, while another proposes a policy change. Again, this accords with Pomper and Lederman's definition of 'conflicting pledges' as policy statements on the same specific subjects on which "the parties were basically opposed" (ibid.).

The coalition agreements of 1986, 1989 and 1994 were analysed using the same method as that used to identify pledges in the election programmes. The method used to identify whether or not a pledge was 'supported', 'rejected' or 'not mentioned' in the agreement was the same as that used to identify whether

a pledge was 'consensually', 'dissensually' or 'not' related to a pledge in the election programme of one of the other parties. Policy intentions of the prospective coalition which, if enacted, would mean that an election pledge would have to be described as at least partially enacted, were coded as 'support' for that pledge.

The first hypothesis refers to the saliency parties associate with the policy themes within which they make pledges. Data concerning this concept of thematic saliency were collected under the auspices of the Manifestoes Research Group.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, each sentence (or 'quasi sentence') in each election programme is associated with one of 54 coding categories, each representing a particular policy theme. The percentage of the total amount of text in an election programme that was devoted to a particular policy theme indicates the level of saliency the party associated with that policy theme. The sixth hypothesis refers to saliency at the level of the specific issues on which parties make pledges. In order to test this hypothesis, a measurement of saliency at the level of individual pledges is required, rather than, for example, the levels of saliency parties attach to the policy areas or themes within which they make several pledges. The measure selected for analysis was that of 'repetition'. Pledges on issues that were featured in parties' previous election programmes are more salient to them than pledges not featured in previous election programmes. Such repetition is evidence of the parties' long standing concern with the specific issues in question.<sup>3</sup> For each of the pledges found in the 1989 election programmes, it was established whether or not the 1986 programme of the same party contained an election pledge on the same issue. Similarly, for each of the pledges found in the 1994 election programmes, it was established whether or not the 1986 and 1989 programmes of the same party contained at least one specific pledge on the same issue.

### 3.3 Method of analysis

The data on election pledges were first collected and organized on the basis of the twelve separate election programmes examined in this study. The cases in each of these twelve datasets were the election pledges found in the manifesto concerned. When investigating the distributions of and the relationships between the election pledges themselves, we are concerned primarily with these datasets. When investigating the conditions under which pledges are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreements, however, a more integrated way of organizing the data is required. Three integrated datasets were constructed: a separate dataset for the 1986, 1989, and 1994 election pledges. The integration of the data on pledges made by different parties had to take account of the existence of directly related election pledges. This means

that there are deterministic interdependencies between the support in the coalition agreement for pledges contained in different manifestos. For example, support in the agreement for the PvdA's pledge to reduce the basic rate of taxation means, by definition, that the CDA's pledge to do so is also supported. Similarly, the support for a pledge to maintain the present level of welfare benefit entitlements means, by definition, that a pledge to reduce them is rejected. The best solution is to organize the data on the basis of the specific issues on which the pledges are made, rather than the pledges themselves. Each of the integrated datasets has the structure illustrated in Table 1. There are two so-called design variables for each party, indicating whether or not the party made a pledge to maintain the status quo on the issue, or to take a policy action on the issue. Parties that did not feature the issue at all in their manifesto receive a zero in both of these design variables. In the first case illustrated in Table 1, D66 and VVD pledged to liberalize the shop closing law, while the CDA opposed these initiatives, insisting that the present law would be maintained. The PvdA did not make a pledge on this issue. The variable 'Coalition Agreement' indicates that a policy action was supported in the agreement that was at least partially congruent with the pledges of D66 and the VVD. The second case in Table 1 shows that the PvdA and D66 both supported a reduction of the basic rate of income tax: pledges that were both supported in the subsequent agreement. The integrated datasets do not contain a category for pledges that were rejected explicitly in the agreement. In addition, support for status quo pledges is not represented in these datasets. These are acceptable limitations of this organization of the data because, as will be shown, such references to election pledges are rare occurrences.

The advantage of this organization of the data is that it allows the majority of dissensually related pledges to be included in the multivariate analyses. The dissensually related pledges that can be represented in these datasets can be described as follows: at least one party supports the maintenance of the status

Table 1 Illustration of the structure of the integrated datasets

Issue	PvdA		D66		CDA		VVD		Coalition agreement
	on SQ	on change	on SQ	on change	on SQ	on change	on SQ	on change	
Liberalization of shop closing law	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Reduction of basic rate of income tax	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

quo on a specific issue, while one or more parties propose a similar policy change on the issue. The subset of dissensually related pledges in which parties support at least two alternative courses of *action* cannot be represented in this data structure. This subset constitutes a minority of the dissensually related pledges. For example, in the 1994 manifestos, there were four issues on which there was dissension between the parties that could not be represented in the integrated dataset. Ten pledges were made on these four issues. In the same manifestos, there were thirteen issues on which two or more parties took clearly different positions, in the sense that one or more parties supported the status quo, while one or more parties supported a similar policy change. A total of 36 pledges were made on these thirteen issues. These were represented in the integrated dataset. Given the relatively small numbers of pledges that had to be excluded from the multivariate analyses, this is unlikely to bias the results.<sup>4</sup>

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Election pledges

Information regarding the first hypothesis, on the distribution of election pledges, is contained in Table 2. The figures in this table refer to the correlations between the percentages of textual space devoted to each policy theme in each manifesto, and the numbers of pledges made within each of these policy themes. In accordance with the first hypothesis, the results show clearly that parties make more pledges in policy themes they present as being particularly salient. The claim that pledges are confined to peripheral policy areas could hardly be falsified more convincingly. When considering

Table 2 Distribution of election pledges and saliency of policy themes

Year	Labour Party (PvdA)	Democrats 66 (D66)	Christian Democrats (CDA)	Liberal Party (VVD)
1986	.79 (43)	.90 (42)	.66 (43)	.77 (46)
1989	.79 (40)	.84 (41)	.87 (44)	.76 (41)
1994	.76 (44)	.86 (45)	.69 (44)	.66 (38)

All p-values < 0.001

Pearson correlation coefficients measuring the relationships between the saliency of policy themes in election programmes and the numbers of pledges made within each of these themes (N = number of policy themes mentioned in each manifesto). Saliency of policy themes measured by the percentages of textual space devoted to the policy themes contained in the Manifestoes Research Group's coding framework.

the relationships between the saliency of policy themes and the distribution of policy pledges, it should be kept in mind that thematic saliency is measured by textual space. Pledges are made almost in direct relation to the amount of textual space devoted to related topics. It is not the case that more salient themes are more densely populated with policy pledges than less salient themes. This fact by no means weakens the falsification of the critics' claim or the empirical support for the first hypothesis. Election pledges are concentrated in policy themes that parties present as being particularly important.

An investigation of the substance of the specific policy issues on which election pledges were made is also consistent with the proposition that pledges are an important element of electoral discourse. Pledges were made, for example, on the issue of the extent to which welfare benefits should be increased annually in line with increases in employees' salaries. The Labour Party supported the application of the coupling between welfare benefits and incomes in all three of the election programmes studied. The other parties supported a more limited application of the coupling mechanism. For example, in two of its election programmes, 1986 and 1994, the Liberal Party stated that the coupling should be frozen, and even proposed radical cuts in benefits. In addition, all parties made specific policy commitments on income taxation. While a reduction of the tax burden on incomes is a priority for all four of the main Dutch parties, there were differences between the specific policy measures they supported. Predictably, the Labour Party pledged support for the provision of tax breaks for low income earners, while the other parties also proposed tax breaks for middle and high incomes. Other specific issues on which election pledges were made include the liberalization of shop closing hours, student finance, housing subsidies, and the creation of subsidized employment places in the collective sector. Pledges refer to policy proposals that, if enacted, would be expected to influence the lives of citizens.

The second hypothesis posited that *a high proportion of election pledges made by any party is not related directly to pledges made by other parties*. Table 3 contains the percentages of the total numbers of pledges found in each election programme that were unrelated, either in a positive or negative way, to the pledges found in the election programme of each other party for the same year. The table reveals that, on average, 72 per cent of the pledges contained in each of the manifestos was unrelated to the pledges made by each of the other parties considered separately. Even in a coalition system, where parties are aware that if they enter government office after the election at least one of their competitors will become their coalition partner, the vast majority of their specific policy proposals are unrelated to those made by other parties.

There is a particularly noteworthy relationship between the saliency associated with pledges and the presence of relationships between pledges. Pledges on issues perceived to be particularly salient are generally more likely

Table 3 Parties 'talking past' each other in the Netherlands

1986	PvdA (261)	D66 (151)	CDA (164)	VVD (193)
PvdA	-	56%	69%	72%
D66	74%	-	75%	79%
CDA	81%	73%	-	77%
VVD	81%	74%	70%	-
1989	PvdA (158)	D66 (194)	CDA (184)	VVD (135)
PvdA	-	70%	72%	72%
D66	65%	-	74%	64%
CDA	72%	75%	-	68%
VVD	80%	75%	77%	-
1994	PvdA (121)	D66 (228)	CDA (145)	VVD (97)
PvdA	-	75%	79%	63%
D66	54%	-	68%	50%
CDA	77%	80%	-	65%
VVD	74%	80%	75%	-

Percentages of total pledges in the manifesto of the column party that were unrelated to pledges contained in the manifesto of the row party (total number of pledges in manifesto).

to be related directly to pledges made by other parties. This positive relationship between saliency and relatedness is evident in the following two findings. First, there is a Pearson correlation coefficient of .62 ( $N=36$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) between the number of pledges contained in each of the twelve election programmes and the percentages of these totals that were unrelated to each of the other three manifestos for the same year. This stands to reason. A party that confines itself to a smaller number of election pledges is likely to focus on those issues that are perceived to be particularly urgent. These are issues that all parties will feel compelled to address in some way or other. By contrast, a party that supports a larger number of concrete policy proposals in its election programme is likely to address a larger number of issues that are considered to be important by a narrower range of societal interests. As a result, other parties will not feel obliged to address these issues. Second, pledges on issues of long standing concern to the party that made them are more likely to be related directly to pledges made by other parties than pledges on issues that feature in a party's election programme for the first time.<sup>7</sup> The implication of the finding that related pledges are generally more salient is that this subset of pledges deserves special attention.

Table 4 contains information on the basis of which the third hypothesis can be tested. This hypothesis posited that the political distances between parties would be reflected in the relative amounts of consensus and dissensus between

them, as evident in the relationships between their election pledges. Of the total number of related pledges made by each pair of parties, the percentages that were consensually related were calculated. These figures clearly reflect the positioning of the four main parties on the left-right policy dimension during the time period considered in this study. Regarding the related pledges contained in each set of election programmes, there is most consensus between the PvdA and the D66, and *relatively speaking* the least amount of consensus between the PvdA and the VVD. These results support the hypothesis.

Table 4 Consensus between parties in the Netherlands (all pledges)

	PvdA	D66	CDA
1986			
D66	92% (135)	-	-
CDA	73% (100)	87% (82)	-
VVD	64% (103)	80% (80)	82% (94)
1989			
D66	91% (115)	-	-
CDA	70% (96)	78% (97)	-
VVD	64% (69)	74% (96)	81% (85)
1994			
D66	85% (111)	-	-
CDA	79% (58)	80% (93)	-
VVD	75% (67)	78% (94)	87% (70)

Percentages of related pledges that were consensually related, calculated for each pair of parties (N = Number of pledges made by the column party that were related to pledges made by the row party, plus the number of pledges made by the row party that were related to pledges made by the column party).

Broadly, the same conclusions can be drawn from Table 5, which contains the same percentages as Table 4, but this time confined to related pledges on socio-economic policy issues. There are, however, a number of noteworthy differences. There is less consensus between each pair of parties on the subset of socio-economic issues than on the complete set of issues contained in the election programmes. Apparently, socio-economic policy issues are the ones with which parties distinguish themselves from each other most sharply. For the most part, the relative percentages of agreement correspond to the parties' positioning on the left-right dimension. There are two exceptions. First, in their 1986 election programmes, the D66 and VVD had relatively more consensually related pledges than the CDA and VVD. Second, in their 1994 programmes, the PvdA and VVD had a slightly higher percentage of consen-

sually related pledges than the PvdA and CDA. Despite these differences, the figures on socio-economic policy issues also reveal a reduction in the differences between the relative amounts of agreement between each pair of parties. At the same time, the relative amount of agreement between the PvdA and VVD increased substantially in 1994.

Table 5 Consensus between Dutch parties on socio-economic policy issues

	PvdA	D66	CDA
1986			
D66	88% (64)	-	-
CDA	73% (55)	89% (47)	-
VVD	51% (70)	87% (52)	84% (57)
1989			
D66	84% (51)	-	-
CDA	59% (51)	66% (44)	-
VVD	42% (31)	62% (45)	74% (54)
1994			
D66	80% (61)	-	-
CDA	64% (28)	80% (54)	-
VVD	65% (37)	78% (54)	83% (42)

Percentages of related pledges on socio-economic issues that were consensually related for each pair of parties (N = Number of socio-economic pledges made by the column party that were related to pledges made by the row party, plus the number of socio-economic pledges made by the row party that were related to pledges made by the column party).

#### 4.2 Governments' policy intentions

Table 6 contains the percentages and numbers of election pledges that were explicitly supported, rejected or simply not referred to in each of the three coalition agreements considered in this study. The three documents contain comprehensive and detailed specifications of the coalition's policy intentions. The absolute numbers of manifesto pledges that were referred to explicitly in the agreements range from 29 (the number made by D66 in 1996) to 57 (the number made by the same party in 1994). Therefore, it would be quite inaccurate to contend that the formulation of the coalition agreement is not concerned with policy commitments. Table 6 shows that most explicit references to election pledges in the agreements are positive ones. It is for this reason that most of the hypotheses on the congruence between election pledges and government intentions were phrased in terms of 'support' in the agreement.

Table 6 Election pledges and coalition agreements

	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
1986				
Supported in agreement	8% (21)	16% (24)	16% (27)	24% (47)
Rejected in agreement	6% (15)	3% (5)	2% (3)	2% (4)
Not mentioned	86% (225)	81% (122)	73% (134)	74% (142)
Total in manifesto	261	151	164	193
1989	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
Supported in agreement	27% (43)	19% (37)	24% (45)	18% (24)
Rejected in agreement	1% (2)	3% (6)	0% (0)	5% (7)
Not mentioned in agreement	72% (113)	78% (151)	76% (139)	77% (104)
Total in manifesto	158	194	184	135
1994	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
Supported in agreement	31% (38)	23% (53)	21% (31)	38% (37)
Rejected in agreement	0% (0)	2% (4)	3% (5)	4% (4)
Not mentioned in agreement	69% (83)	75% (171)	75% (109)	58% (56)
Total	121	228	145	97

Explicit references to election pledges in the coalition agreements of 1986, 1989 and 1994. Percentages of total pledges in manifestos (numbers of pledges). Prospective coalition partners in boldface.

The fourth hypothesis posited was: *election pledges of the prospective coalition partners are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than those of parties not involved in the negotiations*. Indeed, in terms of both the raw numbers of manifesto pledges as well as the percentages of pledges in each manifesto, Table 6 shows that significantly more of the negotiating parties' pledges were supported in the agreements. On average, 26 per cent of the election pledges made by negotiating parties were supported in the coalition agreement; this compares to an average of 16 per cent of the pledges made by parties that were not involved in the coalition negotiations after the elections.

Table 7 contains the same type of information as Table 6, but this time the analysis is restricted to socio-economic policy pledges. This information is presented for two reasons. First, this subset of pledges is shown to refer to policy issues with which the main parties distinguished themselves from each other more sharply. Second, the multivariate tests of the hypotheses are based on the analyses of the integrated datasets that contain information on socio-economic pledges only. The figures in Table 7 lead to the same conclusions regarding the fourth hypothesis as those in Table 6. Prospective governing parties were able to secure explicit support in the agreements for relatively more of their pledges than prospective opposition parties.

Table 7 Socio-economic election pledges and coalition intentions

	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
1986				
Supported in agreement	6% (7)	16% (11)	19% (16)	26% (28)
Rejected in agreement	7% (8)	6% (4)	0% (0)	2% (2)
Not mentioned	87% (98)	78% (52)	81% (68)	72% (79)
Total in manifesto	113	67	84	109
1989	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
Supported in agreement	30% (23)	25% (19)	27% (23)	15% (13)
Rejected in agreement	3% (2)	5% (4)	0% (0)	6% (5)
Not mentioned in agreement	67% (51)	70% (53)	73% (63)	79% (67)
Total in manifesto	76	76	86	85
1994	<b>PvdA</b>	<b>D66</b>	<b>CDA</b>	<b>VVD</b>
Supported in agreement	36% (20)	30% (33)	20% (18)	44% (24)
Rejected in agreement	0% (0)	2% (2)	4% (4)	7% (4)
Not mentioned in agreement	64% (36)	68% (74)	75% (67)	48% (26)
Total	56	109	89	54

Explicit references to election pledges on socio-economic policy issues in the coalition agreements of 1986, 1989 and 1994. Percentages of total socio-economic pledges in manifestos (numbers of pledges). Prospective coalition partners in boldface.

So far, the fourth hypothesis has been tested using the information contained in Tables 6 and 7 on the aggregate levels of congruence between election programmes and coalition agreements. This hypothesis was also tested at the level of the specific issues on which pledges were made, using the integrated datasets described in the previous section. Election pledges from separate manifestos for the same election were treated as a single case if they were related directly to each other. The multivariate analysis of these datasets, reported in Table 8, enables us to ascertain whether or not negotiating parties' pledges were more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement, while controlling for the effects of the other variables, such as consensus between parties and the saliency associated with their pledges. Each of the (exponentiated) coefficients in the row labelled 'Negotiator' indicates that, after controlling for the effects of other variables, the pledges of the negotiating parties are indeed more likely to be supported in the subsequent coalition agreement than those made by parties not involved directly in the negotiations. For example, the figure in the row labelled 'Negotiator' in the column labelled '1986' indicates that the election pledges made by the negotiating parties in 1986 (CDA and VVD) were 3.6 times more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement of 1986, than pledges made by the non-negotiating parties (PvdA and D66). This relationship

Table 8 Support for pledges in the coalition agreements

	1986	1989	1994
Constant (B)	-3.7***	-3.5***	-2.4***
Negotiator	3.6*	3.1*	3.3**
Ministry	1.9	2.2	0.9
Consensus: among negotiators	4.6**	1.1	1.6
Consensus: between negotiators and non-negotiators	1.9	2.0	3.5***
Consensus: among non-negotiators	0.7	2.4***	-
Dissensus	2.6	0.5	0.8
Saliency: repetition	-	2.7**	1.0
GM	41.9 (p=0,00)	49.2 (p=0,00)	26.6 (p=0,00)
R <sup>2</sup> L	0.23	0.24	0.13
N	248	226	203

Logistic regression analyses of support for election pledges in the coalition agreements. With the exception of the constant terms, the figures refer to Exp(B), and can be read as odds ratios. \*: P < 0.10; \*\*: P < 0.05; \*\*\*: P < 0.01.

is found in the analysis of each of the three datasets.

In the first part of this section, it was shown that there are relatively few cases of direct dissension between parties evident in the relationships between their election pledges. Nevertheless, direct dissension was shown to be an important element of election programmes, in the sense that the relative numbers of dissensually related pledges reflected the political distances between them. It was also hypothesized that these policy statements are of particular importance in the context of the policy negotiations between parties. In particular, the fifth hypothesis posited that *election pledges on which the prospective coalition parties disagree are more likely to be mentioned in the coalition agreement than pledges on which they do not disagree*. The figures contained in Table 9 show that dissensually related pledges are generally more likely to be referred to explicitly in the subsequent coalition agreement than those on which only one of the prospective coalition partners took a stance. With regard to the 1989 and 1994 election pledges, those that were the subject of disagreement among the coalition partners had about the same likelihood of being referred to in the coalition agreement as pledges that were the subject of consensus between them. It is not the case, as is suggested by the sceptical view of coalition formation, that dissensually related pledges are avoided conspicuously in the coalition agreements.

As described in the previous section, the integrated datasets include the majority, although not all, of the dissensually related pledges. The subset of dissensually related pledges that are included consist of those whereby at least

Table 9 Explicit references to negotiating parties' pledges in coalition agreements by the type of relation between these pledges and those of other negotiating parties.

	1986		1989		1994		
	CDA	VVD	PvdA	CDA	PvdA	D66	VVD
	(164)	(193)	(158)	(184)	(121)	(228)	(97)
Dissensus with prospective coalition partner(s)	11% (9)	25% (8)	43% (14)	67% (15)	50% (12)	44% (16)	62% (13)
No relation with prospective coalition partner(s)	9% (115)	20% (148)	22% (113)	15% (133)	15% (60)	16% (155)	26% (43)
Consensus with prospective coalition partner(s)	48% (40)	54% (37)	45% (31)	42% (36)	47% (49)	44% (57)	54% (41)

Percentages of negotiating parties' pledges that were referred to in the coalition agreement they signed up to, by the type of relationship that these pledges had with pledges of the negotiating partner or partners (N = numbers of pledges from which percentages are taken).

one party supported a continuation of the status quo on a policy issue (i.e., no policy action), while at least one other party pledged support for a policy change on the same issue. The integrated datasets analysed in Table 8 contain a total of 38 issues on which there is this form of dissension between parties; there were fourteen such issues in 1986, eleven in 1989, and thirteen in 1994. Previous studies have found that there is a bias toward the status quo, in the sense that status quo pledges are more likely to be congruent with subsequent government policy than action pledges (see, for example, Pomper and Lederman 1980; Royed 1996). Accordingly, it might be expected that there is a bias toward the status quo when this form of dissension occurs. This leads to the expectation that pledges to take a particular policy action that are dissensually related to status quo pledges are less likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than other 'action pledges'. The statistics in the row labelled 'Dissensus' in Table 8 allow this expectation to be tested. The first statistic in this row, 2.6, indicates that pledges from the 1986 election programmes to take policy actions were 2.6 times *more* likely to be supported in the subsequent coalition agreement if they were dissensually related to status quo pledges than if they were not (not significant). The other two statistics are in the expected direction (less than 1.0), but neither is statistically significant. Therefore, on the basis of the limited evidence available, it cannot be said that there is a bias toward the status quo when this type of dissension between parties occurs. Furthermore, status quo pledges are not featured prominently in the coalition agreements.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with the sixth hypothesis, the evidence supports the proposition that, in general, pledges to which the parties attach more saliency are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement. Two findings support this hypothesis. The first is based on the argument that election programmes containing fewer pledges concentrate on issues to which the parties attach higher levels of saliency. Therefore, a negative correlation between the total numbers of pledges in each programme, and the percentages of pledges from each programme that were supported in the subsequent coalition agreement, is to be expected. This is indeed the case: there is a strong negative correlation between these two variables (Pearson  $r = -.59$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ;  $N = 12$ ). The second finding that supports this hypothesis consists of the two multivariate tests of the hypothesis taken together. These tests, the results of which are reported in the row labelled 'Saliency' in Table 8, are based on the 'repetition' indicator of saliency. Pledges on issues featured in previous election programmes were found to be more salient to the parties that made them. The first figure in this row concerns the election pledges made in 1989. This figure indicates that pledges on issues to which the parties attached a relatively higher level of saliency were 2.7 times more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than pledges on issues to which they attached a lower level of saliency ( $p = 0.02$ ). The second figure in this row pertains to the election pledges made in the 1994 election programmes. This figure does not indicate the presence of a relationship. What conclusion should be drawn regarding the hypothesis in question? A Bonferroni based procedure that can be applied in such situations is the so-called 'ensemble adjustment of  $p$  method' (Rosenthal 1991: 30). Following this procedure, the most significant  $p$ -value in a set of correlated tests is multiplied by the number of tests of the hypothesis. In this case, the probability that the significant relationship could have been obtained if the null hypothesis of no relation had been true is ( $0.02 * 2 =$ ) 0.04. Therefore, taken together the results support the hypothesis.

The seventh hypothesis was said to be associated with the sceptical view of the coalition formation: *election pledges on which there is a consensus between the prospective coalition partners are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement than pledges on which there is no such consensus*. Consensus among prospective coalition parties is one of the three types of consensus that can be distinguished in this study. The other two are consensus between prospective governing and opposition parties, and consensus among prospective opposition parties. In order to estimate the effect of one of these types of consensus, it is necessary to control for the effects of the other two. Therefore, three 'Consensus' variables, corresponding to these three types of consensus, were included in the analyses presented in Table 8. An examination of the statistics in the row labelled 'Consensus: among negotiators' enables the above hypothesis to be tested. All three of the (exponentiated) coefficients indicate

that pledges on which there is a consensus among the negotiating parties are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement. However, only one of these is statistically significant: that is the coefficient in the analysis of the 1986 pledges. It indicates that pledges on which a consensus existed among the negotiating parties were 4.6 times more likely to be supported than other pledges ( $p = 0.01$ ), after controlling for the effects of other variables. Application of the Bonferroni procedure, as described above, indicates that, taken together, the results support the above hypothesis.

It is noteworthy that pledges on which there is a consensus with opposition parties are also more likely to be supported in the coalition agreements. Regarding consensus between negotiating and non-negotiating parties, the three coefficients indicate that this type of consensus increases the likelihood of support. Only one of these, that pertaining to the 1994 election pledges, is statistically significant. Election pledges made in 1994 were 3.5 times more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement if they were the subject of consensus between at least one of the negotiating parties and the CDA, than pledges that were not ( $p = 0.008$ ). Perhaps more surprisingly, consensus among parties not involved in the negotiations also had, overall, a positive and significant effect on the support for pledges in the coalition agreement. The finding that consensus with prospective opposition parties has a significant effect suggests that the authors of coalition agreements are intent on formulating documents that will meet with the approval of a broad set of stakeholders. Not only pledges made by the negotiating parties themselves are featured, but also those on which there is a consensus between the representatives of other societal groups.

The eighth and final hypothesis concerns the distribution of ministerial portfolios: *election pledges are more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement if the party that made them receives ministerial responsibility for the relevant policy area*. The analyses do not support this hypothesis. This can be seen by examining the figures in the row labelled 'Ministry' in Table 8. None of these are significant. This implies that the distribution of ministerial portfolios is not a mechanism of cabinet governance through which coalition agreements become 'credible' documents. If the coalition agreements could only be guaranteed by the distribution of ministerial portfolios, then parties would be restricted severely in the combinations of policy initiatives they could support credibly. Therefore, the evidence suggests that parties have more freedom and opportunity to reach agreements with prospective coalition parties than is suggested by the portfolio allocation model.

## 5 Conclusion

The findings reported in this article support the proposition that election pledges constitute an important element of political discourse. Election programmes published by the four main Dutch parties were shown to contain large numbers of election pledges. Moreover, contrary to some existing claims, election pledges are concentrated in policy themes that parties present as being of the utmost importance. In addition, the specific issues on which parties make pledges are diverse and societally relevant. Furthermore, the relative amounts of consensus between parties, as evident in the relationships between their pledges on the same specific issues, were found to reflect the relative ideological distances between them. One implication of this finding is that voters who are aware of the ideological differences between parties possess information from which the relative amounts of consensus between parties on concrete policy proposals can be derived accurately. Research on electoral behaviour and voters' perceptions has shown that voters rely on ideology as a cognitive device when deciding how to vote and that, on the whole, voters' perceptions of parties' ideological positions are accurate (Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983; Van der Brug 1998). It was also argued that these findings on the importance of election pledges are consistent with the saliency theory of party competition, in which the emphasis of policy themes is said to be the central mechanism through which parties express their policy preferences. Without election pledges, however, such emphases are empty. In short, there is little in the argument that pledges are cheap, in the sense that they are confined to peripheral policy areas or to specific issues that are societally trivial.

It was shown, in accordance with the conventional wisdom in the Netherlands, that coalition formation involves real negotiations on policy options. In particular, it was found that election pledges on issues on which the prospective coalition partners disagreed were more likely to be referred to in the agreements than pledges on issues referred to by one of the negotiating parties only. Contrary to the sceptical view of coalition formation, parties do not avoid such potentially divisive issues. In addition, there is a modestly strong, positive relationship between the saliency associated with the pledges by the parties, and the likelihood of support for these pledges in the coalition agreement. In other words, pledges to which parties attach relatively higher levels of saliency are more likely to be supported in the agreement. Finally, a hypothesis derived from a variant of the sceptical view, the portfolio allocation model of coalition formation (Laver and Shepsle 1996), was rejected. The rejection of this hypothesis accords with the conventional wisdom regarding coalition formation in the Netherlands, where the distribution of ministerial portfolios occurs after the formulation of the policy document containing the coalition's policy intentions. These findings suggest that coalition agreements have charac-

teristics associated with the products of real policy negotiations.

Although these findings support the proposition that the coalition agreements are the products of real negotiations, certain elements of the sceptical view did receive empirical support in the analysis of these documents. It was found that pledges were more likely to be supported in the coalition agreement if they were supported by more than one of the prospective coalition parties, than if supported by one prospective coalition party only. In addition, it was found that by far the most common type of reference to election pledges in the agreements was that of 'support', rather than 'rejection'. Statements that are clearly in conflict with parties' policy proposals are avoided in coalition agreements. However, contrary to the sceptical view, this bias toward positive references to pledges on which there was already a consensus did not lead to the exclusion of pledges on issues that are relatively more salient to the parties, and on which they disagreed with each other directly.

The research presented in this article forms part of a larger project in which the enactment of election pledges is addressed (Thomson 1999). There are two particularly noteworthy differences between the variables that were found to influence the likelihood of support for pledges in the coalition agreements, and those that were found to influence the likelihood of pledge enactment. Firstly, while the distribution of ministerial portfolios does not affect the likelihood of support for pledges in the coalition agreement as hypothesized, it does influence the enactment of pledges. The second difference is that while the level of saliency that parties attach to their pledges has an effect on the likelihood of support for pledges in the coalition agreement, this does not affect the enactment of pledges. These differences also suggest that the formulation of the coalition agreement offers party representatives a unique opportunity to place their policy demands on the government's agenda. The formulation of the coalition agreement and government policy-making involve quite distinct decision-making situations. The key difference between these situations concerns the sets of stakeholders involved in these decisions. During the formulation of the agreements, the stakeholders directly involved in the negotiations are confined primarily to the elites of the negotiating political parties. Undoubtedly, these actors will attempt to represent and anticipate the demands of other stakeholders when formulating the agreements. However, the closed negotiations, in which the agreements are formulated, are not as receptive to influence attempts by outside stakeholders as are, for example, ministerial departments when policies are being formulated during governing periods. Furthermore, at the stage of the formulation of the agreement, the ministerial posts have, at least formally, yet to be allocated. This means that government ministers do not exert influence on the agreement, as they may do on government decisions. One of the consequences of these differences is that parties are able to impose their own preferred

priorities on governments' policy intentions, as set out in the agreements, to a greater extent than on governments' policy actions.

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### Notes

1. The definition used here is similar to that employed by Terry Royed (1996). An inter-coder reliability test of the identification of pledges in the Dutch election programmes resulted in a reliability measure of 88 per cent (N = 226).
2. I am grateful to Paul Pennings of the Free University of Amsterdam for applying the MRG framework to these manifestos and making the data available.
3. The validity of this measure of saliency, along with several other candidate measures, was tested by checking the accuracy of the prediction of the explicit prioritization of pledges contained in the vvd's 1994 election programme. As will be discussed later in the text, the number of pledges contained in each election programme was also found to be a valid indicator of saliency; the more pledges a party makes, the less saliency it associates, on average, with each of its pledges.
4. Five issues (sixteen pledges) featured in the 1989 election programmes were excluded due to the fact that the dissensually related pledges made on these issues could not be represented in this dataset. Eleven issues (thirty pledges) featured in the 1989 election programmes, on which the parties made dissensually related action pledges, were included in the integrated dataset. With regard to the 1986 election pledges, five issues (thirteen pledges) were excluded for this reason. Fourteen issues from the 1986 programmes, on which thirty-eight dissensually related action pledges were made, were included in the integrated dataset. Note that the numbers of issues on which dissensually related action pledges were made are too small to warrant the creation of a dependent variable with three values. Instead, these dissensually related action pledges were analysed qualitatively (Thomson 1999).
5. This finding is supported by significant bivariate odds ratios; these revealed that pledges on issues featured in previous election programmes were significantly more likely to relate directly to at least one of the pledges made by another party at the same election.
6. The support for status quo pledges in the coalition agreements was investigated on the basis of the separate datasets: one for each election programme. Few explicit references to status quo pledges were found in the agreements.

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## Women's Right of Choice?! A Reflection on Women's Rights, Cultural Toleration and Public Morality

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### Abstract

Immigration has given rise to a debate in political philosophy about the extent to which a Western liberal state can accommodate the cultural claims of minority groups. Some cultural traditions of minority groups seem to violate some of their members' civil rights and liberties that liberal democracies are supposed to protect. In those cases, cultural diversification can lead to deep controversies. In 1997, a debate took place in the Netherlands that appears to be about such a case. In the debate about sex selective abortion, it was assumed that certain cultural minorities have a cultural preference for sons and that sex selective abortions may be wished on that ground. The question that arises is whether this cultural preference should be respected. This article presents an analysis of the debate, raising questions about women's rights, cultural toleration and public morality. It discusses how a diversity-based and an autonomy-based approach to toleration could balance these different values. In conclusion it is argued that although sex selective abortion is morally wrong, access to abortion should not be restricted.

### 1 Introduction

In 1997 a debate took place in the Netherlands about sex selective abortion for non-medical reasons. Sex selective abortion involves identification of the sex of the fetus using prenatal diagnosis, with abortion of the fetus if it is of the undesired sex. The overture to the discussion was a television programme implying that abortion is allowed far too easily in the Netherlands. Two abortion practitioners stated during the programme that they refrained from any moral judgement and accepted any motive underlying a woman's wish for an abortion. Moreover, if a woman chose to have an abortion purely on grounds of the sex of the fetus, this was not a reason for the doctors to refuse. The debate was given an extra impulse when the Minister of Health, Els Borst, intervened with a statement which made it clear that she considered sex selective abortion permissible in the Netherlands. The public debate then concentrated on the Minister's statement.

This paper presents an analysis of the debate, in which the questions of