Election studies in the Netherlands: Pluralism and accommodation

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Introduction

Electoral research in the Netherlands is well developed. Sizeable election studies are conducted at every parliamentary election and a considerable number of scholarly publications have appeared in print. The field has always been characterized by diversity in theoretical approaches. This pluralism has however, long been accompanied by collaborative efforts to maintain the common infrastructure of national election studies. This essay attempts to sketch the development of electoral research in the Netherlands. It does so partly chronologically, partly by discussing how particular aspects of the Dutch political, social and academic context have influenced the evolution of this field.

Early precursors of modern voter studies: the pre-1967 period

Large scale surveys of voters are of relatively recent date in the Netherlands. Only since the second half of the 1960s have voter studies become 'normal' phenomena in the context of elections. This take-off period was preceded by two decades of earlier work which, although not very spectacular, was relevant in preparing the ground and establishing experience. This section discusses these precursors.1

There is little to report on electoral research before 1945. The few existing pre-war publications all focus on the analyses of aggregate data, in particular turnout. Some date from even before Siegfried's renowned study on France (1913). The most noteworthy examples are Blink (1892) and Ramaer (1909). Later studies in this tradition have been greatly facilitated by the publication (since 1901) of election results at low levels of aggregation by the Dutch Census Bureau, the Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics. Since approximately that time a number of larger cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht) also started publishing such data, at even lower levels of aggregation.

Surveys of individual voters' behaviour, opinions and preferences were introduced in the Netherlands only after World War II. Until the mid-1950s the number of published reports from voter studies is extremely limited as
their analytical contribution to understanding behaviour and preferences. The main reasons for this are paucity of data on the one hand and limited knowledge of how to use survey data on the other hand.

The disabling effect of a lack of analytical skills is demonstrated by the report of the Royal Commission of 1953. This survey-study yielded the first elaborate questionnaire on party preference and other political topics to be administered in the Netherlands on a national sample (*Nederlandse Kiezer*, 1956).

Election and voter studies were hardly at all influenced by academic work until the mid 1950s. This is not surprising, as political science was launched in Dutch universities only after 1945, and then on a very small scale. In the mid-1950s, however, its practitioners had sufficiently settled their position to aspire to their own research. A voting study in *Nieuwer Amstel*, a suburb near Amsterdam, was initiated in 1955 under auspices of the Dutch Political Science Association.

The Nieuwer Amstel study was the first on the European continent in which respondents were interviewed repeatedly. A conscious effort was made to replicate important aspects of the design pioneered in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) and *Voting* (Berelson et al. 1954). This implied, among other things, a focus on dynamic aspects of voter choice and the inclusion of a comparatively wide range of topics in the questionnaire. In spite of this, the Nieuwer Amstel study failed to exert the strong stimulating influence on the development of electoral theory and research which its originators and the sponsoring Association had intended. To some extent this may be attributed to the late appearance of its publications (Van der Land et al. 1963, 1964), but even more to their character. They still very much emphasized sociological determinants of the vote, were almost exclusively descriptive and exhibited little theoretical reflection on the basis of the empirical results.

Research on elections, voting and vote changing is scarce during the second post-war period, 1956–1965. Occasionally opinion polls carried 'political' items, a few articles are written by party activists, but no new research of any scope, depth or creativity was undertaken. The only significant publication in this period is Daudt’s dissertation (1961), which focuses on floating voters and the floating vote. It does not include any Dutch data, but instead reanalyzes previously published American and British data. It is the first Dutch publication of any importance which discusses in depth the significance of psychological variables such as party identification, party affiliation, partisanship and party image.

Notwithstanding the reports of the Nieuwer Amstel study and Daudt’s dissertation, the 1955–1966 period represents stagnation with respect to electoral theory and research in the Netherlands.
From take-off to institutionalization: 1966–1971

The landslides of the 1966 (provincial) and 1967 (parliamentary) elections greatly stimulated interest in voter behaviour, and prompted the take-off of voting studies. Within a few years, more than 10 rather large election surveys were conducted, covering local, provincial or parliamentary elections. Almost all gave rise to reports which were published very quickly after completion of the fieldwork and which were directed to a general public of politicians, journalists and interested citizens. Speed and style allowed them to influence the political debate after the elections. Mass media became aware of the newsvalue of election research, and started, in addition to publishing results, to commission or sponsor studies as well. These speedy publications were instrumental in demonstrating the depth of increased volatility and in describing the shifting bases of electoral support for the various parties. They failed, however, to provide an interpretative and explanatory perspective on the recent electoral changes.

The brief period before institutionalization in 1971 generated a number of academic studies which stand apart by their evident ambition to generate new and in-depth insights into the nature and dynamics of electoral choice and related phenomena. A number of these were local studies. In 1966 a large sample drawn from the population of Amsterdam was interviewed on local politics, civic attitudes and orientations, political disaffection and political preferences. It consciously pioneered the use of multiple item measurement for a wide variety of attitudinal variables. In addition to a number of articles it produced a dissertation on political participation by Van der Maesen (1974). Other large surveys of the Amsterdam electorate were undertaken in 1966 and 1970, but none generated more than a few scattered articles.2

The two most important studies in this period were national in scope. They were the Free University 1967 parliamentary election study and the 1970 Tilburg provincial election study. Both used lengthy questionnaires and large samples. Both contained a wide range of attitudinal and motivational variables in addition to more traditional sociological characteristics. Both aimed to link party choice with more general political orientations and behaviour.

The Free University 1967 parliamentary election study was the first large-scale academic election study on a nation-wide sample in the Netherlands. According to the investigators, it was primarily directed to answer the question ‘whether or not Dutch voters try to realize certain political goals, and if so, which’. Innovative aspects of this study include questions on:
- voters’ opinions on issues
- attitudes mediating religious and political orientations and preferences
- generic goals and values such as equality, freedom, religion, etc.
- a wide range of different aspects of political involvement
- voters’ attachment to parties
second choice of party
sympathy and dislike for parties
positive and negative images of parties

The Free University study soon produced a report with preliminary results (SWI-VU 1967), and a scholarly article (Hoogerwerf 1967). The intended major publication, however, was not to appear for another decade (Kiezen in 1967, SWI-VU 1977). The 1977 main publication fulfilled the original aim to investigate voters’ choices from the perspective of political objectives and not from sociological or nonspecific identification factors. The major conclusion was that the relationship between voters and parties is not founded on specific policy proposals, but rather on more general political principles which parties and voters stand for. The authors failed, however, to specify to which extent this explanation accounts for voters’ behaviour.

Three years after the Free University study, which at that time had not yet yielded more than preliminary reports, a large nation-wide sample was interviewed at length at the occasion of the provincial elections of 1970. This study was designed by a joint team from the University of Tilburg (Stouthard, Thomassen & Heunks) and the University of Michigan (Miller, Jennings & Rusk). The study was consciously modelled after the design of the ‘Michigan paradigm’ and sought not only to contribute to the application of that approach to the study of voter behavior in the Netherlands, but also to contribute to a representation study by providing the relevant information for the electorate. This study produced a series of scholarly articles in the 1970s, and a major publication on representation in the Netherlands by Thomassen (1976). The sample was re-interviewed twice, in 1971 and 1972, thus generating the first nation-wide panel election study.

The innovations in the various studies in the brief 1966–1971 period are centered on the introduction of ‘subjective’ characteristics as explanatory variables in the study of party choice and voter behaviour: attitudes, values, orientations, purposes, perceptions and identifications. The impetus to include them in surveys was at least twofold. First, dramatically increased electoral and political instability required for its analysis more than the traditional socialstructural characteristics which were the focus of voter surveys during the previous decades. A second factor of importance was influence from other, mainly American and British, voter studies. Part of this impact came by way of exposure to the literature, part by direct contacts. The Tilburg study in particular benefitted from intensive contacts between the local researchers and their counterparts in Ann Arbor. This study is a deliberate effort to translate important elements of the Michigan model to the Dutch situation, in particular those pertaining to party identification and issues. The Free University study, as well as the local Amsterdam surveys of 1966 and 1970, also show influences from the American literature in which the Michigan paradigm was dominant at that time. These studies, however, reflected a more selective stance, which allowed adoption (or adaptation) of only those elements from other studies which fitted within indigenously
developed theoretical perspectives. This contributed to somewhat different conceptualizations and operationalizations of seemingly similar variables.\(^4\)

One important study should be mentioned also: shortly after the 1967 parliamentary election Lijphart published his *The Politics of Accommodation*, a study of the origins and operation of the system of pillarization in the Netherlands (Lijphart 1968a, 1968b). Although this study is not an election study per se, it exerted great influence on election studies. Lijphart's theory of consociationalism incorporates in it an explanation (one might even call it a model) of voting behaviour which incorporated many of the implicit perspectives on voting commonly used before. In its essence it is a sociological theory of voting behaviour. It explains voting behaviour in the Netherlands from differences in religion and, for non-religious voters, social class. Compared with previous sociological approaches, Lijphart's description and theory are advanced as they link these differences to subcultural cleavages which dominate social life in many respects, including the political realm.

When the parliamentary elections of 1971 approached, a somewhat paradoxical situation had emerged. In the five years since 1966 a great number of studies had been conducted, but no in-depth analyses had yet been published. As long as the intended products of these projects had not yet been produced, the data would be under embargo and inaccessible for others. The continuing political changes increased everyone's appetite for election studies, yet it seemed unlikely that all appetites could be accommodated by the National Science Foundation, apparently the only possible source of support. The solution favoured by all was cooperation rather than competition.

**Institutionalization of Dutch national election studies**

As of 1971, studies of parliamentary elections had been organized as collaborative projects of the community of political scientists. Data-collection was conducted not for the benefit of any specific (group of) researcher(s), but for everyone interested in the field of voting. As a corollary, problems such as data-cleaning, documentation, archiving and dissemination of data were (perhaps for the first time) recognized as warranting systematic attention.

An inter-university network (the National Election Studies Workgroup) was formed in which everyone involved in electoral research was included or represented. On behalf of this group data-collection was organized by one of the participating institutions.

The desired standard resembled closely that of similar studies elsewhere. The relevant keywords were: face-to-face interviews with individual electors, and representative samples. A two-wave pre-post election design was seen as desirable, partly to obtain information on short-term change, partly to increase the amount of information to be collected while keeping the duration of a single interview limited. In the course of time, the occurrence of early
elections after the fall of a (coalition) government occasionally prevented the conduct of a pre-election interview, leading at times either to different timing of the two desired waves, or to a simple one-wave design.

All data were to be archived immediately after completion of coding and cleaning. Documentation was to be extensive, in a format modelled after that of the ICPSR codebooks. No embargoes would exist on use of the data or on publications.

As of 1971 studies have been conducted by the National Election Studies Workgroup at the occasion of all parliamentary elections. A detailed description of the election studies conducted since 1971 is provided in Appendix 1.

National election studies in the 1970s

The collaborative nature of the Dutch National Election Studies had important consequences for the way in which the questionnaires were composed.

As the description of the situation during the late 1960s has illustrated, no dominant perspective or paradigm of voting studies existed in the Netherlands. Some researchers (for example the Tilburg group), were strongly influenced by the Michigan approach others (for example the Free University group) entertained their own theoretical perspectives. Yet others entertained still different theoretical perspectives. No group could claim prominence, as none had yet started to publish its results in earnest. Composing questionnaires therefore became a process of bargaining between those who had submitted proposals for questions. The outcome tended to give most participants at least a part of what they wanted. The result is that various traditions of electoral research all left their traces on the questionnaires – including the social-structural approach, the social-psychological approach, the consumer model, the economic perspective. None dominated the studies, all were sufficiently present to allow initial analyses. As a result, questionnaires acquired somewhat of an omnibus character. A major disadvantage of this was that the questionnaire occasionally provided too narrow a data-base for conclusive and in-depth studies.

The 1971 national election study took an explicitly eclectic approach. Questionnaires were collected from election studies in the USA, Sweden, Great Britain and Germany, as well as from other studies deemed to be of importance, such as 'The Civic Culture' five-nation study. In addition, scholarly publications were searched for analyses and reports in order to learn which concepts and variables had or had not fulfilled their promise. Not surprisingly did the Michigan model come prominently to the fore by these efforts. Still, this did not result in a wholesale imitation of the Michigan studies in the Dutch context. Inspection of the Swedish, British and German election studies revealed that, to the extent that they had been inspired by the Michigan studies, adaptations had been necessary. This merely reinforced the existing tendency to only ‘borrow’ those aspects of the Michigan model
which, at face value and on the basis of then present knowledge and expectations, were considered to be relevant in the Dutch situation. Party identification, issue concerns and perceived party competence with respect to issues were included. Candidate orientations were never given much prominence. The Civic Culture five-nation study was influential and inspired the inclusion of extensive blocks of questions in the 1971 Dutch National Election Study.

More specifically, the questionnaires covered the following topics rather extensively:

- detailed information on individual turnout and party choice: did one vote, if not: why not; if so: for which party? Why did one vote for this party? How far in advance did one decide on this choice; what was one's second choice? Recall of previous voting behavior in national elections
- affective relations between voters and parties, in terms of membership, party identification, sympathy, and the like
- voters' opinions on urgency of problems, and which of the parties would best be able to handle them
- voters' preferred position on a large number of salient position issues, and ideological dimensions, as well as their perceptions of major parties' positions
- citizen orientations towards politics, such as political interest, feelings of (dis)trust, cynicism, political efficacy, political competence, etc.
- political activism and civic participation in a number of ways: conventional and unconventional, individual and collective, etc.
- political knowledge in various ways: knowledge about politicians, about coalition and cabinet composition, etc.
- coalition preferences
- satisfaction with government, over-all as well as in terms of specific policy areas
- in great detail: demographic, socio-economic and religious background variables

Because of a lack of a sufficiently large body of empirical insights, most of the changes in the questionnaires of the election studies of the 1970s did not reflect advances or developments in empirical theories of elections in the Netherlands. Rather, they were caused by such unsystematic factors as who was involved in the design of the various studies, of the current climate of which social and political problems deserved specific attention, and, occasionally, of possibly of theoretical developments elsewhere, to the extent that these were considered relevant.

The output of the first decade of collaborative National Election Studies consists of two kinds: the datasets and the codebooks on the one hand and, on the other publication reporting analyses of these data. The election studies of the 1970s provided an unprecedented wealth of high quality data. They were thoroughly cleaned, well documented and free for the asking. They covered, compared to earlier ones, a very wide field of topics. They were based on sound sampling and on fieldwork that had to conform to higher
standards than what was usual in opinion research. And, best of all, they became available in a preliminary form to every interested researcher within a few months after completion of fieldwork, and in final form and accompanied by extensive documentation within a year. This all made them attractive and widely used by political scientists, political sociologists, sundry other social scientists, and by generations of students as material for term papers, Masters’ theses and the like. Thus, the studies facilitated the growth of empirical political science in the Netherlands, and helped to disseminate the basics of electoral research among social scientists. The codebooks themselves not only served their purpose of describing datasets, but also became invaluable sources of reference for everyone not engaged in actual electoral research, but willing to investigate (at least at the univariate level) the validity of all kinds of assertions about the electorate.

The output in terms of publications during the first decade of National Election Studies was considerably less impressive. Most publications were descriptive and rather elementary, more directed towards a general audience of interested nonprofessionals than to specialists. Some of the best work in developing empirical electoral theory was not based on the data of the National Election Studies but on information from dedicated surveys and experiments (e.g. Bronner & De Hoog 1978).

Consolidation: election studies in the 1980s

After 1977 the organizational structure of the National Election Studies was somewhat altered, or, to be more specific, tightened up. The most important changes related to assigning responsibilities, and, as a consequence, to the way in which questionnaires were designed.

During the 1970s day-to-day responsibility for the various election studies had alternated between a number of institutions: the University of Amsterdam in 1971, the University of Nijmegen in 1972 and the University of Leiden in 1977. This alternation had a number of positive effects. It helped to proliferate knowledge and experience and it promoted the development of electoral research at several universities. Its negative effects were a lack of cumulative experience and its consequences in terms of mistakes and missing follow-up of promising ideas. After 1977, responsibility for coordination, supervision of fieldwork, cleaning, documentation etc. was largely concentrated at the University of Amsterdam. At the same time procedures for questionnaire design were altered. The bargaining process in which a large number of people were involved (interested researchers and proponents of questions suggested for inclusion in the questionnaire) was abolished. Instead, a small committee of renowned electoral researchers was to decide on the contents of the questionnaire. A number of guiding principles were adopted: space devoted to topics of no immediate relevance for electoral theory was severely reduced. Comparability with earlier election studies was
to be safeguarded. Fragmentation of questionnaire space was to be prevented. Each study was to contain innovative elements, which were to be sufficiently endowed with questionnaire space to allow definite conclusions. The major thrust of these organizational changes was to increase quality, professionalism and the role of expert judgement. The new system operated during most of the 1980s, in which period election studies were conducted in 1981, 1982 and 1986 and 1989.

In the course of the 1980s the Dutch election studies start bearing fruit in terms of academic publications. A number of in-depth books and monographs were published (Andeweg 1982; Van der Eijk & Niemöller 1983) as well as a large number of contributions in (national as well as international) edited volumes and scientific journals. Publications directed at an interested general public – prevalent during the previous decade – remain of importance too, and started popularizing the results of academic publications in addition to presenting descriptive and elementary analyses.

A full portrayal of the conceptual, theoretical and empirical advances presented in the publications which appear during the 1980s is not appropriate in the present context. Rather, we will focus on part of this literature, the part which uses election studies data to analyze, explain and interpret party choice, election results and the changes therein. We will paint in broad contours two different currents of analysis, within which many of these publications can be classified. Not only were they important because of their contributions to developing theories on party choice and elections, but also because they generated a lively academic debate concerning their theoretical and empirical merits. Both approaches made extensive use of the possibilities for longitudinal comparison which had become available by the series of election studies and the long-term election panels. They are also of importance because they provided important feedback to the design of the questionnaires of the National Election Studies in the 1980s.

A brief sketch as presented here necessarily emphasizes the differences between these two emerging traditions and tends to disregard their commonalities. This should be kept in mind, and the reader should be aware that in reality most of the works referred to are much more subtle than what can be shown in this review.

The dramatic electoral changes which occurred in the Netherlands since the mid-1960s constitute the focus of most serious analyses of voting behaviour in the 1980s. The world before that watershed seemed stable, simple and intelligible, and had aptly been described by Lijphart (1968). Party choice used to be the straightforward expression of people’s position in the structure of society, defined in terms of deep-seated cleavages, religion and class. That world, however, was irrevocably lost, which raised a number of important questions. What was the locus of electoral change, what were its causes, would cleavage voting disappear completely or not? How were voters’ choices to be interpreted if they did not express cleavage positions? Had voters lost all their moorings, or did (old, or new) factors exist which would constrain
their behaviour into some kind of stability? To what extent was electoral change, either at aggregate or individual levels, merely random or interpretable? Two different perspectives on these questions emerged. For lack of better terms they will be referred to as the long-term-structure and the short-term-factors approach.

The first, the long-term-structure approach, interprets the changes which took place as a process of both de-alignment and re-alignment. De-alignment pertained to the structure of cleavage voting which used to constrain voters into stable choices and which resulted in predictable and stable election results. The proponents of this approach claim that the old alignment not only decayed, but that it had to a large extent been replaced by a new one, which reflects voters' substantive political ideals, largely captured by their position in terms of left and right. Party choice can to a large extent be regarded as either maximizing or optimizing ideological utility. This perspective contains the notions that the left-right dimension constitutes the dominant political dimension in the Netherlands, that voters are largely cognizant of parties' positions on this dimension, and that they identify themselves with a position on it. The strong correlation between voters' left-right positions and the position of the parties they vote for, is interpreted as indicative of goal-directed behaviour (or, in Downsian terms, of rationality in party-choice expressed by smallest-distance voting). This approach suggests that the supply side of the electoral market is of crucial importance in explaining (changes in) election results, and thus necessitates attention for (changing) ideological and policy positions of parties. Keywords of this approach are uni-dimensionality of the party system, utility functions, rational (or at least purposeful) behaviour, ideologically structured party competition, ideological constraint of issue preferences, shared cognitive meaning of ideological labels. Its main proponents are located at the University of Amsterdam and include the present authors.5

The second approach, focussing on short-term-factors, also interprets the electoral changes since the mid-'60s as de-alignment, but is not convinced that a realignment has taken place. Its proponents contest the validity of many analyses which purport to show the importance of left-right as a cognitive and evaluative instrument used by voters. Instead, they counter-argue, the correlation between voters left-right positions and the position of the parties they vote for is partly rationalization, partly tautological, and partly without meaning because of the many different ways in which the terms left and right can be, and are, interpreted. They emphasize that parties cannot be adequately represented by their position on only a few dimensions, and hence that parties are unique entities, which cannot be meaningfully ordered in a simple manner. Explanations of party choice should consider on the one hand the remnants of the old alignment structure, religion and class, and, on the other numerous short-term factors such as popularity of politicians, the influence of pre-election polls-results, the current state of the economy, specific issues which are salient at the time, etc. Changes in party choice or
in election results should not primarily be viewed as politically motivated or interpretable, but may to a large extent be caused by non-systematic differences in the set of short term factors from one election to the next. Key notions of this approach are multi-dimensionality of the party system, rationalization of choice, limited comprehension and heterogeneity of meanings of ideological labels. Its main proponent includes Irwin and Andrew at the University of Leiden.6

Fortunately, the divide between the two perspectives is not as absolute as it may appear.7 To a large extent, the two approaches may be seen as complementary, although disputes will remain between them as to the degree to which each of them overlooks relevant facts or falls prey to methodological pitfalls. In any case, the debate between them is one which rests not merely on convictions, but on empirical evidence, logical reasoning and supporting evidence. It therefore cannot fail but to contribute to improving the quality of research and theory, and to cumulation (and possibly integration) of knowledge.

The field of electoral studies is more variegated than the brief review above suggests. It has matured considerably since the early 1980s, and its entire development would not have been possible without the empirical and theoretical knowledge generated directly and indirectly by the national election studies.

Into the 1990s

Since their inception, the national election studies have been funded largely by the Dutch national science foundation (formerly ZWO, currently NWO). During the 1980s however, mainly because of budgetary problems, NWO became increasingly reluctant to continue its support. Soon after 1986, discussions started about a long-term funding. Involved were, in addition to NWO and the inter-university organization of electoral researchers, various government departments, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP), and the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). A scheme was agreed upon in which financial support from various sources was guaranteed for a period of 10 years, to be administered by NWO. The election studies to be conducted in this decade were to be a joint academic-CBS undertaking, in which the academic community would design and decide upon the contents of the studies, and CBS would conduct their fieldwork. The 1989 election study for those elections was to be the first one under the new organizational structure. The experience proved to be less than an undiluted success. Different styles of operation, differing perspectives on the exact demarcation of responsibilities, unauthorized alterations made in the questionnaires by CBS, disagreements on how to safeguard anonymity of respondents all contributed to a strained relationship between election researchers at the universities on the one hand and CBS on the other. The extent to which this relationship
will develop in a more productive direction will determine the likelihood of continuation of the new structure after the expiration of the contract in 1996. At least one election study will still be conducted in this period, in 1994 (or as much earlier as necessary in the case of early elections).

Context effects on the Dutch national election studies

The way in which disciplines and fields of study develop is obviously influenced by the surrounding context. On the one hand the social and political context, the characteristics of the system which to a large extent is the subject of study. On the other hand, the academic context which by providing incentives as well as obstacles had a profound impact (although often unplanned) on the way in which electoral research evolved. In this section we will discuss a number of the most noticeable ways in which these contexts affected the contents and development of the field.

The social and political context has been important because it provided the necessary stimulus to really engage in electoral research. A number of specific aspects of the social and political contexts can be identified which have greatly affected the contents of the Dutch national election studies. They will be discussed in turn below.

Of great importance for the contents of election studies is, of course, the nature of the Dutch party-system and its electoral system. The system of proportional representation, combined with the lowest possible threshold for representation has contributed to a relatively large number of political parties being represented in parliament. This presents a problem in all instances where questions have to be asked pertaining to each of the political parties, as is the case with perceptions of their position on issues or ideological dimensions, with evaluations of their performance, or with their (perceived) capability to handle certain problems. One solution which has often been used consists of including only the parties which are represented in parliament (between 9 and 13 parties), or only the most important parties (4 to 6 parties). The latter procedure has considerable drawbacks, however, when the aim is to test hypotheses of issue voting or smallest distance voting. Yet, even this second option is extremely costly in terms of questionnaire space, while the costs of the first option may at times be prohibitive. Consequently, Dutch election studies suffer a comparative disadvantage compared to their counterparts in countries with more restricted party systems. This has curtailed the breadth of what could otherwise have been addressed in the questionnaires.

A second important aspect of the social context is the religious diversity in the Netherlands and its relation to politics. In contrast to, for instance, the Scandinavian countries, England, Belgium, France and Italy, the Netherlands is characterized by a multitude of religions, denominations and sects, a fair number of which have maintained institutionalized relations with political
parties for a long time. The amount of questionnaire space required to fathom the relevant aspects of respondents' religious background is much larger in Dutch election studies than in many other countries, obviously at the expense of other topics.

Another fundamental fact of Dutch politics which necessarily affected election studies is the necessity of coalition government. The opposition is equally little confined to a single party. This has a number of ramifications for electoral studies because it discourages research in a number of hypotheses which are very common in systems where governments are single party affairs: the obvious logic of hypotheses on the electoral effects of incumbency, of performance in office and of the state of the economy is irrevocably lost. On the other hand, coalition government may provide extra incentives for strategic voting. People not only have to consider which party they like best, but also which of various possible coalitions they like best, and what would be required to have the desired coalition come into existence.

Not only did the political context influence the contents of election studies, a reverse impact can be observed as well. Political parties, politicians and journalists have shown a lasting interest in the results of election studies. Their perception of reality has been influenced as a result, as has their behaviour, although not necessarily leading to the outcomes they desire. Two examples of the effect of electoral research on politics may suffice. The social-democrats' political strategy in the 1966–1977 period has been demonstrated to rest in no small measure on selective reading and poor interpretation of results from voter studies, which were (incorrectly) believed to show that a strategy of 'polarization' could prevent the formation of a single christian-democratic party. It failed to do so, however, and even backfired by damaging the bases for a stable coalition with christian democrats (Van Praag 1991). A more successful use of election studies was made by D66 in 1985. After a stunning electoral defeat in 1982 and considerable internal confusion, the party was on the brink of extinction in mid-1985. Serious appeals were made to a popular former leader of the party, Van Mierlo, to return and pull the party away from the brink. Before making a decision, Van Mierlo and a small group of companions obtained from academic electoral analysts unbiased assessments of the electoral situation of the party. Their assessment was that the party had a relatively large electoral potential which could only be realized (at least in part) with more visible and inspiring leadership. In spite of virtual absent actual voter support at the time, Van Mierlo was sufficiently encouraged by the party's demonstrated potential to attract votes to accept the leadership of the party. He brought it back to considerable electoral success.

An entirely different context which affected the way in which the discipline of electoral research developed in the Netherlands is academic. A number of aspects stand out, and are successively discussed below.

One of the most important contextual constraints on the development of electoral research has always been the small size of the relevant scientific
community. Political science is a small discipline, it is taught at only a few places, and the number of academic staff has never been very large. Assuming that electoral research is not the forefront of activities of those who specialize in international relations, political philosophy, political administration and policy research, the group with a potential interest in electoral studies becomes quite small indeed. The consequences of small size are various. One is vulnerability. The loss of one of them, by promotion, moving to a different job, illness or worse, may easily cripple affected research projects. A second effect of small size is small research budgets, within universities as well as within the context of the national science foundation. Here too, the total budget for political science has to be divided among a number of areas, of which electoral studies is only one. A third effect of small size is a disincentive to individuals to concentrate all their efforts in this field. Academic careers are to be made in political science in general rather than in the subfield of election research.

In overcoming the negative effects of small size, other contextual factors have been invaluable. The positive image of 'hard', quantitative, 'really scientific', objective modes of research undoubtedly helped in securing necessary funds, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s. Whereas small size provides all kinds of disincentives to concentrate efforts in one field, a quite different contextual factor worked to compensate and overcome this. Organized contacts with colleagues abroad, with other institutions, with prestigious centers of research were priceless for keeping researchers active in the field. The importance for the field of the training, socialization and inspiration provided by the Interuniversity Consortium in Ann Arbor (ICPSR) and later also by the ECPR Essex Summer Schools, cannot be overstated. The yearly joint sessions of workshops of the European Consortium (ECPR) likewise provided an otherwise largely absent forum for discussion and inspiration.

A quite different factor in the academic context which influenced the evolution of electoral studies in the Netherlands was formed by methodological preoccupations in the relevant community of researchers. The development of institutionalized electoral research coincides largely with the rise of methodology in Dutch empirical social sciences. This correspondence was not only temporal, but to a large extent also personal. Political methodologists were among the most active and influential among those involved in election studies. They contributed to a lasting concern for the quality of measurement and analysis, which, however, also generated a few unintended (negative) side-effects. Quality of measurement implied in practice a strong reliance on methods which require operationalization by multiple items. This often resulted in a considerable burden on both questionnaire space and attention of researchers. At times it almost seemed as if it was less important what was being measured than that whatever was included in the questionnaire was measured well. A similar conclusion is to some extent justified for the exuberant use of newly emerging multi-dimensional mapping methods,
which could much easier be applied in the Dutch system with a dozen or more parties, than in countries with only a few. Still, the sometimes lively debate on the correct representation and dimensionality of the Dutch political space did, in the long run, contribute little to the development of substantive empirical theories on voting and elections.

In lieu of a conclusion

Looking back at the history of Dutch election studies, we see that they were never dominated by a particular 'school', 'paradigm' or 'approach'. Not only is Dutch society plural, but the community of electoral researchers is so also. The system is too small, however, to generate sufficient funds for more than a single large-scale parliamentary election study. The solution has not been one of competition, but one of accommodation, where all involved could contribute to the contents of national election studies. Access to scarce questionnaire space was only determined by the relative merits of the various proposals, access to the data from the study was absolutely unrestricted. The lack of a dominating paradigm may possibly have delayed the production of the first crop of in-depth and advanced publications of elections and electoral behaviour. In the long run, however, it has not merely sustained pluralism in approaches, but has contributed to a climate of open and productive scientific discussion between contending theoretical perspectives. Each of these has a fair opportunity of advancing its case and acquiring relevant empirical evidence, further contributing to the common good of critical scientific debate and cumulative science. Pluralism leading to accommodation, and back again: could this be the hallmark, not only of Dutch politics, but also of the community which studies it?

Notes

2. See, for example, Daudt and De Lange, 1971.
3. The study also included a considerable number of questions for an empirical study on alienation and anomie, which resulted in a number of publications by Heunks (the most important one: Heunks, 1973).
4. A case in point can be found in questions pertaining to affective relations between voters and parties. The concept of 'attachment to parties' has been included in the Free University study. At first sight it bears great resemblance to that of 'party identification' which is part of the Tilburg study. The difference seems to be merely one of question wording. Yet, these differences in formulation stem from conceptual differences which are far from negligible. Whereas the Tilburg questions attempt to measure as good as possible the Michigan concept in the Dutch context, the formulation of the Free University questions springs from the (quite different) theory of purposeful behaviour on which the study is based.


7. As is, to some extent, witnessed by the joint publication by protagonists from both approaches, refer to Irwin et al. (1987).

Appendix: National election studies

All studies listed below are archived at Steinmetz archives, and can be obtained either from them, or from any other recognized data-archive.

Regular studies


1982: 1-wave, post election study (n = 1541). Contains 264 variables. A supplementary study has been conducted by reinterviewing the respondents of the 1981 study. The two datasets can be combined into a dataset containing 334 variables (n = 2747). Documentation: C. van der Eijk, B. Niemoller and M.J. Koopman, *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 1982*, Amsterdam: CT Press.


Long-term panel studies

1971–1979 six-wave panel study, covering the parliamentary elections of 1971, 1972 and 1977. The first two waves are the regular 1971 study. In 1972–1973 the remaining respondents have been reinterviewed in conjunction with the regular 1972 study, using an almost identical questionnaire. A fifth wave was added in conjunction with the post-election wave of the 1977 regular study, but a separate questionnaire was used for the panel. A sixth wave has been added outside an election context in 1979. Attrition was cumulative. Net n’s in the various waves are: 2495, 1980, 1324, 887, 509 and 437. The total set contains 1974 variables. No amalgamated codebook for the entire panel has been produced. Further information on this panel is provided by Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983:388–392).

1981–1986 five-wave panel study, covering the parliamentary elections of 1981, 1982 and 1986. The first three waves are the regular 1981 study. Reinterviews in 1982 were conducted in conjunction with the regular 1982 study, with an almost identical questionnaire. The fifth wave of interviews was conducted in conjunction with the post-election wave of the regular 1986 study, but with a different questionnaire. Net n’s in the various waves are: 2305, 1812, 1620, 1206, 757. The total file contains 2130 variables. Documentation: C. van der Eijk, G.A. Irwin and B. Niemöller, Dutch Parliamentary Election Panel Study 1981–1986, Amsterdam: Steinmetz Archives.


References


Blink, H. (1892). *Nederland en zijne bewoners, handboek der aardrijkskunde en volkenkunde van Nederland* (3 volumes), Amsterdam: Van Looy.


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