The ever-changing and ever-stable Dutch party system

Otjes, S.P.; Lange, S. de; Louwerse, T.; Hart, P. 't; Ham, C. van

The Oxford Handbook of Dutch Politics

Sarah de Lange (ed.) et al.

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198875499.001.0001

Published online: 23 January 2025 **Published in print:** 31 October 2024 **Online ISBN:** 9780191987380 **Print ISBN:** 9780198875499

CHAPTER

26 The Ever-Changing and Ever-Stable Dutch Party System

Simon Otjes, Sarah de Lange

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198875499.013.26 Pages 437–456

Published: 23 January 2025

Abstract

Since the early 1990s, the Dutch party system has shown signs of both continuity and change. The effective number of parties has risen to a historic high, as has the level of volatility. New political parties have entered parliament and support for traditional parties has declined. Moreover, new coalition formulae have been explored. However, the spatial structure of the party system has been two-dimensional since the early 1990s, with parties taking up relatively stable positions in the political space. Moreover, despite experiments with new government formulae, the most important feature of the Dutch party system remains the partial alternation in office. It is therefore difficult to argue that genuine party system change has taken place in the Netherlands.

Keywords: party system, party families, fragmentation, two-dimensionality, partial alternation

Subject: Comparative Politics, European Union, Politics

Series: Oxford Handbooks

Collection: Oxford Handbooks Online

Introduction

The study of party systems has been central to the European political science tradition. Describing existing party systems, in terms of both their numerical properties and their structure of competition, has been a key undertaking by prominent founders of the field, such as Duverger (1964), Blondel (1968), and Sartori (1976). Moreover, understanding why frozen cleavages created stable party systems throughout most of the twentieth century (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) and grasping the process of their unfreezing (Mair, 1990, 1998) has been a central objective of party system scholars. In more recent years, the focus has shifted to understanding the strategic behaviour of individual parties within the party system, theorizing for example about the conditions under which parties put new issues on the agenda (Hobolt & De Vries, 2020) or respond to new competitors (Meguid, 2005).

The Dutch party system has always been of great interest to international students of politics and has been studied as part of each of the types of research outlined above. This interest stems from the many parties in the Dutch system and, more specifically, the wide array of new parties that have made it into parliament since the introduction of proportional representation. Some scholars have argued that the Netherlands is therefore the perfect country to examine party system change (Wolinetz, 1988). After all, with new parties propagating new ideologies, or creating and servicing new electoral niches, the patterns of competition and cooperation between parties might become upset.

Upon closer inspection, however, the Dutch party system has a number of features that appear to have been relatively stable since the introduction of proportional representation. Most notably, government coalitions have almost always been formed from the centre, suggesting centripetal tendencies underpinning party
p. 438 interactions. As a ↳ result, most studies classifying the Dutch party system have labelled it a limited or moderate multiparty system (Lijphart, 1999; Sartori, 1976; Wolinetz, 2003), making it most similar to the Finnish and Belgian party systems.

Since the 1990s, however, the Dutch party system has been in a state of flux (De Lange, 2018; Pellikaan et al., 2018; Pennings & Keman, 2008). The decline of the three traditional 'core' parties (Smith 1989) of the system—the Christian-democratic CDA, the conservative-liberal VVD, and the social-democratic PvdA—and the rise of niche parties, and especially the populist radical right, has fundamentally changed the composition of parliament. But has it also led to party system change in the Netherlands?

In this chapter, we examine the Dutch party system, focusing on Dutch parties in the plural: we look at parties as members of ideological families and as part of a party system—that is, as bearers of political ideologies that compete and cooperate to gain power in structured ways. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the main Dutch party families, followed by an analysis of key features of the Dutch party system: its numerical characteristics, its spatial characteristics, and the patterns of interactions that can be detected when parties compete for, and cooperate in, office. We conclude the chapter with a characterization of the current state of the Dutch party system and offer several avenues for further research.

The Dutch Party Families

On the basis of their shared programmatic orientations, their transnational links, their historical origins, and their name, political parties can be classified as belonging to the same party family (Mair & Mudde, 1998). In this chapter, we use the term 'party family' as a rough translation of the Dutch term '*politieke stromingen*' (political currents), which refers to like-minded parties that share sociological support bases and/or historical origins. Historically, Dutch political scientists have identified three main party families: Christian democrats, socialists, and liberals (De Beus et al., 1989). Each of these families consists of multiple parties: one large party representing a mainstream interpretation of the ideology and multiple small challenger parties presenting more radical versions of the same ideology, which Lucardie (2000) calls 'purifiers'. We briefly discuss each of the three families and their members, without going too much into their history.[1]

Established Party Families

In the contemporary party system, the Christian-democratic party family consists of the *Christen-*
p. 439 *Democratisch Appèl* (Christian Democratic Appeal, CDA), the Christian-social ↳ *ChristenUnie* (Christian Union, CU),[2] and the Christian-conservative *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (Political Reformed Party, SGP). The central notion in their shared ideology is that state, market, and society each have their own responsibility. Since the 1990s, the CDA, the most successful and most important party in the Christian-democratic family, has positioned itself as a communitarian party and emphasized the importance of norms and values (Van Kersbergen, 2008; Van Kersbergen & Krouwel, 2008). The CU and SGP have different roots in the complicated family tree of Dutch Protestantism (Koole, 1995). Despite a shared moral conservativism that includes the rejection of euthanasia and abortion, the two parties disagree fundamentally about the position of women in society, with the SGP opposing female suffrage in principle and until 2005 barring women as members. Moreover, the CU steers a centre-left course on economic, immigration, and environmental issues, while the SGP has outspoken right-wing positions on these issues, even adopting the anti-Islamic orientation of the populist radical right (Otjes, 2021).

Until the early 1990s, the CDA played a dominant role in Dutch politics. It, or one or more of its three predecessors, was continuously in office between 1918 and 1994. However, from the 1990s onwards, the party suffered serious losses, weakening its position in the Dutch party system. In the elections of 1994, for example, it lost 20 of its 54 seats, and in 2010 it lost 20 of its 41 seats. Although the party partly recovered between 2002 and 2006, its electoral development has been downwards since 2010. The gradual electoral decline of the CDA is a result of, among other factors, secularization (Te Grotenhuis et al., 2012). Despite its decline, it was still part of seven out of the ten government coalitions that formed between 1994 and 2021. The parliamentary representation of the CU has been stable, and in recent years it has become an attractive coalition partner, serving in three governments since 2007 (Voerman & Hippe, 2010). Meanwhile, the SGP has remained a stable electoral force with a conservative political orientation and constructive relations with different governments, though never participating in coalition governments (Vollaard & Voerman, 2018).

The liberal party family consists historically of two types of liberals: conservative liberals and social liberals. They differ in their view of the role of the state, with the conservative liberals favouring a night-watchman state and the social liberals being more positive about government intervention; as well as the relationship between citizen and state, with the social liberals favouring democratization and the conservative liberals favouring societal order over radical change. The *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD) belongs to the conservative-liberal tradition, while the most important social-liberal party is *Democraten 66* (Democrats 66, D66). The VVD focuses on 'liberal evergreens', such as

fiscal conservatism, law and order, and supporting homeowners and car drivers (Van der List, 2019). D66 has changed substantially in the more than half a decade of its existence, initially focusing on democratic reform and more recently campaigning on climate and education ↳ (Brummer & Otjes, 2021). A recent addition to the liberal family is the Euro-federalist party Volt, which shares many of the positions of D66 (Otjes & Krouwel, 2023).

Both liberal parties performed well in the period of depillarization, regularly participating in government. Until 2010, the VVD was always a junior member when it was part of a government coalition. Yet, the party was able to put its mark on government policy, given that mainstream economic science supported its neo-liberal economic programme (Mellink & Oudenampsen, 2022). Since 2010, the VVD has been in government continuously and has supplied the prime minister. D66 started out as rebels challenging the pillarized system. However, by the end of the 2010s, because of their centrist position on socio-economic issues and their constructive orientation, the party has become an invaluable partner or support party for many government coalitions.

The socialist party family consists of the social-democratic *Partij voor de Arbeid* (Labour Party, PvdA) and the socialist and populist *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party, SP). The PvdA has always been committed to the fair distribution of labour, income, knowledge, and power. However, its position in the Dutch party system has changed considerably over time. Directly after the Second World War, it was responsible for the rebuilding of the Netherlands together with the predecessors of the CDA. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, it sought to expand its support by strong polarization against the right, which made it difficult for the PvdA to govern with the Christian democrats and impossible for it to govern with the VVD. It returned to a more conciliatory strategy in the late 1980s and participated in the groundbreaking Purple cabinets together with the VVD and D66 in the 1990s. This coincided with adopting a 'Third Way' orientation as one of the first social-democratic parties in Europe to do so (Oudenampsen, 2021). Since its earthquake electoral defeat in the 2002 elections, the PvdA has been in search of a viable agenda but has not yet settled on a fixed course (Voerman & Becker, 2016). Since then, its electoral decline has speeded up, cumulating in a devastating defeat in 2017, in which the party lost three quarters of its seats. The party has—so far—been unable to overcome this *pasokification*.[3] Since 2021 it has intensified its cooperation with *GroenLinks* (GreenLeft, GL) (see the next subsection), including negotiating as one block in the 2021 coalition formation. The SP, which traces its roots to a Maoist split in the *Communistische Partij Nederland* (Communist Party Netherlands, CPN), takes considerably more radical stances than the PvdA. In addition to adhering to a socialist economic agenda rather than a social-democratic one, the SP also has a Eurosceptic profile and employs populist rhetoric (Lucardie & Voerman, 2019).

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New Party Families

With an extremely open electoral system and with depillarization weakening the links between parties and voters (see Van der Kolk, *this volume*; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, *this volume*), the Netherlands has become a hotbed for new political parties since the 1960s (Krouwel & Lucardie, 2008). In the last 30 years, a whole range of parties has entered parliament, most importantly those espousing postmaterialism and radical right-wing populism. Between the late 1950s and the 1980s, a new generation of parties with postmaterialist ideals entered parliament, including the *Pacifistische Sociale Partij* (Pacifist Social Party, PSP), the *Politieke Partij Radicalen* (Political Party of Radicals, PPR), the *Evangelische Volkspartij* (Evangelical People's Party, EVP). At the same time, postmaterialist values were also embraced by the CPN, D66, and PvdA (Rohrschneider, 1993; Wolinetz, 1976). In 1989, the CPN, PSP, PPR, and EVP merged into GL, which explicitly presented itself as part of the budding European green movement (Lucardie & Voerman, 2010). However, the fact that the PvdA adopted a postmaterialist orientation and GL has roots in the socialist party family makes it difficult to draw a hard border between the green party family and the social-democratic party family. In recent years, GL has transitioned from an oppositional force to a more constructive party. However, despite this transformation the party has not yet been included in any government coalition (Lucardie & Voerman, 2010). In 2006, a second party with a postmaterialist orientation entered parliament, the *Partij voor de Dieren* (Party for the Animals, PvdD). The party is committed to a deep-ecological, planet-wide agenda (Otjes, 2014). In the period that GL became more government oriented, the PvdD offered a more oppositional green alternative to voters (Otjes & Krouwel, 2015).

The populist radical right came late to the Netherlands in comparison to similar consensus democracies like Belgium and Austria (Kriesi et al., 2008; see also De Jonge, Rooduijn, & Zaslove, *this volume*). Populist radical-right parties only became truly successful in 2002 when the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (Pim Fortuyn List, LPF), which mobilized voters with populist rhetoric and an anti-immigration message, including depicting Islam as a threat to secular, liberal values and women's and gay rights (Akkerman, 2005), gained 26 seats in parliament. Due to the assassination of its leader Pim Fortuyn, the party collapsed within a matter of years. Its populist radical-right niche was taken over by the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party, PVV) of former VVD member of parliament Geert Wilders. This party shared the profile of the LPF on cultural matters (Vossen, 2016). On economic issues, however, the party mixes left-wing and right-wing positions (Otjes, 2019). As the PVV moved to the centre on economic issues, it opened itself to a challenge from the right. This came in the form of *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy, FVD), a party that has always flirted with extremist ideas. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the party adopted a fully fledged conspiratorial ideology. Anti-Semitic rhetoric is common in its youth organization. In response, a number of the more 'moderate' elements left the party to form *Juiste Antwoord* 2021 (Yes 2021, JA21), which seeks to offer a 'decent' populist radical-right alternative to the VVD (De Lange, 2022).

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A number of other parties has also entered parliament in recent years, but these parties do not belong to established party families. They represent the interests of specific segments of society, such as pensioners (50PLUS), farmers and residents of rural areas (*BoerBurgerBeweging*, Farmer–Citizen Movement), and ethnic groups (*BIJ1*, AsOne and *Denk*, Think/Equal). However, their representation of a specific electoral constituency does not imply that they are single-issue parties; they often have a fairly developed ideology.

A Political Science Perspective on the Dutch Party System

Central in how political scientists think about party systems is that they are more than the sum of individual parties: what matters is how they interact—compete and cooperate—to gain political power (Sartori, 1976). Only when significant changes in these interactions emerge can one speak of party system change (Mair, 1998). We will examine two perspectives on party systems and party system change: a numerical approach and a spatial approach. First, we will examine how we can classify the patterns of competition and cooperation between parties using quantitative indicators. Secondly, we will discuss how political parties position themselves on the salient lines of conflict and how these have changed in the last decades. Lastly, we will examine how changes on these two dimensions affect the patterns of competition and cooperation between Dutch parties, especially for office.

Numerical Characteristics of the Dutch Party System

One way to think about the Dutch party system is on the basis of its features that can be expressed in numerical terms, such as the absolute and effective number of parties in parliament.[4] The Netherlands has always had a relatively high (effective) number of parties as a result of its extremely proportional electoral system (see Van der Kolk, *this volume*). On average, there have been 10.3 parties represented in parliament in the period 1946 to 2021, while the average *effective* number of parties in the same period is 5.2.

However, throughout history the Netherlands has experienced periods of higher-than-average (and lower-
p. 443 than-average) fragmentation. In the post-war era, a first period ↳ of high fragmentation occurred in the early 1970s, when 14 parties were elected to the House of Representatives and the effective number of parties rose to 6.4. Contributing factors to this fragmentation were the onset of depillarization and the emergence of new, in particular postmaterialist, parties in the Netherlands (Rorschneider, 1993; Wolinetz, 1976). A second period of high fragmentation started in the early 1990s, reaching its peak in 2021 (see Figure 26.1). Between 1989 and 2021, the absolute number of parties rose from 9 to 16, while the effective number of parties more than doubled from 3.8 to 8.5. The latter development is mostly due to the fact that the largest parties in the Dutch parliament have progressively become smaller, while many smaller parties have become larger (see Figure 26.2). In 1989, for example, the CDA and PvdA together still controlled more than two thirds of the seats in parliament. By 2021 this number had dwindled to 15% of the seats.[5] Hence, the large increase in the effective number of parties is the result not only of new parties gaining access to parliament, but also of the structural decline of the three core parties described in the previous section.

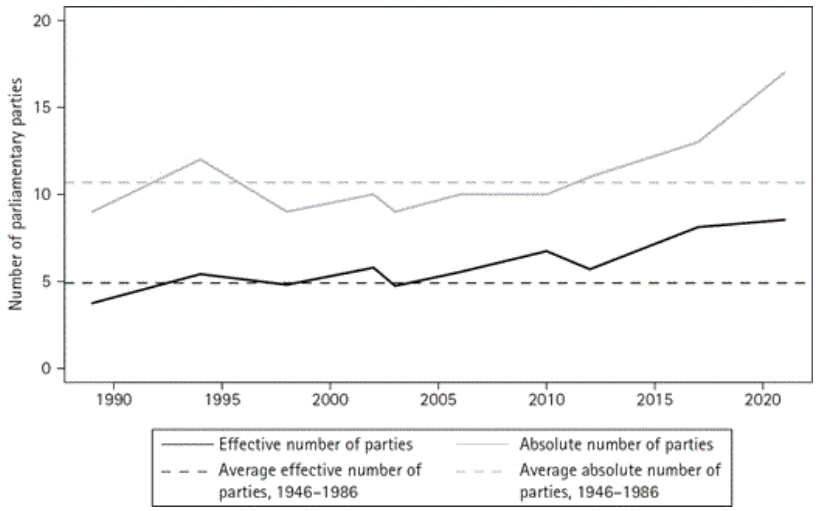

Figure 26.1 Absolute and effective number of parliamentary parties, 1989–2021

Source: ParlGov, authors' own calculations.

The current fragmentation level places the Netherlands among the most fragmented party systems in the Western world. Moreover, when the degree of fragmentation is studied over a longer period (i.e. since 1989), the Netherlands scores in the top 10% of the most fragmented parliaments, together with countries like
p. 444 Belgium, Israel, Italy, ↳ and Switzerland.[6] It is for this reason that increases in fragmentation in other countries are these days often referred to in the media as the 'Dutchification' of party politics (Bergsen, 2019).[7]

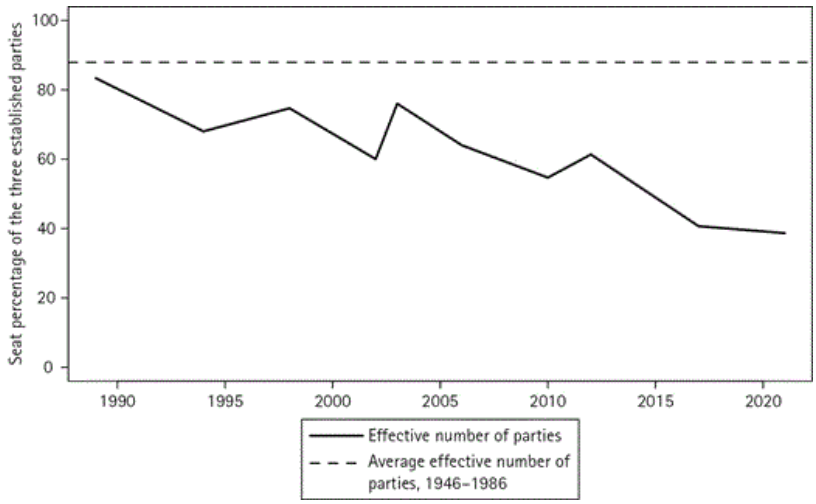

Figure 26.2 Percentage of seats held by the three core parties, 1989–2021

Source: ParlGov, authors own calculations; Interrupted line: averages 1946–1986.

The high level of fragmentation can be explained by several related factors. First, the extremely proportional Dutch system and the low registration required for elections gives new parties an incentive to form and compete for voters. Yet, under the same electoral system, the Dutch party system has been less fragmented than it is now (e.g. in the 1960s and 1980s). The decline of the core parties since this period can be attributed to the decline of the structured voting model (Van der Meer & Van der Brug, *this volume*). The electoral space left by these core parties was taken over by a wide variety of new parties. Students of new party formation emphasize that their issue agenda is an important factor when accounting for their success

(Lowery et al., 2011; Otjes & Van de Wardt, 2023). As new issues come on the political agenda, new parties can mobilize on these; if the political agenda narrows to a few issues, the room for political parties diminishes.

Spatial Characteristics of the Dutch Party System

Numerical indicators obscure some of the most important ways in which the Dutch party system has
p. 445 changed over time (De Lange, 2018), and especially do not show that ↳ the structure of competition for office and voters has changed significantly (Pellikaan et al., 2021). In order to show this transformation, a spatial analysis of the Dutch party system is instructive. By analysing the dimensionality of the Dutch political space and the positions parties take in this space, we can assess the level of polarization on key lines of conflict in Dutch politics and determine which parties are likely to cooperate in the legislative or executive arena or compete in the electoral arena.

For many scholars, the Dutch party system has always been multidimensional in nature (Ten Napel, 1999). De Beus et al. (1989) describe the post-war system as being triangular, with the three party families (social democrats, liberals, and Christian democrats) discussed above and their three most important representatives (CDA, PvdA, and VVD) forming the three corners of an ideological triangle. In this triangle, two ideological dimensions structure party interactions: a socio-economic dimension and a moral dimension.[8] Despite this multidimensionality, competition and cooperation primarily took place along the economic left–right dimension until 1994. On this dimension, the CDA was positioned in the middle, making it the pivotal party in the Dutch party system (Green-Pedersen, 2004), with the PvdA to its left and the VVD to its right. As a result, the government coalitions that were formed between 1946 and 1989 were of either centre-left (the CDA or its predecessors and the PvdA) or centre-right signature (the CDA or its predecessors and the VVD).[9]

In 1994, it became evident that the pattern of cooperation could best be captured by more than one dimension. After the CDA lost heavily in the 1994 elections, the PvdA, VVD, and D66 formed a so-called Purple cabinet, which united the left and right and excluded the centre. At this point in time, two lines of conflict were particularly salient to these parties: an economic dimension that included the role of the government in the economy and the redistribution of income, and a moral or ethical dimension that focused on issues related to gender, sexuality, and medical ethics (Pellikaan et al. 2003; see also Trappenburg, *this volume*). On this, the CDA had a conservative position and D66, the VVD, and the PvdA were more progressive. The formation of the Purple government was possible because these parties agreed on moral issues and were slowly converging on economic issues.[10] As the Purple governments legalized euthanasia, prostitution, and same-sex marriage, the most pressing moral issues were resolved. However, electoral
p. 446 competition during this period remained two-dimensional, with the ↳ CDA appealing to centrist and morally conservative voters, and the VVD and PvdA targeting voters who were morally progressive but shared their right-wing and left-wing economic views respectively (Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2008).

The year 2002 saw a major change in the structure of party competition, when Pim Fortuyn founded the populist radical-right LPF and politicized the issues of immigration and integration. According to Pellikaan et al. (2003), these issues were part of a broader cultural dimension that replaced the moral dimension in the Dutch political space. This cultural dimension focuses on closed versus open societies and separates parties that favour a multicultural society that is open to immigration from parties that attach importance to a *Leitkultur* and want to restrict immigration. This two-dimensional understanding of party competition in the 2000s is not unique to the Netherlands and has been propagated on a European level by among others Kitschelt (1994) and Kriesi et al. (2008).[11]

Many scholars have examined Dutch politics, and particularly electoral competition and governmental cooperation between Dutch parties, through the lens of a two-dimensional space constructed along an economic and a cultural opposition (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; De Lange, 2007, 2018; De Vries, 2018; Pellikaan et al. 2007, 2018).[12] Figure 26.3 shows where the Dutch parties discussed in the first section of the chapter are located in this political space. The figure also shows that the positions of the parties are relatively stable over time.

Why the cultural dimension replaced the moral dimension in the political space has been a hotly debated topic in Dutch academia. Based on fragmentary empirical evidence, it can probably be partly understood as a consequence of the way in which mainstream parties responded to the rise of the populist radical right in the Netherlands. Dutch mainstream parties have adopted either an accommodative or adversarial strategy (Meguid, 2005), in both cases acknowledging the legitimacy of the issue of immigration and integration on which the populist radical right campaigns, and indicating that they will prioritize this issue for competition
p. 447 (Van Kessel, 2021; Van Klingeren et al., 2017).[13] While these issues were gaining salience prior to the rise of
↳ the populist radical right, some mainstream parties, and particularly the conservative-liberal VVD, responded quite directly to its success by devoting more attention to them (Van Kersbergen & Krouwel, 2008). Equally importantly, most mainstream parties also reacted to the success of the populist radical right by adopting its frames when discussing immigration and integration issues. Over time, the cultural integration of immigrants, as opposed to their economic integration, has become the main focal point of the Dutch debate (Van Heerden et al., 2014). In addition, mainstream parties have reacted by adopting more restrictive stances on immigration and integration issues (Davis, 2012). A shift from more multicultural to more monocultural positions can be observed in the manifestos of the larger mainstream parties, the CDA, PvdA, and VVD, albeit to a varying extent. The centre-right parties, the CDA and VVD, have moved to the
p. 448 'right' more rapidly than the parties of the centre and centre-left, D66, GL, PvdA, ↳ and SP (Van Heerden et al., 2014). Such positional shifts have depended both on the extent to which immigration and integration issues cause intraparty tensions (Super, 2014) and on the composition of parties' electorates (Davis, 2012; Van Heerden et al., 2014).

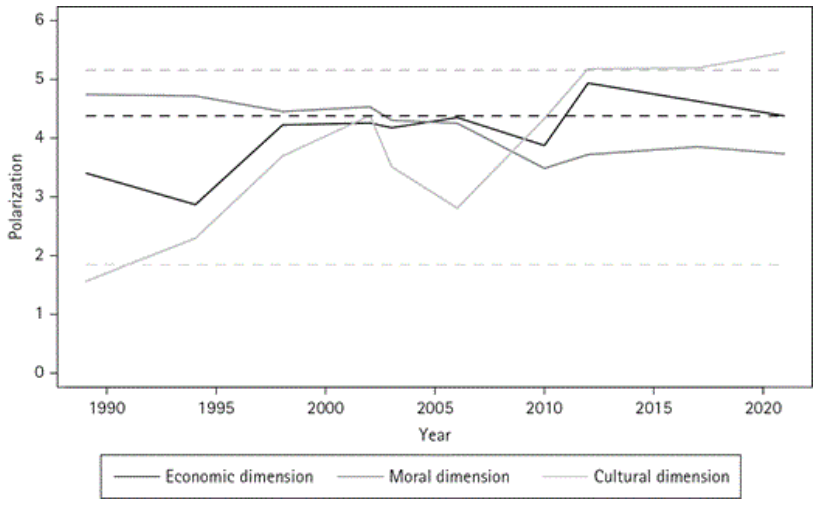

Figure 26.4 Polarization on the economic, cultural, and moral dimensions

Notes: Uninterrupted light grey line: average polarization on cultural dimension 1989–2021; Uninterrupted dark grey line: average polarization on moral dimension 1989–2021; Uninterrupted black line: average polarization on economic dimension 1989–2021; Interrupted light grey line: average polarization on cultural dimension 1971–1986; Interrupted dark grey line: average polarization on moral dimension 1971–1986; Interrupted black line: average polarization on economic dimension 1971–1986.
Source: Combination of Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al., 2017; Bakker et al., 2015; Laver & Hunt, 1992; Laver & Mair, 1999; Benoit & Laver, 2006) and V-Dem (Lührmann et al. 2020); authors own calculations.

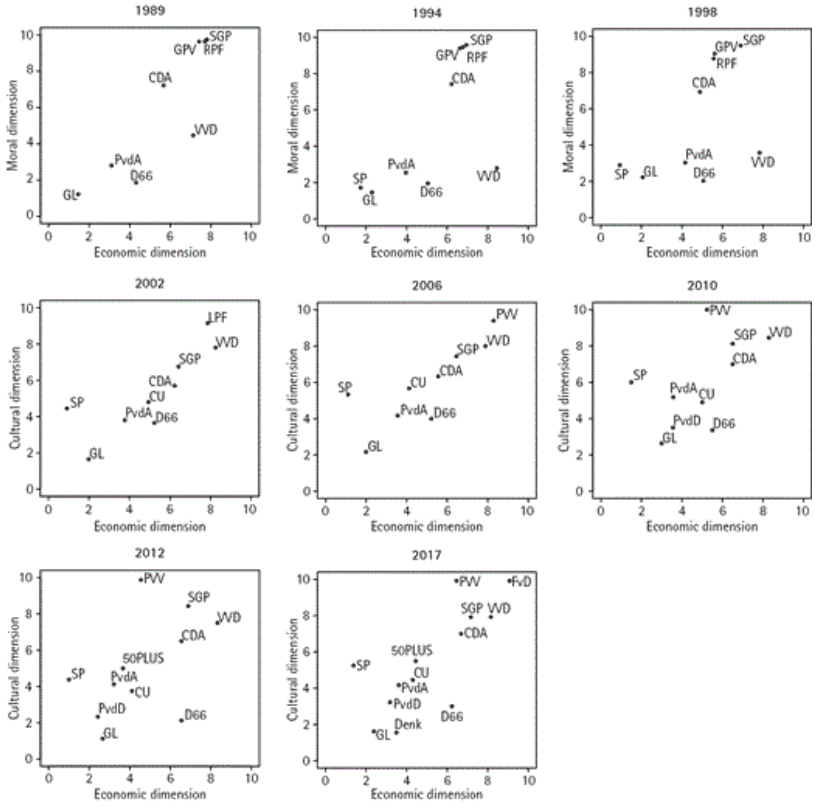

Figure 26.3 Two-dimensional models of the Dutch party system, 1989–2017

Source: author-generated combination of Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017; Benoit & Laver, 2006, Laver & Mair, 1999) and V-Dem (Lührmann et al. 2020).

In addition to individual parties' positions on key dimensions of competition and cooperation, another important characteristic of party systems is the extent to which parties are polarized on these dimensions. Polarization is the extent to which parties are distributed on a dimension (Dalton, 2008). They can all be concentrated close to the average position, or they can be distributed equally over the dimension.[14] Figure 26.4 shows the polarization on the economic, moral, and cultural dimensions between 1989 and 2021, and relates this to levels of polarization on these dimensions in the period 1971–1986. The figure demonstrates that in 1989, Dutch parties were most polarized on the moral dimension and least polarized on the cultural dimension. The economic dimension fell in between these two extremes. In subsequent decades, the
p. 449 polarization on the moral dimension declines somewhat, as the morally conservative parties lose ↳ votes. At the same time, the polarization on the cultural dimension increases sharply, particularly between 1989 and 2002. By 2021, the cultural dimension shows the highest level of polarization. The polarization on the economic dimension also increases during this period, particularly in the second half of the 1990s. The figure also allows for comparison between the average level of polarization in the period 1971–1986 and the levels of polarization since 1989. This comparison demonstrates that positions on the cultural dimension have become clearly much more polarized over time, while polarization on the economic dimension has remained relatively stable. Polarization on the moral dimension, however, was higher in the period prior to 1989 than in the period after this year. However, it should be noted that the importance of the moral dimension in Dutch politics fluctuated significantly during the latter period. All in all, these results show that until the 1990s, the Dutch system was clearly polarized on the economic and moral dimensions, and that by the 2010s, the cultural and economic dimensions were showing the highest levels of polarization.

Conflict, Cooperation, and Government Formation in the Dutch Party System

In the two-dimensional space that structures party competition in the Netherlands, and with high levels of fragmentation, government formation is far from easy (Louwerse & Timmermans, *this volume*; Pellikaan et al., 2018). Under these conditions, the core parties have shown a relative openness to governing with new parties, or small parties without much government experience. D66, for example, was essential for the formation of the Purple cabinet in 1994. In 2002 the LPF entered government, followed by the CU which joined in 2007, and from 2010 to 2012 the PVV supported a minority government. Since 2012, the CU and D66 have also been essential government partners to keep Mark Rutte's centre-right governments in office. Thus, the openness to new coalition compositions and the inclusion of parties without prior government experience in coalitions is a core feature of the Dutch party system.

Another key characteristic of coalition formation in the Netherlands is that at least one party stays in government while others leave and enter (see Table 26.1), a phenomenon that Mair (1997) has dubbed 'partial alternation'. As the Netherlands has only seen partial alternation since 1918, the complete absence of wholesale alternation is perhaps the most consistent characteristic of the Dutch party system. Between 1977 and 1994, the CDA was in government continuously.[15] After its defeat in the 1994 election, the PvdA and VVD were able to cooperate in the Purple governments because the PvdA had needed to moderate its
p. 450 position to be able to govern with the CDA (Green-Pedersen, ↳ 2004). The PvdA, VVD, and CDA (and before 1977, the KVP) are the core parties of the system. This can perhaps best be seen from the fact that every non-caretaker cabinet since 1946 has consisted of at least two of these parties.

Table 26.1 Governing formula and access to government

Year	Parties	New formula
1989	CDA, PvdA	No[a]
1994	PvdA, VVD, D66	Yes
1998	PvdA, VVD, D66	No
2002	CDA, **LPF**, VVD	Yes
2003	CDA, VVD, D66	Yes
2007	CDA, PvdA, **CU**	Yes
2010	VVD, CDA	No[b]
2012	VVD, PvdA	Yes
2017	VVD, CDA, D66, CU	Yes
2021	VVD, D66, CDA, CU	No

Note: Parties ordered by size in lower house, parties without prior government experience in bold.

a Technically, this was the first CDA–PvdA government. Yet between 1952 and 1958, the PvdA had governed with all the predecessors of the CDA. Moreover, between 1946 and 1952, and 1965 and 1966, the PvdA governed with at least one of the predecessors of the CDA, and between 1981 and 1982, the PvdA governed with the CDA and D66.

b Not classified as new because the CDA and VVD had governed together between 1982 and 1989. Yet in its status as a minority government with PVV support, the cabinet was new.

Partial alternation often occurs in multiparty systems with low levels of polarization (Otjes, 2020). It is characteristic of party systems in Austria, Belgium, Finland, and Germany. However, the Netherlands is the only European country that has never experienced wholesale alternation since the introduction of universal suffrage. This makes the Dutch party system fundamentally different from other multiparty systems. The effect of the prominence of partial alternation in the Netherlands has been the subject of speculation (Andeweg, 2003), but it has never been explored systematically. It may give citizens the feeling that their vote cannot affect government formation (Irwin & Van Holsteyn 2011) and might lead to lower levels of retrospective voting (Otjes & Stiers, 2022) and lower turnout (Otjes & Willumsen, 2019).

An important element of a party system is how parties cooperate and compete for power. Following Mair (1997), Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2016) propose that party systems may be more or less closed. They measure party system closure by making an index of the occurrence of wholesale alternation, familiar government formulae, and the absence of new government parties. If we look at these indicators, the
p. 451 Netherlands has become less stable in recent years. Of the 43 European countries analysed by Casal ↳ Bértoa and Enyedi (2016), between 1918 and 2023 the Netherlands scored very close to the median in terms of party system stability (with Switzerland on top, Lithuania on the bottom, and countries with partial alternation, such as Iceland and Belgium, close to the Netherlands). If we look at the value since 1989, however, the Netherlands scores much lower, as a smaller proportion of the parties in government returned to government, new parties entered government, and more innovative formulae were tried compared to the post-war period. All the indicators imply that the level of 'closure' of the Dutch party system is lower than it once was.

Conclusions and Avenues for Further Research

Since the early 1990s, the Dutch party system has shown signs of both continuity and change. On the surface, change is more manifest. The effective number of parties has risen to a historic high, as has the level of volatility. Many new political parties, especially of a populist radical-right signature, have entered parliament. Their support has been growing, while that of the three 'core' parties, the VVD, PvdA, and CDA, has declined. Moreover, polarization on the dimension along which these parties compete, namely the cultural dimension, has increased significantly. At the same time, the level of polarization on the moral dimension has declined. Many new coalition formulae have been explored, with the CDA, PvdA, and/or VVD governing in various compositions, often with completely new parties (e.g. the LPF) or parties without previous government experience (e.g. the CU).

However, below the surface stability is visible. The spatial structure of the party system has been evidently two-dimensional since the early 1990s, with an economic dimension and first a moral and then a cultural dimension structuring the party space, and parties have taken up relatively stable positions in this space. Moreover, despite experiments with new government formulae, the most important feature of how Dutch parties cooperate and compete for power remains the partial alternation of its coalitions in office. Given the stability of this key feature, it is difficult to argue that the Dutch party system has transformed (Green-Pedersen & Vis, 2023).

However, the signs of change open up many avenues for future research. At the moment, it is not yet clear whether the high level of fragmentation is sustainable and whether it might have negative effects on the functioning of Dutch democracy. In 2017 and 2021, it made government formation extremely lengthy (225 and 299 days respectively) because only four-party coalitions could get a majority in the House of Representatives and reach a programmatic agreement. However, the degree of fragmentation could also affect the speed of policymaking, or citizens' attitudes towards an electoral system that allows for the proliferation of these parties. In these areas, little research has been conducted.

p. 452 Moreover, little is known about the way in which the absence of wholesale alternation in the Netherlands affects citizens' attitudes and behaviours. The fact that elections have never entirely removed a government in the Netherlands in more than a century, and that the parties in opposition work on the assumption that if they enter government they will join at least one of the parties currently in the cabinet, is likely to shape how citizens relate to parties and government coalitions. Preliminary evidence suggests that parliamentary decision making is more inclusive and less adversarial if members of parliament supporting the government expect that they will need to govern with opposition parties in the future (Louwerse et al., 2017). The cooperative orientation of mainstream parties could have a positive effect on citizens' satisfaction with the system. However, the absence of wholesale alternation also means that elections are not the decisive forum for who governs, which may undermine satisfaction with the system.

Moreover, the changes in the Dutch party system also make it clear that a better theoretical understanding of the conditions under which party system change occurs is required. While descriptively the changes in the Dutch party system are well documented, we know surprisingly little about why such changes occur. This is especially the case when we try to understand the transformation of the Dutch political space from a three- to a two-dimensional one and seek to account for the dominance of the cultural dimension in Dutch politics. There is some evidence that populist radical-right parties played a role in this process as catalysts which accelerated processes that had already taken off (De Lange, 2018; Van Klingeren et al., 2017). However, it remains unclear to what extent the development of a new line of conflict is a result of bottom-up processes or top-down choices, and what role political entrepreneurs play in this process. On the basis of the work of De Vries and Hobolt (2020), these processes could be studied in more detail in the Netherlands.

In addition to these substantive areas for future research, we would also like point out a methodological challenge that, in our opinion, should be tackled. We observe in the field of party system studies, and this chapter is no exception to this rule, a strong reliance on large quantitative data collection enterprises, such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the Manifesto Project, and the ParlGov dataset. These datasets provide us with standardized and therefore comparative data, and enable us to describe trends in the effective number of parties, or the level of polarization and volatility, and to answer questions about party system change using statistical tests. However, they also contain little nuance, and therefore are unable to detect many country specificities, something which can be uncovered using qualitative research. We believe that in order to understand how party systems function in different historical and national contexts, more qualitative research is necessary. It allows us to truly understand the interaction between parties, which is at the core of what party systems are about. In other words, we would like to advocate the return of the classic party system study, as advocated by Mair and Sartori, but employing the rich toolbox of qualitative methods that is at our disposal today.

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Notes

1 Excellent historical accounts of the development of the Dutch party system and its constitutive families have been provided by Koole (1995), Ten Napel (1999), and Wolinetz (1976, 1998).

2 The CU was formed in 2000 as a merger of the *Reformatorisch Politieke Federatie* (Reformed Political Federation, RPF) and the *Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond* (Reformed Political League, GPV).

3 Pasokification refers to the rapid electoral decline of social-democratic parties in Europe in the 2000s. The term originates from Greece, where the social-democratic PASOK saw its vote share decline from 43.9% in 2009 to 4.7% in 2015.

4 With the effective number of parliamentary parties being calculated as $ENPP = \frac{1}{\sum p^2}$, where *p* is the share of seats in parliament of each party (Laakso & Taagapera, 1979).

5 The pattern is slightly weaker when the third core party, the VVD, is also included in the analysis. In that case the share of seats has declined between 1989 and 2021 from more than 80% to less than 40%.

6 Source: ParlGov database of parliamentary systems.

7 https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/12/dont-be-afraid-political-fragmentation

8 Pellikaan et al. (2003) propose that a third dimension is part of the ideological triangle, namely a communitarian dimension on which the PvdA and the CDA have the same position, promoting collectivism, and oppose the VVD, advocating individualism. Analytically, two dimensions suffice to describe a triangle because the economic and communitarian dimensions are connected through parties' stances on social policies.

9 The only party that was able to breach this cartel of the big three successfully prior to 1989 was D66. It governed between 1973 and 1977 and in 1981–1982. Both the PPR and Democratic Socialists '70, a right-wing split from the PvdA, governed once in the 1970s. After their stint in government, these parties lost considerable electoral support.

10 The Third Way embraced by the PvdA on economic issues contributed to the social democrats and conservative liberals being closer together than in the 1980s.

11 There is some debate about the way in which positions on European Union (EU) integration should be incorporated into this system. There are those who see the EU dimension as part of the cultural dimension (De Vries, 2018; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009), with cosmopolitan parties favouring EU integration and immigration, and nationalist parties opposing both. Otjes (2016) points out that during the eurozone crisis, party positions on major economic reforms (e.g. raising the retirement age) followed the pro-/anti-EU dimension and differed from parties' positions on the general left–right dimension, which at that time reflected positions on migration.

12 Van der Brug (2008) and Otjes (2011) criticize the added value of the second dimension. After all, parties' positions on cultural issues are ranked in a similar way to their positions on economic issues. As a result, few parties position themselves as explicitly left-authoritarian or right-libertarian, except perhaps for D66 (economically centre right, culturally progressive) and the PVV (economically centrist and culturally very conservative).

13 Similar strategic patterns have also been detected when it comes to welfare chauvinism (Schumacher & Van Kersbergen, 2016) and Euroscepticism (Meijers, 2015), but not when it comes to democratic reform (Bedock et al., 2023).

14 While there is some effort at developing one measure for polarization along multiple dimensions (Koedam et al., 2023), we believe it is useful to look at the three dimensions separately.

15 Between 1939 and 1977 this role was performed by the *Katholieke Volkspartij* (Catholic People's Party, KVP). Between 1918 and 1939, the position was occupied by the *Christelijk-Historische Unie* (Christian-Historical Union, CHU).