



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

Boekbespreking van: De Slag om IJburg. Campagne, Media en Publiek

Anker, H.

Citation

Anker, H. (2000). Boekbespreking van: De Slag om IJburg. Campagne, Media en Publiek. *Acta Politica*, 35: 2000(1), 115-118. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450749>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450749>

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

accept Popper's reply that we *adopt* the rationalist attitude and that this adoption may be described as an irrational *faith in reason*: neither logical argument nor experience can establish the rationalist attitude. Instead, Stokes adopts Habermas's meta-ethical 'discourse ethics', which would allow for the rational selection of values. It remains unclear, however, precisely how Habermas pulls this off (Stokes admits that for non-specialists it is not easy to assess Habermas's project).

Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method covers a lot of ground. In most of the chapters, it is Stokes's working method to present first a summary of Popper's position on a certain topic, subsequently to touch upon some of the points of criticisms that have been raised against it, and then, in conclusion, to give his arguments why it is that Popper is right and the others are wrong, or vice versa. Although Stokes demonstrates an admirable grasp of Popper's work, due to the fact that he has reviewed an enormous number of subjects in scarcely more than 140 pages (chapter 8 deals with a completely separate topic), there is always the threat of superficiality. Two examples will suffice in this context, but more can easily be found. The first concerns Stokes's agreeing with Weatherford, and disagreeing with Popper, that one can accept physical determinism, without having to accept social determinism (p. 108). However, if Stokes accepts that the social world is indeterministic, and he also accepts, which he does, Popper's claim that the social world can interact with the physical world, then he must reject physical determinism. In consequence, it becomes incomprehensible why he agreed with Weatherford in the first place. The second example involves Stokes's treatment of Bradie's critique of Popper's evolutionary epistemology. According to Stokes, Bradie rightly accuses Popper of applying "inappropriate cultural metaphors on biological processes", since in "evolution there are no goals and there is only one problem, that of survival" (p. 130). But is this not a bit silly? Granted that 'evolution' itself, just like 'knowledge', has no goals, it has turned out to be very fruitful to explain the process of evolution as if its subjects are goal-oriented. Indeed, survival is not their problem but their goal! Moreover, while trying to survive, these subjects are confronted with any number of problems (how to get food, where to find a mate, how to avoid predators, etcetera).

There is certainly quite a bit more in the book with which I would like to take issue, notably Stokes's mishandling of World 3, but this will not keep me from applauding Stokes's achievement. The arguments he employs to establish the inescapable ethico-political foundations of epistemology and methodology are clear and consistent. Karl Popper stands revealed as a most political philosopher of science. *Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method* is a fascinating book, as well as an important one. It deserves to be read (even chapter 8!).

Robert H. Lieshout

Peter Neijens and Philip van Praag jr. (eds.), *De Slag om IJburg. Campagne, Media & Publiek (The Battle of IJburg. The Campaign, the Media, and the Public)*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis. DFL 37.50.

Referendum campaigns are a relatively new phenomenon in the Netherlands. Referendums still do not exist at the national level – in fact, the country almost lost its government coalition over the issue in the spring of 1999. But, at the local level, several referendums have been held in the wake of the 1990 municipal elections, whose record low turnout had sent shock waves through the nation's town halls. While turnout in these local elections was still a respectable 62 per cent, the 10-point drop in comparison with the previous elections sparked major concerns about the apparently growing distance between citizens and their local political representatives. Many municipalities embarked on projects aimed at increasing citizen participation in public affairs. Several towns and villages, with the city of Amsterdam as the most prominent example, started experimenting with the referendum instrument. Amsterdam held much publicized referendums on whether to reduce car traffic in the downtown area (result: *yes*), whether Amsterdam and its neighbouring municipalities should join forces in a single 'city province' (*no*), and on whether the city should be allowed to build houses on a tiny strip of grassland in the western part of the city (*yes*).

The *IJburg* referendum, held on March 19 1997, marked an important step in the transition toward mature referendum campaigns. The referendum was about whether to reject the city council's decision to develop a new city area in the IJ-lake, east of the current city. More than ever before in any type of election, the competing parties (which I will refer to as the *for* and *against* campaigns) relied heavily on paid media, giving the various referendum activities some of the looks of a professional election campaign. The referendum campaign also saw the arrival of independent expenditures, operating freely without any legal restrictions, which left a particularly deep imprint on the *against* campaign.

At the same time, the referendum campaign also had a distinct amateurish feel. For example, fundraising activities were completely unregulated. Fundraising for the *against* campaign was basically non-existent until a large environmental NGO provided the necessary funds and more or less seized control of the campaign. The *for* campaign, on the other hand, did not have to worry at all about fundraising since it was financed by, believe it or not, the taxpayer. Neither party used their paid media to react to their opponents' messages. Instead, the same old set of commercials was recycled over and over again. Rapid response was conspicuously absent, even when the mayor accused the *against* campaign of "buying the election" – an ironic accusation, given the nature of the *for* campaign's funding base, that perhaps even more ironically constituted the major turning point in the campaign, allowing the city government to take the offensive and the moral high road. The sense of amateurism extended well into the media. The local television station, for example, was so inexperienced that it naively broadcasted the city government's infomercials about IJburg as neutral television programmes.

On the evening of March 19, the verdict of the Amsterdam voters was clear: a solid majority of 58 per cent rejected the city council's decision to develop IJburg. Normally that would have marked the end of the IJburg project. However, in a bizarre twist, the local referendum law had been changed shortly before the referendum. As of that moment, city council decisions could only be overruled ('corrected') by a referendum vote if the absolute number of votes *against* would exceed "half the number of people who cast a vote in the most recent municipal elections". Under the old law, the IJburg project would have been soundly defeated; under the new law, however, the *against* campaign was 25,000 votes short of the number necessary to overturn the council's decision. IJburg was on and the city government was the triumphant loser.

Most of these events have been chronicled and analysed in the new volume edited by Peter Neijens and Philip van Praag, two senior campaign analysts from the University of Amsterdam. The *Battle of IJburg* is a welcome addition to the small body of literature on referendum campaigns in the Netherlands. The book follows the same model used for other books on recent election campaigns in the Netherlands and features contributions from both campaigners and academics.

After a brief introductory chapter, the campaign managers in the *against* and *for* campaigns give their own accounts in separate chapters. Without any editorial comment, the *against* campaign is assigned two chapters instead of one: one for the 'official' referendum committee (written by Dalm) and a second one for the environmental NGO, *Natuurmonumenten*, who dominated the *against* campaign as an independent expenditure. The authors are pleasantly candid about their mistakes, especially about their failure to respond hard to the city government when they had to, thus allowing themselves to be defined by the *for* campaign. All authors share great resentment about the city government's dual role as organizer and party in the campaign, a feeling that, while understandable, does not always seem justified.

If anything, the two *against* chapters show how problematic, and in all likelihood counter-productive, the involvement of *Natuurmonumenten* was in the referendum campaign. Dalm shows a keen understanding of the strategic context in which the official referendum committee had to operate. In her view, the assignment was not so much to engage in an exchange of arguments but rather to wage a guerrilla-like warfare to keep the unpopular city government on the defensive by discrediting it as a reliable source of information. But this game plan was seriously undermined by the arrival of *Natuurmonumenten*, who quickly gained control of the *against* message and whose participation effectively ended the short-lived underdog status of the *against* campaign. Even in the book, the representatives from *Natuurmonumenten* still come across as fairly self-centred and not really capable of reflecting on the organization's own role in the campaign. Thus, the two *against* chapters provide very interesting contrasts and on close reading many clues about why the *against* campaign was less successful than it normally should have been, given the strategic context of this referendum campaign.

The chapter by Schoep for the city government's *for* campaign further corroborates Dalm's strategic notions. A large part of the *for* campaign was correctly aimed at

raising the credibility of the city government. The campaign engaged in significant amounts of electoral research and relied mainly on independent spokespeople to get the message across. Schoep's account also documents the damaging effect of the two-week window in the early stage of the campaign when *Natuurmonumenten* ads ran unopposed. During this period, support for the *against* campaign rose dramatically. The increase came to a halt when the *for* campaign hit the airwaves with its own ads.

After these three fascinating chapters the *Battle for IJburg* takes an abrupt turn. Rather than using these extremely interesting accounts as raw material for a scientific analysis of the referendum campaign, the reader is unexpectedly confronted with a methodological discussion of a piece of campaign research carried out by the *for* campaign. It is also at this juncture that the reader is confronted with another surprise: one of the editors, as well as the majority of the other academic authors, turns out to have been intimately involved in the *for* campaign. That, of course, is critical information and should have been shared candidly and clearly with the reader from the outset. (The introductory chapter does state that some of the *data* were taken from the research conducted by the *for* campaign, but fails to inform the reader about the authors' personal involvement.)

But, far more important than the question of who worked on which campaign is the fact that the academic contributions are not nearly as rich as the campaigners' perspectives. Most chapters suffer from serious data problems (the chapter on turnout and voting behaviour), a lack of relevant counterfactuals (an attempt to analyse the role of the media using content analysis), or failed to receive the proper amount of scholarly attention (a chapter on framing, where the term 'framing' does not even appear in its concluding section). Buried in these chapters, we find the true jewel of the book: a very simple, yet extremely cogent analysis by Slot and Saris of how question wording and order effects have caused significant discrepancies between the polls. But interesting as it may be, such an esoteric analysis does not provide major insights into the general dynamics of referendum campaigns, which I take to be the main purpose of the book.

In the final chapter the editors wonder whether this is the referendum 'that Amsterdam wants'. In many ways, this is the chapter that the reader was already looking forward to having read the accounts of the campaign managers. This final chapter is, indeed, very informative and addresses many of the issues surrounding the referendum instrument. Still, it is very much restrained by the manifest experiences of the IJburg referendum. It does not offer a general framework for understanding why the campaign was fought in the way it was, and what one should expect in this regard in the future. Such a framework is necessary if we want to obtain true insights that go beyond the idiosyncrasies of the IJburg referendum campaign.

In my view, all of this can be easily accomplished by relying on a modern campaigning perspective. Such a framework, which would outline the many components of a modern election campaign (paid media, electoral research, endorsements, etc.), would have made it much easier to see where the burgeoning referendum campaign culture in Amsterdam (and the rest of the Netherlands) currently stands – and in which

direction it may be heading in the future. Such insights could then conceivably be used to strengthen the positive elements of the existing referendum instrument and to mitigate or eliminate its negative traits.

Hans Anker

Contributors

Karen M. Anderson is a postdoc fellow at the Faculty of Public Administration and Public Policy at the University of Twente.

Hans Anker is a political consultant based in Washington DC.

Christien van den Anker is a lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK. She convenes the Working Group on Global Ethics of the British International Studies Ass.

Forde Berglund is a research fellow at the Institute of Social Research in Oslo.

Robert H. Lieshout is professor of International Relations at the School of Public Affairs at the University of Nijmegen.

Petra Meier is a research assistant at the Department of Political Sciences at the Free University Brussels.

Cas Mudde is a lecturer at the Department of Politics at the University of Edinburgh.

Paul Pennings is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the Free University Amsterdam.

Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism: towards a Political Compromise*
Hub Pellibaan 237

Alex Borja, *Political Parties, Groups, and Country Conservatism and Social Democratic Economic Strategies in the World Economy*
Michael Wagemans 258

Rogid Lalan, Rory O'Donnell and Matthew Smith, *Revisiting Experimental Union: Re-linking Integration*
Neil Wain 266