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Managing Increased Complexity in Dutch Coalition Politics

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CHAPTER 28

MANAGING INCREASED COMPLEXITY IN DUTCH COALITION POLITICS

TOM LOUWERSE AND ARCO TIMMERMANS

INTRODUCTION

ALL democratic Dutch governments have been multiparty coalitions. All but one of these governments commanded a majority in the House of Representatives at the time of their formation; minority governments are an exception. In the parliamentary system of the Netherlands, the government is a key political actor: while formally the government depends on the confidence of parliament, in practice the coalition parties in parliament loyally support the government. A written coalition agreement helps to ensure the government's survival.

How government coalitions are formed, how they govern, and when they end are thus important questions for understanding politics in the Netherlands. In contrast to other parliamentary democracies, pre-electoral coalitions are rarely made, and the electoral system also does not ensure the direct translation of the election outcome into a new coalition. On the contrary, elections are only the starting point of often lengthy coalition negotiations in which multiple possible combinations of parties are usually considered, and parties winning seats may 'lose' the formation, and vice versa. These negotiations are long not only due to the uncertainty and complexity of the bargaining environment, but also because parties forming a coalition negotiate over many policy topics and include them in a detailed coalition agreement that must guide the parties once in office. Thus, the time of government formation is the time to get things done. After their formation, Dutch coalitions use various coordinating mechanisms to facilitate decision making and avoid conflicts within the coalition.

This practice of forming multiparty majority coalitions that use strong political and policy coordination has been criticized. For one, there is a relatively weak link between

the electoral outcome and the outcome of the government formation. The proportional electoral system does not offer a bonus to the largest party, and in the absence of pre-electoral coalition or block formation, it is often unclear which government will be formed after elections. While the voters may try to ensure that certain coalitions are possible and others are not, they do not directly decide which party or coalition of parties gets into executive power. Secondly, the lengthy and painstaking negotiation process leaves the country with a caretaker government with no full policy agenda and low ambitions for many months or even the largest part of a year.

There is also concern over the dominance of the majority coalition in the government–opposition divide in political decision making, which is sometimes called ‘monism’ (see also Louwerse & Van Vonnö, *this volume*). In most political conflicts, government ministers and coalition party members of parliament (MPs) are on one side of the divide and opposition MPs are on the other side. This is seen to limit parliament’s powers of oversight and scrutiny of the government, as coalition parties almost always side with the government and opposition parties almost always must operate in a minority position. In this chapter, we examine the formation, governance during office, and termination of Dutch coalition governments. In the following section we focus on the basic features and developments over the past 30 years. Next, we present and discuss key findings in the literature on government formation, governance, and government termination in the Netherlands. We conclude by outlining an agenda for further research.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Scholarly analysis of coalition politics has long focused on the coalition formation process and circumstances of government termination, but attention is increasingly being paid to what happens during the lifetime of a government coalition: coalition governance (Bergman et al., 2021). Here we outline the key features of coalition formation, governance, and termination in the Netherlands, focusing on the national government.

Coalition Formation Process

Coalition formation in the Netherlands begins after general elections. Pre-electoral coalitions are exceptional—a left-wing pre-electoral coalition formed in the early 1970s but failed to win a parliamentary majority, and in 2023, two parties joined forces to be stronger in the election campaign. More frequent are pre-electoral *exclusions*—cases of a party stating before the elections that it will not sit in a coalition with a particular other party. Mostly, parties that are serious contenders for government participation prefer to keep their options open.

Due to the large number of parties obtaining seats in the House of Representatives and the absence of pre-electoral commitments, the bargaining situation is usually unclear, and the government formation process takes a long time. After 1945, the average post-election cabinet formation took 88 days, almost the same as Belgium (86 days), but much longer than any other western European country included in the comparative analysis of Bergman et al. (2021, p. 694). Two recent government formations, in 2017 and 2021, even took considerably longer. Minimal winning coalitions in which all parties are necessary for maintaining a majority were the most frequently formed, especially since after the merger of three Christian parties into the Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1977 (see Table 28.1). Minority coalitions are exceptional: only between 2010 and 2012 did such a coalition exist after parliamentary elections—between the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the CDA—and with a rather encompassing support deal in place with the Freedom Party (PVV) to ensure a parliamentary majority. In practice, it behaved almost as a majority coalition (Otjes & Louwerse, 2014), but it lasted only a brief time. Governments sometimes have minority status as caretakers after the resignation and departure of a coalition party, but these are only intended to last for the time it takes to organize elections and form a new government.

Since 2012, the procedure for forming a new government coalition has generally been as follows (Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021). The day after the parliamentary elections, the incumbent Speaker of the House of Representatives invites to a meeting all leaders of the parties that won seats in the elections. At that time, election results will not have been certified and the old parliament will still be sitting for another two weeks, but to avoid losing too much time, this somewhat informal meeting is held. It usually results in the appointment of one or two 'scouts' (*verkenners*) or *informateurs*, usually proposed by the largest party. They will generally explore which coalitions are more likely to find the broadest support in parliament—at least until the newly elected parliament can appoint an *informateur*. Depending on the progress made, this new *informateur* can continue exploring which parties will start negotiations and engage in discussion of policy issues. In the record-long 2021/2022 formation, it took six months even to agree on the question which parties would be involved in the bargaining process, at which point substantive negotiations still had to start. In contrast, in 2012 the two-party coalition of VVD and the Labour Party (PvdA) seemed the most likely option and the exploration phase took less than two weeks. Once it is clear from the exploratory phase which parties are most likely to be able to form a viable coalition, the substantive negotiations start. These substantive negotiations about a coalition agreement—that is, the policy programme for the new government—which are led by one or more *informateurs*, can again take up to several months. The coalition agreement is extensive and negotiations for it are the most important opportunity to make claims or gain concessions from other parties. In recent years, negotiations have been spearheaded by the party leader and a *secondant*, while party issue specialists negotiate on specific issues that are later finalized at the main bargaining table.

When the agreement is finalized, the House of Representatives appoints a *formateur*, who is normally the prospective prime minister and has meetings with candidates for

Table 28.1 Cabinet formation and termination, 1946–2023

Cabinet	Date installed	Duration of formation	Party composition	Type	Termination reason
Beel I	3 July 1946	47	KVP, PvdA	Mwc	Constitutional change
Drees I	7 August 1948	31	PvdA, KVP, CHU, VVD	Sur	Intraparty conflict
Drees II	15 March 1951	50	PvdA, KVP, CHU, VVD	Sur	Regular elections
Drees III	2 September 1952	69	PvdA, KVP, CHU, ARP	Sur	Regular elections
Drees IV	13 October 1956	122	PvdA, KVP, CHU, ARP	Sur	Conflict in coalition
Beel II	22 December 1958	10	KVP, CHU, ARP	Mwc	Caretaker, early elections
De Quay	19 May 1959	68	KVP, CHU, ARP, VVD	Sur	Regular elections
Marijnen	24 July 1963	70	KVP, CHU, ARP, VVD	Sur	Conflict in coalition
Cals	14 April 1965	46	KVP, PvdA, ARP	Sur	Conflict in coalition, defeat in parliament
Zijlstra	22 November 1966	38	ARP, KVP	Min	Regular elections
De Jong	5 April 1967	49	KVP, ARP, CHU, VVD	Mwc	Regular elections
Biesheuvel I	6 July 1971	69	ARP, KVP, CHU, VVD, DS70	Mwc	Conflict in coalition
Biesheuvel II	9 August 1972	20	ARP, KVP, CHU, VVD	Min	Caretaker, early elections
Den Uyl	11 May 1973	164	PvdA, PPR, D66, KVP, ARP	Sur	Conflict in coalition
Van Agt I	19 December 1977	272	CDA, VVD	Mwc	Regular elections
Van Agt II	11 September 1981	108	CDA, PvdA, D66	Sur	Conflict in coalition
Van Agt III	29 May 1982	17	CDA, D66	Min	Caretaker, early elections
Lubbers I	4 November 1982	57	CDA, VVD	Mwc	Regular elections
Lubbers II	14 July 1986	54	CDA, VVD	Mwc	Intraparty conflict
Lubbers III	7 November 1989	189	CDA, PvdA	Mwc	Regular elections
Kok I	22 August 1994	111	PvdA, D66, VVD	Mwc	Regular elections
Kok II	3 August 1998	90	PvdA, D66, VVD	Sur	Voluntary resignation after NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies report
Balkenende I	22 July 2002	68	CDA, LPF, VVD	Mwc	Conflict in coalition
Balkenende II	27 May 2003	112	CDA, VVD, D66	Mwc	Conflict in coalition

Table 28.1 Continued

Cabinet	Date installed	Duration of formation	Party composition	Type	Termination reason
Balkenende III	7 July 2006	8	CDA, VVD	Min	Caretaker, early elections
Balkenende IV	22 February 2007	92	CDA, PvdA, CU	Mwc	Conflict in coalition
Balkenende V	23 February 2010	0	CDA, CU	Min	Caretaker, early elections
Rutte I	14 October 2010	127	VVD, CDA	Min	Support party withdrew
Rutte II	5 November 2012	54	VVD, PvdA	Mwc	Regular elections
Rutte III	26 October 2017	226	VVD, CDA, D66, CU	Mwc	Voluntary resignation after report parliamentary inquiry
Rutte IV	10 January 2022	300	VVD, D66, CDA, CU	Mwc	Conflict in coalition

Note: Min = minority, Mwc = minimal winning coalition, Sur = surplus majority.

Sources: Louwerse and Timmermans (2022); authors.

ministerial and junior ministerial posts. Usually, the number of cabinet posts for each party and the allocation of ministries has been agreed before the *formateur* starts. The allocation of portfolios is roughly proportional to the seat share of parties in the House of Representatives. Parties try to gain portfolios that represent issues that they find important. This also involves reshuffling departmental policy responsibilities, with mergers or splits of departmental units. Furthermore, the appointment of ‘watchdog’ junior ministers (i.e. a junior minister belonging to a different party than the minister) is also quite common. After meeting with all ministers, the *formateur* writes the final report, the prospective ministers (not junior ministers) hold a *constituent meeting* in which the division of labour between ministers is finalized, and all officeholders are subsequently appointed formally by the king. While the appointment of the *formateur* may be seen as a (very weak) type of investiture vote, the House of Representatives has no further involvement in the appointment of the new government or individual ministers. As long as there is no explicit vote of no confidence, the government is considered to have the support of the House of Representatives.

These are the main characteristics of the formation process, but some important changes were made in recent decades. One change is the role of the king since 2012. Before then, the monarch consulted party leaders and official advisers (Speakers of both houses of parliament and the vice-president of the Council of State) and then appointed (*in*)*formateurs*. This procedure was not transparent about the personal influence of the

monarch as unelected head of state. For this reason, a House majority decided to change its standing orders, and since then there has been effectively no role for the king in coalition formation, except for the formal appointment of ministers at the instruction of the incoming prime minister.

The complexities of the political situation also had an impact on the negotiation process. Before the 1980s, surplus majority coalitions (i.e. coalitions containing at least one party that was not necessary for controlling a parliamentary majority) were more common (Andeweg, 2008, pp. 257–258). Since 1980, however, there have been only two surplus majority coalitions and minimal winning coalitions have become customary. Moreover, with the trend of declining support for traditional parties and increasing political fragmentation, the governmental majority in the House of Representatives has narrowed to just over 50% of the seats. The role of the Senate has also been considered more explicitly in recent years. While finding a coalition that could expect a ‘fruitful cooperation with the States-General’ (i.e. the House of Representatives *and* Senate) has usually been part of the *informateur*’s assignment, a Senate majority was usually easy to secure. Indeed, all post-electoral governments formed between 1946 and 2010 commanded a stable majority in the Senate. Due to increased electoral volatility and party fragmentation in the Senate, however, such a majority has eluded most of the governments formed since 2010. While this is a concern for negotiating parties, it has not been an obstacle for government formation. It has nevertheless complicated cabinet governance, as we will see in the next subsection, because since 2010 opposition support is often required for passing legislation in the Senate.

Coalition Governance

Multiparty governments in the Netherlands need discretion to function well. Following Lijphart’s principles of the politics of accommodation (1968), cabinet ministers must reach agreement and be able to do their policymaking work, and for this they need autonomy and non-intervention from their colleagues (Andeweg, 1988). The government must also have a sphere where it can deliberate upon and settle issues that may present an obstacle to its functioning or continuation in office.

Over time, as in many other countries, governments in the Netherlands have become much more exposed to an external environment in which all kinds of stakeholding actors influence the agenda and challenge the traditional institutions (Heimans & Timms, 2018). This has increased the internal pressure and urgency to manage the agenda and settle issues and disputes within the cabinet. In the distant past, cabinet ministers could buffer such pressure by proclaiming that any impatient stakeholder of government policy should ‘wait for our deeds’, as the mid-nineteenth-century liberal statesman Johan Thorbecke put it, but this phrase became less effective over time. Coalition governance has become a constant balancing act that includes forecasting and planning, organizing capacity for policy initiation and preparation, managing interparty, interministerial, and political-administrative relationships, and ensuring

the implementation of policy programmes. Governments need to set a policy agenda effectively and apply mechanisms of coalition governance and conflict resolution to secure their intentions are carried out during their term in office.

Coalition agreements are a crucial tool in coalition governance in the Netherlands. They are investments in the joint policy agenda and maintenance of peace among the partners in office, and this is also why it often takes several months to put them together. Coalition agreements are based largely on the electoral programmes of the participating parties, but the selection process in which issues and intentions are taken up or neglected is not straightforward. The policy agenda built during government formation is always a mixture of planning based on party programmes and reactions to issues that feature in the news and compete for attention. Thus the range of issues included in a coalition agreement covers many of the problems and topics that governments will face during their term in office. Issues may be included because they are controversial and making deals on them is part of coalitional risk management that pays off during the coalition term (Timmermans, 2003). Included in agreements are financial plans for the coming term, so that substantive policy intentions are linked to budgetary priorities. As agreements are generally considered to be authoritative—albeit not legally binding—documents for policy development, they are influenced both by the political parties directly involved and by all kinds of stakeholders seeking access to the agenda (Timmermans, 2018).

This pivotal role of coalition agreements and coordination mechanisms means that empirical research on coalition governance has moved from focusing exclusively on the stability and survival of governments to considering their policymaking activities (Bertelli & John, 2013; Budge & Keman, 1990; Klingemann et al., 1994; Martin & Vanberg, 2011) and their performance in enacting reforms (Bäck & Lindvall, 2015; Saalfeld, 2013), with a particular focus on policy agendas and coalition agreements. The policy agendas of coalition governments are being analysed to better understand how agenda setting and policy production are managed, and for this coalition agreements are a key point of departure (Timmermans & Breeman, 2014). Empirical analysis of the effects of coalition agreements in the Netherlands shows they have a streamlining effect on policy decisions and help in conflict prevention or management (Moury & Timmermans, 2013; Timmermans, 2006).

The increased pressure on Dutch governments encourages investment in written agreements to create a reference point for internal use whenever tensions arise and for external use when ministers and parties in office are held accountable. This has come with a direct role for the coalition parties in parliament and particularly for the parliamentary leaders and policy specialists. For this reason, coalition management—securing the smooth rolling out of the agenda, and preventing or resolving controversy—often involves party group leaders. Over time, the conflict management mechanisms used have moved away from the parliamentary leaders exclusively to the inner cabinet and coalition committees of key ministers and parliamentary leaders (Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021, pp. 465–469). Parties in parliament have become smaller and more numerous, and the coalition parties' need to

remain visible now puts considerable pressure on the coherence and togetherness of coalitions.

The close coordination within the coalition has evoked frustration among opposition parties, which often appear unable to force their priorities and views on government policy and suffer from the 'closed shop syndrome' once the policy agenda of the government has been settled and locked in during government formation (Timmermans, 2011). Since 2010, however, the fact that governments have lacked a Senate majority has opened up possibilities for opposition parties to influence legislation. Coordination between coalition parties remains necessary, but this bargaining and coordination process is now to some degree extended to opposition parties that are willing to consider supporting the government's legislation in the Senate.

In this process, the role of the prime minister in the Netherlands, while never really presidential, has become more important and more difficult at the same time (Fiers & Krouwel, 2005; Swinkels et al., 2017; Van Dorp & Rhodes, 2022). Still, while the prime minister may have grown stronger within his or her own party, they must be very cautious in adopting presidential characteristics in dealings with colleagues from other parties (Andeweg et al., 2020, p. 133).

Coalition Termination

Herbert Kaufman's rhetorical question 'Are governmental organizations immortal?' (1976) certainly has no affirmative answer when looking at Dutch government coalitions. Compared to administrative organizations (Kaufman's primary object of study), political coalitions encounter many threats to their continued existence. Of course, the democratic delegation of power to governments in the Netherlands is itself regulated constitutionally to end formally after four years. But many governments need repeated deep intakes of breath or intense conflict settlement to have a chance of reaching this formal end, and even then, they often do not succeed.

The limited individual power of the prime minister is also apparent with regard to government dissolution. Dutch prime ministers never call early elections at their own discretion, and when elections are held earlier than at the normally and formally scheduled date, this is because the coalition is no longer able or willing to stay in office. In decisions about coalition termination, the prime minister is therefore—and always was—*primus inter pares*. When a critical event happens in parliament, the majority basis of government can fall apart, and prime ministers must then take the lead in communicating what happens next. Votes of no confidence that obtain a majority in the House of Representatives will always include at least one government party, given that coalition governments normally have a majority basis when they start their term in office. But such votes, while provoked frequently by opposition parties, are rarely successful. The only post-war case in which a parliamentary vote led directly to the resignation of a cabinet (that was not later revoked) is 1966, when the leader of the Catholic

People's Party (KVP) introduced a motion that was interpreted by the prime minister as a motion of no confidence. A successful parliamentary vote of no confidence against the government as a whole has not happened since 1966.

In the historical development of government terminations, internal disputes within the cabinet and among their related parties in the House of Representatives or, sometimes, in the Senate over policy issues have become the primary reason for governments to end prematurely (see Table 28.1). Some governments do reach the formal end of their term, which is followed by regular elections, but since 2000 this has happened only once for a non-caretaker cabinet (Rutte II), while four cabinets resigned due to policy conflicts and two others resigned 'voluntarily' due to the presentation of a damning report on the government.

RESEARCH ON COALITION POLITICS

Coalition Formation Process

Research on government formation has long focused on predicting the type and party composition of coalitions being formed. Here the work of Dutch academics on the Netherlands and other country cases has contributed substantially to the development of the literature. De Swaan's (1973) seminal contribution on the formation of ideologically compatible governments was followed by various game-theoretical analyses in the following decades (De Vries, 1999; Hendrix et al., 2013; Van Deemen, 1990; Van Roozendaal, 1990). More recently, the focus has shifted from formal theory to statistical and case study analysis, and these studies have used the Dutch case to show how parties engage in coalition formation and how they build trust and exchange their policy views to reach agreement (Andeweg, 2011; Bäck & Dumont, 2007).

Key questions addressed in research on the Netherlands are the reason for the formation of surplus majority cabinets in the past and why minority cabinets were exceptional. The former has been linked to pillarization and the existence of three Christian-democratic parties (Andeweg et al., 2020, p. 130). Moreover, the decline of the dominant established parties has contributed to an increase in minimal winning coalitions being formed in recent decades (Keman, 2011). The formation of minority governments long seemed outside of the realm of what parties considered a reasonable outcome (Andeweg, 2011). The comparative literature also relates the occurrence of minority governments to veto points in the system, such as an investiture vote and bicameralism (Thürk et al., 2021). However, this explanation applies only partially to the Dutch case: before 2012 there was no investiture vote and after 2012 there was only a very weak type (see the section 'Background and Historical Development' above), while as for bicameralism, in recent years governments have formed that did command a majority in the House but not in the Senate.

The party composition of the coalition has also received attention, particularly the role of policy in coalition formation, the role of the CDA as a 'core' party (Van Roozendaal, 1990; Pellikaan et al., 2018), and the inclusion of radical-right populist parties in governing coalitions (De Lange, 2012). De Swaan's (1973) proposition that 'closed minimal range coalitions' would form was influential, and it offered a good explanation of coalition formation in the years when he published his work. De Lange (2012) finds that this theory also helps to explain the formation of cabinets that include radical-right populist parties, including the Balkenende-I government in the Netherlands. The Purple cabinets, on the other hand, were not predicted by the minimal range criterion because they were not connected ideologically on socio-economic policy (Andeweg, 2011, p. 149). Moreover, the fragmentation of the party system in combination with the rise of new conflict dimensions further affects the predictive power of this theory. More recent work on coalition formation, albeit generally comparative in scope, considers more fully the importance of multilevel politics and the coalition agreement in coalition formation and governance (Albala, 2018).

While most research on the duration of government formation is comparative in nature, these analyses usually pay special attention to the long formations in the Netherlands (Diermeier & Van Roozendaal, 1998; Martin & Vanberg, 2003). The most relevant question is why government formation takes so long in the Netherlands when taking place directly after elections (not for caretaker governments that are sometimes formed after a government collapse). Golder (2010) shows that bargaining complexity plays a role, in terms of both the number of legislative parties and ideological polarization (see also Ecker & Meyer, 2015). If there are more parties that have larger ideological distance on multiple issue dimensions, which is the case in the complex Dutch party system, formation is more complex. In addition to these factors, De Winter and Dumont (2008) find that higher bargaining power fragmentation, a higher proportion of extremist parties, the absence of a 'core party', a prime minister who cannot dissolve parliament, and constitutional revisions requiring a super-majority all add to the duration of government formation. These factors are (increasingly) present in the Netherlands. De Winter and Dumont (2008, p. 153) link 'Dutch exceptionalism' in terms of the length of government formation to the central position of the CDA. However, the party has lost this core position since 2010 (Pellikaan et al., 2018) and this has not resulted in quicker government formation processes, probably due to increased fragmentation and the presence of extremist parties that are excluded from the formation process.

Turning to research on the allocation of portfolios, this is mostly proportional, in line with Gamson's law (Falcó-Gimeno & Indridason, 2013). Usually, the smallest coalition parties get a little more than their parliamentary seat share would predict, but the deviations from perfect proportionality are small. Before 1951, when *informateurs* started to play an important role, the involvement of the monarch resulted in a 'bonus' for the *formateur* in terms of the number of portfolios held, but this has not been the case since (Akirav & Cox, 2018). While the number of portfolios is thus relatively straightforward, determining which parties gets which portfolios is perhaps an equally important question. Ecker et al. (2015) propose that this process is sequential, whereby parties

choose their most preferred portfolio by taking turns. Whose turn it is to choose is best predicted by the D'Hondt formula, which favours larger parties. The choice of portfolio depends on both the 'objective' importance of a portfolio and the ideological preferences of the party. One mechanism that assists in portfolio allocation is portfolio reform (Sieberer et al., 2021), particularly via an assignment of non-departmental ministers that can relate to the specific priorities of coalition parties (Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021, p. 462). The use of non-departmental ministers expanded substantially between 2012 and 2023.

Coalition Governance

In the international literature on coalition governance, the research focus has shifted from government formation and termination to the lifetime of governments and the way coalition policy is produced (Bergman et al., 2021). While the Netherlands is included in many comparative analyses of coalition governance that address aspects of the coalition life cycle, there are also studies zooming in more specifically and in detail on the way the policy agenda evolves in the Netherlands and how mechanisms of coalition governance are applied.

The general features of coalition governance in the Netherlands have been presented by Andeweg (2011), Timmermans and Andeweg (2008), and Louwerse and Timmermans (2021). Like the lengthier and more uncertain government formation process, tensions within the coalition, in both the parliamentary and executive arena, have become more visible and for this reason mechanisms of conflict containment and settlement need to be operative almost daily. While not all controversies within Dutch coalition governments are party political—many are about interdepartmental issues—the potential for such 'lower' politics to escalate into 'high politics' means that management of policy issues is key.

The Coalition Agreement

The coalition agreement has been central to managing coalition governance. Coalition research shows that agreements have a positive effect on the lifetime of governments (Krauss, 2018), and they help in conflict resolution because the deals in them provide a reference point whenever matters become politically tense (Klüver & Bäck, 2019; Timmermans, 2006). Since the 1960s, coalition agreements have always been drafted and published; these vary in length, scope, and level of detail (Timmermans, 2006).

The coalition agreement to a large degree reflects the election manifestos of the negotiating parties, but other actors also try to influence its contents. After a government formation is concluded, the files kept by the *informateurs* and their secretariat contain hundreds of lobby papers submitted during the successive rounds of interparty negotiations (Timmermans, 2018). Such input may or may not be considered, and this is itself a selection process that is even more lacking in transparency than the interparty negotiations themselves that happen in the venues of government formation—as Petersen

and De Ridder (1986) have called it, the ‘institutionalized extra-institutional arena’. By and large, analysis of the government formation of 2017 shows that those policy topics where lobbying organizations, groups, or citizens presented their wishes by teaming up and with an emphasis on the public interest had a higher likelihood of being included in the coalition agreement than when they tried to plug in their corporate or other type of self-interest (Timmermans, 2018). Advocates who are traditional allies with one of the negotiating parties also benefit more from making requests (Romeijn, 2021).

Empirical analysis of the topics on the policy agenda shows a pattern of rise and decline in the prominence of issues (Timmermans & Breeman, 2014). After almost two decades of increasing attention to the writing of coalition agreements and making sense of what these documents were meant for in the 1960s and 1970s, they became comprehensive documents in the early 1980s. This practice consolidated in the 1990s and at the turn of the century the number of issues included went down. But in the 2010s, parties again felt the need to expand what they would schedule in advance for governmental attention, and thus agreements again became longer and included a broader range of subjects.

The analysis of topics in coalition agreements shows how some get almost constant attention and others are exchanged according to the sense of urgency. The economy, foreign affairs, and the structure and reform of the political and administrative apparatus of government are the most prominent over time (Jennings et al., 2011). Issues relating to the welfare state, such as the environment, health, and the labour market, have also evolved, and attention to the economy depends considerably on international developments in markets and monetary issues, as the open economy of the Netherlands is sensitive to European and global trends. This relates to research findings about the core functions of modern governments (Jennings et al., 2011). What are core issues and what is ‘vital’ to coalition government functioning is part of the historical development of policy-making responsibilities, but it is also a subject of coalition bargaining and depends on the way governments process signals from their social and economic environment, as for example with the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and refugee issues. Even when topics receive modest levels of attention, once they are included in a broad coalition agreement they are usually on the agenda in the following years, and they may become more salient and receive higher priority.

Figure 28.1 shows the scope of coalition agreements over time, measured as the number of subtopics included according to the Comparative Agendas Project classification.¹ The correlation between the length of agreements and their policy scope is 0.64, which indicates that including more issues in the document is in part a matter of agenda capacity expansion, but also shorter agreements can be stuffed with many different subtopics. Since coalition agreements have a conflict prevention or containment function, the manifest or latent differences between parties in positions and in emphasis on which matters are urgent induces such policy stuffing.

¹ The maximum possible scope is equal to the sum of subtopics in that classification: 220 in the Netherlands.

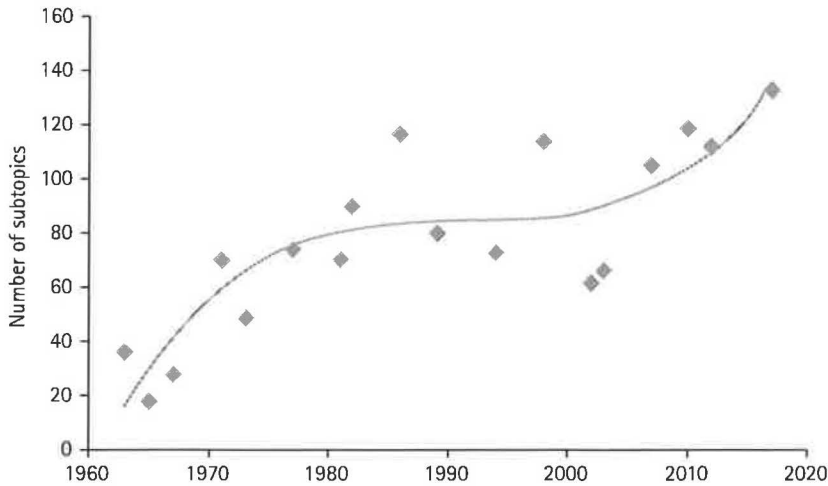


FIGURE 28.1 Policy scope of coalition agreements in the Netherlands, 1963–2017

Source: Netherlands Policy Agendas Project (www.comparativeagendas.net).

The Changing Policy Agenda

As Breeman and Timmermans (*this volume*) explain, the policy agenda is not static during a term in office. Attention shifts, even though the coalition agreement sets the governmental policy agenda. Such shifts do not necessarily contradict what was announced in the coalition agreement: some points in the agreement may require fleshing out and some new issues may arise. We may call this constant consideration and reconsideration of attention to topics *policy agenda updating*. One way in which coalitions update their policies is through the annual Speech from the Throne, in which government concerns and intentions are announced. While core issues such as the economy and foreign affairs feature in it every year, the attention paid to issues like the organization of the state, the functioning of government, and the position of the Netherlands in international organizations varies considerably from year to year (Breeman et al., 2009).

The timing and focus of legislative activity is another way in which coalitions can update their policy agendas (Timmermans & Breeman, 2014). Typically, when taking office, ministers need to familiarize themselves with their department and their role. For this reason, bills usually begin to emerge in the second year in office, and seen over a longer time, there are cycles of legislative output. This pattern resembles the political business cycle model, in which governments time policy delivery to win elections (Nordhaus, 1975). In a coalition government context, such strategic timing is often thwarted by institutional and political thresholds and delays, which mean that bills initiated by one government may be ratified and implemented only by the next government in office. This is reflected in comparative work in which Dutch governments were found to submit bills later during their term in office than governments in other European countries (Martin, 2004). The legislative output cycles in the Netherlands are

not clearly related to the party-political composition of governments, in that centre-left coalitions do not produce significantly more laws than centre-right governments.

A third way in which government can update its policy agendas is through the budget. There is some evidence of the impact of the party composition of the coalition, if we look at budgetary spending in the period 1951–2010.² The government participation of a left-wing party (almost always the Labour Party) does not matter for the total size of expenditure, but it affects the allocation of budgets to policy topics (Bolhuis & Timmermans, 2015). The more left-wing a coalition government, the higher the growth rates of expenditure on public services, and to a lesser degree, social security and education. Governments with a centre-right profile spend slightly more on law and order and defence, but this is not a pronounced difference. Coalition composition thus matters to priorities in spending for some topics, but not for others. Party profiling effects are limited due to a lack of wholesale alternation: a new government has always included at least one of the parties of the previous government. The Dutch consensus tradition thus seems to smooth out large differences in attention and spending of governments of different party composition. Moreover, as the Netherlands is a small country with an open economy, international developments, the world economy, and international migration also impact decisions on where governments need to spend. This suggests that a ‘Downsian model’ of public spending, which assumes that politicians are not guided by ideology but are oriented towards policy choices that attract the most voters (Downs, 1957), is most applicable to the Dutch case, and we find patterns consistent with the ‘Partisan model’ only on some issues (Bräuninger, 2005).

Managing Coalition Consensus and Continuation

While coalition governance mechanisms may be used to control the policy production process and avoid conflict escalation, pressures from outside make agenda management in coalitions a hard task. What mechanisms are used for policy streamlining and conflict management? Here, it is useful to consider two types of tension and conflict that may arise: interdepartmental conflicts between ministers as heads of their administrative organizations, and interparty conflicts in which entire coalition parties are in confrontation with each other (Andeweg, 1988). As the stakes are higher in interparty conflicts, compromising is harder and the need for effective resolution mechanisms is therefore pressing. While interparty conflicts over values and principles are less frequent than interdepartmental conflicts over budgets, competencies, and more technical problem definitions, they have a higher risk of escalation. One example is the dispute

² The data on spending are drawn from metadata provided by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB), which gives an overview of the expenditures over the period 1951–2010. The CPB dataset differentiates eight spending categories: public services, defence, infrastructure, education, care, social security, transfers to corporations, and international cooperation. For analysing changes in government expenditure, the CPB spending category budgets are converted to yearly nominal percentage growth rates of a spending category budget, corrected for the effect of prices on gross domestic product, which provides a better indicator of political conditions for spending priorities (Bos, 2006).

over migration policy that led to the fall of the Rutte IV government in July 2023. In addition, internal debate within parties over policy positions may push issues to the level of interparty conflict, as party leaders feel the need to be responsive to their rank and file and take a firmer stance towards their partners in the coalition.

Research on conflict management shows the repertoire of arenas used and tools employed to keep the politics of accommodation going (Andeweg & Timmermans, 2008; Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021; Moury & Timmermans, 2013). Informal cabinet committees consist of varying groups of ministers sitting down to settle matters that need coordination or early detection to avoid conflicts. They are more relevant than the formal subcouncils of the Council of Ministers that meet weekly in the prime minister's department. While the Council of Ministers is the formally recognized venue for cabinet meetings, it is used more for general deliberation and information exchange than for resolving disputes. When controversial issues arrive on the agenda in the Council of Ministers, it also becomes more difficult to downscale them. Formal cabinet meetings are closely scrutinized by the coalition parties, the opposition, and the media, and this all adds to the stakes for those inside. Managing cabinet committees themselves is already becoming more difficult as more parties are participating in the coalition government, each of which also normally provides a vice-prime minister.

For this reason, apart from informal cabinet committees, some other arenas of conflict prevention and settlement have institutionalized for continued coalition governance. With increasing fragmentation in the parliamentary arena, securing the support and shared views of the leaders of the parliamentary groups of coalition parties is conditional to survival. Hence such meetings have become part of the regular weekly schedule for coalition party leaders from the executive and legislative branches, referred to as 'Turret meetings', named after the small tower at the historical governmental site where the prime minister's office is located. Sometimes extended sessions also include policy specialists. These weekly 'mini-summits' or 'cockpit talks' help to keep the government on course, enforcing the coalition agreement or developing adaptive capacity without destabilization (Meeus, 2018; Niemantsverdriet et al., 2016). Even though the exact combination of political leaders involved in these types of top talks varies, they remain a consistent feature of coalition coordination in the Netherlands.

Coalition Termination

In the scholarly literature, government termination is often seen in different ways, varying between deterministic models based on properties of coalitions, such as their size and the policy distance between coalition partners, and models placing critical focus on events (Strøm et al., 1988). Another approach is more voluntary, emphasizing the strategic timing of elections that maximizes the expected benefits from voter support—that is, for the one party that does the strategic timing—and, in this way, pushes the coalition government out of office (Lupia & Strøm, 1995). However, for a coalition system with a consensus tradition, such as exists in the Netherlands, the increasingly uncertain

results of parliamentary elections—whether held early or normally scheduled—make the rational calculation and anticipation of electoral rewards even more problematic, and we thus see little evidence of this approach. As we noted above, most Dutch governments that end prematurely do so because ministers and parties within the government have disputes over policy issues.

CONCLUSION: OPEN QUESTIONS AND A RESEARCH AGENDA

Coalition governments in the Netherlands face rising hazard rates: with political fragmentation it has become harder to build and maintain stable political majorities, while the demands for policy and agenda responsiveness are ever louder. The party system and the policy topics on which parties profile themselves have evolved to a truly multi-dimensional space of intense and constant competition. Electoral success of new parties and decline of traditional parties have made the point of departure for forming majority coalitions more problematic. The mechanisms to control the policy production process and avoid conflict escalation are exposed to more pressure, both internally and externally to the cabinet. While for decades, the dominance of the majority coalition in the government–opposition divide called ‘monism’ prevailed (see also Louwerse & Van Vonn, *this volume*), this political opportunity structure has now shifted to give more space to legislators in both houses of parliament. Risk management for parties in office has brought political strategy and communication advisers into the departmental corridors and offices of cabinet ministers, in order to buffer the many challenges they face. When conflict appears unmanageable and the government decides to resign, it moves into a limbo period of caretaker governance in which policy ambitions must be limited and controversial issues are postponed.

This changing context of coalition governance in Dutch politics calls for new research questions to be taken up and answered. One theme for further research is the way in which the changing bargaining environment, with its increasingly fragmented party system and new issues entering the scope of party competition, leads to changes in government formation and governance mechanisms. Building on Andeweg’s (1988) useful distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces in coalition governments, these forces have become more dynamic and are putting major pressure on functioning and performance. Coalition governance mechanisms as we have seen them will need to be studied in conjunction with the evolving repertoire of ministers for political survival. This includes developing media relationships and the engagement of the departments they lead with external stakeholders and citizen groups.

Another topic that deserves further study is how election campaigns involve the direction of attention to topics on which parties can assume political responsibility. Campaigns are always a mix of owned issues, on which parties can profile, and those

issues on which their opponents attack them. How does this play out in the government formation that follows? One specific research topic relating to this is how cases of policy implementation failure feed back to agenda setting when new governments are formed, and how parties (old and new) put these matters forward in reform plans.

Furthermore, in the increasingly fragmented and volatile Dutch political environment, a better understanding of executive–legislative relations is necessary, especially in relation to opposition parties whose support may be necessary. Finally, aiming for more cross-fertilization and integration of the two disciplines of political science and public administration, which in the Netherlands often still stand apart, more theoretical and empirical work on the interaction between coalition and party politics and departmental politics would be useful. Such work might explore, for example, the way in which policymaking in coalition governments shifts up and down between ‘high’ politics in coalition summits and ‘low’ politics within and between government departments.

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