

STATE OF THE PROFESSION

Stability and change in Dutch politics: Introduction to the Handbook of Dutch Politics

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Abstract

Notwithstanding its considerable degree of constitutional and institutional stability, Dutch politics has seen considerable step changes and occasional upheavals across the last half century. Influenced by long-term demographic, socio-economic, and cultural shifts, the old social cleavages have waned. New social identities and dividing lines – such as ethnicity, education, place, and gender – have influenced Dutch citizens' political attitudes and behaviours, including their voting patterns. The media landscape and the information environment have been altered by new technologies that politicians and citizens alike have to navigate. This has produced changes in such pivotal components as the party system, coalition formation and management process, executive-legislative relations, public policy making, and many others. In the *Oxford Handbook of Dutch Politics*, researchers take stock of what, if anything, has changed over time, how scholars have conceptualised and studied these dynamics, and what key factors can account for the developmental patterns found to be at play. In doing so, the Handbook provides a comprehensive longitudinal overview of the state of the art of academic research on the Dutch political system: its origins and historical development, its key institutions, main fault lines, pivotal processes, and key public policy dynamics, making an important contribution to the political science profession in the Netherlands, and beyond. In all, this volume provides unique and indispensable insights into stability and change in a political system that once gained notoriety as an archetype of a consensual or consociational democracy.

Keywords: Dutch politics, Pillarisation, Populism, Consociational democracy

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Stability and change in Dutch Politics?

Once upon a time, the Netherlands held a special position in the study of politics on the wings of Arend Lijphart's (1968) classic portrayal of its distinctive formula of elite accommodation, that helped turn a country with a social structure that might leave it bitterly divided and politically paralysed into a stable and well-functioning consensus democracy. Its way of making democracy in a divided society work made it an intriguing case within the empire of mainstream comparative politics, posing an implausible yet vigorous challenge to the then conventional understanding that (a) a majoritarian electoral system delivering two-party competition provided the most robust and effective form of 'polyarchy' (Dahl, 1971); (b) democracy/polyarchy stood little chance of survival in any country with deeply entrenched and mutually reinforcing social cleavages (Almon and Verba, 1963; Kriesi, 1998).

Though not without its critics (e.g., Daalder 1974; Van Schendelen 1983, 1984; Lijphart, 1984), Lijphart's gripping case study of the 1917 'grand bargain' between the key political groupings in the Netherlands, and his analysis of the subsequent decades of institutionalisation of elite concertation as a political safety valve on top of entrenched pillarisation of society along religious, class and regional lines, that survived World War II and delivered prosperity in the first few post-war decades became a kind of bedrock political-science narrative about Dutch politics in the 20th century. Moreover, although the socio-demographic and socio-cultural basis underpinning the pillar system crumbled during its later decades, the system of centripetal elite bargaining and consensus seeking, buffeted by mechanisms and arenas for depoliticising tricky issues, and intricate juggling of front-stage political posturing and back-stage pragmatist deal-making, was largely maintained until well into the first decade of the 21st century (Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000).

Meanwhile, deep and rapid technological, ecosystemic, geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural changes have come to the fore, and have challenged the narratives, institutions and practices of the Dutch political system. Voter behaviour has become more volatile than in the heydays of pillarisation as voters have 'begun to choose' (Mair, 2008; Thomassen & Van Ham, 2014). Likewise, political trust in elites and institutions, traditionally very high by comparative standards, has moved up and (recently mostly) down (Bovens and Wille, 2008; De Blok & Brummel, 2022; Den Ridder et al., 2023; Snel et al., 2022). The Dutch party system has been in a state of flux, with numerous newcomers, breakaways, and a discernible hollowing out of what once was its centrist core (Pellikaan et al., 2018; Kessenich & Van der Brug, 2022). These developments have led to unprecedented levels of political fragmentation, which have created renewed challenges to governing the country.

Under the record-length prime ministership of Mark Rutte (2010-2024) these challenges have been managed by shifting the political composition of governing coalitions and by extremely tight coalition management practices (Louwerse &

Timmermans, 2021). Critics allege the latter have undermined the dualist structure of the Dutch political system, in which there is an institutional separation between the legislature and the executive (Voermans, 2021). Under Dutch dualism, cabinet members are not members of parliament and are overwhelmingly recruited from outside parliamentary ranks. It presupposes that governments govern and that parliaments deliberate about the executive branch's legislative proposals, put forward proposals of their own, and hold governments to account – and also that parliamentarians form their views without fear or favour. In practice, monist pragmatism and coping mechanisms have always muddled the waters, though to different extents and in different ways at different points in time (Andeweg, 1992).

With parliamentary majorities in both houses of parliament having become elusive as of the 2010s, monism has made a comeback. Party discipline among MPs of governing parties has been high for several decades, and their political leaders in cabinet and parliament have been increasingly pre-cooking deals on every controversial item on the agenda. Moreover, they have also been reaching out to leaders of parties in opposition that are needed for upper house majorities. With its co-legislative and co-steering activities largely pre-empted by these practices, critics argue that the Dutch parliament has largely become a venue for vacuous political posturing and ever more exacting accountability rituals (Andeweg, 2008; Voermans, 2021). The traditionally subdued and business-like tone of parliamentary deliberations has been challenged by a higher incidence of straight-talking amongst MPs and members of government. Polarising figures have rattled the political establishment and challenged the implicit consensus about the bandwidth of what is considered acceptable political discourse. In the 2000s alone, these have included Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated by an animal rights activist in 2002 on the eve of what looked like an electoral triumph that could have seen him become prime minister; Thierry Baudet, who characterised the EU as a 'cultural-Marxist' project and who has been accused of a range of political sins including antisemitism, misogyny, and taking money from Putin; and above all anti-Islam, anti-immigration nationalist crusader Geert Wilders, who has lived under permanent police protection for two decades, has been convicted up to the Supreme Court for 'the insulting of social groups', and yet managed to score a resounding shock victory in the November 2023 parliamentary elections.

In addition to these populist radical right leaders, other new parties also entered parliament, such as an animal rights party, a farmers' party, a minority rights party, a pan-European party, and a social justice party. These parties reflect and politicize fault lines between the centre and periphery, urban and rural areas, lower and higher educated citizens, younger and older generations of citizens, and citizens with and without a migration background, thereby changing parliamentary dynamics. Clearly, there are pressures upon and within the Dutch polity to move away from

its tried and tested 20th-century formula, but it is as yet unclear what it is gravitating towards. Are we witnessing the end of Dutch politics of accommodation, and a change towards a more politicised and competitive form of Dutch politics? It is hard to answer these questions in a simple and straightforward manner.

The *Handbook of Dutch Politics* is born out of recognising that the contextual and endemic changes described above may impinge differently on various Dutch political institutions, actors, arenas, and processes. It seeks to provide a comprehensive collection of thematic reviews investigating the trajectory of the many building blocks that make up the Dutch political system. For the overwhelming majority of the nearly fifty chapters in the Handbook, the Big Question in the background is whether, when, and where the system has faced critical junctures at which the once path-dependent 'way we do things around here' has been challenged, ditched, adapted, or reinvented. In doing so, the Handbook aims to provide a comprehensive overview of all aspects of Dutch political history, key institutions, pivotal processes and public policy dynamics, thereby systematically assessing stability and change patterns and outlining an agenda for future research.

In this introductory overview of the Handbook¹, we briefly survey how the study of Dutch politics – conducted mainly but certainly not exclusively by political scientists – has evolved. We then present the design of the Handbook, the considerations that have gone into it, and the strengths and limitations of the exercise that flow from it. Finally, we briefly showcase the substantive topics reviewed in each of its six constituent thematic parts. We hope readers will enjoy engaging with the Handbook of Dutch Politics. We hope the agenda for future research set out in the Handbook will inspire future research into the multifaceted Dutch political system.

Ebbs and flows in the study of Dutch politics

In 1963 the study of Dutch politics was a small enterprise within the academy comprising just four professorial chairs all held by white males (H. Daalder at Leiden University; H. Daudt at the University of Amsterdam; G. Kuypers at the Free University in Amsterdam, and G. Schichtling at the Catholic University in Nijmegen) (Hoogerwerf, 1981). Political historians and constitutional lawyers outnumbered 'empirical' political scientists considerably. Intellectually, 'old institutionalism' (Rhodes, 2006) and the modernist 'policy sciences' reigned, while the behavioural, rational choice, and (neo-)Marxist perspectives that would gain prominence in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. De Swaan, 1973; Stuurman, 1983; Van Putten, 1981) were still in their infancy.

¹ Please note that this article is an abbreviated version of the Introductory chapter to the Handbook: The Evolving Study of Dutch Politics (de Lange et al. 2024).

Since then, Dutch political science has expanded numerically and geographically, the outlook and composition of research staff have diversified, and technological advances have made new approaches possible. This has led to a considerable expansion of the range of questions political scientists have asked about Dutch politics, the research methods they bring to bear on investigating these questions and the insights they are able to produce. The field has been transformed since then. Rather than studying Dutch politics as a case *sui generis*, subsequent generations of scholars have followed Lijphart's and his contemporary Hans Daalder's lead and have increasingly studied 'the Dutch case' as part of thematically driven cross-national comparative research designs that were primarily aimed at contributing to middle-range theories and general political science models (Andeweg & Vis, 2015). To some degree, therefore, Dutch political scientists have left part of the work to contemporary political historians who however rely on their own periodisations and diachronic comparisons and make limited use of nor contribute to the stock of theories, typologies, and cross-national comparisons of their political science colleagues (e.g. Bosmans and Van Kessel, 2011; De Rooy, 2014; Te Velde, 2002; Van Baalen & Van Kessel, 2016).

The traditional lenses used to study Dutch politics and government have been complemented by perspectives such as intersectionality (Celis et al., 2012; Leyenaar, 2013; Mügge, 2016; Mügge et al., 2019), post-colonialism (Jones, 2012; Oostindie, 2011; Sharpe, 2020), political leadership (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017; Swinkels et al., 2017; 't Hart and Ten Hooven, 2004; 't Hart and Schelfhout, 2016), policymaking and policy networks (Hufen & Ringeling, 1990; Kickert & Van Vught, 1995; Kickert et al., 1997; 't Hart et al., 1995); and multilevel governance (Geuijen et al., 2008; Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020; OECD, 2014; Scholten, 2012; Witteveen et al., 1995). Moreover, Dutch political scientists have not just focused their energies on penetrating the columns of leading international academic journals but have breached new ground in contributing to public debates about Dutch politics through a variety of channels: online magazines (e.g. stukroodvlees.nl), custom made voting assistance tools (e.g. kieskompas.nl), op-ed articles in leading newspapers and election commentator roles with prime news channels.

Design and core themes of the Handbook

The Handbook provides a comprehensive overview of the state of the art in research on Dutch politics, divided into six parts.

Part I traces the *historical development of the Dutch political system*. It discusses the formation and institutionalisation of the Dutch state, the evolution of political styles among Dutch politicians, the development and eventual decline of Dutch consociationalism, and the origins, features, and reforms of the Dutch welfare state.

Part II examines the *key institutions making up the Dutch trias politica*. It analyses the monarchy's constitutional role and contemporary challenges, the parliament's organisation and functioning of parliamentary politics, the judiciary's historical coexistence with politics and its recent politicization, and the executive branch's internal workings, focusing on executive politics and the changing roles of cabinet government and senior civil service.

Part III explores politics beyond the national level and takes a *territorial perspective on the Dutch political system*. It starts with municipal politics, focusing on relationships with citizens, internal governance, and intergovernmental links; and then continues with regional politics, discussing the increasingly dense networks of regional cooperation and the unresolved debate around regional governance. It also examines provinces and the longstanding system of regional water authorities, emphasising their institutional resilience and democratic quality. The section further considers how EU membership influences both the role of the Netherlands in the EU as well as the role of the EU in domestic politics, and it reflects on the Kingdom of the Netherlands as a trans-Atlantic entity, studying the Kingdom relations, especially with the Dutch Caribbean islands.

Part IV explores *key social cleavages and prominent political issues in which social fault lines become apparent*. Traditional divides based on religion, class, and place once structured Dutch politics, but have been supplemented by new cleavages like age, gender, urbanisation, ethnicity, and education. These shifts have contributed to a realignment in Dutch politics. Public opinion remains structured largely along left-right ideological lines, though new issues increasingly influence voter behaviour. Political support for the Dutch political system remains high, but there are widening gaps between social groups, and increasing politicization of political support. Political participation, particularly voting, remains high, but inequality persists in who participates. Three key political issues are then explored that continue to dog Dutch politics: morality politics (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, gender identity), which has become more actively politicised since the 1990s; colonial history which remains a contentious issue; and populism, which emerged relatively late in Dutch politics but quickly integrated into the political landscape, contributing to fragmentation.

Part V examines *pivotal political structures and processes that make the Dutch political system work*. The Dutch electoral system remains highly proportional, facilitating parliamentary access for new parties but contributing to fragmentation. Political campaigning has professionalised, with new technologies like microtargeting creating both opportunities and integrity risks. Voting behaviour has become more volatile, with traditional predictors like religion or class losing importance to

short-term factors such as issues and leadership. The Dutch party system shows continuity in the absence of wholesale alternation, but new political families like the populist radical right have emerged. Coalition formation has become increasingly complex with rising fragmentation, requiring intricate negotiations and management. Representation remains unequal, especially for women, minorities, and marginalised groups. Substantive representation shows a generally good ideological match between voters and politicians, but policy responsiveness skews toward wealthier, more educated citizens. The media's role in politics has intensified, with politicians strategically using mainstream and social media to shape narratives. Interest representation continues to be marked by close government ties to a small number of interest organisations, though new mobilisation methods are shaking up traditional patterns. Finally, accountability mechanisms have become more numerous and rigorous, with greater activism from oversight bodies and citizens.

Finally, **Part VI** looks at the *political dynamics of public policymaking across a wide range of policy domains*. Despite increasing polarization, Dutch politics maintains a strong tradition of forging compromises across divides. The chapters in this part of the book discuss key policy challenges, the actors and arenas involved in policy making, pivotal policy commitments and emerging pressures to adapt and reform them. The specific policy areas surveyed include economic policy, labour market policy, education policy, health care policy, agriculture policy, climate mitigation policy, internal and external security policy, migration policy, foreign policy, innovation and technology policy, and democratic reform.

All in all, the Handbook offers a comprehensive and longitudinal examination of Dutch political institutions, processes, and practices, and of how researchers have documented and interpreted both stability and change in Dutch political life. The book is important for the political science profession in the Netherlands and beyond, as it is the first book to comprehensively bring together the state of the art on the Dutch political system. By mapping historical developments and placing the study of the Dutch political system in its comparative context, it provides an important resource for scholars of Dutch politics, but also for scholars working in comparative research, on any of the areas covered in this book, who require more in-depth insight into the workings and development of the Dutch political system. We hope the Handbook will inspire new generations of political science scholars to take up the many remaining research questions outlined in each of the chapters and continue to study and critically engage with the Dutch political system.

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