
Original Article

Assessing prime-ministerial performance in a multiparty democracy: The Dutch case

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Abstract This article discusses the use of expert ranking methodology for assessing the performance and 'place in history' of heads of government, in particular prime ministers (PMs). It reports an expert ranking study of PMs in the Netherlands. Open/spontaneous as well as criteria-led, more detailed modes of performance assessment are compared. Moreover, the study's findings, pertaining as they do to a PM hemmed in by the need to manage tenuous coalitions in a multi-party consensual democracy, are compared against those of similar exercises conducted for PMs in majoritarian, Westminster style democracies, suggesting that prime-ministerial reputations in multiparty democracies are made on the strength of their longevity in office, their coalition management skills and the policy legacy of their governments.

Acta Politica advance online publication, 13 February 2015; doi:10.1057/ap.2015.2

Keywords: prime minister; political leadership; The Netherlands; expert ranking methodology

How to Ascertain Prime-Ministerial Performance?

Evaluating the performance of government leaders has always been an ordeal. Political candidates can be assessed simply in terms of their electoral fortunes, and party leaders in addition in terms of the coherence and robustness of the party organisation, but how do we systematically evaluate the leadership of prime ministers (PMs) and other heads of government? They are publicly held responsible for 'everything' yet often highly constrained in their ability to shape anything, as many of their memoirs are quick to attest to. Indeed, judgments of chief executive performance are ubiquitous – in the polls, by commentators, among backbenchers, by historians and quite often their predecessors. Many observers are quick to praise them and as quick to damn them. Much talk about prime-ministerial leadership performance is ephemeral, subjective, and politically motivated.



The development of systematic frameworks for the purpose of leadership assessment has attracted little scholarly attention for a long period of time. Some argue national leadership cannot be measured according to established indices (Hirst, 2010; Greenstein, 2009). Indeed, the underlying question is how we define and assess leadership success ('t Hart, 2011a). In the corporate sector, leadership success has often been assessed by correlating leadership characteristics and styles with aggregate level outcomes such as company survival, market share or share value (Adams *et al.*, 2005). Such an approach clearly cannot be followed in the case of assessing prime-ministerial performance. Attributing changes in a country's GDP, its employment rates or indeed its 'gross domestic happiness' (Bhutan's intriguing alternative to GDP) to a PM's leadership is methodologically treacherous terrain. Attribution errors loom large. If social outcomes are elusive, should we consider policy outputs, political survival or levels of public support instead? Experts disagree on which variables and indicators should be used – as they do about judgements of success and failure in public policy and governance at large (Bovens *et al.*, 2001; Bovens, 2010; Marsh and McConnell, 2010; McConnell, 2010; Helms, 2012).

One route to sidestepping the common problems of evaluating leadership – criteria choice, analyst bias, attribution errors and lack of process information – is to focus not on political leaders' performance *per se*, but on their reputations, their place in history. To this end, expert ranking methodology has been used in various countries. It makes use of medium-sized panels of academic experts (and possibly other knowledgeable and suitably detached observers). This approach was first used by the American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, who in 1948 asked 55 historians to rate all US presidents (Schlesinger, 1948). He asked the carefully selected sample of expert respondents to rank each president in one of five categories (ranging from 'great' to 'failure') without providing any preconceived performance criteria, has been followed many times ever since, both inside and outside the United States. The Schlesinger approach has been subject to numerous criticisms, concerning most importantly the (in)comparability of leaders and governing circumstances across different eras, as well as the problem of assessing leaders whose performance clearly diverged across different policy domains (for example, George H.W. Bush's strong foreign versus lacklustre domestic policy performance), with regard to different dimensions of performance (for example, Nixon on effectiveness versus integrity), or over the course of their tenure in office (for example, Clinton's first and second term). Despite these objections, Schlesinger-like expert rankings of leadership have found their way from the United States to Westminster democracies like the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia (Strangio *et al.*, 2013).

Expert ranking methodology has a few potential contributions to make. First, in most countries, individual assessments of PMs have pre-dominated. Many of them however are hazy on the criteria used and lack a comparative edge. Expert rankings, which are designed to explicitly compare the leadership effectiveness of an entire set



of PMs, thus form an important addition to knowledge about political leadership. Moreover, such rankings require their designers, participants and audiences to reflect upon the values and qualities that are taken into account in leadership assessment. Comparing rankings over time may, third, show to what extent criteria come and go, or receive different weights at various points in time. Leaders move up and down rankings partly because experts and observers alike change the value set with which they judge their performance in light of present-day predicaments and priorities. Over time, new interpretations of a leader's record may also emerge, prompted by the opening of archives and the publication of biographies. The notable re-appreciation of US president Dwight D. Eisenhower (1952–1960) decades after his resignation is a case in point. Once regarded as a golf-playing 'do-nothing President' Greenstein's (1982) careful archival study of his presidency revealed his genius as a 'hidden-hand leader', and this got picked up in subsequent ranking exercises. Fourth, gaining not just diachronic but also cross-national comparative insight in the criteria that are regarded as important for prime-ministerial performance allows us to assess whether institutional and cultural variables shape our frames of reference when assessing political-office holders such as PMs. For example, after comparing expert rankings in four Anglo parliamentary democracies Strangio *et al* (2013, p. 219) concluded that 'while the evidence from the rankings points to common ingredients in leadership success across the four countries, there are also home-grown variables.'

The million-dollar question often asked in ranking exercises is whether we can explain, or even predict, executive leadership success. In the United States, a cottage industry is devoted to this quest, trying to correlate a whole range of personal – IQ, EQ, absent fathers, birth order, prior careers, legislative experience, dying on the job and situational background variables – for example, variations in GNP, presence of crisis and war – or skills sets to presidents' places on the presidential greatness rankings (Nice, 1984; Simonton, 1987, 2001, 2006; Ones *et al*, 2004). To our knowledge, in parliamentary systems no such research has been conducted to date. The frontiers of the field in those systems are still at designing and establishing sensible rankings, and developing longitudinal data about stability and change in prime-ministerial rankings.

Whatever their ambition level, ranking exercises need to be carefully designed and executed. The extent to which this has been the case in the past varies considerably (Strangio *et al*, 2013). In this article, we build upon and extend the work of Theakston and Gill (2011) and Strangio *et al* (2013) to develop what we believe is current best practice in ranking the performance of PMs. Empirically we report an expert ranking study of PMs in the Netherlands. We can compare our findings about the Dutch case of PM's hemmed in by the need to manage tenuous coalitions in a multi-party consensual democracy (see further below) against those pertaining to the performance of Westminster style PMs, who generally preside over relatively stable majority (single party or two-party coalition) governments. One would expect these differing systemic conditions to be reflected in different ideas about the kind of



leadership that PMs are expected to exercise. Whereas in the Anglo context one might expect a stronger emphasis on powerful rhetorical, decisive, and heroic leadership, in the Dutch context one can hypothesise that prime-ministerial effectiveness hinges more upon backstage, consensus-building and coalition maintenance qualities. Is this reflected in the actual rankings? Comparing the findings of the Dutch study against the 4-country findings about Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom reported in Strangio *et al* (2013) will allow us to shed light on these contrasting expectations. Herein lies the key contribution this study seeks to make.

To put this study in context, we first provide a short overview of the position of the PM in the Dutch political system. We then describe the design of the study, and discuss its unique features in light of existing international practices. Next we will report the findings and compare them to those of Strangio *et al* (2013). We conclude by suggesting ways forward in the study of prime-ministerial performance.

The Office of Prime Minister in the Dutch Political System

Historically, the Dutch PM has long been an institutional footnote within the Dutch system of government. Before 1945, there was no legal footing underpinning the role. In that year, the office of PM was finally recognised, followed by the establishment of a Department of General Affairs in 1947. However, these developments affected the de-facto importance of the Dutch PM only marginally: he (so far, all Dutch PMs have been male) remained a *primus inter pares* with few formal powers.

Dutch PMs spend a lot of time engaging in inter-party diplomacy and deal-making to keep the country's complex multiparty coalitions afloat (De Vries *et al*, 2012). This leadership pattern is rooted in the Dutch electoral system, which is characterised by a high degree of proportional representation. With electoral and parliamentary fragmentation (at no time since 1900 did the number of parties represented in parliament fall below seven, and in many instances rising above 10) thus a given, the formation and maintenance of government coalitions has always been both crucial and complicated (Andeweg and Irwin, 2009). Relatively large numbers of relatively small political parties have produced often tenuous multi-party coalition governments. They usually take months of post-election negotiations to form and often consist of parties that went into the elections with markedly different programmes. They are led and managed by political leaders who first engage in intense electoral rivalry, then have to paper over these differences in the cabinet-formation process, and subsequently have to make sure that their own party colleagues and constituencies swallow and abide by the inevitable compromise agreement upon which these governments have to rely.

In this setting of fractured power and fragile inter-party relations, the main task of the PM always has been to hold the coalition together and keep the peace – in



Cabinet as well as among the coalition parties' parliamentary and party organisation leadership. Traditionally, this has made for PMs whose political personas are more often 'small' rather than 'large'. For a long time, they were explicitly positioned as agents of their parties, not as leaders in their own right; and as 'statesmen' whose job it was to create and nurture bridging capital across the religious and ideological 'pillars' (Lijphart, 1968). Some of them were personalisers but with only a few exceptions they were distinctly and self-consciously non-charismatic personalizers, who according to Ansell and Fish (1999, p. 283) typically are 'anything but prophets. Their authority arises not from an ability to inspire or transform their followers but rather from the skill to mediate conflicts within the party.' Mediators within their parties, they are chairpersons and managers of cabinet process rather than the visionary leader of the government. In 2013, the incumbent Dutch PM, Mark Rutte, placed himself in that tradition, rejecting calls for him to articulate his strategic 'vision' for the country, stating that 'vision is like the elephant that obstructs the view' (De Volkskrant, 2013).

This low-profile take on the role is reflected in the formal powers of Dutch PMs. They do not get to 'hire and fire' ministers (Dowding and Dumont, 2008). They have no power to promote or sanction ministers or to reshuffle cabinet. At best, they can be said to have some agenda-setting powers, mainly deriving from their position as chair of the ministerial council. The executive leadership of Dutch PMs thus seems to be first and foremost about subtle process management, about negotiating and communicating; in short, about keeping everyone inside the coalition tent. The PM's institutional position has remained largely unchanged, though in mid-1990s changes of the Cabinet manual he was given the right to place an item on the cabinet agenda even if the directly responsible minister(s) do not, as well as seeing his responsibility for coordinating policy formalised. But his informal position has no doubt been strengthened over the years (Broeksteeg *et al*, 2004; Bovend'Eert *et al*, 2005). Perhaps more importantly, the PM's public persona and media skills have come to play a major role in an electoral system that mercilessly reveals that most parties now have a chronic lack of 'partisans' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Mair, 2013). The PM has privileged access to mass media, for example in a weekly prime-time TV interview. Also, the growing importance of the EU and the European Council of heads of state and government has strengthened the PM's position (Rozemond, 1992; Broeksteeg *et al*, 2005).

Andeweg's (1991) description of the Dutch PM as 'not just chairman, not yet chief' remains relevant, given the lack of accrual of any formal powers of appointment or decision. According to De Vries *et al* (2012) the modern Dutch PM has a few key roles: chief animator of government policy (Van den Berg, 1990, pp. 97–122), coalition coordinator (Velde, 2010, p. 133) and guardian of the unity of government policy (*Elsevier Magazine*, 2005, pp. 10–11). In recent decades, the weight of a fourth role – public face of the government of the day – has increased.



Moreover, according to many observers the contemporary PM has effectively become the national diplomat-in-chief on the international stage at the expense of the autonomy and influence of the Foreign Minister.

On balance, therefore the PM has not only become more visible externally but also internally more powerful. Politically, the fate of Dutch PMs is essentially determined by their ability to maintain productive relationships with seven critical stakeholders and interlocutors: cabinet, parliament, party, mass media, international counterparts, civil society and the symbolically ever-important monarchy. Table 1 provides descriptive detail of the holders of the office since 1901, the parties they represented, their longevity as PM, and the average life span of the various governments over which they presided. Government 'net' duration is calculated from the day of the cabinet's inauguration until the moment the coalition hands in its resignation with the monarch. Dutch governments that do not complete their full term either lose their majority (most often because one or more coalition partners withdraws its support) or pre-empt a parliamentary vote of no confidence. They continue as care taker governments until a new coalition is hammered out, most often following early elections. These processes can take many months, therefore introducing 'noise' into the cabinet duration and PM's political longevity data when one does not correct for these occurrences. Politically speaking, governments and PMs are 'dead' or at least 'on hold' during the caretaker period. To get a more precise sense of the duration of a PM's leadership, we have corrected for caretaker periods, during which in effect parliament reigns and governments cannot initiate any policies regarded as 'controversial', as their political mandate to govern is considered to have expired. This is why in Table 1 we speak of 'net' PM political longevity. We also speak of 'net' cabinet duration, as we have applied the same correction here. This measure is an indicator of the PM's ability to hold together a coalition. The 'average net' cabinet duration has been calculated by adding up the net political life spans of all cabinets led by a particular PM, and dividing the total by the number of cabinets led by a PM. Table 1 allows us to distinguish between PMs who are: good at holding governments together but not at staying in the job, such as Kuypers, Heemskerk, De Quay, De Jong and Den Uyl; good at staying in the job but not at holding governments together, for example, Colijn and Balkenende; not successful at either (though some of these were designed to be short-lived, 'stop-gap' governments), such as Schermerhorn, Beel, Marijnen, Cals and Biesheuvel; effective at both, particularly Ruys de Beerenbrouck, Drees and Lubbers.

Research Design

In the summer of 2013, we conducted an expert poll on prime-ministerial performance in the Netherlands. Seventy-five experts were invited to fill out the poll; forty-seven participated, a healthy 63 per cent response rate. Each contributed only once. The experts that were invited mainly were historians and biographers,

Table 1: Dutch prime ministers and their cabinets from 1901

<i>Prime Minister</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>PM's net longevity (months)</i>	<i>Nr of govts led</i>	<i>Average net gov.t duration (months)</i>
A. Kuyper	ARP	1 August 1901–17 August 1905	46	1	46
T. de Meester	Liberal Union	17 August 1905–12 February 1908	28	1	28
T. Heemskerk	ARP	12 February 1908–29 August 1913	63	1	63
P. Cort van der Linden	No party (but a liberal)	29 August 1913–9 September 1918	58	1	58
C. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck	RKSP	9 September 1918–4 August 1925	122	3	41
H. Colijn	ARP	4 August 1925–8 March 1926 and 26 May 1933–10 August 1939	71	5	14
D.J. De Geer	CHU	8 March 1926–10 August 1929 and 10 August 1939–3 September 1940	51	2	25
P. Gerbrandy	ARP	3 September 1940–24 June 1945	52	3	17
W. Schermerhorn	VDB / PvdA	24 June 1945–3 July 1946	10	1	10
L. Beel	KVP	3 July 1946–7 August 1948 and 22 December 1958–19 May 1959	26	2	13
W. Drees	PvdA	7 August 1948–22 December 1958	127	4	32
J. de Quay	KVP	19 May 1959–24 July 1963	47	1	47
H. Marijnen	KVP	24 July 1963–14 April 1965	19	1	19
J. Cals	KVP	14 April 1965–22 November 1966	17	1	17
J. Zijlstra	ARP	22 November 1966–5 April 1967	3	1	3
P. de Jong	KVP	5 April 1967–6 July 1971	47	1	47
B. Biesheuvel	ARP	6 July 1971–11 May 1973	15	2	8
J. den Uyl	PvdA	11 May 1973–19 December 1977	45	1	45
A. van Agt	KVP / CDA	19 December 1977–4 November 1982	51	3	17
R. Lubbers	CDA	4 November 1982–22 August 1994	126	3	42
W. Kok	PvdA	22 August 1994–22 July 2002	88	2	44
J-P. Balkenende	CDA	22 July 2002–14 October 2010	80	4	20
M. Rutte	VVD	14 October 2010–present	ongoing	2	NA

Note: All Dutch governments are multi-party and thus 'coalition' governments, although the practice of detailed prenegotiated coalition agreements developed only since the Cort van der Linden governments.





political scientists, and political journalists. The ideological leanings of many were unknown to us, and for those that we did know about we took care to achieve a balanced sample. The lead criterion was demonstrable knowledge of twentieth century Dutch political history.¹ In a methodological innovation compared with previous rankings exercises, we asked participants to assess the level of confidence in their own expertise in judging all twentieth century PMs. Five (10 per cent) reported having less than full confidence in assessing pre-World War II PMs. While this forms no iron-clad defence against possible recency bias in the experts' assessments, building in the question in the survey at least forced participants to reflect on this point and yielded transparency about the self-reported confidence in being able to cover the entire period under study. We could have chosen to pre-empt the problem by selecting a shorter time period (for example, the Post-World War II era). However, the origins of the modern Dutch state lie well before 1945. The 'settling' of the Dutch prime ministership took place in the early decades, not mid-century. World War II was not a significant turning point in Dutch executive government.

Respondents first were asked to choose their favourite twentieth-century PM and provide arguments why they preferred this particular PM. This yielded not only the overall esteem score but also allowed us to content-analyze the rationales provided by the experts so as to gain insight into the criteria they used to form their judgment. Many previous polling exercises stop here, but following the trend in Anglo-Saxon countries, we also asked participants to nominate their top-3's of PMs on nine specific criteria. These pertained to a range of performance domains, selected on the basis of prior ranking exercises abroad (as reported in Strangio *et al*, 2013) as well as being informed by prior research on the specific role and position of the Dutch PM (Andeweg, 1991; Velde, 2002; Fiers and Krouwel, 2005). These criteria are listed in Box 1.

The list includes *competency*-based (for example, which PM was the most effective communicator?) and *outcome*-based (for example, which PM has left the most robust (policy) legacy?) criteria. The pre-selection of such evaluation criteria presents inevitable challenges: are all these aspects of performance equally relevant

Box 1: Nine Prime-ministerial performance areas

- Is an effective Cabinet and coalition manager².
- Enjoys parliamentary authority³.
- Has demonstrated the ability to convert political promises into deeds⁴.
- Maintains a high level of personal integrity⁵.
- Has left a robust policy/reform legacy⁶.
- Effective communicator (in speeches and/or mass media)⁷.
- Effective advocate of Dutch interests abroad/in the EU⁸.
- Has successfully managed the country in times of turbulence/crisis⁹.
- Effective manager of the monarchy and the House of Orange.



across the entire time-span of the study, and do all PMs within that time-span operate on a 'level-playing field'? For example, including 'effective public communication' as a criterion might, induce a bias towards more recent PMs who operated in the world of television and more recently the internet. Consequently it could be argued that they have much more opportunity than the early PMs to develop their public brand, and in manage contemporary 'news cycles' can rely on very significant professional staff support that did not exist in the early decades of the twentieth century. That said, there is plenty of evidence that earlier PMs were also keenly aware of the need to craft a public brand for themselves. The difference was one of media (mass gatherings, radio, newspapers back then; visual and interactive media now), degree and pace, not of kind. Respondents demonstrated awareness of this, ranking one of the earliest PMs in the sample (Abraham Kuyper, a prolific writer and powerful public speaker) among the top-3 PMs on this criterion. Other criteria such as 'effective crisis manager' or 'manager of relations with the monarchy' are more debatable. Both presuppose that there was something major to manage during the tenure of all PMs; this has clearly not been the case. Some PMs with short tenures were spared major emergencies, 'hot' conflicts, or sensitive issues in relation to members of the Royal family; others got plenty of them, and thus more opportunity to either shine or fail in handling them.

While undeniably inducing potential bias, we felt that all criteria selected were valid and important to assess government leaders against, yielding intrinsically interesting information. In yet another methodological innovation upon previous research we did ask respondents to motivate their scores, allowing us to obtain a sense of how they had interpreted the criteria and the intensity of their preferences, as well as at the end of the poll to rank the relative weight they attached to the nine criteria themselves, and to indicate if they thought any pertinent criteria had been missing.

Results

Table 2 reports the rank order that emerged in response to the open question 'Who is the best PM that the Netherlands has ever had (or still has)?' The experts clearly converge on three PMs from three different ideological groupings who were active in three different parts of the twentieth century which represented quite different points in Dutch 'political time' (Velde, 2002; Skowronek, 2008; see also 't Hart, 2011b; Laing and McCaffrie, 2013): the social democratic icon and pragmatic post-World War II architect of the modern Dutch welfare state, Willem Drees; the unaffiliated liberal academic who shepherded the nation through neutrality in World War I and managed to resolve some of the most sensitive ideological and inter-faith political conundrums of the era, Pieter Cort van der Linden; and the long-serving Christian-



Table 2: Ranking in expert poll on basis of open question ‘who was best PM’?

<i>Name (expert poll, n = 47)</i>	<i>No of votes</i>	<i>Rank</i>
W. Drees (1948–1958)	13	1
P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	10	2
R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	9	3
P. de Jong (1967–1971)	5	4
W. Kok (1994–2002)	2	5
J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	2	5
H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	1	7
W. Schermerhorn (1945–1946)	1	7

democratic master of the political compromise who managed to lift the country out of its early 1980s deep recession, Ruud Lubbers.

The combination of open and closed methods of soliciting the experts’ views we used creates the possibility of a further comparison. In the open first question of the survey, the experts could name their favourite PM using whatever criterion they felt was the most important. In the subsequent questions we asked them to put aside their own frames, and make judgements about PMs on the basis of clearly pre-defined criteria that pertained to very different aspects of prime-ministerial leadership. Table 3 provides a map of the scores on each of the nine criteria presented in Box 1.

First of all, it appears that the collective memory of the experts has produced a clear ‘winner’ in almost all of the performance domains. Only in two of nine categories (#1 and #9) do two or three PMs finish on almost the same score. In the other areas there is always one PM who leads the pack. There seems to be a broad consensus that Drees’ personal integrity and Lubbers’ ability to convert promises into deeds rise far above their colleagues. The question is what this type of consensus reflects, as critics would argue that such clear-cut assessments are at least in part the product of the ‘echo chamber’ produced by prominent historians’ writings and repetitive references in the popular media, which over time tend to produce certain set storylines about the leadership styles and effectiveness of prominent politicians that will be drawn upon whenever a particular PM is being talked about and evaluated. Second, we can clearly discern two categories of PMs: those who score well in almost all performance areas, and those who stand out only in a limited number of areas. It could be argued that the former are probably most widely regarded as the real ‘statesmen’ of twentieth century Dutch parliamentary democracy, Drees and Lubbers. At the other end of the spectrum are PMs who are best described as average or below average in the aggregate scores, whose historical reputation is rooted in one or two stand-out distinctive qualities (like Kuyper, whose reputation rests strongly on his widely noted oratory skills). Finally, World War I PM Cort van der Linden who achieved second place in the initial open-question based

Table 3: Best PM in nine different performance domains

Rank	Name of PM	N	Name of PM	N	Name of PM	N	Name of PM	N	Name of PM	N
1	W. Drees	19	R. Lubbers	26	J. den Uyl	17	W. Drees	22	R. Lubbers	22
2	P.de Jong	19	W. Drees	14	R. Lubbers	14	P. de Jong	11	W. Drees	8
3	R. Lubbers	19	J. den Uyl	13	A. Kuypers	10	J. den Uyl	11	H. Colijn	7
4	W. Kok	11	W. Kok	13	H. Colijn	8	W. Kok	6	P. Cort van der Linden	4
5	M. Rutte	4	H. Colijn	5	A. van Agt	8	P. Cort van der Linden	5	W. Kok	4
6	P. Cort van der Linden	3	P. Cort van der Linden	5	M. Rutte	7	J-P. Balkenende	4	J. den Uyl	3
7	J. den Uyl	3	P. de Jong	3	W. Kok	6	W. Scherm-erhorn	3	P. de Jong	3
8	A. van Agt	1	J. Zijlstra	3	W. Drees	5	J. Zijlstra	3	J-P. Balkenende	2
9	J. de Quay	1	A. Kuypers	2	P. de Jong	2	A. van Agt	1	J. de Geer	1
10	C. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck	1	L. Beel	1	J-P. Balkenende	1	P. Gerbrandy	1	J. Zijlstra	1
11	—	—	—	—	—	—	M. Rutte	1	—	—
	<i>1: Is an effective Cabinet and coalition manager (n = 38, missing:1)</i>		<i>2: Enjoys parliamentary authority (n = 37)</i>		<i>3: Effective communicator (in speeches and/or mass media) (n = 35, missing: 1)</i>		<i>4: Maintains a high level of personal integrity (n = 37, missing: 3)</i>		<i>5: Has demonstrated the ability to convert political promises into deeds (n = 32, missing: 3)</i>	
1	R. Lubbers	17	W. Kok	10	W. Drees	22	J. den Uyl	23		
2	W. Drees	11	R. Lubbers	7	P. Cort van der Linden	10	W. Kok	21		
3	J. den Uyl	11	J-P. Balkenende	6	W. Kok	10	W. Drees	15		
4	P. Cort van der Linden	8	W. Drees	5	R. Lubbers	10	R. Lubbers	14		
5	P. de Jong	7	H. Colijn	3	P. de Jong	3	J-P. Balkenende	4		
6	H. Colijn	5	P. Cort van der Linden	3	C. Ruys de Beerenbrouck	3	P. de Jong	3		
7	P. Gerbrandy	3	P. Gerbrandy	1	J-P. Balkenende	2	L. Beel	2		
8	W. Kok	3	P. de Jong	1	P. de Quay	2	H. Colijn	1		
9	J-P. Balkenende	2	M. Rutte	1	J. Cals	1	M. Rutte	1		
10	—	—	—	—	J. Zijlstra	1	—	—		
11	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—		
	<i>6. Has successfully managed the country in times of turbulence / crisis (n = 31)</i>		<i>7. Effective advocate of Dutch interests abroad/in the EU (n = 31, missing: 7)</i>		<i>8. Has left a robust policy/reform legacy (n = 32, missing:1)</i>		<i>9. Effective manager of the monarchy and the House of Orange (n = 35)</i>			





ranking, is almost completely absent in the top of the more detailed performance rankings. The most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that many of the experts who were well aware of his historical significance and general reputation felt unable to judge the specific leadership skills of this temporally more distant PM whose political life has been less prominently documented than that of the post-WWII PMs’.

How do the results of the open versus closed questions compare? In order to make a summative judgment on the nine criteria and compare it with the ranking that emerged from the general opening question, we developed a scoring system. PMs who ended in top place on a particular criterion received three points, second-placed PMs two points and third-placed one point. Table 4 compares the aggregate findings that emerged from this exercise with the scores of Table 1. It produces markedly different results. Cort van der Linden drops from rank 2 to 6, whereas Joop den Uyl rises from place 5 to 3. Clearly, when prompted on specific evaluation criteria, experts come up with more nuanced judgments than their own summative, spontaneous general assessment.

These differences may partly reflect underlying differences in the value assessors place on the nine criteria they were asked to rate with. To trace this, respondents were asked to rank the nine areas of prime-ministerial performance in an order from 1–9, 1 being the most important and 9 being the least important. We used the same score system as described above: every time a certain performance domain was ranked first, it was awarded 9 points, heading down to 1 point for every time it was ranked ninth, the seven in between being awarded 8 heading to 2 points. In Figure 1, the sum of this exercise is reported. As can be seen in the figure, the experts consider the

Table 4: Comparison between spontaneous and criteria-led expert rankings

<i>PM ranking emerging from general assessment (open Q)</i>			<i>PM ranking after aggregation of scores on set performance criteria (closed Qs)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>
W. Drees (1948–1958)	13	1	W. Drees (1948–1958)	16	1(-)
P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	10	2	R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	14	2(+1)
R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	9	3	J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	6	3(+2)
P. de Jong (1967–1971)	5	4	P. de Jong (1967–1991)	4	4(-)
W. Kok (1994–2002)	2	5	W. Kok (1994–2002)	4	4(+1)
J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	2	5	P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	2	6(-4)
H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	1	7	H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	1	7(-)
W. Schermerhorn (1945–1946)	1	7	A. Kuyper (1901–1905)	1	7(*)
—	—	—	J.P. Balkenende (2002–2010)	1	7(*)

Note:

Deviations between (brackets) compared with ranking after general assessment

* = not included in ranking emerging from general assessment

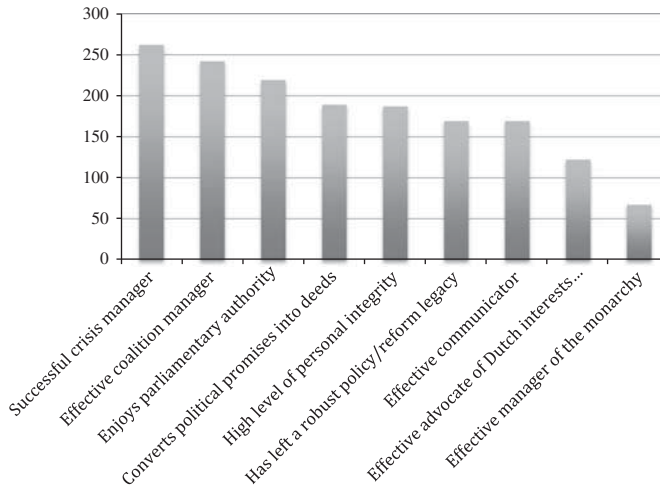


Figure 1: Relative importance attributed by expert to prime-ministerial performance domains.

ability to successfully manage a nation in times of crisis the most important quality of a PM. This is remarkable, especially given the constitutionally weak position of the Dutch PM. It might reflect a certain ‘presentism’: the concerns of the moment in the Dutch polity at the time the data collection took place, which centred squarely on the demands of managing the recession and the Eurozone crisis and constituted the key performance test that was being applied to the then incumbent Dutch government and its leader, PM Mark Rutte. However, it might also reflect a more general propensity across polities to view crisis and war as the supreme performance test for national leadership (Strangio *et al*, 2013). The criterion that on aggregate came in second, effective coalition management, can be explained more easily from the Dutch multi-party-government tradition in which holding the coalition together always has been an important task of the PM. Interestingly, the experts seem to consider the ability of the Dutch PM to effectively advocate the Dutch national interests in an international context less important than the frequent commentary about the increasing salience of this role would have led us to suggest: it ends up in eighth place. Clearly, domestic political performance trumps foreign policy prowess. Likewise, the growing media profile of the PM does not seem to convince the experts of the fact that communication skills are among the most important qualities for effective prime-ministerial leadership: at seven they rank surprisingly low.

Table 5 adds another column to Table 4, showing what happens if one factors in the weighting of these criteria. The criterion that was accorded the most importance by the expert rankers was given a factor 9, the least important as factor 1, and the seven in between went from factor loadings 8 to 2. We then again gave 3 points to the most frequently mentioned PM in a particular performance domain, 2 to the second

**Table 5:** Comparing spontaneous, non-weighted and weighted criteria based rankings

<i>PM ranking emerging from general assessment (open Q)</i>			<i>PM ranking after aggregation of scores on set performance criteria (closed Qs)</i>			<i>PM ranking after accounting for the relative weight accorded to individual performance criteria</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>
W. Drees (1948–1958)	13	1	W. Drees (1948–1958)	16	1(–)	R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	108	1(+2)
P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	10	2	R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	14	2(+1)	W. Drees (1948–1958)	96	2(–1)
R. Lubbers (1982–1994)	9	3	J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	6	3(+2)	J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	47	3(+2)
P. de Jong (1967–1971)	5	4	P. de Jong (1967–1991)	4	4(–)	P. de Jong (1967–1991)	34	4(–)
W. Kok (1994–2002)	2	5	W. Kok (1994–2002)	4	4(+1)	W. Kok (1994–2002)	12	5(–)
J. den Uyl (1973–1977)	2	5	P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	2	6(–4)	P. Cort van der Linden (1913–1918)	10	6(–4)
H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	1	7	H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	1	7(–)	H. Colijn (1925–1926; 1933–1939)	8	7(–)
W. Schermerhorn (1945–1946)	1	7	A. Kuyper (1901–1905)	1	7(*)	A. Kuyper (1901–1905)	6	8(*)
—	—	—	J.P. Balkenende (2002–2010)	1	7(*)	J.P. Balkenende (2002–2010)	2	9(*)

Deviations between (brackets) compared to ranking after general assessment

* = not included in ranking emerging from general assessment



rated, and one to the third rated, and multiplied these by the relevant factor loading. Working our way through all nine performance criteria, the aggregate rankings change yet again: Lubbers surpasses Drees in the top spot, though all the other PM's rankings remain the same. It is a matter of judgment of course which of the three methods one sees as the most valid and reliable way of ascertaining 'overall' prime-ministerial performance. We feel there is value in both the open and closed approaches, but to the extent one uses the latter, we would argue the weighting of the value placed upon the criteria by the experts who do the ranking is a useful and indeed essential corrective that better reflects their collective opinions.

Interpreting Dutch Prime-Ministerial Performance: A Comparative Perspective

Overall, the findings reported here echo Theakston's conclusion about greatness in British PMs: 'Prime ministers may to some extent only be as effective as "the times" permit, but the great leaders are able to discern what is necessary and extend what is possible – they practice "the art of the possible" not in the usual minimalist sense of doing only what they can or must, but rather by doing as much as they can, when they can' (Theakston, 2013, p. 238). This pretty much epitomises the way in which the consistent high scorers Drees and Lubbers understood and enacted their role, and clearly Dutch experts still appreciate this decades later.

This raises the broader question how the reputational pattern of the Dutch PMs compares with those of other nations. In a 4-country comparative review study of rankings exercises in Westminster systems, important cross-national similarities and differences were found. As in the United States, in all four countries a high degree of stability exists among experts about which leaders deserve to be in the top and bottom tiers of prime-ministerial 'league tables' (Strangio *et al.*, 2013, p. 218). But whereas in the United States there is a pre-occupation with presidential success and 'greatness' in office, elsewhere, the framing of results from similar studies tends to be slightly different, with emphasis placed on the moderate to meagre performance scores of so many occupants of the head of government role. As Theakston and Gill (2011, p. 78) put it in their overview of British rankings exercises: 'Many of the postwar prime ministers ... had mixed records at best, may have promised a lot but left office unfulfilled, and often faced adverse political circumstances.' Australians too do not like to think of their political leaders as iconic figures. They are 'not comfortable with impeccable heroes of the Washington and Lincoln variety' (Bolton, 1995). An eminent historian was categorical: there had been 'no great Australian prime minister' – ever (Hirst, 2010, p. 167). Whether this is because of lack of talents, challenges, or opportunities is a matter of debate, though a cultural explanation might be the most powerful: Australia has been termed a 'democracy of



manners' that thrives on the notion that, 'so that all men can be equal, politicians have to be dishonoured' (Hirst, 2002, p. 312, as quoted in Strangio, 2013, p. 267).

The Dutch have had a long-standing cultural bias against strong, heroic, top-down political leadership. The Dutch Republic was a confederacy of unruly provinces rising up against a Spanish King who was a man with a clear, yet repressive leadership vision. In building their own state, the Dutch made sure that no such predominant leader could impose his will on the country; they believed in dispersed rather than monocratic leadership; its leaders needed to be collegiate and consultative rather than pre-eminent and directive. Dabbling with the latter after the end of the Napoleonic wars, when monarchy was restored and kings William I and II attempted to run the country from the centre, convinced the Dutch burghers that this was not a good idea. Losing what is now Belgium in a secession process directed against absolutist (and Protestant) rules, within four decades the monarchy was relegated to a largely ceremonial role. Collegial and consensual leadership – government by deal-making – were restored. Whereas in the late nineteenth century the Dutch like most other European nations were drawn towards more charismatic leaders of the great social movements of the era, they never quite extended that pattern of expectations to the people actually governing the country (Te Velde, 2002). Though briefly flirting with the strong leadership of PM Hendrik Colijn during the recession-ridden 1930s, the traumatic experience of being overrun by neighbouring Nazi Germany turned traditional scepticism into open resentment and even taboo. For five decades after World War II the very term 'leader' was largely banned from Dutch-political discourse. Politicians and commentators exerted themselves in using euphemistic alternatives instead. It took the 'double punch' of the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks to change the speech rules of the game in Dutch politics, and re-legitimize a longing for (strong, authentic, charismatic) 'leadership' ('t Hart and Ten Hooven, 2004). The epic rise and dramatic premature end to populist Pim Fortuijn's oppositional leadership seems to have only reinforced that longing, creating a niche for confrontational 'conviction politicians' like Geert Wilders. Whether they Dutch are now ready to accept this as a mould that should also extend to PMs is a different matter. So far, no one of that ilk has made it into the role.

Strangio *et al* (2013) sum up the core findings about the ingredients of successful prime-ministerial leadership in their 4-country study: 'In Britain ... the experts are seen to prize prime-ministerial leadership that is bold and conviction driven, while in Canada an ability to hold together a nation with pronounced regional and cultural cleavages is confirmed as the sine qua non of successful leadership, and, consistent with this, preference is given to change wrought consensually and unobtrusively. Similarly, in New Zealand a very high premium is placed on longevity (PMs need to have won at least three elections to be considered in the top tier), whereas in Australia longevity in office seems to be a less important indicator of leadership excellence than is policy legacy.'

To examine this thoroughly for the Dutch PMs exceeds the scope of the present study, but some preliminary observations can be made. First, on *party*: though the



Christian-democratic party and its various precursors (catholic and protestant parties) has dominated much of modern Dutch governments, its PMs have not necessarily loomed larger in expert and public appreciation. Of the four PMs topping the bill in the open question in both types of polls, only Lubbers is a Christian-democrat; Drees and Den Uyl were both social democrats; and Cort van der Linden was not a member of any political party (though ideologically a liberal). Second, on *longevity*: Lubbers and Drees were not only the highest scoring but also the longest serving PMs. The ability to survive in office obviously counts for something. At the same time, Jan-Peter Balkenende, who led four different governments in 8 turbulent years during which he won three consecutive elections, does not rate very highly at all. Clearly, more is needed than just electoral endurance. That 'more' could well be *coalition management ability*: it is perhaps not surprising that the top scorers Drees and Lubbers belonged to the very small group of PMs who were good at keeping their cabinets politically afloat *and* at mustering the electoral and collegial support to get themselves reappointed as PM more than once.

Finally, there is *policy legacy*, which also is a key lens Australians use when judging their PMs: the five-term PM, 'do-nothing' PM Robert Menzies (1949–1966) is consistently outscored by activist and successful legislators and reformers such as Ben Chifley (1945–1949) and Bob Hawke (1983–1991). Likewise in Holland, Drees is credited with rebuilding the war-torn nation and constructing its welfare state while Lubbers is credited with effectively reigning it in. These are records of tangible achievement that stand the test of time, which no other Dutch PM can match. This is probably also why the otherwise somewhat elusive and publicly 'forgotten' figure of Cort van der Linden still rates remarkably highly in the open-question polling: under his government some of the key social questions (religious education, child labour, universal suffrage) were settled in ways that endured and freed up the political system that had hitherto been held hostage by them.

Perhaps of the countries surveyed in the previous section, the Canadian experience resembles the Dutch the most. As Azzi and Hillmer (2013, p. 242) observe: 'Canadian politics are quiet, moderate, and incremental. Not for Canadian leaders, or not usually, the charismatic flourish, the dramatic overture, or the grand idea... Canadians are not given to thinking of their prime ministers as great unifying figures, representative of national will and spirit, but rather as pragmatic political fixers and problem-solvers.' Change 'Canadian' to 'Dutch' in these sentences, and one captures the essence of the findings reported here.

Concluding Reflections

The question is how much of the picture that has emerged from our study on Dutch prime-ministerial performance is going to change in a world of post-ideological, personalised, media-driven, highly transparent and real-time politics in an era of deep



uncertainty about issues of nationhood, identity, sovereignty, economic and ecological futures. These developments have begun to crowd out the space for traditional party systems and the leadership niche of doing backroom deals, discrete diplomacy and non-charismatic pragmatism – skills at which ‘great’ Dutch PMs have traditionally excelled. It instead appears to favour ‘great communicators’, populist polarizers, and celebrity politicians who reach out not to the ‘hearts and minds’ but to the underbellies of the increasingly restless electorate (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Mair, 2013).

It remains to be seen whether this trend is robust enough to influence who get to be head of government and how they interpret their roles. We will know in a decade or two, provided students of executive leadership in governments in countries like the Netherlands persevere in periodically conducting these polling exercises. As we have pointed out earlier, methodologically flawless they are not. Nor will they ever be, given the inherent complexities and subjectivities involved in evaluating political leadership ('t Hart, 2011a). But at least they offer, we hope to have shown, interesting food for thought about what countries value and condemn in their most important political leaders.

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Note

1 In line with international practice, we did not include background questions concerning the demographic, socio-economic and political-ideological backgrounds of the participants, treating them all as ‘experts’ instead. As one reviewer rightly pointed out, this omission precludes analysts from examining the potential influence of such background factors on the experts’ judgments.

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