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### **Citation**

Koole, R., & Daalder, H. (2002). The Consociational Democracy Model and The Netherlands: Ambivalent Allies? *Acta Politica*, 37: 2002(1-2), 23-45. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450871>

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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## The Consociational Democracy Model and the Netherlands: Ambivalent Allies?

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### Abstract

After a short review on whether the Netherlands historically ever fully met the model, this chapter reviews political developments since Lijphart put forward the consociational democracy model as the most influential interpretation of Dutch politics. The three to four 'pillars' on which the system rested have virtually disappeared; there have been massive changes in parties and electoral relations; coalescent elite behaviour has been challenged; and different interpretations have been put forward on the degree to which the Netherlands has remained a consensus democracy or not. This article suggests that there has been an irreversible decline in ideological segmentation, while elite behaviour has not followed a unilinear change. It analyses the Dutch experience in terms of a transition towards more adversarial politics since the 1960s, which was followed in the 1980s by a return towards more consensual patterns of elite accommodation, and probes various possible explanations for these developments.

### 1 The Netherlands and the consociational democracy model

As has been argued previously, the study of comparative European politics can be written largely in terms of the successful efforts of individual authors to add 'their' country to what was once a largely Anglo-Saxon map of comparative politics (Daalder 1987; Daalder 1997). In support of that general proposition, Arend Lijphart's work is an obvious example. In the Netherlands itself the translation of his book *The Politics of Accommodation. Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Lijphart 1968b) has been remarkably successful and influential, although Lijphart himself was well aware that his analysis had focused on a system that was undergoing substantial changes.

For all its success in Dutch academe and political discourse, Lijphart's analysis of Dutch politics did not remain uncontested. Stripped to its essentials, criticism has gone four ways:

1. *A problem of historical sequence.* One school of thought has focused on a historical puzzle. Lijphart based his analysis on a society characterized by strong subcultural tensions. But, if tensions between subcultures were so strong, why was it that elites still had the will and the power to contain these tensions, by engaging in what Lijphart termed a 'self-denying hypothesis'? Most of Lijphart's empirical data on subcultural divisions were taken from the 1950s and 1960s, but he dated the relevant elite accommodation around 1917, a period of so-called 'Pacification', when in one great compromise all parties agreed to accept general suffrage, proportional representation, and freedom and full subsidies for religious schools. But by 1910, the actual historical record had not seen the fully crystallized subcultures, which presented such a real threat in Lijphart's model that the elites simply had to act to prevent a collapse. In fact, the subcultural segmentation that followed was as much the consequence as the cause of the 1917 settlement. One might therefore argue that Lijphart found a 'solution' to a problem that was mainly of his own making, or – to be fair – which had its origin in a preoccupation of American theories of the time.

2. *The bloc metaphor.* A second line of criticism warns for what might be termed a mechanistic fallacy. Although Lijphart signals differences among the different subcultures ('pillars', or *zuilen* in Dutch), he speaks readily of rival subcultural blocs. This usage tends to give insufficient weight to the substantial differences within and among the three major subcultures of Calvinists, Catholics and Socialists, not to speak of the less-developed Liberal one. The Calvinists were, with the Liberals, historically near to the centres of power and the concept of the nation, whereas the Catholics long remained very much the junior partner in government, and the Socialists were only accepted as a coalition partner marginally in 1939 and fully in 1945. To put it differently: some subcultures were very much more 'minorities' than others. Not only did the different subcultures differ in the manner in which they were built up, they also differed in the manner of their eventual demise.

3. *The incomplete nature of social segmentation.* Despite all the alleged stark features of twentieth century social segmentation in the Netherlands (which gave rise to the famous *Verzuilings*-metaphor), there was also the danger of exaggeration. There were substantial cross-cutting cleavages in the system (recognized by Lijphart, when he spoke of "the fact that the basic cleavages in Dutch society – religion and class – do cut across each other at an almost perfectly straight angle" [Lijphart 1968a: 205]). Equally significant is the fact that vital institutions and social sectors never came fully under the influence of ideological divisions. This was true, even when these divisions were at their strongest. Thus, the monarchy, the judiciary, the armed services and police,

the bureaucracy, and generally also the workplace tended to remain beyond specific subcultural controls, making Dutch society possibly less divided than, for example, Austria and Belgium.

4. *Rival theories of elite control.* If Lijphart has focused on processes of elite accommodation, as necessitated by processes of subcultural divisiveness, some authors have taken a reverse position: they have argued that elites historically fostered forms of *apartheid* to consolidate their own elite positions. This line of reasoning has both a general variant (Van Schendelen 1978; 1984; Scholten 1980; 1987), and a more specific Socialist, or even Marxist version. In the latter, the focus is on the conscious policies of existing elites (notably among the religious sections of the population) who used ideologies and organizational controls to keep their followers away from Socialist temptations and 'objective' working-class interests (Stuurman 1983).

Be that as it may, the main body of this chapter does not look at questions of historical fits, but rather at changes in the Dutch political system during the last thirty years. A final section checks the major characteristics in Lijphart's definition of the consociational democracy model against the experiences of Dutch politics as described in this paper.

## 2 The massive weakening of the *pillars*

### 2.1 The Catholic pillar

The most spectacular case of the disintegration of the 'pillars' was that of the Catholic subculture. The Catholic KVP attained its best election results in 1963 (31.9 per cent). But within a decade its electoral share was reduced to almost a half of this figure (17.7 per cent in 1972). In terms of party members the demise of the KVP was even more telling. In 1960 the Catholic party had almost 400.000 members; in 1970 not even 100.000.

The exodus of voters and members from the KVP was exemplary for the disintegration of the pillar as a whole. Developments within the Catholic Church served as a trigger. Catholic believers were increasingly free to follow their conscience, both in domains like birth control and in the political arena. As a consequence, the Catholic Church stopped being the uniting force of all Catholics in fields other than the church itself. Processes of secularization (i.e., Catholics turning into non-believers) were reinforced by 'depillarization' (or *ontzuiling* in Dutch: continuing religious association no longer determined social and political activities and attitudes). Where hitherto the links between

the various Catholic organizations had been considered to be mutually reinforcing, individual organizations began to see these links as liabilities. Many were cut. The daily newspaper *de Volkskrant*, owned by the Catholic trade union (NKV) stopped presenting itself as 'Catholic' in 1966, turning into a major 'general' left-wing newspaper. In 1976 the Catholic Trade Union NKV fused with the Socialist NVV to form the new FNV. As a consequence, the Protestant CNV was the only remaining major trade union with a religious basis. On the employers' side, Catholic and Protestant employers decided to work together in the newly founded NCW, which recently went on to join the larger 'general' employer's organization.

Even at the political level the KVP ceased being the 'political arm' of the Catholic pillar. Not only because the pillar fell apart, but also because the party itself wanted change. A special commission of the KVP perceived the developments in the Church and the process of secularization as an indication that the autonomous position of a Catholic party was untenable in the future (*Grondslag en karakter van de KVP*, 1966).

After the elections of 1967, when the Catholic and the two larger Protestant parties together, for the first time since 1913, won less than half of the parliamentary seats, their leaders decided to start negotiating a possible merger. This turned out to be a difficult process. It resulted first in a federation that presented a common list of candidates at the national elections in 1977, and then in a formal amalgamation of the three parties in 1980. Thirteen years of protracted negotiations in a hostile environment produced a 'miracle' in Dutch politics: the foundation of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), in which parties from two different pillars decided to collaborate. But the process also resulted in losses. Already in 1968 some left-oriented Catholics and Protestants split from their earlier parties and founded the *Politieke Partij Radikalen* (PPR). It survived for more than twenty years with fluctuating electoral success before merging in turn with three other, smaller left-wing parties to form the the Green Left in 1990. At the right side of the KVP several splits occurred as well, but the political parties emanating from them scored only marginal and fleeting electoral results.

## 2.2 The Protestant pillar

The decline of the two major parties within the Protestant pillar (ARP and CHU) was both a longer and a less profound process than the disintegration of the much bigger Catholic pillar. Electoral decline of the ARP started immediately after the Second World War. The ARP saw its electoral share decline from 16.4 per cent in 1937 to 12.9 per cent in 1946, and continued to lose from the 1950s through the 1960s. In 1963 it obtained 8.7 per cent of

the popular vote. The decline of the CHU had already started in the 1930s. Its relative share of the electorate remained more or less stable during the 1950s and 1960s, at the rather low level of somewhat over 8 per cent, but declined sharply again in the early 1970s.

Societal changes also affected other actors within the Protestant pillar. As was mentioned earlier, the Protestant employers' organization merged with its Catholic counterpart. The daily newspaper *Trouw*, once the instrument of the political leadership of the ARP, took a more independent position, although it continues to have a Protestant leaning. The same holds true for the CNV, the Protestant trade union, which did not follow its Catholic sister organization into its merger with the Socialist trade union. The CNV may have good relationships with the new CDA, but formal ties and personal unions do not exist; they also cherish good contacts with other parties, notably the PvdA. Finally, the leadership of the major Protestant churches very often took (progressive) positions that the Protestant parties – or even their voters for that matter – were not always willing to assume. The sometimes radical stances of the churches corresponded only to a very limited extent to the positions taken by the CHU. The ARP on the other hand transformed itself in the 1960s from a rather conservative party into a more progressive 'evangelical people's party', as the party started to call itself in 1966. But that change was mainly the change of the leadership; its rank-and-file followed only reluctantly.

The radical stances of many leaders, paradoxically, helped to make the merger with the Catholic KVP acceptable for the ordinary members of the Protestant parties. The grassroots of the Protestant parties clearly preferred the option of a Christian-Democratic party to the idea of an 'open' party, based on both humanism and Christianity, which was seriously considered in the decade between 1965 and 1975 as an option to replace the three existing major religious parties. The prospect of losing a Christian profile altogether, made them overcome their hesitation to cooperate with the Roman Catholics. But, as always, some people disagreed with such a move. As a result, new parties were created, among them the *Reformatiepolitieke Federatie* (RPF), formed in 1975.

The CDA, formally established in 1980, was set up to be an open programmatic Christian-Democratic party. Although the party considered the Bible as the most important source of inspiration, members and candidates were only asked to adhere to the platform of principles of the party, not to the Bible itself. The CDA has no privileged contacts with any church, although it is clear that Protestants and Catholics constitute the overwhelming majority of its members and voters. In 1986 and 1989, however, the party was also able to attract a substantial number of non-religious voters, thanks to the popularity of its then leader R.F.M. Lubbers, who was prime minister from 1982 to 1994.

In the Dutch political system, the CDA thus continued to play the pivotal role, which had been filled earlier by the KVP.

Things changed radically in 1994, however. The national elections that year resembled a political 'earthquake'. Volatility had never been so high. Political discontent favoured parties in opposition. The CDA lost almost 40 per cent of its electorate. As a result of political malcontentment over drastic cuts in social security arrangements and a change in the party leadership followed by disunity within the party elite, the CDA lost its pivotal role. Some observers explained the dramatic loss of the CDA as the result of a suddenly intensified process of depillarization. But this picture is hardly accurate. The losses of 1994 were mainly the result of the defection of the non-religious voters, who had temporarily joined the ranks of the CDA in the 1980s, coupled with the still ongoing, gradual processes of depillarization and secularization (Andeweg 1995). Efforts to renew the party did not pay off at the national elections in May 1998. The CDA lost substantially again, obtaining only 18.4 per cent of the votes; slightly above half its share in 1986.

### 2.3 The Socialist pillar

The Socialist pillar was never as fully developed as the Catholic or even the Protestant one. In the one-time 'Red Family' various societal organizations based on the common ideology of socialism existed, but they never covered all aspects of socio-cultural life. Of course, there were Socialist trade unions, youth and women's organizations, and to this day even a Socialist broadcasting organization, but the Socialists' children went to neutral state schools, as did the Liberals' children. Socialists also shared institutions of the non-pillarized public domain with the Liberals of both progressive and conservative orientation in other areas. And many Socialists belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, where they shared a religious home with people voting Liberal or CHU, or one of the smaller Protestant parties.

The 'Red Family' was also affected by the process of depillarization. Around 1960, the daily newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*, owned by the Socialist Labour Party (PvdA) and the Socialist trade union, still had the largest circulation of all dailies in the country. In the decade that followed, it lost a great many subscribers and was reduced to a local and more neutral newspaper in the area of Rotterdam. Socialist trade unions as such disappeared in the 1970s, when the NVV merged with the Catholic NKV into a more neutral FNV. Formal links between the Socialist broadcasting organization VARA and the PvdA were cut, although mutual sympathy has continued to exist.

The depillarization within the 'Red Family' was fostered by substantial

changes within the PvdA. In the second half of the 1960s, a New Left group wanted to radicalize the party (and society). By mobilizing disaffected members of the former Christian parties and new entrants into the political arena during the 'revolution of the sixties' as well, this New Left was able to exercise a dominant influence on the PvdA from 1969 onwards. It contributed very much to the temporary adversarial atmosphere in Dutch politics, but it also tried to alter the societal position of the party. In the 1970s, the PvdA proclaimed the need to be an 'action party', seeking close contacts with all kinds of extra-parliamentary opposition groups (the so-called 'action groups' of women, students, squatters, environmentalists, pacifists). Especially the links with the peace movement were important at the end of the 1970s and in the first half of the 1980s. The question of the deployment of nuclear cruise missiles on Dutch soil dominated the political debate for many years. If the PvdA seemed to be in touch with the spirit of time by siding with the powerful peace movement, the party remained politically in opposition for most of the time. The societal position of the PvdA became more and more isolated in the 1970s and early 1980s. As in most political parties, the number of party members declined rapidly, especially after the mid-1980s. A series of electoral defeats after 1986 led to efforts to 'renew' the PvdA.

Under the leadership of Wim Kok (who had once been the leader of the Socialist NVV and later of the more 'neutral' FNV), the PvdA returned to more centrist policies, dropping its goal to become an 'action-party'. Contacts were sought with people active in civil society, within and outside the traditional pillar. But these contacts were non-structural and highly personal. Links between the PvdA and societal organizations thus became rather eclectic: in a sense, the 'Red Family' was replaced by post-modern 'networking'.

### 2.4 The growth of the non-pillarized public domain

One way of summarizing the massive weakening of the pillars is by looking at the growth of the non-pillarized public domain. This is illustrated by the fact that Liberal parties, which had always been the least 'pillarized', have substantially increased their share of the popular vote in the decades since the Second World War.

A Liberal 'pillar' had always been a contradiction in terms. No Liberal network of organizations, formally interrelated or tied together through numerous interlocking directorates, existed during the heyday of *pillarization*. That is not to say that there were no contacts in existence at all. The alleged 'neutral' press, for instance, did advise the voters to vote for the Liberal party on several occasions, but there were no institutionalized ties. In the period

between the First and Second World War, hesitant efforts were made to establish something like a Liberal pillar, but these failed.

What happened after the 1960s was that other political groupings began to resemble the Liberal parties with respect to contacts with civil society: no institutionalized ties, but informal personalized contacts, networking instead of pillarization. This has also meant that contacts have become less privileged. Trade unions and employers' organizations now try to have good relationships with all major parties. And all major parties stress the importance of good contacts with civil society. But, of course, history counts. The Social-Democrats and the left-wing Christian-Democrats have closer relationships with trade unions than other parties. The Green Left and environmental organizations have a high degree of reciprocal understanding. The Liberals and the employers' organisations still show mutual sympathy.

### 3 Changing elite orientations

So far, the main emphasis has been on what has changed since the 1960s within and between the pillars. From the 1960s onwards, the Netherlands was no longer the segmented society it had been since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the terms of Lijphart's well-known typology of democratic systems, the structure of Dutch political culture changed from a 'fragmented' one into a more 'homogeneous' one (Lijphart 1968c). In order to place the Dutch political system into this typology, we also need to look at the second dimension of the Lijphart scheme, to see whether the behaviour of the elites was 'coalescent', as it had been before the 1960s, or 'competitive'. In this perspective, a clear distinction may be made between the period from the end of the 1960s until the mid-1980s, on the one hand, and the period thereafter, on the other. While Dutch political culture has grown less and less segmented during the last thirty years, elite behaviour has not shown a unilinear development. The first period was characterized by a rather adversarial atmosphere. It was replaced later by a period in which consensus once again seems to be the prevailing political wisdom. Arguably, the Dutch political system seemed first to develop from a 'consociational democracy' in the direction of a 'centripetal' democratic system, but ended up turning into a 'depoliticized' democracy.

Of course, a homogenous 'political culture' in Lijphart's terms does not imply a homogeneous society in terms of religious, class and/or ethnic identities. Different (ethnic) groups exist within Dutch society nowadays without completely assimilating with the 'traditional' Dutch culture. But these differences in society are not reflected in the political culture, i.e., the different ethnic and/or religious groups do not have a specific political party that represents the group *in politicis*.

The role of Dutch political elites is subject to some academic controversy. The debate is about whether political elites have only reacted to changed circumstances, or whether they have also helped to create them. Were they just victims or were they guides? In an important study on the changes in the Netherlands in the 1960s, James Kennedy (1995) has argued that traditional Dutch elites very much took the lead in events that changed Dutch society. This rather voluntaristic approach contradicts the more traditional approach, which emphasizes the degree to which the traditional elites were surprised by events, reacted in a rather clumsy way, and were replaced to a substantial extent by a new generation. In this view, structural developments determined political changes. New elites who understood the 'spirit of the time' better took over the positions of former elites, but did in fact little else than adapt to changing circumstances. Both approaches can be defended, but both only to a limited extent. Political leaders as well as leaders of the churches did lead their followers into a new era, but did so only because they were fully aware of the structural developments of secularization and depillarization that were already taking place under the surface. The simultaneous arrival of the welfare state, television, the changes in the churches, and the coming of age of the 'baby boom' generation are generally considered to be the major explanatory factors. Interrelated processes of individualization and secularization may also have occurred elsewhere in the Western world, but they manifested themselves with particular speed in the Netherlands.

Far less than in other consociational democracies (e.g., Austria, Belgium), political elites in the Netherlands could rely on the instrument of patronage and clientelism in order to defend the status quo, which may help to explain the relative speed of the process of 'depillarization' in the Netherlands. The quasi-absence of this instrument, possibly due to the predominant Calvinist culture, constituted a serious impediment to the penetration of the state by Dutch pillar organizations (Andeweg 1999: 120; Luther & Deschouwer 1999: 261). One might argue that without this powerful instrument of patronage, the elites of the Dutch pillars could only adapt to changed circumstances or disappear.

Also, the extremely proportional electoral system in the Netherlands may have contributed to the sensibility of the political system to societal changes. The growing electoral volatility triggered political engineering. Leaders of the major religious parties decided to collaborate and to change their 'confessional' parties into a more open Christian-Democratic party in order to stop or to slow down a possible electoral decline in the future. The electoral haemorrhage of the religious parties in 1967 and the prospect of possible further decline made political parties at the left hope that a majority of 'progressive' (i.e., left-wing) parties would be possible in the near future. In 1967, a new party, Democrats '66, won an unprecedented seven parliamentary seats (4.5 per

cent), a spectacular result according to Dutch standards at the time. The Democrats advocated constitutional reform, which included the direct election of the prime minister and changes in the electoral system. Such reforms were meant to give voters a greater say in politics. The D66 victory in 1967 fuelled the belief that the electorate was willing to change the political system.

This belief was increasingly shared by the PvdA, notably by the New Left that became dominant in the party from 1969. The New Left protagonists were very hostile towards the Catholic KVP, which was accused of being an unreliable party since its parliamentary party had caused the fall of a centre-left coalition in 1966. The subsequent initiative of the religious parties to cooperate was countered by the introduction of a so-called 'strategy of polarization', once the New Left was in power. Based on the Westminster two-party model, the PvdA wanted to offer the voters a clear choice between a block of 'progressive' parties on the left and a block of conservative parties on the right. The strategy was clearly meant to destroy the centre position of the religious parties in the Dutch party system. A cartel of 'progressive' (i.e., left-wing) parties presented itself to the voters in 1971 and 1972. In 1972 these parties (PvdA, D66 and PPR) drafted a common electoral platform *Keerpunt* (Turning Point), which reflected the prevalent optimistic radicalism of the young generation in a period of a booming economy. The three parties did not win a majority in 1972, but without them it was not possible to build a viable coalition government. The result was the Den Uyl cabinet (1973-1977), with a minority of ministers from two of the three religious parties in an unwanted secondary position. The cabinet was led by the political leader of the PvdA, the most prominent survivor of an older generation in the predominantly New Left era.

In 1977 the PvdA, now presenting itself as a separate party again, won its greatest victory ever. However, this success was not so much due to the polarization strategy, but rather to the popularity of Den Uyl, aided by a professional election campaign, which ignored the decision of the party congress to campaign on a radical election platform (Van Praag 1990). The party in fact won mainly at the expense of smaller left parties and D66, the aggregate left and progressive vote only increasing from 42.5 to 43.5 per cent. However, the formation of the CDA (the three major religious parties presented a joint list of candidates in the 1977 elections), coupled to the fact that the PvdA overplayed its hand during the negotiations for a new cabinet, resulted in the return of the PvdA to the opposition benches in 1977. Despite its electoral success, the party was forced into an increasingly isolated political position for more than a decade.

The Liberals in the VVD did better. The antagonistic style of the left in that period was very much to the advantage of the VVD. Paradoxically, the VVD

adopted a very adversarial style towards the PvdA, but it did so by stressing its desire for cooperation in a coalition government. It could never expect to obtain a parliamentary majority on its own, and hence the VVD opted successfully for a standing coalition of the CDA and itself.

In the period between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, the political debate was dominated by the left. As a consequence, the political atmosphere was adversarial rather than consensus-oriented. But from the mid-1980s the political atmosphere changed again. Consensual politics returned. The major change took place at the left side of the political spectre, where the smaller left-wing parties almost disappeared and the PvdA formally dropped its polarization strategy. Also, at the other extreme of the left-right divide, albeit somewhat later and probably as a consequence of the change within the left, anti-left feelings began to lose their sharpness. It was not so much its electoral results, but rather the quasi-permanent exclusion from government, that brought the PvdA to reconsider its position from the mid-1980s onwards. This strategic change was prepared by the research institute of the party, which had begun to criticize the radical and state-oriented attitude of the party some years earlier (Kalma 1982). The change within the PvdA was induced by a stagnating economy after the second oil crisis of 1979 and the rise of neo-liberal economics that followed. Moreover, the peace movement lost its momentum after 1985. The Social-Democrats began to realize that they no longer dominated the public debate.

Instead, Christian-Democracy and the Conservative-Liberal VVD came to control the political agenda. They stressed the necessity of a 'no nonsense' macro-economic policy: retrenchments and budget cuts, based on the idea of 'a withdrawal of the state'. As elsewhere, Keynesianism had died in the 1970s, and the political parties that advocated 'less state' and 'more market' seemed to be in tune with the spirit of the time. The Dutch economy showed high levels of unemployment and enormous budget deficits. Paradoxically, however, the recovery of the Dutch economy, which led to the 'Dutch miracle' of the mid-1990s, was (later) not considered to be so much the success of neo-liberalism, but rather of neo-corporatism. In 1982, the most important trade unions and employers' organizations made the so-called 'Wassenaar Agreement', by which trade unions accepted wage moderation in exchange for a reduction of the working hours, while central corporatist agreements were to be replaced by decentralized agreements at the sectoral level. If this agreement proved to be decisive for the recovery of the Dutch economy in the years to come, such a revitalization of neo-corporatism could not have taken place without the threat of political interference of a centre-right coalition then in power.

The coalition of Liberals and Christian-Democrats, which governed for most of the thirty-year period after 1958, collapsed in 1989. The PvdA entered

a governmental coalition again, much to its own surprise. Nobody had foreseen the VVD's manoeuvre to bring down the government in an effort to promote its own visibility among the electorate, but which resulted in the VVD's isolation during the negotiations for a new cabinet that followed. The PvdA's return to more consensual politics had made it a possible coalition partner again.

The result was the third cabinet led by the Christian-Democratic leader Lubbers, but now composed of CDA and PvdA. This cabinet felt obliged to take drastic measures to reduce the costs of some social security arrangements. This was to be a major factor in the enormous losses both parties suffered during the 'earthquake elections' of 1994.

These elections cannot be fully understood, however, unless a more general reaction against politics is taken into account. Political discontent in the Netherlands mainly affected the two governing parties. Most of the losses of the CDA and the PvdA benefited the two major opposition parties, VVD and D66. D66 and VVD, the two winners in the 1994 elections, joined hands with the PvdA, which, for all its electoral losses, had become the plurality party. D66 very much wanted a coalition without the Christian-Democrats, in order to achieve a renewal of the Dutch political system. The VVD hesitated to join a coalition with the Social-Democrats, but was persuaded to join in, once it had successfully negotiated a rather Liberal 'government programme' during the more than 100 days it took to form the new cabinet coalition. The result was the so-called 'purple coalition' (a mixture of the red of the Social-Democrats and the blue of the Liberals). For the first time since 1952, VVD and PvdA participated again in the same government coalition, with Wim Kok as prime minister, and, for the first time since 1918, there were no Christian-Democrats in the cabinet. The composition of the purple coalition symbolized the advanced secularization of Dutch society as well as the abandonment of the strategy of polarization.

#### 4 Changes in the party system

From the preceding description, important changes in the party landscape can be deduced.

First, the power relations among the major political actors have changed dramatically in the period since World War II. In 1946 only 6.4 per cent of the electorate voted for a Liberal party, in 1998 this had risen to more than a third (33.7 per cent) of the electorate voting for either D66 or the VVD (in 1994 the figure was even slightly higher at 35.5 per cent). The major religious parties suffered a massive decline from 1967 onwards. Until then the combined major religious parties had always scored above 50 per cent of the vote, but in 1998

the merged CDA received only 18.4 per cent of the vote. The results for the Social-Democrats have fluctuated more, without a clear trend. In 1998 the PvdA won 29 per cent of the votes, the same as in 1952, with many ups and downs in between. What remains the same is the fact that the Netherlands is a country of political minorities: no one party has ever won a parliamentary majority (nor is one likely to win such a majority in the near future).

The second important change is that electoral volatility increased substantially. Pedersen's index of total volatility shows that profound changes took place in the 1970s in a highly adversarial climate and again in the 1990s in a time of greater consensus. While the high degree of antagonism may have helped to explain the high level of volatility in the 1970s, a reaction against politics played a role in the earthquake elections of 1994. The results of the 1998 national elections point at the possibility that electoral volatility continues to be high, precisely because of the high degree of consensus politics. During the 1970s and 1980s, volatility was mostly intra-block volatility (voters changed parties within either the left or the right block of parties; Mair 1990). But during the 1990s, inter-block volatility increased considerably, although intra-block volatility remained higher.

Third, the Dutch political scene has seen parties come and go, though it continues to be a system of many parties. Some new actors came to the fore, others disappeared or merged into a new party. The Catholic KVP and the ARP and CHU merged into the CDA in 1980; three smaller left-wing parties (the communist CPN, the pacifist-socialist PSP and the Christian-radical PPR) and the tiny left-Christian EVP joined forces to form the Green Left in 1990; and in 2000 two smaller Protestant parties, RPF and GPV, decided to fuse into the Christian Union. Amalgamations of parties, however, do not necessarily lead to fewer parties. The number of parties represented in parliament remained fairly high. Rae's index of fractionalization was highest in 1971 and 1972, when fourteen parties were represented, but was almost as high in 1994, when twelve parties managed to win at least one parliamentary seat. Of these twelve parties, only four had existed before 1965: the PvdA, the VVD, and the two conservative-Protestant parties SGP and GPV. Two of the twelve were successors to parties that had existed before 1965: the CDA and the Green Left. The other six parties had been founded as entirely new parties since 1965: D66 (1966), the Protestant RPF (1975), the left-socialist SP (1972), the extreme right-wing Centre Democrats (1984, successor to the CP, 1980), and two senior citizens parties AOV (1993) and Unie 55+ (1993). The latter three parties, CD, AOV and Unie 55+, lost their seats again in 1998, when 'only' nine parties won parliamentary seats. More than half of these nine parties had not existed as such before 1965. The Dutch party system has thus been renewed considerably in terms of parties and party labels.



## 5 Neo-corporatism and the primacy of politics

One of the goals of the purple coalition in 1994 was to reduce the influence of neo-corporatist arrangements. The predominance of the two Liberal parties in the coalition, D66 and VVD, was reflected in the plea for a 'primacy of politics'. It must be noted, however, that criticism of the influence of trade unions and employers' organizations had been heard before. In the neo-liberal climate of the 1980s and early 1990s, both the state and the traditional advisory bodies were criticized because of their negative impact on the smooth functioning of the market. A strong, but reduced state was to have primacy over 'social partners', where market forces alone could not do the job. But this reduced state should try to operate as much as possible according to the principles of the market itself. Newspeak like 'The Netherlands Ltd.' that had to keep its 'customers' satisfied, entered political discourse.

In the Netherlands (neo-)corporatism and *pillarization* had strong affinities. The Liberal parties in the 1990s considered corporatism to be something of the past. In a segmented society it had perhaps been understandable that private organizations belonging to the various pillars had a considerable impact on socio-economic policy-making, however, depillarization had definitively made such a situation untenable. A special law was accepted to limit the power of the traditional advisory agencies. Even the 'crown jewel' of Dutch neo-corporatism, the Social Economic Council (SER), was under attack. The government decided that it should no longer be obliged to ask its advice in matters of labour policy. Thus, one of the prime examples of over-arching elite cooperation, mentioned by Lijphart, seemed to lose its privileged position. However, by the end of the (first) term of the purple coalition, things had changed again. The success of the Netherlands in creating new jobs, while at the same time retaining a rather benevolent system of social security (the so-called 'Dutch model' or *polder-model*), reduced the criticism of neo-corporatist arrangements. For it was widely believed that the strength of the Dutch economy in the 1990s was largely the result of the Wassenaar Agreement between trade unions and employers organizations during the profound economic crisis more than a decade before, although this agreement would most likely not have been reached without substantial pressure from the government (Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen 1997). Moreover, the position of the SER appeared not to have been weakened so much after all. The Social Economic Council may have had more influence precisely because its advice was no longer obligatory.

Nevertheless, the fluctuating appreciation of neo-corporatist arrangements does not preclude some more structural effects of the ideological onslaught of the 1980s and 1990s. The attack on traditional advisory bodies has led to their

partial replacement by the politics of the *Antichambre* and well-paid consultants, while privatization and 'rent-a-government' increased substantially (Daalder 1993). This phenomenon, too, may be regarded as a modern way to 'depoliticize' political issues, although a rather costly one.

## 6 Whatever happened to consociationalism in the Netherlands?

How does the character of the Netherlands of today differ from that of the country during the heyday of pillarization? To assess the degree of change we will check Dutch experience against the four major characteristics of the Lijphart consociational democracy model, and then give a general appraisal of the Dutch political system as it functions today.

### 6.1 The four characteristics of the consociational democracy model

*Executive power-sharing.* Full power-sharing in a 'grand coalition' never occurred at the level of the cabinet in the Netherlands. This was not the case during the heyday of pillarization, nor did it come about during the period of its demise. The prevailing reform climate of the 1960s and 1970s brought a clear challenge to the assumptions of executive power-sharing. Such practices, New Left advocates of various persuasions argued, glossed over real political differences and deprived the electorate of real choices of policies and personalities. Majoritarian assumptions were propagated, and to some degree practised, at both central and local government levels. But in the end, such attempts were abandoned, not least because the possibility of a genuine left electoral majority remained a *fata morgana*, and because many left coalitions at local levels proved contentious and unstable. This finding may have led to a return of deliberate power-sharing in many local councils, but it did not do so in all local executive councils, nor at the national level in the cabinet. In the latter, first either the Socialists or Liberals, and then from 1994 onwards the Christian-Democrats, were left in opposition.

*Segmental autonomy.* With the crumbling of the institutional pillars and the great increase in what is termed 'individualization', the very concept of internal autonomy has lost much of its relevance. Of course, remnants of older sub-cultural institutions persist (e.g., broadcasting organizations), but these no longer belong to a 'pillar', when the latter is defined in terms of

institutionalized relations between organizations with a common religious, ethnic or ideological background. However, while there is little left of the old autonomies of major subcultures, one might save part of the hypothesis by stressing the high degree of tolerance of deviant behaviour (although very recently criticism of this tolerance has intensified), and an almost routine willingness to respect or even finance specific group interests.

*Proportionality.* In spite of a host of majoritarian reform proposals, the principle of proportionality tends to remain unabated in The Netherlands. There has been no real change in the electoral system, which is the most open and proportional electoral system in the world. The idea that rights and finances should be allocated proportionately is fully retained. In government appointments, the idea of proportionality is still often honoured, with major positions also going to representatives of opposition parties (e.g., in the appointment of mayors). While civil service positions were traditionally somewhat immunized from political appointments, these are now slightly more frequent (Van der Meer & Raadschelders 1999). The strength of proportionality tenets is such, however, that too partisan practices by parties in power are limited by assumptions of distributive fairness.

*Minority veto.* Although this element was of crucial importance in the definition of a consociational democracy, its force has largely disappeared with the decline of the older ideological subcultures. Notably in advisory agencies, collegial practices of decision-making are still being retained, which tend to give minorities at least a voice. But at the same time, there are signs that parties in government are increasingly high-handed towards opposition parties in the day-to-day jumble of parliamentary politics.

Based on these four criteria of a consociational democracy model, the Netherlands would now seem to meet the wider criteria of a consensus democracy more than that of a consociational democracy. Elite accommodation remains a characteristic feature of the Dutch system, but it concerns elites without pillars. There are no great ideological distances between them. They tend to dominate their respective party organizations, and – when in government – they are not necessarily very considerate towards opposition parties. For all the parlance of democratic or populist developments, elitist attitudes and practices persist.

## 6.2 The Netherlands and consensus politics today

In an interesting article published in 1989, Lijphart analysed changes in Dutch politics since 1967 in a comparative perspective, using data for the period 1945-1980. He concluded that: “by comparative standards, the extent of change is quite unimpressive. The politics of accommodation did not undergo a complete metamorphosis into its very opposite. No ‘revolution’ ever happened” (Lijphart 1989: 151). In 1994 Mair repeated the Lijphart study of 1989, using more recent comparative data. Comparing Dutch experience with that of other European countries for the period 1967-1988, he found that in a comparative perspective “the Netherlands no longer enjoys the status of a highly consensual democracy.” In terms of consensualism the Netherlands had been surpassed by some other countries, even though “the character of Dutch politics may not have changed substantially in the last two decades” (Mair 1994: 121).

We tend to take a different position. Although this chapter does not contain comparative data, we stress the need to distinguish between the period before and the period after the mid-1980s. Mair’s data reflect a period characterized to a large extent by an adversarial atmosphere, promoted notably by the left, not only in politics, but also between ‘social partners’. The return to a more consensual politics, that took place from the mid-1980s onwards, does not figure prominently in either Lijphart’s or Mair’s analyses. If anything, the Dutch score on a consensus-majoritarian dimension is likely to have become higher again (which does not preclude the possibility that other countries may have become even more consensual). But the present consensual atmosphere differs from that of the days of pillarization, in that it is due to converging visions on many political issues rather than to negotiations among political elites despite their initial differences in principle. One could say, in somewhat exaggerated terms: compromises then, consensus now.

Although the consociational democracy model remains the best-known model that seeks to explain the high degree of consensus (or ‘compromise’) in Dutch politics, it does raise two major questions. First, why did and could ‘prudent elites’ successfully engage in coalescent elite behaviour, as Lijphart argued in his well-known ‘self-denying prophesy’ proposition? And, second, if deep social divisions were the major challenge, how relevant is the model now that social segmentation has clearly gone?

One way to answer both questions is to insist on the historical importance of a pre-existing political culture, characteristic of Dutch elites (e.g., Daalder 1966, 1974, 1981, 1989). If it is true that regional and religious diversities necessitated a ‘politics of accommodation’ already at the time of the Dutch Republic, this could explain why subcultures were able to develop in the period of social modernization and democratization of the 19th and 20th centuries,

without engendering the degree of conflict that created the analytical problem Lijphart thought to solve. The previous existence, as well as the later persistence, of such an elite culture could then explain many continuities of the Dutch political system. In such a view, the consociational model was at most a passing phase, and a response to particular circumstances.

A rival explanation insists on the importance of economic variables. Katzenstein (1985), for example, insists that an open economy makes small countries so vulnerable as to force them to dampen internal antagonism. This same factor could also explain the prevalence of corporatist arrangements. The present reification of a Dutch *polder-model* provides a clear pointer in the same direction. But, one should be equally aware of the clear *animus* against corporatist arrangements: witness the onslaught on advisory agencies, the call for the full play of market forces, and, more generally, the wish to restore the 'primacy of politics'. Should one argue that intensified European integration is decreasing the specific vulnerability of small states with open economies, so that such corporatist arrangements become less vital?

Finally, one should not totally exclude the rather obvious (and perhaps additional) explanation that in a country of political minorities – where no grouping has ever won a parliamentary majority by itself or came close to it – elite cooperation was simply a matter of pragmatism (or 'rational' behaviour, see Andeweg 1999: 132). This approach would also help to explain why elite cooperation in the Netherlands has never been complete: parliamentary majorities might be necessary, but this did not imply all-party governments.

But, if the tradition of elite cooperation is so deeply rooted in the Netherlands, one might wonder how the antagonistic atmosphere in the late 1960s-1970s can be explained. The answer could lie in the coincidence of the international wave of political radicalism that hit the Netherlands (especially among the youngsters) with particular force at the same time as the Dutch pillars were clearly eroding. A conflict of generations contributed to the adversarial climate. However, antagonistic politics in the 1960s and 1970s was largely a tool in the hands of the middle level elites to challenge the then existing top-elites. The top-elites paid lip service to the radicalism of their militants and sometimes adopted some of their political stances in order not to lose grip on ongoing developments, but continued very much to act according to the consensual tradition in daily political decision-making. The *atmosphere* and *style* may have been antagonistic, actual *policy-making* was far less so. But that is the defining feature of consociational politics: top-elites who overcome ideological distances between their respective followers by playing the political game according to some specific rules.

Consociational democracy, when defined as the combination of a segmented society and elite cooperation, definitively belongs to the past in the Netherlands. But consociationalism in terms of consensual politics is

flourishing, albeit in a thoroughly changed society. As a result of immigration the Netherlands is becoming a more 'multicultural society', but the new (sub-)cultures are not translated as such into the Dutch political system. Dutch 'political culture', therefore, remains homogenous in terms of Lijphart's typology. The resulting 'depoliticized' democracy, however, risks being more 'elitist' than the pillarized Dutch political system, which was criticized precisely for that reason so vehemently during the 1960s and 1970s. While in earlier days some accountability of the elites existed within the various subcultures, today's political elites are neither held responsible by pillars, nor very much by a critical middle level elite in strong extra-parliamentary party organizations.

The absence of real opposition within the democratic system might lead to opposition against the system. But this logic reveals a new puzzle of Dutch politics. The rise of radical right parties in Austria, Belgium and Switzerland seems to confirm the hypothesis of the emergence of anti-system opposition in depoliticized democracies. In the Netherlands, however, no anti-system opposition of real importance has come to the fore as yet, notwithstanding the high degree of cooperation between political elites. Perhaps a depoliticized democracy is less vulnerable to anti-system opposition after all?

But how democratic is it? If the specific label 'consociational' is no longer really applicable, the debate about 'democracy' in a time of individualization, privatization, and the growing impact of economic globalization and international decision-making, remains very much on the agenda.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Tom Ertmann, Percy B. Lehning, the participants of the Harvard Conference, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful, critical remarks on a draft of this contribution.

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