



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Boekbespreking van: Voters, Parties and Governments

Kolk, H. van der

Citation

Kolk, H. van der. (1998). Boekbespreking van: Voters, Parties and Governments. *Acta Politica*, 33: 1998(1), 101-105. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450607>

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450607>

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

considered to be an 'example', 'aspect', 'component', or 'case' of postmodernization only, this extensive elaboration does not fit very well into a book that argues for a much broader scope. Although interesting in itself, not much is gained by this lengthy presentation of well-known arguments that have been the subject of a virtually endless list of other publications.

As a third, and probably the most interesting part of the book, the chapters on the preconditions for democracy should be identified. In an admirably systematic way Inglehart distinguishes between causes and conditions for a certain level of democracy on the one hand, and for the *stability* of this type of political systems on the other. Furthermore, he compares the relative impact of economic factors and social structure with those of cultural and social determinants. It is especially in these comparative analyses that the advantages of his extraordinary dataset become evident, allowing the specification of complicated models and the introduction of additional information about the countries considered. The difficult question on the relationship between economic, social, and political developments can be answered by pointing to the fact that specific cultural patterns emerge under conditions of economic development, and that these specific factors are very supportive of democracy. As Inglehart summarizes his major findings: "economic development leads to cultural changes that make mass publics more likely to *want* democracy and more skilful at *getting it*" (p.330; italics in original).

The fourth and last part of the book (apart from a concluding chapter) contains an overview of the cultural changes between the early 1980s and 1990s among the populations of the more than twenty countries questioned on both occasions. An extremely wide range of topics – from political participation to abortion, and from a belief in hell to national pride – is touched upon here. Dealing with such a diverse range of themes for so many different countries unavoidably results in very sketchy analyses and rough descriptions. And, although the general impression is clearly in line with the predicted postmodern shift, and Inglehart frankly admits the problems caused by a number of deviating cases, the reader is left alone with his request for further information in the middle of a pile of information of unprecedented dimensions.

By undertaking the task of disentangling the relationship between economic, cultural, social, and political developments Inglehart has presented himself an almost impossible assignment which can only be dealt with satisfactorily within a mature systematic framework. On this point reading *Modernization and Postmodernization* leads to the feeling of uneasiness indicated. The general outline of the book is not clear and several chapters can be characterized as contributions to some poorly edited volume rather than well-planned steps in a monograph. Besides, the first half of the book in particular contains many repetitions of the arguments or even identical parts of the text (e.g. parts of pages 33 and 132, and of 46 and 134 are simply copied). Conceptual weaknesses of the book start with the lack of a clear demarcation between postmaterialism and postmodernization at both the conceptual and the operational level. As postmaterialism is considered to be just one 'aspect' of a much broader

process of social change, how can we use empirical information on postmaterialism as the main source of corroboration of theses on postmodernization? Only a much stronger emphasis on falsification could justify the use of empirical information here. Finally, the very restricted way factors at the micro and macro level are employed should be mentioned. Inglehart restrains from any use other than direct (causal) relationships between aggregated micro-data and other types of macro-data. Contextual analysis – with macro-factors introduced as conditional variables – is a much more promising research strategy here for the simple reason that theorizing in this field mainly relies on these type of models instead of the direct relationships discussed by Inglehart.

Any scholarly book with an exceptionally wide scope will be an easy target for experts and grumblers alike. Inglehart's erudition, intellectual competence, and courage to publish a book like this should be praised and his fascinating conclusions about the impact of cultural factors on social and economic development, as well as on the preconditions of democracy, deserve extensive attention and discussion. Besides, *Modernization and Postmodernization* will be an excellent textbook for use at upper-graduate level courses in comparative politics. But, at the same time it is clear that in this new book experts will hardly find anything that has not been published before (although the empirical information is unique and extraordinary), and that many readers will be irritated by the repetitions of arguments and by the lack of discrimination between major and relevant information on the one hand and inessentials on the other. Often less can be more.

Jan van Deth

H.M. Narud, *Voters, Parties and Governments: Electoral Competition, Policy Distances and Government Formation in Multi-Party Systems*, report 96: 7, Institutt for Samfunnsforskning, Oslo, 1996, ISBN 82-7763-058-1 ISSN 0333-3671

The title of Hanne Marthe Narud's thesis, *Voters, parties and governments*, perfectly fits this varied collection of previously published articles. The subjects covered are the behaviour of voters, the activities of parties, and the formation and termination of governmental coalitions. Its main theme, presented in the first chapter, is the complex relationship between voters and parties. In order to win seats, parties have to adopt an electorally attractive policy position. However, the party's policy position not only affects the number of votes won in the election, but also directly influences its bargaining power after the elections, since the policy position adopted influences the chances of entering a coalition. Moreover, entering a governmental coalition influences the electoral support in the next period. Parties therefore have to weigh different consequences of their behaviour. Starting from these general ideas, Narud presents

articles on turnout, coalition formation, coalition termination and incumbency effects. All articles combine theoretical ideas with empirical (case) studies of Norway and the Netherlands.

In the first three chapters of the thesis Narud focuses on the behaviour of parties. Here she stresses the importance of changing issue saliency and the interaction between campaigning and coalition bargaining. Taking more than one policy issue into account may improve our understanding of coalition formation processes: Narud expects that it does. She illustrates this expectation with the negotiations that followed the Norwegian elections of 1993. According to Narud, a coalition formation theory assuming a single left-right dimension normally predicts Norwegian coalition formation quite accurately. However, during the elections of 1993, a pro-contra EU issue became salient, independent of the traditional left-right dimension. The non-socialist parties were divided over this new issue. Despite the numerical majority of these parties, this controversy weakened their ability to form an alternative coalition against the socialist minority government. Narud concludes that, at least in this case, taking both issues into account improves our understanding of coalition formation processes. Changes in issue saliency may affect the internal cohesion of an existing coalition as well as the viability of a competing coalition. Therefore, changing issue saliency not only affects the formation of new coalitions, but also the termination of existing coalitions. Narud illustrates this by a description of the termination of three coalitions in Norway.

As already stated, electoral promises not only affect the number of votes won in the election, they also influence the bargaining power of parties after the elections. In Chapter 3 Narud analyses the way political parties try to optimize their policy position with respect to winning office. Narud assumes that voters want their parties to take firm and relatively extreme positions, an assumption borrowed from the directional theory of voting. She also assumes parties can only cooperate if they compromise, taking less firm and less extreme positions. Because of the relationship between the consequences of winning votes by taking extreme positions and the consequences of winning the coalition formation by taking less extreme positions, Narud suggests that policy-based models alone cannot take account of the way coalition formation proceeded after the 1993 Norwegian elections. Her main conclusion is that models of coalition bargaining should therefore take account of the interaction between electoral competition and coalition formation.

In the next three chapters the focus is shifted from parties to voters. Chapter 5 discusses electoral turnout in Norway. Two explanations of turnout are offered. According to the first explanation, voters abstain if government alternatives are unclear. The empirical analysis, based on aggregate turnout percentages, supports this hypothesis. Narud states that the level of turnout after World War II was high when the bourgeois parties were able to form an alternative to the socialist government. When these parties were unable to do this, turnout was relatively low. The second explanation of turnout is based on the Michigan model of party identification. Narud expects that strong party identifiers who temporarily disagree with their party may

choose to abstain rather than vote for another party. Therefore, she expects strong identifiers who disagree temporarily with their party to abstain more often than weak identifiers who disagree with their party. Under cross-pressure, weak identifiers vote for another party. Empirical analysis of survey data does not confirm this second hypothesis. There appears to be no significant relationship between party identification and cross pressures on the one hand, and turnout on the other.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the consequences of the behaviour of governing parties for the behaviour of voters. Chapter 6, previously published in *Acta Politica*, 1994/3, tests the hypothesis that a party stepping out of a governmental coalition ('the breaker') loses votes. In order to explain this hypothesis, Narud states that "Dutch political culture places high value on reaching an acceptable compromise and 'the breaker pays' hypothesis indicates that the trade-off is considered to be to the disadvantage of the party forcing the break." Narud tests the hypothesis with data about Dutch governments. She presents some data about the eight post-war cabinets that ended after political conflict. Six of these broken cabinets were followed by elections. In each of these cases Narud identifies the 'breaker' and shows that in five cases the breaker 'paid', compared with the previous elections. However, it may be that the party was going to lose for other reasons and that it reversed the downward curve by breaking the coalition. Therefore, Narud also presents data from NIPO polls, showing the support for governing parties in the year preceding three breaks of governments (1977, 1982 and 1989). These data do not show a substantial effect of breaking a coalition. Narud concludes that "the evidence for 'the breaker pays' hypothesis is (...) inconclusive."

The last substantial chapter contains a comparison between the Netherlands and Norway and connects some of the ideas presented in the other chapters. The question addressed is whether entering a coalition and assuming governmental responsibilities affects the popular support of parties. Narud predicts that coalitions differ in the way they can put the blame for their policies on someone else. A single governing majority party is easily held accountable, while a minority coalition can blame the opposition. According to Narud, a coalition constituting a majority in parliament will not be judged as a whole. Its constituent parties are held to be responsible for some of the relevant policy issues. Narud studies the effects of incumbency on electoral support and concludes that the "analysis yielded only limited support for the hypothesis that governing parties suffer electoral liabilities" in the way predicted.

Narud's book contains some very interesting questions about the link between citizens' choices and government policy. It also combines a rich collection of theoretical arguments with empirical research in two different countries. Despite these merits, a lack of theoretical coherence and an underdeveloped relationship between theory and data seem to hinder an in-depth analysis of the interesting subjects addressed.

One of the most interesting ideas in the first part of the thesis is the effect of changing issue saliency on the formation of coalitions. In most theories of party behaviour the number and content of issue dimensions form part of the assumptions.

Parties move along the dimensions in order to optimize their strategic position. Narud adds the possibility that parties introduce new issues in order to distinguish themselves from other parties. She suggests that this change in issue saliency is to some extent a consequence of party choice. Unfortunately, she does not define the concept of 'changing the saliency of an issue'. She also fails to discuss the way an issue can be introduced by parties. She simply assumes that parties are able to do so. But, even if we assume that parties are able to do so, we need to explain why parties sometimes do and sometimes do not introduce new issues. According to Narud, parties may decide to do so in order to win votes. She suggests, for example, that the controversy over the EU issue in Norway was introduced by the (non-socialist) bourgeois parties because voters wanted these parties to take firm and relatively extreme positions. The bourgeois parties therefore tried to distinguish themselves by introducing the EU issue. However, by doing this, they introduced controversy within the only bloc that was able to form an alternative to the existing socialist government. Thus, the attempts of the bourgeois parties to attract voters destroyed their chances of forming a viable coalition against the socialist party. In other words: raising the saliency of the EU issue forced the bourgeois parties to adopt relatively extreme positions on the issue, while they actually preferred a situation in which all bourgeois parties take moderate stands. But why then did the bourgeois force themselves into a situation in which they had to choose this collectively sub-optimal strategy? Narud does not ask this important question, nor does she answer it. It may be that the bourgeois parties expected the socialist party, which was divided over this issue, to split. But why did the bourgeois parties misconceive the ability of the socialist party to maintain its unity? Despite the fact that introducing a new issue is an interesting subject, Narud does not present a coherent theory to explain the meaning, the causes or the consequences of changing issue saliency.

The lack of coherent theoretical arguments about the relationship between voters and parties can also be illustrated by comparing Chapters 2 and 3. As stated before, in Chapter 2 the Norwegian coalition formation of 1993 is explained quite well using a two-dimensional policy-oriented coalition formation model. Narud concludes that "a uni-dimensional approach contributes considerably to the understanding of coalition bargaining as far as the Norwegian system is concerned," while, "considerable insight will be gained by extending the model with two or more dimensions." Nevertheless, based on the same case study Narud concludes in Chapter 3 that "future models of coalition bargaining should account for the interaction between electoral competition and legislative behavior." Why should they, if the explanatory power of the existing models is 'considerable'? Narud seems to have something else in mind. In existing models, coalition formation starts with policy positions and the numbers of seats for all parties. Therefore, these models only apply to situations after the elections. Narud proposes to extend these models by treating the policy positions not as assumptions, but as variables to be explained by electoral competition. Such an extension of existing models, which is not presented by Narud, would probably improve upon our

understanding of democratic politics, but not of the coalition formation as such. Narud is proposing an extension of existing policy-oriented coalition models. She is not offering an alternative model explaining coalition formation. The main conclusion of Chapter 3, therefore, seems to be unwarranted.

A strong aspect of Narud's thesis is the combination of theoretical ideas and empirical research. However, in some chapters the relationship between theory, research methodology and empirical analysis is rather poor. In most chapters Narud presents case studies. According to her: "in strict methodological terms" this "research strategy of the present dissertation does not allow for general conclusions," which is of course an adequate description of the consequence of using case studies. Narud announces that she will "return to these matters in the final chapter of the dissertation." In the final chapter the careful formula is abandoned: "each of the (...) chapters has been concerned with the empirical testing or analysis of theoretical propositions." On the basis of a single case study, Narud concludes that "it has been demonstrated that coalitions can relatively easily be established when parties (...) are divided along a single conflict dimensions, while (...) coalition bargaining becomes more difficult when more than one dimension is salient." But this can never be demonstrated on the basis of a single case study because there is no variation in the dependent and independent variables.

It is not only the choice of research strategies that is debatable: the use of data is sometimes at best 'impressionistic'. This can be illustrated by the analysis of saliency change in the first chapters of the thesis. In these chapters Narud restricts herself to a description of issue dimensions and the positions of parties and voters on these issues at one point in time. A description of change is missing. Another example can be found in the chapter about government accountability. The theoretical framework in this chapter contains complex theoretical concepts like 'accountability'. This concept cannot be measured by changes in electoral support alone. Changes in electoral support must be combined with an evaluation of governmental policies by voters. Only if governmental policies are negatively evaluated and coalition parties lose votes, can one conclude that governments are 'accountable'. Because data about the evaluations are absent, conclusions about the accountability of parties can hardly be based on the empirical analysis presented in this chapter.

As said before, this book contains a rich combination of ideas and gives rise to some interesting questions about the link between citizens' choice and government policy. It also combines a variety of theoretical arguments with empirical research. However, the large number of themes she addresses seems to hinder a sophisticated theoretical and/or empirical analysis of the relationships between voters, parties and governments: the theories used are not coherent and the empirical analysis often only hints at the theoretical concepts to be measured. Therefore, despite its merits, this thesis is more a promising starting point, which is as it should be, than an important next step in the development of the, in the words of Narud, 'European politics tradition'.

Henk van der Kolk