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Boekbespreking van: Where's the Party?

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W. van der Brug. *Where 's the party? Voters' perceptions of party positions*. Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1997, no ISBN, Dfl. 15.00

Are voters able to perceive what positions parties take so that they can take these into account in their voting decisions? The question posed in the title of this dissertation suggests that voters might have difficulty perceiving these positions correctly. The author, however, shows that voters know where to find their party. The position a party takes on most issues can be represented by its position on the left-right dimension, and because voters are able to perceive the party's position on this dimension and to compare it to their own preferred position, they are able to make a rational voting choice.

This, in brief, is the message of Van der Brug's dissertation. In the first part of the dissertation he uses party manifestos and roll call analysis to determine the positions of the Dutch parties after the Second World War, and election surveys since 1974 to determine voters' perceptions of these positions. He then compares the actual positions of the parties to their perceived positions, and concludes that there is substantial agreement between the two. In the second part of the dissertation he compares different subgroups of voters on their political knowledge, participation, and preferences, and finds no systematic differences among them.

The first chapter gives an overview of the literature and then lays out the plan of the book. Chapter 2 presents the study of voters' perceptions of party positions. The parties' actual positions, as determined from their party manifestos and their voting behaviour in parliament, are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. In my review, however, I will discuss the actual positions before the perceived positions.

To determine the positions of parties on the basis of their promises, Van der Brug uses the coded data from the party manifesto project of Budge et al.. Each party manifesto is described by the percentage of sentences it devotes to 56 different topics. The distance between two party manifestos is defined as the sum of absolute differences in percentages over each of these 56 topics. The distances are then used as input to a multidimensional scaling programme. Manifestos are aggregated over elections in partially overlapping time periods of at most ten years (e.g., 1946-1956, 1952-1959, ... 1986-1994), in order to determine whether party positions have changed over time. For eight of the ten time periods a two-dimensional representation fits well, and comparisons of the representations from successive periods reveal that there have indeed been changes in party positions. Van der Brug first tries to interpret the two dimensions by attempting to represent each of the 56 topics as a possible dimension in the ten two-dimensional spaces. Only a few (32) of the 560 possible topics (56 topics x 10 time periods) show an adequate fit, and the 7 among them that fit the last set of manifestos, between '86 and '94, explain only the first dimension. Van der Brug then switches rather abruptly to a unidimensional interpretation – "After the 1970s the election programs of the major parties were primarily structured by one dimension" (p. 64) – which he interprets as a socio-economic dimension.

A similar procedure is followed to determine party positions on the basis of roll calls on parliamentary proposals, which are analyzed both for a number of specific issue areas (abortion, nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, and socio-economic issues) and the legislative programme as a whole. The distance between two parties is defined as the number of times they voted differently, divided by the number of votes. The votes cast in eight different legislative periods between '63-67 and '86-'89 are analyzed separately to see whether parties have changed their positions over time. Metric multidimensional scaling analyses of distances, based on either each issue area separately or the legislative agenda as a whole, reveal that a unidimensional solution provides a good fit in each time period. The deviating results based on the "abortion" issue are briefly discussed, but discarded because "abortion" only comprises 5% of the whole legislative agenda.

Voters' perceptions of party positions are based on secondary analyses of the Dutch National Election surveys since the 1960s. In these surveys, voters were asked to use a seven-point bipolar scale to rate the positions of various parties and of themselves on the following issues: income difference, nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, abortion, and euthanasia. A measure of agreement between respondents developed by Van der Eijk is used to calculate the extent to which voters agree in their perceptions of the parties. (Unfortunately, Van der Eijk's measure of agreement is not explained in the book, and the only reference to it is an unpublished paper.) On a scale between -1 and +1, the agreement among voters in different election years varies between +0.35 and +0.70, depending on the party and the issue in question.

In Chapter 5 the correspondence between the actual positions of parties and the way voters perceive them is analysed. The perceived party positions on the different issues, as analysed in Chapter 2, are represented in terms of possible directions in the two-dimensional spaces found in Chapters 3 and 4 (as far as the software used for the analyses is concerned, only the INDSICAL-programme is mentioned). One procedure in these analyses used the perceived position of the parties on a ten-point left-right scale as a possible dimension. The results are that perceived party positions on most issues and perceived party positions on the left-right scale define the same dimension. Hence, all agreement is defined in terms of the single left-right dimension. But this result is clearer for party positions based on roll calls than on manifestos.

The second part of the book discusses variations in perceptions. Chapter 6 deals with the difference between voters with little or much political knowledge, deduced from the number of photos of prominent politicians they can identify. Chapter 7 analyses the difference between politicians, party members and voters, and Chapter 8 takes up voters with different party preferences.

These chapters consistently point to the same conclusion: there are some differences in the perceptions of voters from different groups, but they are minor compared with the large amount of agreement. Variations in perceptions are only modestly related to political knowledge and involvement. For example, Dutch voters who support different parties generally agree in their perception of the positions of these parties.

But respondents with little knowledge perceive party position as similar to party positions on the left-right dimension on abortion and euthanasia more often than those respondents with much knowledge. This is interpreted as evidence that the left-right dimension dominates perceptions on all issues for people without much political knowledge.

Chapter 9 stands alone from the rest of the book. It reports an analysis that uses the panel data of the 1986 national election survey to estimate both changes in voters' own attitudes toward nuclear energy, and changes in voters' perception of parties' positions on nuclear energy in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion, which took place between the first and second wave of the panel. Both types of change are modelled in terms of the original positions of voter and party, voters' awareness of the positions of the parties, and assimilation, contrast, and persuasion effects. A non-linear estimation procedure developed by Courtney Brown was used to estimate the size of the different effects. Assimilation, contrast, and persuasion effects were found to be very small. The major effects were respondents' change of attitude toward nuclear energy as a result of Chernobyl, and the "objective" change in the parties' positions on nuclear energy. On the basis of this outcome Van der Brug concludes that "Voters appear to be quite reasonable, one could even call them 'rational'" (p. 190).

This theme is taken up again in the final chapter, in which Van der Brug concludes that gross misunderstandings between voters and parties did not occur, and – by simple extrapolation – are unlikely to occur in the near future. The overarching importance of the left-right dimension allows the voter to make rational choices between the different parties. Even though the legislative behaviour of the Dutch parties has depended on a single left-right dimension for some time, the party manifesto results suggest that this may change. For example, the differences among parties on health, education, and the public media do not coincide with party positions on the left-right dimension.

Van der Brug's book is well crafted, with hypotheses developed on the basis of a sound grasp of the literature. But I have some lingering reservations. First a technical quibble: more up-to-date unidimensional procedures could have been used in chapters 3 and 4 to investigate the positions of the parties. Second, the analysis of the party manifesto data leaves a number of questions unanswered, especially about the interpretation of the neglected but undeniably present second dimension, and of changes in the positions of parties. Most problematic, however, is the general conclusion that voters' choices can be explained rationally. For this conclusion to be compelling a link needs to be forged between voters' preferred position on the left-right dimension and their perception of their own well-being. The result that voters with little political knowledge use the left-right dimension more than others points away from that interpretation.

Although Van der Brug uses the available data very ingenuously to support his conclusions, the caution expressed in his final chapter that the left-right dimension may not be here to stay undermines the predictive value of this study. On the other

hand, this expectation opens the field for new research questions on what conflict dimensions will preoccupy future generations, and how voters will cope with them.

Wijbrandt van Schuur

Maarten A. Hajer, *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernisation and the policy process*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995, ISBN 0-19-827969-8

This study focuses on the innovation of theory and method of discourse analysis. The discourse under study is "ecological modernisation". The study compares acidification policies in the 1980s in Great Britain and the Netherlands.

Acidification, caused by SO₂ emissions (coal burning for electricity generation in particular), received wide attention in the eighties, because of the discovery of dying forests in Germany. In many countries, governments started programmes to study acidification impacts in their countries. Hajer pays much attention to the agenda setting of the issue. In Great Britain, the barriers to placing the issue on the political agenda were extremely high. From 1980 onwards, the conservative government successfully denied the issue agenda status for a six year period. The issue was denied by arguing that Britain already had a proud record in fighting air pollution. It was also argued that there was no scientific proof whatsoever for the acidification thesis. The United Kingdom, therefore, came to lag far behind other European countries in developing and implementing policies. In contrast to the UK, the Netherlands showed a flow of general concern about acidification. The issue entered the policy agenda easily. It didn't take long to establish a joint research programme with government and private sector participation. However, as in Great Britain, implementing the policies was a painful process.

The study shows that in both countries large emission reduction policies were supported by a heterogeneous coalition, which included radical environmentalists as well as industry representatives and politicians who did not have any affiliation with the environmentalist movement. What these groups had in common is what Hajer refers to as the discourse of "ecological modernisation". This discourse is characterized by the notion that environmental costs should be included in public and company policies, especially in large investments. By doing so, a nation or a company can gain a comparative technological advantage over competitors. Ecological modernisation, therefore, serves both wealth and the environment.

Pivotal throughout the study is the notion that environmental problems are socially constructed. Hajer shows that the social construction of environmental problems not only relates to the policy arena, where policy-makers and interest groups struggle on the formulation and implementation of environmental policies, but also to the area of scientific expertise. By highlighting the interactions between policy and science for