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**Boekbespreking van: The Party Mandate: Election Pledges and Government Actions in TheNetherlands, 1996-1998**

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Despite these clear similarities, Schaffer is strongly inclined to emphasize the differences. He points out that *demokaraasi* differs from the American-English term in coupling participation in electoral institutions with ideals of social welfare and extending participation to a range of institutions that promote collective economic security. I am not at all convinced that these additional characteristics makes *demokaraasi* completely unique and totally different from the Western concept. If one studies something in depth, and studies only one case in detail, then differences will always be found. Schaffer should have conducted a broader comparative study in which he should have compared the meanings in several different cultures at greater length. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that the additional characteristics of 'assuring economic security' are mentioned by the Wolof-speakers of the Senegalese population, not by the Senegalese political elite. Schaffer compares this Senegalese concept of *demokaraasi* as defined by the mass with the American concept of democracy as defined by the elites and political scientists like Dahl and Schumpeter. This may not be a fair comparison. It might be that people in developed countries also refer to economic welfare if they think of a democratic system.

Nevertheless, Schaffer concludes that

if students of democracy aspire to understand the meaning, social context, and democratic implications of the behaviors they observe, they cannot assume that their own ideals of democracy are universal. It is risky to equate democracy with what Chinese speakers call *minzhu*, what Luganda speakers call *eddembe ery'obuntu*, or what Wolof speakers call *demokaraasi*, for the ideals and practices that infuse American institutions are not universal (p. 146).

Although, in my opinion, Schaffer's book gives more evidence of the universality of the concept of democracy than Schaffer himself suggests, I agree that it can be important to take the differences seriously. Even when democratic ideas are diffused throughout the world, local communities assimilate those ideas selectively and transform them to fit their own way of life. By emphasizing and investigating the differences, the functioning of democratic institutions in an 'unfamiliar culture' can in this way indeed be better understood. The author has certainly succeeded in achieving this more narrow goal of understanding politics in the Senegalese context. And yet, if just one other researcher would conduct a similar study in another country, serious comparisons could be made and it would be possible to investigate whether 'democracy' is universal or not.

Renske Doorenspleet

Robert Thomson, *The Party Mandate. Election Pledges and Government Actions in the Netherlands, 1986-1998*. Thela-Thesis, Amsterdam 1999, ISBN 90-5170-489-5

The mandate theory of democracy states that the parties that win elections have acquired a mandate to enact their election pledges. This theory has been criticized as being mainly applicable to majoritarian electoral systems that produce winning and losing parties. Systems based on proportional representation provide a much weaker indication of which party should form the government. For this reason, it is argued, the mandate theory is not suited as a general applicable theory of democratic policy-making.

In his dissertation Robert Thomson tests the mandate model for the Netherlands. He compares the Dutch results with the United Kingdom in order to determine to which degree this model applies to a proportional system. Basically, his test examines the party programme to policy linkage: the degree to which election pledges are fulfilled. All pledges on socio-economic policy issues (including welfare benefits, healthcare, housing subsidies, student finance, employment rights, and levels of taxation) made in manifestos for the national parliamentary elections of 1986, 1989 and 1994 were selected for study. These pledges were related to the government agreements that eventually followed these elections. The research is done by means of both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative part of the study consists of descriptions of election pledges and related government actions in order to ascertain whether or not election pledges were made on specific issues that were societally important. The quantitative part consists of a test of a range of hypotheses regarding: the policy areas in which pledges are made; the relationships between election pledges of political parties; the conditions under which pledges are likely to be enacted; as well as the effects of institutional variables, such as membership of government and the allocation of ministerial posts.

The findings can be divided into three categories: findings concerning the election pledges themselves, those concerning the relationships between election pledges and governments' policy intentions, and those concerning the enactment of election pledges. Elections pledges are often made in the policy areas which parties present as being of the utmost importance. Because of the need to form coalitions, a significantly higher percentage of related pledges made by different parties was found in the Netherlands than in the US and the UK. Dutch parties *do* talk less past each other. Additionally, consensus is the dominant type of relationship between election pledges, especially between parties that are close to each other on the left-right dimension.

Pledges to which parties attach relatively higher levels of saliency are more likely to be supported in the government agreement and this support has a strong, positive effect on pledge enactment. Pledges are more likely to be supported in the government agreement if they are supported by more than one coalition party. Election pledges that are supported in the government agreements are significantly more likely to be enacted than those that are not.

The expectation regarding the effect of coalition governance on pledge fulfilment

is supported. Significant lower proportions of pledges made by Dutch parties that entered government office were acted upon. The party mandate in the Dutch context is typically a 'shared mandate', because parties in coalitions must share their governing power with other parties, which evidently reduces their control over public policy. However, the Dutch coalition system is not very handicapped in this respect as a substantial proportion (61% as compared to 70% in the UK) of pledges were, at least partly, enacted. In addition, the pledges of governing parties were significantly more likely to be acted upon than those of opposition parties. These findings do constitute evidence that the mandate theory of democracy is of relevance beyond the Westminster type of government.

Thomson's study is an interesting contribution to the debate on the role of parties within consensus democracies as compared to majoritarian systems. The findings clearly indicate that the mandate theory can be applied to coalition systems, be it that there are a large number of political-institutional factors that determine which pledges can be fulfilled.

Two questions arise regarding the main conclusions. First, how should it be determined whether issues are societally relevant? The mandate theory assumes that the party emphasis reflects the priorities of voters. This connection is not really examined in Thomson's research. It is simply assumed that voters do recognize the pledges made by parties as being relevant to their own concerns. This assumption is questionable, as the existing evidence suggests that there is not a systematic linkage between the preferences of parties and voters.

Second, although pledge fulfilment is strongly favoured by participation in government, which parties get into government is not a direct reflection of the outcome of the elections. Which government is formed depends on a variety of factors, and voter preferences is only one of them. Hence, the politics of coalition formation hinders the applicability of the mandate model to the Netherlands or to any consensus democracy.

These two questions are quite fundamental and should be answered in future research. When party pledges are weakly linked to voter preferences and when the participation in government is vaguely connected to the election results, then the mandate model does not fully apply, even if all party pledges are fulfilled.

Thomson's research is a solid and important contribution to the empirical research on party behaviour and public policy-making. He has shown in a detailed fashion that parties are able to fulfil a significant number of their pledges, even if they have to comprise. However, it is hard to generalize on this. What is needed is a comparative study that is less limited in terms of time and space. When the universe of discourse is opened up to the whole of the OECD, it will become possible to specify the exact conditions that shape the room for manoeuvre of parties and to determine which factors affect their ability to deliver what they promised. Thomson's study certainly holds many useful ideas on how such a comparative study could be established.

Paul Pennings

## Books Received (September – December 1999)

Prices are for paperback editions, if available.

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