

1 How Democracy Works

An Introduction

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1.1 Introduction

ONE OF THE STORIES THAT JACQUES THOMASSEN IS KNOWN TO HAVE related more than once, and which is therefore probably of some significance, is about how his 1976 dissertation *Kiezers en gekozenen in een representatieve democratie* was received. The dissertation reported on the first true representation study conducted in the Netherlands, consisting of surveys among the members of parliament as well as among a sample from the Dutch electorate. It was part of a larger, international research effort that involved researchers from the United States, Germany, Sweden, France, Italy and the Netherlands. Many of these count among the top political scientists of the last decades.

The dissertation contained several remarkable results. Members of parliament appeared to have different policy views than their own voters. Notably, the representatives of left-wing parties were quite out of touch with their voters on law-and-order types of issues. The Dutch press showed a great interest in these results, and the dissertation promised to attract a great deal of coverage. Then a government-appointed committee published its long-expected report on the alleged corruption and bribing affair involving airplane construction firms and Prince Bernard, the Dutch prince consort. Within hours, the media attention shifted completely to the report, and attention for Thomassen's dissertation dwindled.

The story shows how the results of meticulous, time-consuming empirical research do not easily make the headlines – the news of the day is more attractive for the mass media. At the same time, serious research is indispensable for understanding and appraising the developments in everyday politics. It provides the frames for understanding the news, and offers possibilities for comparing the events of here and today with those in other countries or in the past. Without an idea about the divergence of mass and elite opinions, how could one have understood

the outburst of popular support for Prince Bernard at the annual ceremony of the opening of the parliamentary year in 1976?

Mass–elite relationships, in particular the democratic forms of these, and public opinion have been at the focus of Thomassen’s research since his earliest publications. The potential conflict between fundamental values of democracy is one of his constant concerns. Democracy can be regarded as an effort to reconcile the potentially conflicting values of liberty and equality. To make democracy work, we first need a clear view of the possible meanings of these values. What elements of liberty and equality constitute democracy, and how should democratic political systems function? Two equally important questions that follow are about how democratic systems work in reality, and which changes occur in that respect as a result of major societal developments like individualization, globalization and European unification. When the answers to all these questions are confronted, conclusions about the quality of democracy can be drawn: to what extent do political systems live up to the ideals?

This, in a nutshell, is the research program that has guided Jacques Thomassen throughout his academic career. During the past 40 years, it has not lost any of its relevance. In 2010, evaluating the functioning of democracy is even more relevant than ever, because of important changes in society that provide challenges to democracy. It seems therefore fitting to dedicate this book, which appears at the occasion of Jacques’ 65th anniversary, to the functioning of modern democracies in the light of the main principles of representative democracy. The analyses to follow, which are based on recent data from a range of authoritative international research projects, lead to fresh insights about how democracy works in the complex world of today.

The underlying rationale for presenting the present volume can also partly be found in fundamental changes in society in the last decades, as well as their political systems, which have an impact on how democracy can and will function. These changes include the weakening of traditional cleavages like religion and social class, the increased relevance of multi-level governance, and the personalization of politics. In addition, one can also think of the establishment of new democracies in Eastern Europe, the weakened ties between political parties and citizens, and the increasingly critical attitude of the public. Add to this the recent economic and financial crisis, and it is clear that there is sufficient ground for an in-depth analysis of how democracy works in this changed context.

These changes in society are the background of this volume, but it is important to note that thinking about the normative foundations of democracy has developed as well. For example, the notion of deliberation, which can be traced back to the direct democracy in ancient Greece, has been added to the list of elements that characterizes the ideal of democracy. Also the notion of (government) accountability has gained a more central position. But at the same time much has remained as it was. There are still opposing views on the extent to which citizens should play an active role in politics – ranging from the elitist view of limited citizen participa-

tion to the advocates of participatory democracy. Moreover, the new theoretical debates and democratic practices have not really altered the mainstream view of what constitutes the essence of modern democracy. Since the transformation of city-states to nation-states, the most essential feature of democracy has been that of political representation. The question is how such representation takes place in the complex world of multi-level governance. And the classic idea that the ultimate aim of democracy is to establish government policy that reflects the preferences of its citizens, has also remained fairly uncontested and drives research about democracy. Hence, the two basic principles that are still at the heart of democracy are political representation and policy congruence. These principles also guide most of the work in this volume, which thus provides an assessment of the functioning of modern democracies in the light of these classic concepts.

The essays not only constitute an intellectual tribute to Jacques Thomassen. They also bring together several of the main threads that characterize his work. In terms of his approach Jacques Thomassen's work is characterized by a number of elements, which thus also characterize this volume. The first guiding principle is a firm connection between normative democratic theory and rigorous empirical research. Either normative theory is used as the framework for deriving principles to evaluate democratic practices with the help of systematic empirical research, or the presentation of empirical analyses is followed by a discussion of the implications of the major research findings for the democratic legitimacy of the system. Second, in many instances Jacques Thomassen's work builds on the results of international comparative studies. This is not surprising if we consider the prominent position that he has occupied in many national as well as international projects in the field. The contributions presented in this volume make extensive use of these national and international research projects. The third element is a focus on multiple levels of government. Although initially Jacques Thomassen's work was predominantly oriented towards issues of representation and participation at the national level, he has since then made major contributions to the study of participation and representation at the local level and at the level of the European Union. In this volume, too, all levels of government are paid attention to and some chapters are fully devoted to the functioning of democracy in the European Union.

1.2 The basic principles: political representation and policy congruence

The contributions to this volume are organized in four parts. The first part focuses on two basic principles of democracy in modern societies, which have also been central in the work of Jacques Thomassen: political representation and policy congruence (e.g. Thomassen 1976, 1991, 2005; Thomassen, Van Schendelen and Zielonka-Goei 1992; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; Miller et al. 1999). Although there are many different visions of democracy (see e.g. Held 2006), there appears to be a consider-

able amount of agreement on these key elements. In large-scale societies a system of political representation is unavoidable and forms the heart of the democratic system. Indeed, even the minimalist definitions of democracy, such as the famous one by Schumpeter, put the idea of elected representatives central. This is not to say that there is not much more. Indeed, Dahl (1989), for example, described a famous set of characteristics that are also crucial for a well functioning democratic system, such as freedom of speech and freedom of association. But the selection of political representatives by citizens in free and fair elections, in combination with universal suffrage, arguably remains the most essential feature of modern democracy. Furthermore, many agree on the purpose of political representation through elections and define it in terms of responsiveness or policy congruence (see e.g. Powell 2000). This means that policy preferences of citizens are reflected in policies adopted by the government. The extent to which policy congruence between citizens and their representatives exists, or with actual government policy, thus becomes an important indicator of democratic quality (Diamond and Morlino 2005).

The four contributions in Part I all deal with the principles of political representation and policy congruence and expand our understanding of both. In Chapter 2, Russell Dalton, David Farrell and Ian McAllister sketch the development of the study of political representation and argue that most studies have approached political representation as a discrete choice process. Policy preferences or ideological positions of citizens are typically compared with those of their representatives at a particular point in time. Dalton et al. propose an alternative approach that considers political representation more like a steering process in which government policy is adjusted from one election to the next. They test their ideas on the basis of data on elections in 35 nations from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*. More specifically, they examine if post-election policy congruence between citizens and government in terms of left-right is greater than pre-election policy congruence, as their model suggests. The findings support their hypothesis and this leads Dalton et al. to conclude that the overall health of representative democracy is good.

In Chapter 3, Rudy Andeweg also reaches a positive conclusion about the functioning of political representation while focusing on the Netherlands. Andeweg discusses past research on policy congruence and observes that the common approach has been to examine if policy preferences of individual voters match policy preferences of the parties they voted for. Andeweg argues that what matters more for democracy, is whether policy preferences of parliament as a whole reflect those of the electorate as a whole and hence policy congruence should be studied at the aggregate level. On the basis of novel measures he analyzes policy congruence between parliament and the electorate using the elite and mass surveys of the *Dutch Parliament Studies* and *Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies*. The quality of representation appears to have increased substantially and gradually increased from 55 to 60 per cent in the 1970s to 89 per cent in 2006. This feeds optimistic feelings about the health of democracy, but Andeweg also gives a warning sign: citizens' trust in

democracy has not increased accordingly and hence whether policy congruence is the best indicator for the health of a democracy is debatable.

Sören Holmberg returns to the theme of political representation in Chapter 4 and analyzes the dynamics of mass and elite public opinion. The key question he addresses is whether opinion formation is dominated by political elites (top-down) or by citizens (bottom-up). He utilizes mass and elite survey data from Sweden on a wide range of policy issues across eight different elections since the late 1960s. Holmberg concludes that there is a considerable amount of overlap between shifts in opinion at the mass and elite level, and that most frequently elected representatives lead their voters and not the other way around. Democratic leadership turns out to be more than following the opinion of the electorate; it also involves shaping public opinion.

The final contribution in Part I is by Peter Mair, who in Chapter 5 asks the question if in modern democracies policy congruence is still central. It often seems that voters have become more concerned about the process of governing rather than the stands of political parties on the issues. Put briefly, the function of (government) accountability seems to have become more central than the function of representation (by parties). Building on these ideas, Mair develops three hypotheses about the nature of vote shifts in parliamentary elections. He tests these on the basis of aggregate level data on election outcomes in fourteen West European countries across the last five decades of the twentieth century. Mair observes that the divide between government and opposition has become more influential. However, in the same period volatility as such has also increased and hence the relative importance of incumbency has not changed. So government accountability has not become the dominant feature of electoral politics. This means that political representation remains as important as it has been.

1.3 Citizens' judgements of democratic governance and political parties

In Part II of this book we shift our attention to citizens' support for democracy, a theme that has also featured prominently in the work of Jacques Thomassen (e.g. Thomassen 1991, 2007; Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Thomassen and Van der Kolk 2009). In Chapter 6, Christian Welzel and Hans-Dieter Klingemann emphasize the importance of support for democratic values. Welzel and Klingemann argue that the stability of democratic regimes depends on the extent to which they satisfy their citizens' demand for democracy. Similarly, authoritarian regimes will be more stable if citizens' demand for democracy is weak. The authors refer to this match between demand and supply of democracy by the notion of democratic congruence. They further argue that what matters is how democracy is effectively respected at the supply side and intrinsically valued at the demand side, which is captured by the notion of substantiveness. Data from the *World Values Surveys* about dozens

of countries across the globe enable Welzel and Klingemann to test their ideas. They find that institutionalized democracy, as indicated by Freedom House ratings, indeed correlates with democratic preferences at the mass level. They proceed with analyzing the underlying mechanisms and conclude that democratic congruence emerges not because citizens internalize the regime choice of elites, but because elites satisfy mass demands.

In Chapter 7, Pippa Norris seeks to deepen our understanding of citizen satisfaction with democracy by focusing on the role of regime performance. She distinguishes between process accounts and policy accounts and discusses the assumptions of both in the literature. The first emphasize the importance of the intrinsic quality of democratic governance, as reflected in the protection of civil liberties and political rights, whereas the second emphasize the relevance of evaluations of governments' policy output, as reflected by economic performance but also factors such as security or social policy. Norris uses the *World Values Survey* and finds support for both accounts. She specifies which indicators are powerful predictors of satisfaction with democracy and which indicators do not have an effect, thus shedding new light on (sometimes contradictory) findings from previous studies.

Bas Denters, Oscar Gabriel and Lawrence Rose use a similar distinction between dimensions of judgement in Chapter 8, where they shift the focus to the local level of government. They address the relative importance of procedural and functional considerations for citizens' views on good local governance and analyze individual level differences in these views. The analysis, which utilizes data from national surveys in the Netherlands and Norway, shows that both countries display similar patterns. Citizens consider most of the items that tap either dimension or judgement important, which supports Norris' findings that citizens care about the input as well as the output side of democratic governance. Denters et al. further show that citizens display stronger support for items that link up with the notions of representative democracy, participatory democracy, and effective and efficient government, than for items reflecting the idea of limited government. They also show that these views do not differ strongly across different social and political groups and hence conclude that there is a fair amount of consensus among citizens about what constitutes good local governance.

The final contribution of Part II shifts the focus from the democratic system as a whole to its main actors: political parties. In Chapter 9, Kees Aarts and Bernt Aardal revisit the debate in electoral research about the proximity model and directional model of issue voting and hence analyze whether parties benefit more from moderate and centrist ideological positions or from positions that are as clear and unambiguous as possible. Aarts and Aardal utilize data from 37 democracies across the world from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*. They analyze the distributions of party evaluations in relation to left-right ideology in the light of expectations derived from both models. One conclusion is that the proximity model works relatively well for centrist parties and the directional model works best for parties with a more pronounced ideological position. On the whole, however, the support

is weakest for the model that is dominant in textbooks, the proximity model, and much stronger for the directional model. This means that, in general, political parties benefit more from polarization than from moderation.

1.4 Political representation in the European Union

The contributions described so far focus on the national level of government, with the exception of the chapter on good local governance. One of the most important developments for democracy, however, has been the increased relevance of transnational political systems. The European Union is presumably the most relevant example and its democratic system has understandably received much attention in the literature on democracy. Jacques Thomassen has made important contributions to this literature (e.g. Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999; Steunenberg and Thomassen 2002; Thomassen 2009; Mair and Thomassen 2010). The two chapters of Part III focus on political representation and policy congruence in the European Union, treating electoral turnout and party choice.

In Chapter 11, Cees van der Eijk, Hermann Schmitt and Eliyahu Sapir start with the observation that in European Parliament elections turnout has always been lower than in national elections and often in large margins. They ask the question if consequently particular groups are better represented than others, which could have important implications for policy making. Van der Eijk et al. use voter survey data from the *European Election Study 2009* and analyze whether particular political parties would have received more or less seats if turnout had been higher. Their main conclusion, which matches findings on previous elections, is that the low level of turnout in the 2009 European Parliament election had virtually no impact on the distribution of seats: only one seat would have changed if turnout had been 'normal.' So the quality of political representation in the European Union works much better than one might think on the basis of the low levels of electoral participation.

Less positive conclusions are reached in Chapter 12, where Rosema and De Vries assess the quality of political representation in the European Union. They analyze whether in both available electoral channels – national and European elections – voters select parties that best represent their policy preferences. Rosema and De Vries use the survey data from 15 countries of the *European Election Study 2009*. As expected, voters somewhat more often 'voted correctly' in terms of left-right than in terms of European integration. Rosema and De Vries observed fairly strong biases at the aggregate level for the second dimension of conflict: voters were relatively likely to choose parties less Euroskeptic than themselves. This was caused by the fact that political parties showed limited variation in their stances on this topic. Moreover, opposition to European integration was mostly voiced by small parties at the extreme of either side of the left-right continuum and therefore were not viable options for most voters. This means that the quality of political representa-

tion in the European Union could benefit from future changes in the supply side of electoral politics.

1.5 The impact of the economic context

In the fourth and final part of this book the impact of the economic context is focused on. This theme has perhaps not been as central in the work of Jacques Thomassen as some of the other themes discussed above, but it has received attention in much of the literature relevant to political representation, especially studies of voting (see e.g. Thomassen 2005). Moreover, in the light of the findings on the relationship between regime performance and support for democracy, the question arises how the recent financial and economic crisis has affected support for democracy. In Chapter 12, Jan van Deth, who was Jacques Thomassen's first Ph.D. student, takes up this question. He uses survey data from the *European Social Survey* to study the development of citizens' political orientations across 21 countries in this turbulent time period. Van Deth shows that by the end of 2008, when the recession had strongly influenced the opinion climate, citizens' life satisfaction and political confidence had not really suffered from it. An in-depth analysis of the situation in Germany in the final months of 2008 confirms this conclusion: the increased economic threat was not matched by similar shifts in political trust or life satisfaction. What should be noted though, is that cross-national variation existed. One striking finding is that in countries where the negative economic developments were relatively small, happiness in fact increased. Yet the most relevant conclusion presumably concerns the robustness of democratic support. If democratic attitudes easily survive the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, this is a good sign for democracy.

For most citizens and politicians, thinking about the economy during the last couple of years presumably means thinking about bad economic times. However, in other times or at other places the mirror image may apply and the economy is prosperous. In Chapter 13, the final contribution to this volume, Ola Listhaug and Hanna Marthe Narud examine the effects of economic prosperity by focusing on Norway. They argue that whereas this country once was a typical example of cleavage-based politics, with the center-periphery cleavage being of primary importance, the cleavage structure has lost much of its impact. This has made room for the impact of the economic situation on election outcomes, with the Norwegian oil wealth as the most relevant factor. Listhaug and Narud analyze public opinion data and observe interesting differences between three elections in the first decade of the 21st century. Despite the economic growth, in 2001 and 2005 the incumbent parties lost substantially. This appears to result from the fact that government policy did not meet the expectations that citizens had. In 2009, on the other hand, when the economic crisis had emerged, the government could use the oil wealth for spending and citizens were satisfied with how the government dealt with the situation. This shows that

citizens do not blindly hold governments accountable for the economic situation, but respond to how governments deal with it in good times as well as bad.

1.6 Conclusion

The twelve contributions to this book are connected to each other in several ways and we have summarized each in some detail in order to demonstrate their inter-relatedness. Taken together, the broader picture that emerges from these contributions is that of representative democracy that, on the whole, functions rather well. The dynamics between citizens and their representatives and the government indicate that political elites are responsive to citizens, and citizens are responsive to political elites. These dynamics are oftentimes complex – and hence it may not always be clear how (or even *if*) democracy functions – but a close look and careful analysis on the basis of appropriate data reveal that much of the mechanisms that make up the political system meets up to the ideals. Policy preferences of citizens are reflected well in preferences of their representatives in parliament and in government policy, at least when it comes to the major dimensions of political conflict such as left-right ideology. Furthermore, across the world political regimes often supply the democratic governance that citizens demand. This is not to say that exceptions do not exist. For example, there are countries where the type of rule contrasts sharply with the desire of its population. And in the European Union citizens do not seem able to express their policy preferences with respect to the European integration project, and hence policy congruence on this dimension of political conflict may not be optimal. Nevertheless, the optimistic conclusions drawn in the several chapters clearly outnumber the expressions of worry. This seems to contrast with the tendency that one can often observe in public debate, in which the presumed crisis of legitimacy seems to be a permanent feature – a central topic in the formal farewell lecture by Jacques Thomassen on the occasion of his retirement.

The individual chapters link not only to each other, but also to the work of Jacques Thomassen. The themes that are addressed have been central in his work and the chapters have also been created in the spirit of Jacques Thomassen's approach. We hope that readers will agree that individually as well as collectively the chapters contribute to our understanding of the functioning of the democratic system in modern societies. There seems no better way to pay tribute to the work of Jacques Thomassen than by making a modest contribution to something that he himself has contributed to so enormously: the insight into how democracy works.