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PARTIES, VOTERS AND POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS, 1971–2002

Paul Pennings

ABSTRACT

To what extent are the priorities of voters reflected by the policy pledges of parties? And how decisive are party pledges for the policy-making of governments? The chain of delegation assumes direct linkages between voters, parties and governments, of which the voters are the principal actor. When this assumption is tested for The Netherlands, it turns out that parties are not very responsive to voter priorities and that the policy distances between parliamentary parties and governments are relatively small. This pattern makes sense in a consensus democracy in which parties have to compromise and cannot afford simply to reflect what voters perceive as important. It also suggests that the mandate theory is more directly applicable to majoritarian democracies, where the winner takes all and therefore has more scope to translate voter priorities into policy-making.

KEY WORDS ▪ government declarations ▪ party pledges ▪ voter priorities

The relationships between the preferences and priorities of voters, parties and governments are crucial to the functioning of parliamentary democracies. Together, these relationships form a 'chain of delegation' from voters to parties and from parties to policy-makers (Strøm, 2000). This article seeks to unravel the connection between the priorities of voters, parties and governments in order to clarify how the chain of delegation works in the Dutch context. The article is limited to policy priorities, because these are vital to the formation of a political agenda, which is one of the main outcomes of the chain of delegation. This agenda determines how public resources are utilized in order to achieve prioritized collective goals.

Strøm distinguishes four discrete steps in this chain of delegation (2000: 267):

1. From voters to representatives.
2. From legislators to the executive branch.
3. From the head of government to the heads of different executive departments.
4. From the heads of different executive departments to civil servants.

I concentrate on the first two steps, which determine the 'democraticness' of the chain of delegation (Keman, 2002). The first concerns the relationship between the priorities of voters and parties. This relationship is indicative of the degree of party responsiveness: the way in which political parties translate problems and voter priorities into programmes and, when in government, translate these emphases into decision-making (Pennings, 1998). In the literature, two opposing interpretations of this relationship can be found: the Downsian one and the saliency theory.

The Downsian model of party competition assumes that parties are merely vote-seekers and hence not ideologically fixed. Whereas party responsiveness is high according to Downs, it is low according to the saliency theory. The saliency theory of party competition (Budge and Farlie, 1983) claims that parties try to render selective emphases by devoting most attention to the types of issue which favour themselves and give correspondingly less attention to issues that favour their opponents. Consequently, party competition is only secondarily a direct confrontation of opposing policies (Budge, 1992, 1993; Budge and Farlie, 1983: 23–4). Parties do not blindly reflect what voters want and normally they do not argue with their opponents. Instead, they emphasize issues that fit within their ideological profile. This does not mean that there is no overlap between manifestos. Parties do address the same topics, but often prefer to present their own position and not to criticize other parties' positions. This is reflected by the relatively high number of positive statements compared to negative statements in party manifestos (Budge et al., 2001). This is also in line with the saliency theory, which assumes that parties will stress their own position and consequently will not discuss the positions of their competitors at length.

The second step in the chain of delegation concerns the relationship between the priorities of parties and governments. This theme is at the heart of the mandate theory according to which the competing parties offer the voters different programmes from which to choose. The governing parties are therefore bound to carry through the programmes on which they have been elected (Budge and Hofferbert, 1990: 111; Klingemann et al., 1994). The mandate theory on democracy differs from other theories in emphasizing that the policy positions put forward by the parties at elections are crucial for voters in determining their party choice. By selectively emphasizing issues, parties aim at attracting a net inflow of voters (Budge and Hofferbert, 1990). This correspondence between voter priorities and party priorities is essential for the 'democraticness' of the political process. A high

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degree of correspondence between party priorities and government policies as such does not make the chain of delegation democratic, since all depends on whether the party emphases are derived from voter emphases or not. This article is therefore focused on the crucial question: to what degree do parties reflect the policy priorities of voters?

Hypotheses on the Dutch Case

Since the interactions between parties, voters and governments are structured by the national institutional context, it is not possible to give a general answer to this question. For this reason, the analysis is limited to one country, so that the findings can be interpreted within a specific political-institutional context. This prevents too broad generalizations on relationships between the policy agendas of voters, parties and governments which are always bound to a particular time and place. The Dutch case is chosen for two reasons. First, The Netherlands forms a sharp contrast with two-party systems which are often chosen in order to illustrate that the assumptions of the mandate theory are correct. But to what extent are they correct for a multiparty system with coalition governments, which are so predominant in Europe? Second, the Dutch case is well documented with comparative data on the policy positions of the main political actors through time. Included in the analysis are all parties that have participated in government before 2002. These are the Christian Democrats (the CDA and its predecessor KVP), the progressive liberals (D66), the social democrats (PvdA), the conservative liberals (VVD) and the Green Left (GRL).[1]

The applicability of the mandate theory to the Dutch case has recently been studied by Robert Thomson (1999), who compares the degree of pledge fulfilment in The Netherlands (1986–98) with the United Kingdom. He finds that in the Dutch context 61 percent of the pledges on socio-economic topics made by parties in government are fulfilled, whereas in the UK this average is 70 percent. Yet, it would be too early too conclude, given this moderate to high degree of pledge fulfilment, that the mandate theory is fully applicable to The Netherlands. There are two reasons for this. First, the mandate theory assumes that the party emphases do reflect the priorities of voters. This connection is not empirically examined in Thomson's research. It is simply assumed that voters recognize party pledges as being relevant to their own concerns. This assumption is questionable since, as this article demonstrates, there is no systematic and close association between the preferences of Dutch parties and voters.

Second, pledge fulfilment is mainly a concern of cabinet parties, but which parties get into government is not a direct reflection of the outcome of Dutch elections. Which government is formed depends on a variety of factors, and voter preferences are only one of them (De Vries, 1999; Narud, 1996). Hence, the politics of coalition formation hinders the applicability of the

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mandate model to The Netherlands or any other consensus democracy. If party pledges are weakly linked to voter preferences, and if 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.

The need for coalition-building and compromise in The Netherlands implies that parties cannot translate their own policy preferences directly into policy-making. For this reason it is expected that public policy-making is not a direct reflection of the priorities of governing parties and voters. Although not perfect, there is likely to be some connection between the priorities of voters, parties and governments, because otherwise democratic decision-making would be inconceivable and the chain of delegation would not even exist.

Data and Methodology

The priorities of voters are estimated on the basis of one question that is asked in all Dutch parliamentary election studies: 'What do you consider to be the most important problems in our country?' (Van Deth and Horstman, 1989). The answers are coded into categories that capture all main policy domains in Dutch politics.[2] The multiple response answers to the 'most important problem question' are taken by counting the percentages across five variables (problem first mentioned to problem last mentioned). This way of counting is appropriate because the order of the problem seems unrelated to importance as evaluated to the respondent (Schumann and Presser, 1981: 88). For this reason, the number of responses gives a better impression of the overall importance of problems than just the problem mentioned first. However, two types of objection could be made.

First, one could argue that, in the chosen procedure, respondents who (can) name many problems get more weight in the analyses than those who can see only one dominant problem, not to mention those who do not spontaneously name any 'important' problem. This is correct, but the number of responses per individual respondent is limited. Furthermore, this problem would not be solved by choosing only the first problem, since this one is not necessarily the most important problem. Second, one could expect a bias in this question format towards national problems as opposed to international, European or world problems. If so, the question format could also lead to bias in estimates of the relationship between voters' priorities and parties' priorities. It seems, however, that this possible bias is also limited because the question wording does not exclude references to international problems. One category of problems, for example, is 'common market and EU' (Horstman and Van Deth, 1993). Not only voters but also party manifestos will often discuss international problems from a national perspective. However, it is correct that the national scope of the problems put forward is more pronounced in the case of voters than

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in the case of party manifestos and government declarations. Finally, one has to be aware that the multiple response score is highly aggregated and does not reflect the saliency which individual voters attach to issues. All the scores from voters, parties and governments are aggregated to the party level. This means that the units of analysis are the five party policy positions on all issue categories per election year, and each party score is accompanied by the emphasis of voters and governments on the same issues in that election year. This is in line with the chain of delegation in which parties establish the crucial link between voter priorities and government policies.

The priorities of political parties are derived from party manifestos and those of governments from government declarations (Klingemann et al., 1994; Laver and Budge, 1992). Although government declarations are smaller documents than government agreements, their comparability is better, since government agreements vary significantly in size whereas government declarations do not. However, since both document types are closely related, we do not expect a significant difference between them in terms of emphases on policy areas (e.g. this is confirmed by the strong correlations, which are 0.72 in 1994 and 0.86 in 1998).

The priorities of voters, parties and governments can only be compared by means of identically coded issue domains. The party manifestos and government declarations are already coded by means of the MRG coding scheme[3] (Budge et al., 1987, 2001; Klingemann et al., 1994). The problem with these coding categories of party manifestos and government declarations is that they cannot be directly matched with the priorities of voters. In order to achieve an optimal match between the priorities of voters, parties and governments, all relevant policy documents have been recoded by taking the coding categories of voters as the starting point because these are the only categories which are given and cannot be adapted by adding or reformulating categories. The party manifestos and government declarations, on the other hand, can be analysed by any coding scheme with the help of content analysis.

For these reasons, the MRG coding scheme is not used and instead the party manifestos and government declarations are analysed with a new coding scheme based on the categories of the national problems mentioned by voters. This is done by means of a computerized content analysis on the basis of thematic word counts with the help of the computer content analysis software TEXTPACK.[4] For each category of most important national problems, the main relevant key words are selected which cover this policy area. The content analysis leads to a frequency distribution that reveals the relative weight of all policy areas. Earlier content analysis on the basis of this technique has shown that it is possible to code manifestos with word lists and to arrive at reliable results that are comparable to or even better than the coding done by humans (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings, 2001; Laver and Garry, 2000; Laver et al., 2003). The dictionary is validated by means

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of the Keyword-In-Context technique, which allows one to examine the occurrences of key words in their textual environment. In this way the dictionary is improved by assessing the consistency of meanings associated with a word, word pattern or category. Once an inconsistency has been detected the key word was removed or reformulated in order to make it fit better.

Parties and Voter Priorities

The frequency distribution of the voter responses to the national problem question forms a rank order of national problems that can be interpreted as a popular agenda (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1995). It should be noted, however, that the ranking of problems by voters is only partly comparable with the way in which parties emphasize national problems in manifestos. An important difference is that parties relate problems to each other and incorporate them within a comprehensive agenda, whereas voters just mention one to five separate problems that seem important to them at that particular moment in time. Whereas parties are bounded by their own promises, voters are not bounded in any way. Obviously, the popular agenda has a different status from the agenda of parties and governments, but it is still highly relevant because it cannot be ignored without jeopardizing the democraticness of political decision-making. Table 1 gives an overview of the policy priorities of voters between 1971 and 2002. In all the tables presented here, the national problems are aggregated into 15 categories in order to keep the tables as compact as possible without leaving out important policy areas.

Table 1 indicates that several issues appear to be periodically highly salient in The Netherlands, such as unemployment, environmental pollution, housing and ethnic minorities. Others have consistently low scores (like culture) or most of the time relatively high scores (like foreign affairs).

Most striking are the fluctuations in the popular perceptions of problems. Downs (1972) interpreted these as 'issue-attention cycles', in which problems come and go partly as a consequence of the attention given by the media to the problem. However, Downs illustrated this cycle solely for pollution and did not link it to the real world problem intensity. However, since a large range of policy domains is under study, it is interesting to determine the extent to which the cyclical character of issue attention is also relevant for other policy areas. This seems to be the case. Not only was there a sudden rise (and fall) of attention for pollution (1971 and 1989), but also in the case of housing shortage (1971 and 1972), unemployment (starting with the oil crisis in 1973 and ending towards the end of the 1980s) and inflation (1972). In most instances, the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm are followed by a gradual decline from intense public interest. Owing to the cyclical character of public attention, euphoric public

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Table 1. Priorities of Dutch voters (means)

	1971	1972	1977	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002
Agriculture, economy	4.1	3.0	7.2	19.0	11.8	4.8	6.0	5.5	0.8
Culture	3.6	1.1	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.1	0.3	5.7
Democracy, emancipation	5.6	10.1	4.4	6.4	6.7	6.5	9.8	8.5	4.0
Education	1.4	1.8	1.2	0.5	1.8	3.2	1.0	3.9	9.3
Foreign relations	0.7	0.7	1.1	0.6	0.4	0.5	1.0	1.3	1.0
Housing shortage	19.8	12.8	7.2	3.2	0.9	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.1
Law and order, religion	3.5	2.8	5.5	6.8	7.7	7.9	9.3	18.1	18.8
Minorities, racism	2.1	2.8	3.0	3.6	6.3	4.6	22.9	7.4	13.3
Pollution	21.2	16.0	5.7	2.6	3.9	30.7	6.9	6.7	3.2
Public health	3.4	1.5	6.2	1.8	7.6	7.3	3.8	15.7	15.5
Social welfare, subsidies	7.8	6.3	6.6	4.5	8.8	7.3	15.5	9.9	4.6
Taxes, income and prices	9.5	17.4	14.4	3.6	3.9	5.6	2.3	5.7	1.5
Town planning and traffic	9.6	9.2	4.4	0.2	0.8	2.6	3.3	9.2	9.7
Unemployment	3.1	9.9	31.0	37.2	30.5	16.6	16.1	6.1	2.8
War and peace	1.1	1.8	0.8	10.0	8.5	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.0

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, 1971–2002. N = 600 (9 years × 15 issue categories = 135 rows for each of five parties). The Green Left has only 60 rows since no data are available before 1989.

enthusiasm is assumed to have only moderate long-term effects on policy-making (Aarts et al., 1992).

How responsive are parties to the popular perceptions of the saliency of problems? If parties are vote maximizers, parties are seeking to be situated as closely as possible to major concentrations of voters. This Downsian notion of party competition is contested by the saliency theory, which claims that parties tend to stress mainly those issues that fit within their own ideology. This partisan rigidity makes it unlikely that parties are blindly responsive to popular perceptions. The saliency theory predicts that parties will normally stick to issues which fit within their ideological profile (Budge, 1993: 94–5).

In order to examine the degrees to which parties respond to voter priorities, the latter are subtracted from the party emphases on issues in the party manifestos (and referred to hereafter as 'distance scores'). The generally high distance scores in Table 2 demonstrate that the partisan agendas

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Table 2. Distances in policy priorities of parties and voters (%)

	1971	1972	1977	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002
Agriculture, economy	10.0	−3.0	7.8	−0.9	4.2	9.9	10.2	10.2	16.2
Culture	0.7	−1.1	2.0	2.7	3.2	2.5	2.2	3.8	−2.3
Democracy, emancipation	0.5	−10.1	1.6	−1.7	−0.9	−0.4	−2.4	−2.1	2.5
Education	12.8	−1.8	8.7	7.5	7.6	5.1	5.3	6.4	1.9
Foreign relations	10.0	−0.7	9.2	10.0	10.8	11.4	12.2	8.6	5.8
Housing shortage	−17.0	−12.8	−4.0	−0.2	1.3	0.7	−0.7	0.8	1.4
Law and order, religion	2.3	−2.8	0.7	−1.0	−1.4	−1.6	−2.5	−11.5	−11.8
Minorities, racism	−1.4	−2.8	−2.4	−2.3	−4.8	−2.5	−21.1	−5.5	−11.2
Pollution	−17.6	−16.0	−1.5	1.2	1.7	−21.1	1.6	0.3	4.1
Public health	−0.9	−1.5	−2.3	1.0	−4.9	−4.2	−1.4	−11.8	−11.7
Social welfare, subsidies	2.1	−6.3	4.6	5.4	0.7	2.9	−5.3	0.3	4.4
Taxes, income and prices	−3.5	−17.4	−8.6	3.1	1.2	−1.3	3.0	−1.2	3.5
Town planning and traffic	−0.3	−9.2	3.8	7.4	7.8	5.5	4.6	−0.7	−1.0
Unemployment	3.5	−9.9	−20.9	−25.6	−20.0	−8.5	−7.2	2.5	5.7
War and peace	2.2	−1.8	2.4	−6.6	−6.4	1.6	1.4	0.8	1.1

The distance measure is computed as the difference between the emphases of political parties minus those of voters. A positive score means that parties emphasize more; a negative score that parties emphasize less.

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies and party manifestos, 1971–2002. N = 600.

are not a direct reflection of the popular agenda. This apparent lack of responsiveness can be seen as a result of partisan rigidity and as confirmation of the assumptions of the saliency theory. Party rigidity implies, per definition, a lack of responsiveness. This does not mean that parties are totally unresponsive. In the case of the environmental issue, the results show that there was a limited responsiveness in 1971 and 1989 (the mean emphasis of parties was 30.7 percent –21.1 percent = 9.6 percent, which is quite considerable for party manifestos). Yet, compared to the absolute level of voter emphasis on this issue, the responsiveness of parties is weak.

Fluctuations in the popular saliency of issues mostly correspond with the real problem intensity (Van der Brug, 2000). Unemployment was indeed highest between the early 1970s and the middle of the 1980s and the crime rate is steadily rising, just as the increasing popular attention for this issue

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(Visser and Wijnhoven, 1990). But in some cases there is a large distance between the real problem intensity and popular saliency. In these cases, voter perceptions do not mirror real problem intensities very well or are overreactions to these problems. This is illustrated by the issue of environmental pollution. The 'objective saliency' of environmental pollution is reflected by a steadily rising level of all kinds of pollution, but the 'popular saliency' is not linked to these real levels of pollution, but to the degree of media attention (e.g. in reaction to the Club of Rome in the 1970s). Another example is the issue of minorities, in particular asylum-seekers, which scored high as a national problem in both 1994 and 2002 when it figured prominently in the election campaigns. Apparently, voters are mainly led by the attention given by the media to this issue.

A comparison between parties (not shown here) indicates that the distances do not vary much from party to party. Parties seem to stick to their ideological profile and do not make extreme shifts in their policy priorities, as voters seem to do from time to time. The distances also go in the same direction, such that some issues are emphasized by all parties and others less so. It is uncommon for parties to emphasize an issue much more in one year and much less in another year compared to voters. Once an issue is emphasized much more in one election year, it will be emphasized slightly more (or less) in another year in many cases, but never much less than voters.

As far as differences do exist they can often be explained by the ideological profile of parties. The distance of the PvdA on unemployment is higher than that of the CDA and VVD, but in cases of law and order (including traditional morality) it is mostly the other way around. Similarly, the Green Left has a higher positive score on pollution and a higher negative score on law and order, which is also in line with what one could expect on the basis of ideological differences. All in all, Table 2 seems to confirm the earlier hypothesis that the election results are hard to interpret as a mandate of voters to parties because parties advocate policies which are not perceived by voters as most important to their concerns.

What about the differences between parties and governments? In the Dutch case, the need for cooperation between parties in coalition governments means that cabinet parties have to overcome their differences. These parties have to make the switch from competition (during elections) to cooperation (when in government). Consequently, the preferences of cabinet parties during elections may change when they enter government. This institutional feature of a multiparty system is not taken into account by the mandate theory. In order to understand how competing party policy positions can also be the basis for cooperation in governments, it is helpful to study party policy positions over time. The left–right scale is suited to measure policy differences since the left–right divide still represents one of the most fundamental cleavages in Dutch politics (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002; Pennings and Keman, 2003). The scale employed in this article is a

revised version of the left–right scale introduced by Klingemann and others on the basis of a factor analysis (Klingemann et al., 1994; see also Laver, 2001). This scale has been slightly adapted. Items have been removed which do not fit very well into the scale according to a reliability analysis. A Cronbach's alpha score of 0.76 is acceptable, as party manifestos are not written with the explicit aim of scaling items (Kleinnijenhuis, 1999: 93). The scale is constructed by subtracting the sum of 12 left issues from the sum of 11 right issues (consequently, the higher the score, the more to the left a party is).

Figure 1 shows that since 1971 the degree of left–right polarization diminishes. This finding is confirmed in most of the literature (Krouwel, 1999; Laver and Mair, 1999; Michels, 1993; Pennings and Keman, 2003). Between 1986 and 2002 the policy distances between the PvdA, CDA and VVD have become significantly smaller than in the period before. The PvdA, in particular, made a remarkable move toward the centre. This trend is confirmed by an analysis of the city block distances (derived from cluster analysis) which shows that the convergence in The Netherlands is fairly strong compared to other countries (Pennings, 2003).

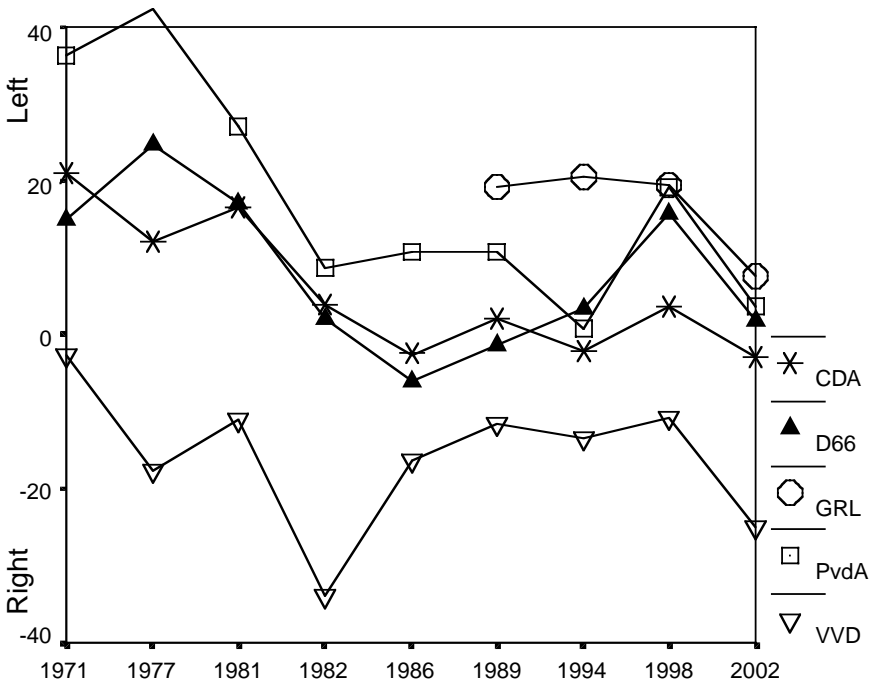In an early analysis of Dutch party manifestos, Dittrich came to the same

Figure 1. Left versus right since 1971

conclusion that there is a gradual trend toward convergence between all parties (Dittrich, 1987: 228). According to Dittrich this can be explained by the sole inclusion of (potential) government parties in the Manifesto Project. Dittrich's interpretation is not wholly satisfactory because the need to build coalitions did not change in the post-war period. This cannot therefore explain why parties tend toward a more moderate stance. The shift from polarization in the 1970s to convergence in the 1990s contradicts the view of Arend Lijphart, in which Dutch pillarization is identified with consensus and depillarization with conflict (Lijphart, 1968).

There are two explanations for convergence in the Dutch context. The first focuses on external factors, in particular the combination of a growing electoral volatility and a decline of traditional cleavages (religion, class) which makes it risky for parties to emphasize the traditional left and right salient issues because there is no large stable group of followers of typically left and right issues (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002; Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 1999). Another explanation focuses on the party system dynamics. When the PvdA follows a polarization strategy, the CDA will build a coalition with the VVD. This in fact happened after 1977. When the VVD polarizes, the CDA will build a coalition with the PvdA, as occurred in 1989. Polarization in the Dutch context therefore means that the chances of becoming a governing party diminish. Consequently, the three (partly) contradictory goals of vote-seeking, office-seeking and policy-seeking are balanced by adapting a depolarization strategy, because this improves the prospects of becoming a governing party (Hillebrand and Irwin, 1999). This strategy is more visible in the movements of left parties (i.e. PvdA and Green Left) than in those of right parties (i.e. VVD). But, generally speaking, consensus-building has become dominant over conflict and polarization (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002). This explains the remarkable movement of the PvdA toward the centre of the left–right spectrum. But there is a price to pay for this shift, i.e. the PvdA gradually loses the support of the left-oriented voters. The intermediate position of parties in the chain of delegation implies that they have to seek a balance between competition for votes and the prospects of cooperation in government. Responsiveness to voter priorities is an aspect of partisan strategic behaviour which needs to be balanced with other party goals (Müller and Strøm, 1999).

Priorities of Parties and Governments

The mandate theory stating that the governing parties are mandated by the voters to pursue policies is based on the assumption that it makes a difference which parties are governing parties and also that voters are able to evaluate the outcomes of the government policies. However, the Dutch parties have been converging, which makes it difficult for voters to distinguish between parties. In addition, cabinets are always based on coalitions,

so that voters may have problems holding one particular party accountable for the outcomes of policy-making. Consequently, it does not make much difference for the policy outputs of governments which parties are governing, not at least as much as in the British majoritarian system. These differences between the British and the Dutch case suggest that the mandate theory is biased by the British situation and cannot be generalized to all parliamentary democracies.

This statement is supported in Table 3, which shows small policy distances between parties and governments compared with the larger distances between parties and voters. Comparative analysis shows that this is typical of countries in which the Christian Democrats are pivotal actors necessary to form a government (Van Kersbergen, 1995). In these countries, the impact of individual parties on government policy is harder to discern than in countries with a regular clear-cut alternation of government. A perceptible impact of parties on government policy has been found in

Table 3. Policy distances between policy priorities of parties and governments

	1971	1972	1977	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002
Agriculture, economy	−2.2	−15.3	−1.5	−1.5	−0.1	1.4	2.5	−0.2	−6.5
Culture	1.7	−1.4	1.0	1.1	2.9	1.6	0.0	2.5	2.8
Democracy, emancipation	2.3	−6.0	2.4	0.4	−0.2	2.1	−1.1	0.7	−2.7
Education	−2.6	−12.4	−2.3	−0.3	−1.8	1.0	−3.4	2.3	1.5
Foreign relations	−2.0	−13.6	1.4	1.2	−1.5	1.3	2.1	−2.9	2.2
Housing shortage	1.2	−3.0	0.9	1.7	0.8	0.8	0.5	1.2	1.0
Law and order, religion	−4.4	−8.7	−4.4	−6.3	−6.3	−11.7	−8.7	−7.4	0.2
Minorities, racism	0.4	−0.5	−0.5	−0.2	−1.2	−0.2	−0.9	−0.5	−0.7
Pollution	−1.5	−3.8	−0.3	0.7	2.6	3.2	3.5	2.4	4.3
Public health	1.1	−1.9	2.2	1.2	1.4	1.7	0.1	1.3	−1.1
Social welfare, subsidies	0.3	−7.5	1.3	0.6	2.3	0.7	1.5	1.0	−2.6
Taxes, income and prices	1.7	−8.4	0.1	1.2	1.1	0.0	2.9	1.9	−0.2
Town planning and traffic	1.8	−6.0	0.6	3.2	1.7	−2.0	1.6	0.9	5.0
Unemployment	0.6	−7.1	−2.1	−1.7	−2.0	−0.7	0.0	−2.5	−4.0
War and peace	1.8	−4.3	1.1	−1.3	0.1	0.7	−0.4	−0.6	0.7

The distance measure is computed as the difference between the emphases of political parties and those of governments. A positive score means that parties emphasize more; a negative score that parties emphasize less.
Source: Party manifestos and Government Declarations. N = 600.

countries like Norway with a clear-cut alternation of government between one bloc of parties and an alternative bloc with little or no overlapping membership (Gallagher et al., 2000; Laver and Budge, 1992: 421–5).

It is not just the distance between the priorities of governing parties and government declarations that is small, but also that between the opposition parties and government declarations. Consequently, the priorities of both incumbent parties and opposition parties are reflected in Dutch government policies. As it is difficult to ascribe policy performance to one particular party, one could expect that participation in government might not seem a very important motivation for party choice. This is confirmed by the research of Van Holsteyn, who found that between 1971 and 1998 on average 10 percent of voters refer explicitly to the composition of previous or future governments when accounting for their own party choice (Van Holsteyn, 2000: 112). The small distance between the priorities of incumbent and opposition parties and government policies must be related to the Dutch consociational political tradition. All established parties are potential coalition partners that might have to cooperate as coalition partners after the elections. As stressed by Petry (1991), incumbent parties are inclined to adopt the priorities of the opposition parties in order to make them less attractive alternative parties to voters.

Discussion

A popular notion of democratic decision-making suggests that political parties should pick up on the problems of the masses and formulate the answers to these problems in programmes and policies. When parties do not appear to be performing this task well enough, most political commentators conclude that there is a large gap between citizens and politicians. This notion of democracy is rather one-sighted, because it only takes into account the input side of the political process. If parties and politicians were to react solely to the priorities of the voters, this could lead to incoherent and ineffective policies because, owing to the issue-attention cycle, the popular preferences are not always adequate reflections of the objective problem intensity. On the other hand, parties cannot totally ignore popular preferences.

The interaction between voters and parties is only one side of responsiveness and concerns the step from problems to programmes. The other side is the degree to which the priorities of governments reflect those of parties. This is the basic theme of mandate theory. Empirical research on the connection of these priorities is theoretically relevant for the assumptions that are made by the mandate theory. The mandate theory gives us an ideal image of democratic decision-making which is inspired by the British system. The Dutch case shows that there are several structural barriers for the mandatory role of parties in consensus democracies where mandates are always shared with other parties.

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The low degree of responsiveness of parties indicates that the linkage between voters and parties is the weakest one in the chain of delegation. The linkage between the priorities of parties and governments is much stronger. There should be some connection between the popular and the political agendas in order to enable democratic decision-making, but if the two agendas would merge, the policy agenda of governments would become highly unstable. In the Dutch context the mandate theory does not apply in the same manner as in Britain because Dutch parties are not in a position to make a direct translation of voter priorities or their own priorities into policy-making since they have to compromise.

Notes

1 The Green Left was never in government, but the PPR, which is one of the constituent parties, participated in the cabinet of Den Uyl (1973–77). For an introduction to Dutch parties and politics, see Andeweg and Irwin (2002).
2 The main categories (apart from subcategories) are agricultural policy, taxes, foreign relations, culture and recreation, defence, democratization, economic and financial problems, energy problems, ethical problems, law and order, income and prices, squatting, social work, environmental problems, minorities, education and science, political problems, religious problems, town and country planning, social welfare, government subsidies, traffic, welfare state, public health, women's emancipation, employment, housing shortage and riot-police behaviour (for the full coding list, see Appendix 1 in Van der Eijk et al., 1981). In all tables these categories are aggregated into 15 categories in order to improve readability.
3 This coding scheme was developed in 1979 by the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) of the European Consortium for Political Research. This coding scheme comprises 56 categories which are divided into 7 domains. On the basis of frequencies (counts as a proportion of the whole document), percentage scores have been obtained for 300 parties in 25 countries. The coding scheme is published in Budge et al. (2001: 222–8).
4 TEXTPACK offers some standard tools for content analysis and can categorize text according to content analytic dictionaries. The numeric output holds frequencies of categories. However, the choice to use TEXTPACK is arbitrary, since many other programs can do the same, e.g. TEXTQUEST, VBPRO and Wordstat. For an overview of content analysis software, see: www.car.ua.edu.

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