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Boekbespreking van: Stemmen in Stroomland: de verkiezingen nader bekeken

Kolk, H. van der

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Book Review

Kramer, P., Van der Maas, T., Ornstein, L. *Stemmen in Stroomland: de verkiezingen nader bekeken (Voting in the Country of Currents: the elections closely examined)* SDU Uitgevers, Den Haag.

Not only political scientists reflect upon campaigning and elections. All of those who have participated in an election campaign consider now and then what has happened and the things they have done to make it happen. Sometimes, such reflection gives rise to a book that is at least more readable than many scientific campaigning studies. The book *Primary Colors*, for example, is more of a pleasure to read than many scientific books about presidential elections. So with curiosity I started to read *Voting in the Country of Currents* about the Dutch elections. According to the introduction, this book aims at "giving a more lasting contribution to record the start, the events and the effects of the elections in the Netherlands" (p. 7). It is written by both insiders and outsiders.

Although some articles and books have been written by participants in the Netherlands in the past few decades, the number of Dutch publications dedicated to electoral campaigns written by insiders is rather small. The simplest explanation for this omission is that campaigning until the 1960s was like setting up a census. In the pillarized Dutch society, the main thing political parties had to do was to stimulate their adherents to vote. And because voting, or at least showing up at the polling station, was compulsory, even this was only a minor task. However, due to depillarization and the accompanying increase in the number of 'floating voters' in the Netherlands, campaigns have probably become more important in recent years. For this reason, it is a good thing that campaigners and journalists have published a book reflecting upon the 1998 campaign for both community council elections and Second Chamber elections.

The book, however, is not very well well-composed. *Voting in the Country of Currents* is an extremely diverse collection of impressions, columns and scientific articles about the 1998 elections and the preceding campaign. The extreme diversity of the book is puzzling: it is about almost anything directly or remotely related to campaigning and elections. It includes impressions from campaigners; a round-table discussion of journalists; an article about the activities of a polling bureau; a piece about the secrecy accompanying the coalition formation process following the elections; and

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also a reflection upon the role of 'spin doctors' in the United States and the United Kingdom. But even the contributions more closely related to the 1998 electoral campaign in a narrower sense range from taxonomy of campaigning instruments to personal impressions of participants. Moreover, the quality of the contributions differs greatly and a general evaluation of the book will pull down some better parts. Therefore, instead of summarizing and evaluating all parts, I will focus upon some themes that did catch the attention of different authors: the factors determining the content of the campaign in 1998; the relationship between parties and the media; and the campaign organization of political parties.

A first theme in the book is the content of the campaign of 1998, a theme closely related to the issues addressed in the articles by Irwin & Van Holsteyn, Van Wijnen, and Van Praag & Brants in this special issue. Scientific electoral research focuses upon the effect upon the voting behaviour of Dutch citizens of: the promises of parties (issue-voting, ideological voting, prospective voting); the past behaviour of political parties (retrospective voting); and the persons representing that party. These party characteristics are, of course, largely a boundary condition for campaigners. Most campaigners are unable to change the party platform or the party leadership. The only thing they can do is to stress or ignore party characteristics. If campaigners succeed in doing so, this may influence the relative weight of party characteristics on the media agenda. This, so campaigners hope, influences the perception and evaluations of voters and their voting behaviour.

According to many of the contributors to the book, personalities dominated the 1998 campaign. 'Real issues' were virtually absent: "it was an unpolitical campaign" (p. 80), according to Job Frieszo, journalist of the NOS TV news, in the forum of journalists. In the book, this characteristic of the 1998 campaign is attributed to the strategy of the three political parties constituting the purple coalition. These parties, PvdA, VVD and D66, wanted the coalition to be continued, and because these parties held a comfortable majority: "the outcome of the campaign of 1998 was clearly settled: a continuation of the purple cabinet" (p. 80). Consequently, the coalition parties were not willing to stress issues during the campaign. The PvdA presented its relatively 'social' face, while the VVD stressed its financial soberness, but both parties knew that paying too much attention to these party characteristics would endanger the continuation of the coalition. Moreover, the opinions of voters led both VVD and PvdA to moderate their views. A good example is the tax deduction of mortgage interest. A prominent member of the PvdA suggested restricting this form of tax deduction, an opinion expressed earlier by the PvdA party congress. All parties, and many PvdA politicians, however, feared losing the votes of house owners. ("The biggest blunder was made by Karin Adelmund, when she started talking about the deduction of mortgage interest" according to Milja de Zwart, journalist of the Volkskrant [p. 85]). Therefore, the PvdA was suddenly forced to say in public that this was a non-issue, that tax deduction was safe with the PvdA, and that this would be included in the coalition programme. Both coalition and electoral considerations led the party to depoliticize

this issue within a few days: "a pity, the vvd campaigners thought, that this article was not published just a few days before the elections" (p. 21).

Because big position issues were not available, the campaigners of both pvda and vvd tried to stress the reliability and integrity of their respective party leaders: "Everyone was convinced that Wim Kok was our trump card. He was indeed our unchallenged number one in this campaign", according to a pvda campaigner (p. 13). And, "It was crystal-clear that the current success of the vvd is owed to the Frits Bolkestein" according to a vvd activist (p. 19). Stressing the candidate factor was relatively harmless and would not endanger the continuation of the purple coalition.

The position of the third coalition partner, d66, however, was difficult with respect to persons. According to Van Lith, journalist of the national radio news and participant in a round-table conference of which parts are presented in the book: "d66 had a leadership problem" (p. 83). Els Borst, Minister of Health, led this party. Borst seems to have been busy with her work as a minister. She was also not seen as a strong party leader. In the internal party elections a few months before the campaign she came only second, after Thom de Graaf. Moreover, some of the other d66 heavy weights were severely criticized for various reasons in the months preceding the elections. And finally, some ministers of d66 planned not to return after the elections. Therefore, without strong candidates and without the possibility to distinguish the party from its coalition parties by stressing issues, d66 was only able to win votes by promoting the party as a 'necessary condition' for the coalition, which was, according to opinion polls, very popular.

Meanwhile, the opposition tried to focus on issues. They had to. The leader of opposing cda, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer was not seen as a strong personality and certainly not as a potential prime minister. Moreover, he was not very well known. In March 1997, when de Hoop Scheffer became party leader, only 16 per cent of the electorate knew his name. In March 1998, at the municipal elections, this percentage had increased to only 60 per cent. The cda was unable to change the campaign into a campaign about issues on its own: it takes at least two to compete.

The contents of the campaign seem to have been determined by the unwillingness of vvd and pvda to compete on issues and the lack of a strong cda candidate. This suggests that political parties do not always compete on the same dimension, not only in terms of issues (a well-known fact studied as 'issue ownership' and 'valence issues'), but also in terms of paying attention to political issues at all.

Parties may decide to stress specific party characteristics in their campaign. This does not mean they automatically get the kind of attention they want. A second theme in the book is the role of the media. In the book, this role is seen through the eyes of both campaigners and journalists. With the increase in the number of commercial broadcasting companies, the opportunities to gain publicity has increased significantly. Until 1997, however, television stations were reluctant to admit political commercials. In 1997, the commercial channel sbs6 decided to admit political commercials, and was soon followed by other channels. The availability of paid publicity was no longer a

problem, but the price still is. Because Dutch parties are still mainly financed by their members, and the number of party members has decreased in the past 30 years, money is an important constraint on the use of paid publicity. In 1997, d66 campaigner Ewout Cassee tried to convince the other parties not to use television commercials, because this would easily exhaust the campaign budget of most parties. However, no arrangements were made and as a result, virtually all paid media, ranging from billboards to television commercials were used – also by d66. Because parties are so eager to use paid publicity during campaigns and the main reason for not using it is the limited resources of parties, an increase in the often discussed state support of parties will lead to subsidizing both commercial and public media.

Because paid publicity is expensive and parties have limited resources, parties deliberately try to get 'free publicity': presenting news or a special event in order to get attention. This seems to be one of the central concepts of campaigners: free publicity. In a campaign all non-paid attention in the media is 'free publicity', therefore, it is just a catchword. Can free publicity be manipulated by parties? The general opinion of journalists is that media attention is hardly directed or manipulated by political parties. An example is the attempt made by the pvda to show party leader Wim Kok walking on the beach. It is supposed to have been a 'spontaneous walk', but many newspapers and television stations presented pictures of Kok surrounded by photographers. At least some campaigners are of the same opinion: "It was not apparent that the media advisors were able to direct the media" (p. 18). Despite this, the attempts of the vvd to direct the media seemed to have been quite successful. Every morning during the campaign, the vvd organized a breakfast meeting with the press. Journalists admired this element of the campaign, although some expressed the feeling that it was directed too much towards the media.

The general impression of campaigners and journalists is that parties are unable to direct free publicity to a great extent. This impression is contrasted with one of the central conclusions in the article by van Praag and Brants in this special issue: "[P]olitical parties succeeded remarkably well in controlling news about themselves and their party leaders. (...) In 1998, the parties were only very rarely forced to address an unwanted campaign theme by the media" (p. 195). Whether this difference in the perception of the relationship between political parties and the media is matter of 'standards' (what counts as control?) or a matter of fact, remains to be seen.

A third theme in the book is the relationship between campaigners and the rest of the party. This subject is not covered by any of the articles in this special issue. The parties differed substantially in the organization of the campaign. The campaigning team of the pvda, for example, consisted of the chair of the party, the leader of the pvda parliamentary group, the leader of the party and some others. By contrast, active party members, not involved in either the party bureaucracy or the faction, headed the campaigning teams of cda and d66.

If May's 'special law of curvilinear disparity' is applicable anywhere, it seems to be in the relation between campaigners and the rest of the party. Green Left campaigners

Joost Lagendijk and Tom van der Lee: "It is scant comfort to know that in other parties too (...) there is a tension between openness and party democracy on the one hand and a balanced, carefully construed image of the party and the party leader on the other" (p. 46). The PvdA campaigner Wiersma, wants to be involved in party affairs after the elections: "I find it difficult to accept that our evaluations will just be archived. The external orientation of parties and the professional methods accompanying it, should be getting more attention in 'normal times'(...)" (p.18).

The book marks the growing importance of campaigning in the Netherlands, at least in the eyes of party representatives. It also offers some insight into the content and organization of the campaign. But the book is 'unfocused', filled with many superficial impressions and unbelievable outpourings (D66 campaigner Cassee after the party had lost 10 of its 24 seats in parliament: "the outcome was not unsatisfactory" [p. 43]). The book also presupposes information about facts probably not generally known after one or two years.

The combination of reading the book and the contributions to this special issue about Dutch elections made me ask what campaigners and journalists can learn from 'us'. Reading both showed that there is a wide gap between scientific research and popular (and participants) reflection upon politics. Despite the fact that all major political parties are now using sophisticated data-analysis techniques like 'focus group analysis', ideas about voting behaviour are straightforward: issues, party images and party leaders determine the vote. Reference to scientific studies of voting behaviour is virtually absent. But, on the other hand, what contributions *can* be made by scientists? Will a campaigner or journalist change his or her way of working after reading a classic on voting research like *The American Voter*? One main task of voting studies may be to put straight some generally held opinions. Journalists' and campaigners' generally positive opinion of Bolkestein, for example, is not confirmed by the analysis of Van Holsteyn and Irwin in this issue. But, because of the currently general availability of opinion polls, and because voting studies are published long after the campaign has ended, this task will be limited.

What contributions then do the journalists and campaigners make to scientific research? Potentially this contribution is twofold; giving information about things not widely known, and asking questions about the things participants did not (yet) understand. In both respects the book falls short. It is mainly a superficial, chronological description of activities, and a collection of personal impressions. The word 'disclosure' used in the introduction is an exaggeration. So, despite the fact that the book aims at giving a more lasting contribution to record the start, the events, and the effects of the elections in the Netherlands, it will not be a classic.

Henk van der Kolk

Ten Years of Dutch Government and Politics: An English Language Bibliography 1989 – 1998

Rudy B. Andeweg & Emma Cohen de Lara

Ten years ago, Hans Daalder compiled his 'English Language Sources for the Study of Dutch Politics' which was published both internationally in H. Daalder and G.A. Irwin (eds.), *Politics in the Netherlands; How Much Change?*, London: Cass, 1989, pp. 162-185 (also published in *West European Politics* 12[1]), and nationally in the loose-leafed and regularly updated *Compendium voor Politiek en Samenleving in Nederland*. The latter has now been replaced by a completely new edition: R.B. Andeweg and E. Cohen de Lara (1999), 'English Language Sources for the Study of Dutch Politics', in H. Daalder et al. (eds.), *Compendium voor Politiek en Samenleving in Nederland*, Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom H.D. Tjeenk Willink, August, pp. D0100-1-44.

To make the new edition of the bibliography more accessible to scholars outside the Netherlands, an abridged version is given below. For reasons of space, it differs from the original publication in *Compendium* in the following ways. First, it only contains books and articles that have been published since Hans Daalder's 1989 bibliography appeared; in other words, it updates rather than replaces the 1989 bibliography. Second, a few sections that may be of less interest to the political scientist (for example, publications on history) have been omitted. Third, this version contains the bibliographical references only and not the explanatory text.

In this past decade, there has been an exponential growth in the number of publications on Dutch government and politics that have been written in English. As a consequence, this bibliography cannot claim to be exhaustive, but the selection should provide the reader with a good overview of some of the most important recent publications across subfields.

1 General Sources

1.1 Factual Information

Recent information on issues in Dutch politics, election results, new cabinets, and institutional changes can be found in the contributions of G. Voerman and P. Lucardie to the annual *Political Data Yearbook*, of the *European Journal of Political Research*. For example: