

## Chapter 4

# Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: Stability and change in the Dutch party system and its effect on the politics of problem solving

*Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Barbara Vis*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 1991, Gladdish argued that Dutch politics was 'governing from the centre'. An important reason for this description was the strong centripetal forces of the Dutch party system, which in turn were closely related to the pivotal position of the Christian democrats (CDA) (van Kersbergen, 1997; 2003). This 'governing from the centre' also influenced policy-making in the Netherlands. This holds especially for the so-called politics of problem solving (Keman, 1997), such as the ability of Dutch governments to pass even highly controversial socioeconomic reforms under volatile economic conditions.

In this chapter, we argue that – quite remarkably, given the huge changes in the Dutch party system, including the decline of the CDA and, even more pronounced, of the social democrats (PvdA) – the description of Dutch politics as 'governing from the centre' appears as relevant in 2023 as it did in 1991. By and large, Dutch politics in general and Dutch governments in particular have continued their centrist focus. Coalition governance is still guided by the 'politics of accommodation', as stated by Louwerse and Timmermans (2021: 477), meaning that not much has changed in coalition governance, despite all other changes. Yet, the governing centre of Dutch politics has moved more towards the centre-right in the last decade or so, largely because of the more central role of the conservative liberals (VVD) – since 2010 – the largest party in the coalitions.<sup>2</sup> We

---

1 Thanks to Hans Keman and Carsten Jensen for comments on earlier versions.

2 Depending on the specific coalition partners, the resulting governments have been either right of centre (e.g., Rutte I: VVD and CDA, with

argue that the continuity that is visible amidst all change helps explain why socioeconomic reform capacity is still relatively high in the Netherlands, even though the changes have made the politics of problem solving increasingly difficult.

### **Governing from the centre: The centripetal dynamics of Dutch party politics**

Gladdish's (1991) description of Dutch politics as 'governing from the centre' was well-aligned with other descriptions at the time, with the Netherlands characterized by consensus governments with roots in pillarization and consociational democracy (Andeweg and Irwin, 1993: 231-238). While pillarization and, to a lesser extent, consociationalism were fading characteristics of Dutch society in the early 1980s, what remained was a party system with three major players: the PvdA, the CDA and the VVD. After the successful merger of the KVP, ARP and CHU in the late 1970s, the CDA had managed to place itself at the very centre of the Dutch party system. The party had a pivot position where building coalition governments was to a large extent a matter of whether the CDA wanted to govern 'to the right' with the VVD or 'to the left' with the PvdA. Furthermore, the centrist position of the CDA in the party system was perfectly aligned with the party's ideology, which – as Kees van Kersbergen has originally demonstrated – focused on reconciling different societal interest and balancing conflict and consensus (van Kersbergen, 1997, 2003). The CDA was the embodiment of 'governing from the centre.'

The decades-long pivotal role of the CDA – with neither a clear left-wing nor right-wing majority being within sight – implied that both the PvdA and the VVD had to adopt a centrist strategy to (re) gain government power in the 1980s. Interestingly, this may also have opened up the possibility of the 'purple' coalitions from 1994 to 2002, the first ones since the First World War without Christian democratic participation (Green-Pedersen, 2004: 328-330). These 'purple' governments of PvdA, VVD and the social liberals (D66) can be seen a continuation, or even culmination, of governing from the centre. When the CDA was removed from office, it was replaced by a government in which the other parties had taken over the CDA's

---

support [*gedoogsteun*] by the populist Freedom Party [PVV]) or a balance between left and right (e.g., Rutte II: VVD and PvdA).

centrist position and continued its focus on reforms in the areas of socioeconomic policy (see van Kersbergen, 2008 for a discussion of CDA's decline in the 1990s and its recovery in the early 2000s).<sup>3</sup> In sum, Dutch politics until 2002 was characterized by strong centripetal dynamics in the party system (see also Pennings and Keman, 2008: 174-176).

The 2002 election can be seen as path-breaking because of the sudden breakthrough of the populist party Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF). This breakthrough followed a turbulent election campaign in which the assassination of Pim Fortuyn nine days before the elections marked the beginning of more tumultuous times in Dutch politics. How to portray the development since then? One way is to look at the measure of party system polarization suggested by Casal Bértoa (2022) (see also Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021: 192-200). This measure captures the electoral support for 'anti-establishment parties',<sup>4</sup> with higher scores indicating a higher degree of party system polarization. As Table 1 shows, party system polarization rose significantly from the 1998 election to the 2002 election, from around 18% to 36%, and has not dropped down to its previous level since then. Table 1 also displays the level of fragmentation captured by the effective number of parties. Here, the 2002 election also implies a substantial increase, but the one from 2012 to 2017 is more pronounced.

The increased fragmentation in the Dutch party system partly reflects two other trends, which are visible in Table 1. The two most recent elections imply a substantial increase in the number of parties

---

3 Kees van Kersbergen (2008) uses the metaphor of the phoenix to describe the CDA's decline – i.e., bursting into flames after having shredded its feathers – and its recovery – i.e., rising from its ashes. Extending this metaphor since then, it seems that the party is still in its shredding phase, polling only 6 seats (currently: 15 seats in parliament) late July, which was shortly after the fall of the Rutte IV cabinet (IPSOS, 2023).

4 Whether a party is an anti-establishment party is based on three criteria: (1) it perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment; (2) it asserts that a fundamental divide exists between the political establishment and the people (implying that all establishment parties, be they in government or in opposition, are essentially the same; and (3) it challenges the status quo in terms of major policy issues and political system issues, see Casal Bértoa (2022). At the 2021 election, such parties that made it into Tweede Kamer are PVV, PvdD, SP, SGP, JA21 and FvD.

**Table 1: Development of the Dutch party system since 1981**

Election year	Fragmentation (effective number of parties) <sup>a</sup>	Polarization (vote share of anti- system parties) <sup>a</sup>	Number of parties in parliament <sup>b</sup>	Vote share of PvdA, CDA and VVD <sup>b</sup>	Party system closure <sup>a</sup>
1981	4.3	11.7	10	76.0	91.70
1982	4.0	12.6	12	83.0	91.23
1986	3.5	8.4	9	85.0	91.82
1989	3.8	10.2	9	81.8	91.69
1994	5.4	17.9	12	66.2	91.77
1998	4.8	18.1	9	72.1	92.23
2002	5.8	35.8	10	58.4	92.14
2003	4.7	22.0	9	73.8	91.94
2006	5.5	31.5	10	62.4	92.15
2010	6.7	35.0	10	55.5	91.63
2012	5.7	26.5	10	59.9	91.36
2017	8.1	39.3	13	39.7	91.52
2021	8.5	35.7	17	37.1	91.88

a Data from Casal Bértoa (2022).

b Data from Andeweg, Irwin and Louwse (2020: 60). Updated by authors.

represented in parliament – 17 regular parties, not counting the split-offs, after the 2021 election – and a substantial decrease in the share of seats obtained by the three traditional mainstream parties that have delivered the Prime Minister since the Second World War: the PvdA, the CDA and the VVD. While their share of the votes dropped substantially to below 60% at the 2002 election, it increased again at the 2003 election to over 70%, to drop again to around 60% at the 2012 election and plummeting to about 37% at the 2021 election. This development is largely driven by the breakdown of electoral support for the PvdA and the more gradual decline of the CDA.

The 2002 election was also important in another way. It opened up the issue of immigration as a new conflict dimension in the Dutch party system beyond the two classic ones, the economically left vs. right parties and, to a lesser extent, the religiously based vs. secular parties. Dutch party competition can thus also be seen as having become more multi-dimensional over the past decades (Andeweg, Irwin and Louwse, 2020: 62-68). Exactly this multi-dimensionality lies behind Pellikaan, de Lange and van der Meer's (2018: 233) argument that a core or pivot party, which is necessary for a party system to be centripetal, no longer exists in the Netherlands. Pellikaan, de Lange and van der Meer operationalize the core of a party system as 'the point in the political space at which all potential legislative majority coalitions intersect' (235-236). The core party, then, is 'able to dominate coalition bargaining and (...) determines the direction of competition, as it is the one that is needed in all majority coalitions that could be formed' (236). Analyzing party manifestos from Dutch political parties between 2002 and 2012 and using a confrontational approach, Pellikaan, de Lange and van der Meer (2018) find that the CDA was the core party in 2002. This core 'crumbled' at the 2006 election, and it was neither occupied at the 2010 election nor at the 2012 election. This would suggest that it was no longer possible to govern from the centre. But is that indeed so?

No matter which indicators or characteristics we look at (see, e.g., Table 1), the Dutch party system has changed dramatically since the studies from the 1990s that emphasized that the Netherlands was governed from the centre. However, this does not necessarily mean that coalition governance and the problem-solving capacity of Dutch governance has changed, too. We examine this question next.

The clearest impact from the changes in the party system on government formation is perhaps that the number of coalition partners has increased. Where the Netherlands was governed by two parties in the 1980s and typically three parties from 1994 to 2017, coalitions of four parties have become necessary these days. Building a coalition government with a majority has simply become more complicated, which is also reflected in the record-long coalition negotiations after the 2021 election: 299 days.

Yet, in terms of the parties included, Dutch governments are characterized by a remarkable continuity. Despite the massive increase in the number of parties in parliament, only one party has managed to establish itself as a new governing party: the Christian Union (CU), which is a centrist party.<sup>5</sup> What has changed in terms of composition of the governments is that the VVD has obtained the position as the largest party in the party system. In practice, this has meant that this party has become the dominant actor in government formation, resulting in a shift of Dutch governments to the centre right. However, the pull toward the right is partly countered by the relatively strong position of the centrist D66 and by the fact that a majority including the VVD and radical right, that is, not including the centre, has never been within sight. The two attempts at including the populist right in government – LPF from 2002 to 2003 and the Freedom Party (PVV) as a support party from 2010 to 2012 – failed, and thus far the VVD has shown no interest in trying again.

So what stands out when we look at the Dutch party system is the contrast between the significant increases in fragmentation and polarization and the growing multi-dimensionality around issues such as immigration and European Integration (Andeweg, Irwin and Louwerse, 2020: 62-68) as well as the continuity of government formation around the centre. This can be illustrated by introducing the concept of party system closure recently developed by Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021) based on Peter Mair's original idea. Party system closure captures how stable and predictable government coalitions are. The measurement of the concept allows for comparison across

---

5 On the general left-right score of the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022), the party is scored at 5.1 on a 0-10 scale, where 0 is extreme left and 10 extreme right. In comparison, the D66 is scored at 5.2, PvdA at 3.6, CDA at 6.8 and VVD at 7.6.

time and countries and varies from 0 to 100, where 100 indicate a completely closed party system.<sup>6</sup> In the latter case, government formation is extremely stable and predictable, meaning that changes in governments are always complete (no party continues from one government to the next), the governing alternatives are completely clear, and new parties have no chance of becoming part of the governing alternatives. The Dutch figures reported in Table 1 are very stable, indicating that patterns of party interactions around coalition government formation have been highly predictable (notwithstanding the length of the coalition formation processes).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the contrast between the turbulent party system and the stable patterns of coalition formation around the centre is remarkable (cf. Louw-erse and Timmermans, 2021). Explaining this stability would be an interesting avenue for future research.

In sum, beyond the higher number of coalition partners, the most significant change to Dutch coalition governments is the relative growth of the VVD into the largest party in parliament and the party delivering the Prime Minister since 2010. Perhaps against all odds, Dutch governments are still centrist, as they combine parties across the political centre, although the balance in these governments has lately tilted more toward the centre-right.

### **Reform capacity and the politics of problem solving**

To what extent has the turbulence in the party system combined with remarkably stable patterns of coalition formation around the

---

6 The measure is calculated based on changes in the composition of governments (see Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021: 34-45), which typically do not occur on a yearly basis. To avoid having many years with values of 100 just because there has been no changes to the government composition and to capture trends in party interaction around government formation, a time-weighted measure is provided, which is reported in Table 1.

7 Comparatively speaking, the Netherlands does not score the highest value because changes in governing parties have almost never been complete. One or more parties have always continued in government. Countries such as Denmark or the United Kingdom typically score higher – from 95 to 99 – because alternation is almost always complete. Yet, party interaction around coalition formation in the Netherlands has been very stable and closed around the centre.

centre influenced reform capacity in the Netherlands and the politics of problem solving? Reform capacity is ‘the extent to which political institutions facilitate the adoption of socially efficient reforms (reforms that increase some measures of aggregate welfare)’ (Lindvall, 2010: 263). If politics is (also) about solving problems, policies need to change if social and/or economic conditions change – which is why reform capacity matters.

### **Looking back: the Netherlands as an exemplary case of high socioeconomic reform capacity**

In the welfare state literature, the Netherlands is often typified as an exemplary case of high socioeconomic reform capacity. This began in the early 1980s, when the Netherlands demonstrated problem-solving capacity in dealing with economic crises that it faced (Keman, 1997), including significant welfare state retrenchment (see e.g., Green-Pedersen, 2002; Vis, 2010). In the late 1990s, the notion of crisis had even been replaced by the idea of a ‘Dutch [economic] miracle’ (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). This development can be attributed to yet more problem solving in the form of various significant retrenchments of the Dutch welfare state, including unemployment insurance and disability pensions (Green-Pedersen, 2002; Vis, 2010; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997).

Looking at how the ‘intrusive’ reforms were adopted in the 1980s and the 1990s, we see an important role for the social partners – especially employer and employee organizations – the Dutch so-called ‘Polder’ model in action (Woldendorp, 2005). Notwithstanding their importance for, say, the well-known ‘Wassenaar accord’ of the 1980s, given the ‘strong government’ at the time (as well as in the 1990s), agreements with the social partners were always forged under a ‘shadow of hierarchy’ of the government (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). This has changed since, especially, the Rutte II government, where we see both the inclusion of small(er) opposition parties in the reform process and a different timing in the sequencing of negotiations (Hemerijck, Karremans and van der Meer, 2023). First, there is approval sought from the social partners and only then from the ‘constructive’ opposition parties, with the government acting as a ‘broker’ between the different actors.



It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all these reforms in detail (see e.g., Hemerijck, Karremans and van der Meer, 2023; Hemerijck and van Kersbergen, 2019 for overviews). Instead, we use the so-called Social Pact adopted in 2014 and the pension reform adopted in 2019 to illustrate the still extant reform capacity in the Netherlands. At the same time, these cases also reveal that the politics of problem solving – the ability of governments to pursue ‘intrusive’ socioeconomic reforms – has become more difficult. This is partly an indirect effect of the considerable changes in the Dutch party system, which has made the Senate, the first chamber of the Dutch parliament, crucial in passing socioeconomic reforms.

The Social Pact entailed a major socioeconomic reform. This pact included planned cuts of, initially, 4 billion euros and formed the basis of, among other laws, the Participation Act (*Participatiewet*, 2015) – a drastic reform of the disability pension schemes – and the Work and Security Act (*Wet Werk en Zekerheid*, 2015) – involving a drastic reform of employment protection regulation. The Social Pact was adopted in difficult socioeconomic times, when unemployment levels were rising, while there was also a need to make budget cuts to meet the EMU budgetary rules. The Rutte II government was able to adopt the different reforms in the agreement by, first, obtaining approval for the pact from the social partners in early April 2013 (see Hemerijck, Karremans and van der Meer, 2023 for a more detailed discussion). This was followed later that month by approval from (several) opposition parties, which were needed to also obtain a majority in the Senate (see below). Some years earlier – in 2007 under the Balkenende IV government comprising the CDA, the D66 and the CU – the reform of dismissal protection (part of employment protection regulation) were still on hold because of irreconcilable differences in the coalition. The fact that the Pact – which included a reform of the employment protection regulation – was adopted testifies to the Dutch socioeconomic reform capacity. However, the, from the government’s perspective, probably more challenging route through which the pact came about suggests that the politics of problem solving has become more difficult.

A similar route, but also reform capacity, is visible in the pension pact that was agreed on in 2019 (see Hemerijck, Karremans and van der Meer, 2023 for a more detailed discussion); the legislation for this

reform has been adopted by the Senate in May 2023. This pension reform entails an increase of the statutory pension age as well as a radical – and politically very difficult (e.g., van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014) – revision of the occupational pension scheme (i.e., second pillar) from a defined benefits to a defined contributions scheme. The proposal for the reform dates back to 2010 but was then rejected by the PVV. In the final months of Rutte I (VVD, CDA), the government and the so-called ‘constructive’ opposition parties (D66, CU and the Greens [*GroenLinks*]) again proposed a pension reform but did not adopt it. A revised proposal made it into the coalition agreement of Rutte II (VVD/PvdA), but also during this government, no such reform was adopted. It was again on the agenda of Rutte III (VVD, CDA, D66, CU). When the government lost its majority in the Senate in 2019, they needed support from the Greens and the PvdA. Until the agreement with the social partners in 2019, these parties had blocked the proposed reform several times (see Heme-rijck et al., 2013).

This brief summary reveals that in terms of process, this pension reform has been anything but easy. But it happened. Like with the Social Pact, also this reform could only be adopted with a key role for the social partners as well as the ‘constructive’ opposition parties, illustrating once again that the politics of problem solving has become more difficult.

Looking at these two cases of socioeconomic reforms, the larger influence of the Dutch Senate is one factor that stands out. For a very long time, the Senate hardly influenced (socioeconomic) reform capacity in the Netherlands, since the parties that had a majority in parliament also had a majority in the Senate. This has changed since 2010, reflecting the more fragmented party system,<sup>8</sup> arguably making compromises complex and cumbersome. However, looking at the socioeconomic reforms that have been pursued in the Neth-

8 Specifically, Rutte I (2010-2012) had half of the votes in the Senate between 2010 and 2011 (i.e., no majority) but did have a majority between 2011 and 2012; Rutte II (2012-2017) had no majority in the Senate for its full term in office; Rutte III (2017-2021) had a majority in the Senate between 2017 and 2019 but not between 2019 and 2021; and Rutte IV (2021-) did not have a majority in the Senate and incurred major losses at the 2023 provincial elections (through which the members of the Senate are elected) (PDC, 2022).

erlands in the past decade or so, reform capacity is still remarkably high. We argue that this is at least partly due to the government's agenda being relatively broad, that is, including a large number of topics, which produces room for cooperation and compromise. As Lindvall (2010: 373) explains, 'where actors have the possibility of linking issues (...) it will be easier to pursue common interests, as with a large number of items on the agenda there will often be trade-offs available' – resulting in reform capacity. Such trade-offs are exactly what we see in the 'intrusive' socioeconomic reforms in the Netherlands in the past decade or so.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have – with admittedly broad strikes, yet, or so we hope, in the spirit of Kees van Kerbergen's work – examined whether and how the changes in the Dutch party system influenced the politics of problem solving. Our argument can be summarized in this way: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. On the *change* side, the party system looks completely different from when Gladdish (1991) wrote about the Netherlands. The CDA has declined substantially and – unless the party will yet again rise from the ashes (see note 2) – lost its position as a 'pivot party'. The PvdA – often a cooperative partner of the CDA – has also been marginalized (Keman, 2022), although its prospects for the 2023 parliamentary elections look brighter now the party has joined forces with the Greens. But there is maybe even more on the *la même chose* side. Coalition formation has still been characterized by much stability, there is still a dominant party (the VVD), and the characterization of 'politics from the centre' still seems to hold. The centre of the Dutch party system is still so strong that a government based on parties on the wings of the Dutch party system are not feasible.<sup>9</sup> What is more,

---

9 Note that this may change after the parliamentary election in November 2023, depending on the development of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) – a party that has one seat in parliament but that has won the 2023 provincial elections with a landslide, reaping over 20% of the votes. If BBB proves to be up to the task of governing in the provinces – something that the winner of the 2019 provincial elections, Forum for Democracy (FvD), failed to do – it may become a realistic coalition partner in a future right-wing government.

the socioeconomic reforms that have been adopted suggest that the Netherlands has not lost its reform capacity either, although it is pressured by, among others things, the challenges of mobilizing a majority in the Senate.

## References

- Andeweg, Rudy B. and Galen A. Irwin (1993). *Dutch government and politics*. Macmillan.
- Andeweg, Rudy, Galen Irwin and Tom Louwerse (2020). *Governance and politics in the Netherlands*. Bloomsbury Academics.
- Casal Bértoa, Fernando (2022). *Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond*. PSGo. [www.whogoverns.eu](http://www.whogoverns.eu)
- Casal Bértoa, Fernando and Zsolt Enyedi (2021). *Party system closure: Party alliances, government alternatives, and democracy in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Gladdish, Ken (1991). *Governing from the centre: Politics and policy-making in the Netherlands*. Northern Illinois University Press.
- Green-Pedersen, Christoffer (2002). *The politics of justification: Party competition and welfare-state retrenchment in Denmark and the Netherlands from 1982 to 1998*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Green-Pedersen, Christoffer (2004). Center parties, party competition, and the implosion of party systems: A study of centripetal tendencies in multiparty systems. *Political Studies* 52 (2): 324-341.
- Hemerijck, Anton and Kees van Kersbergen (2019). Transformative welfare reform in consensus democracies. *Politics of the Low Countries* 1: 44-62.
- Hemerijck, Anton, Johannes Karremans and Marc van der Meer (2023). Responsive corporatism without political credit: social concertation, constructive opposition and the long tenure of the Rutte II cabinet in the Netherlands (2012-2017). *Acta Politica* 58 (1): 161-180.
- Hemerijck, Anton C., Verena Dräbing, Barbara Vis, Moira L. Nelson and Menno F. Soentken (2013). *European Welfare States in Motion*. London: Routledge.
- IPSOS (2023). *Politieke barometer*. 26 July.
- Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jon Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen and Milada A. Vachudova (2022). Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999-2019. *Electoral Studies* 75: 102420.
- Keman, Hans (1997). *The politics of problem-solving in postwar democracies: Institutionalising conflict and consensus in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Keman, Hans (2022) The continued decline of Dutch social democracy, in Georg Menz (ed.), *The resistible corrosion of Europe's center-left after 2008*. London: Routledge.
- Lindvall, Johannes (2010). Power sharing and reform capacity. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 22 (3): 359-376.
- Louwerse, Tom and Arco Timmermans (2021). The Netherlands: Old solutions to new problems, pp. 448-481 in Torbjörn Bergman, Hanna Bäck and Johan Hellström (eds.), *Coalition governance in Western Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- PDC (2022). *Steun kabinetten in Tweede en Eerste Kamer*. Parlement.com.
- Pellikaan, Huib, Sarah L. de Lange and Tom W.G. van der Meer (2018). The centre does not hold: Coalition politics and party system change in the Netherlands, 2002-12. *Government and Opposition* 53 (2): 231-255.
- Pennings, Paul and Hans Keman (2008). The changing landscape of Dutch politics since the 1970s: A comparative exploration. *Acta Politica* 43: 154-179.
- van Kersbergen, Kees (1997). Between collectivism and individualism: The politics of the centre, in Hans Keman (ed.), *The politics of problem-solving in post-war democracies*. Macmillan.
- van Kersbergen, Kees (2003). *Social capitalism: A study of Christian Democracy and the welfare state*. Routledge.
- van Kersbergen, Kees (2008). The Christian Democratic Phoenix and modern unsecular politics. *Party Politics* 14 (3): 259-279.
- van Kersbergen, Kees and Barbara Vis (2014). *Comparative welfare state politics: Development opportunities, and reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vis, Barbara (2010). *Politics of risk-taking: Welfare state reform in advanced democracies*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Visser, Jelle and Anton Hemerijck (1997). *A Dutch miracle: Job growth, welfare reform, and corporatism in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Woldendorp, Jaap (2005). *The Polder model: From disease to miracle? Dutch neo-corporatism 1965-2000*. PhD Dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Thela Thesis.