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3 DEMOCRATIC DEMANDS ON THE MEDIA

To judge whether media meet the standard of media coverage in a democracy, we first have to clarify what the standard is. What can we expect from media? This section starts with answering this question from the perspective of four normative models of democracy, as discussed by Strömbäck (2005). It continues with a discussion of more pragmatic requirements stemming from democratic institutions in the Netherlands, like the Dutch electoral system.

3.1 Normative perspectives on democracy

In this section, I will briefly discuss four normative models of democracy and its implications for voters and the media. It ends with a discussion of various functions of elections and their implications for voters and the media.

3.1.1 *FOUR NORMATIVE MODELS OF DEMOCRACY*

Jesper Strömbäck (2005) distinguishes four normative models of democracy: procedural democracy, electoral democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy. These ‘models of democracy (...) have different normative implications for the media and journalism’ (Strömbäck, 2008: 230).

Procedural democracy departs from the notion that a state has to meet some minimal requirements to be called a democracy. It can be conceptualised as a normative belief that states should adhere to certain democratic rules and procedures like free and fair elections, the rule of law, and political rights such as freedom of organization and freedom of expression (Strömbäck, 2005). The *procedural model* does not demand anything from citizens and media other than that they respect these democratic rules and procedures (Strömbäck, 2005). From this perspective, media can only be said to harm democracy if they do not respect democratic rules and procedures.

Electoral democracy refers to the expression of popular sovereignty through free elections. In an electoral democracy, representatives

make policy decisions. The role of citizens is limited to electing these representatives. Citizens are thus reduced to voters. They just have to elect one of the political alternatives that are competing for voters' support. *How* voters are expected to make this decision depends on one's perception of the main function of elections as will be discussed in the next section. In any case, it is essential that voters have a clear picture of the electoral choices on offer. Media consequently should provide 'information that people can trust and act upon' (Strömbäck, 2005: 339).

From the perspective of *participatory democracy*, political participation is not just instrumental nor is it limited to going to the ballot box every four years. Democracy flourishes if citizens participate in public and political life. Participatory democracy intrinsically values participation in political parties and civic organizations. It does not degenerate citizens to voters. According to participatory democracy, citizens have the responsibility to engage in civic and public life. From the perspective of participatory democracy, it is consequently important that media do not only cover the views of politicians but also those of citizens and civil society, like interest groups.

The *deliberative model of democracy* also values political participation in its own right. Yet it puts more emphasis on the importance of open political discussion. It is an inclusive perspective on democracy, which encourages the participation of the widest variety of citizens. From this normative perspective on democracy, citizens are expected to be politically engaged, to make themselves heard by participating in public debate, and to be interested in politics. From the deliberative perspective on democracy, it is important that the media enable that a wide variety of voices is heard to allow a true *public* debate to take place. Therefore, media coverage should be diverse.

This dissertation assesses the viability of democracy from the normative perspective of electoral democracy. It is important that voters actively participate in society and that an open *public* debate takes place, like participatory and deliberative perspectives on democracy demand. However, a first requirement for representative democracy is that voters can make a well-informed choice between various political alternatives in free and fair elections.

3.1.2 ELECTORAL FUNCTIONS

Democratic elections have several functions. From a liberal view, giving office holders a mandate to represent citizens' interests, preferences, and needs is the most important function of elections. This is the mandate function of electoral democracy. Voters who give a mandate to future office holders make a prospective decision. A mandate vote is commonly also a positive decision. Voters vote *for* a political alternative rather than *against* its competitors, especially in multiparty systems in which there are many alternatives to choose from (Aarts and Blais, 2011).

For representation to be effective and to be supported by the represented, citizens should furthermore be able to claim responsibility from office holders. Voters sanction underperforming office holders by not voting for them. This is called the sanctional function of democracy. By casting a sanctional vote, citizens take on the role of jurors. A sanctional vote is based on voters' evaluation of office holders' performance in the period preceding the vote. A sanctional vote thus is a retrospective as well as a negative decision.

For a retrospective sanctional vote as well as a prospective mandate vote voters need information about societal problems. Yet, depending on our perspective on the function of elections, voters need additional information. From the perspective of the sanctional function of elections, it is of the greatest importance to know how the office of the incumbent parties has addressed societal problems and how successful this approach has been. As Strömbäck (2005: 335) puts it 'people are supposed to have knowledge about what the most important problems are, what problems should have been resolved, how political alternatives have acted and voted during the last term, and who has had the power to resolve what problems'. It is paramount that the media provide this information objectively because research has shown that voters derive their impressions of societal developments largely from the media. They base their impressions on media coverage irrespective of whether the media provide an objective or a distorted picture of reality (Hetherington, 1996; Soroka, 2006).

From the perspective of the mandate function of electoral democracy, it is important to know how parties are planning to address societal problems in the future. Voters should have the ability to make an informed decision regarding which party would best represent their

interests, preferences, and needs. The electorate's mandate is supposed to reflect their interests and issue preferences. Only if voters elect the political alternative that expresses policy stances that are closest to their own policy stances will the election outcome reflect the will of the people correctly. The literature has referred to casting a 'vote a voter would cast based on its own values and beliefs if he would be fully informed' as voting 'correctly' (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997).

From the normative perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy, voters should cast a 'correct vote'. Yet, several factors hamper voter's ability to cast a correct vote. First, only fully informed voters can vote correctly. Yet, few voters will be fully informed. Second, from the perspective of individual voters, casting an 'incorrect' vote can be perfectly rational behaviour. Voters might for example vote for the party that defends their interests, preferences, and needs most fiercely by taking the most extreme positions in order to pull policy in their desired direction (Aarts et al., 1999). Third, what is effective voting behaviour depends on a country's democratic institutions. In a country governed by coalition governments voters might for example vote for a party because they prefer a certain coalition.

In short, from the normative perspective of the *mandate variety of electoral democracy*, voters should cast their vote based on their agreement with a party's issue positions. Yet, a country's democratic institutions, like its electoral system, make other vote motivations more or less viable from a pragmatic perspective. What kind of information citizens need consequently depends on a country's democratic institutions, like its electoral system and its party system. The next section will discuss how Dutch democratic institutions shape requirements for citizens and media.

3.2 Democratic institutions

As we have seen, normative perspectives on democracy impose normative requirements on the media. This study will focus on the requirements on the media from the normative perspective of electoral democracy. In an electoral democracy, voters need to be able to make a well-informed choice between various political alternatives. What kind of information voters need to make a well-informed voting decision de-

depends on the nature of a country's democratic institutions. Democratic institutions influence how voters make a voting decision. It matters, for example, whether a voter has to make a choice between two or many parties. This section will elaborate on what we may expect from the media from the perspective of electoral democracy in a typical consensus democracy, the Netherlands.

The Netherlands is a consensus democracy. A consensus democracy 'tries to share, disperse, and restrain power in a variety of ways' (Lijphart, 1999: 34). It can be distinguished from the Westminster model in which power is concentrated in the hands of the majority (Lijphart, 1999). Lijphart (1999) argues that democracies can be distinguished along two dimensions, an executive-parties dimension and a federal-unitary dimension. Along the executive-parties dimension, consensus democracies are amongst others characterised by broad multiparty coalition cabinets, a parliamentary system, a multiparty system, and proportional representation. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss how these institutional characteristics shape voting behaviour and the role of the media. Each section will start with a description of the democratic institutions in the Netherlands.

3.2.1 MULTIPARTY SYSTEM

Multiparty systems typify the consensus democracy. The Netherlands is a clear example of a multiparty democracy. In the post war period, the number of parties in Dutch parliament varied between 7 and 14 with an average of 10.05 (see *Figure 3.1*). Yet the sheer number of represented parties does not say anything about the actual power distribution. Therefore, party size has to be taken into account too when examining the number of parties in a certain party system. A commonly used measure to compare the number of parties between party systems is the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).⁴ The effective number of parties measures the power distribution while considering party size.

⁴ Effective number of parties = $\sum_{i=party}^n p_i^2$, where n is the number of parties with at least one vote and p_i^2 is the square of each of these parties' vote share.

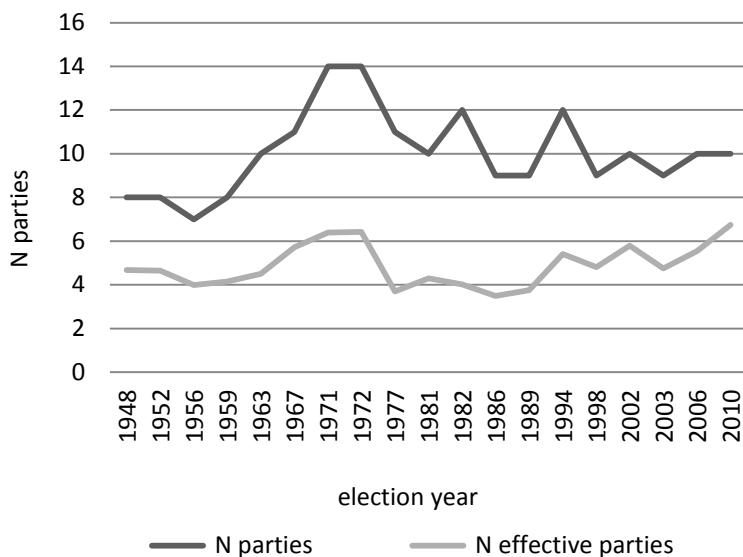


Figure 3.1 *Number of parties in Dutch parliament (1948 - 2010)*

In the Netherlands, the effective number of parties has varied between 3.49 in 1986 and 6.74 in 2010 with an average of 4.88 (see *Figure 3.1*). While the number of parties in parliament has been relatively stable since the 1980s, the *effective* number of parties has been increasing. In 2010, the effective number of parties reached the highest point in the post-war period. The 1970s also knew a high *effective* number of parties. Yet in the 1970s, the number of parties in parliament was higher than in 2010. This means that the political landscape in 2010 was more fragmented than in the 1970s. In the 1970s, the traditionally dominant parties were much larger than they are now. The Dutch political landscape is no longer dominated by a few leading parties. In 2010, the largest party just received 20.5 percent of the votes. No less than four parties obtained more than 10 percent of the votes, while the fifth received 9.8 percent of the votes.

Party system and electoral system are strongly related (Lijphart, 1999). Consensus democracies are typically characterised by multiparty systems and proportional representation. The Dutch electoral system is

characterised by proportional representation, a single nationwide district, and an electoral threshold of .67 percent. This means that the 150 parliamentary seats are proportionally distributed over parties that gained more than .67 percent of the votes that were casted nationwide. This makes the Dutch electoral system highly proportionate (Lijphart, 1999).

The high number of political alternatives complicates the voting decision for Dutch voters. The high *effective* number of parties moreover emphasizes that Dutch voters do not just have to choose between a few dominant parties and many marginal parties. Additionally, since coalitions are highly unpredictable Dutch voters do not have much information to rely on regarding parties' chances to implement their policies. In the period between 1998 and 2010, no less than six parties took part in coalition cabinets with varying compositions, while one party agreed to support a minority cabinet. This shows that Dutch voters have to choose between a wide variety of parties. Many of these parties moreover might have the power to implement their policies. A choice between the current 6.74 effective parties is substantially different from the choice between two competing parties in a two party system.

The highly proportional electoral system shows that the Dutch constitutional lawmakers highly valued diversity. From the normative perspective of electoral democracy it is most important that voters have something to choose since 'without clear political alternatives, this process would be undermined' (Strömbäck, 2005: 334). Electoral democracy thus demands that voters know that they can choose between different political parties. Diversity is also important from the normative perspective of participatory democracy. From the perspective of participatory democracy, media are required to cover a wide variety of voices, including minority voices.

This raises the normative question as to the optimum level of diversity. The high effective number of parties forms a challenge for the media. To which parties should the media pay attention? Should the media give the floor to any competing party, no matter how small? Should it provide a platform to new contesters? How should that attention be divided? In other words, how diverse should media be? Open diversity refers to equal representation of certain categories (Roessler, 2007), like political parties. This is untenable with 7 to 14 parties repre-

sented in parliament and many new contesters each election year. It would mean that parties representing minority views would receive as much attention as the largest coalition party. Reflective diversity, refers to representation of categories, like parties, 'in the same proportion as media users prefer them' (Van der Wurff and Van Cuilenburg, 2001: 214). Reflective diversity is proportionate and does justice to the current power distribution. It, however, hampers voters' opportunity to learn about new parties. So both perspectives on diversities have advantages and disadvantages (Van Cuilenburg, 1977). Van der Wurff and Van Cuilenburg (2001) therefore argue that 'a media system performs optimally when it strikes a balance between open and reflective diversity'.

3.2.2 COALITION CABINETS

In multiparty systems, executive power is usually shared in coalition cabinets, which is in line with the consensus principle (Lijphart, 1999). Because cabinets in parliamentary systems need the confidence of parliament to stay in power, cabinets usually consist of parties that jointly have a majority in parliament. Looking at the period between 1946 and 1982, six out of ten coalitions in the Netherlands consisted of more parties than strictly necessary to form a majority coalition. They were in other words oversized.⁵ As of 1982, the Netherlands has been governed by minimal winning coalitions. The only two exceptions are the coalitions that were formed in 2002 and 2010. In 2002, the 1998 coalition partners *PvdA*, *VVD*, and *D66* continued their cooperation while the participation of *D66* was not necessary for a majority. In 2010, *CDA* and *VVD* formed a minority cabinet with the formal parliamentary support of *PVV*.

As noted before, the coalitions in the period under study varied strongly in composition. Yet each of the coalitions consisted of two of the traditionally dominant parties *CDA*, *PvdA*, and *VVD*. They formed coalitions with new parties and parties with little executive experience. For example, the ChristenUnie ranked 7th with just 4.0 % of the votes when they joined the coalition in 2006. Before coalition bargaining began, voters could not have sensed that the ChristenUnie would end up in the

⁵ This measure is based solely on the coalitions that were formed after elections. The transition coalitions were not taken into account.

coalition. In 2002, the new party of the assassinated anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn entered the coalition. Voters witnessed this first time contender making an unprecedented upsurge during the campaign. Yet, it was by no means a sure case that the party would govern because of the apparent unwillingness of his opponents to join a coalition with Pim Fortuyn.

As previously mentioned, casting a vote in a multiparty democracy is not an easy task. This especially holds true when the effective number of parties is relatively high and the outcome of coalition bargaining is uncertain. Yet, research has shown that voters do take coalition expectations into account in their voting decision in multiparty parliamentary elections (Bargsted and Kedar, 2009). Voters can get some idea about a party's success and consequently its chances of governing based on election polls. Yet, voters usually do not know which combinations of parties have a majority and which do not (Bargsted and Kedar, 2009). Moreover, in a country with as many effective parties as the Netherlands there are so many possible combinations that even polls do not provide voters much ground to stand on. Yet certain combinations are of course more likely than others based on issue agreement. Parties might also express their willingness or unwillingness to form a coalition.

Strategic voting - based on coalition preferences or other power-related considerations - is controversial. From the normative perspective of the mandate function of electoral democracy it is criticised because voters are expected to vote for the party that best represents their interests and issue preferences. Other vote motivations lead to an election outcome that does not reflect people's policy preferences. Yet, it is rational to elect a party that has the power to execute the policies that serve one's interests and issue preferences best. Strategic voting can also be criticised because it is based on polls that are not always accurate. Besides, it is not always clear which benchmark the media use for reported gains and losses in the polls (Kleinnijenhuis and Takens, 2011). Voters might be misled by a loss compared to last week's polls that actually is an increase as compared to the previous election.

Assuming that voters will consider coalition expectations when deciding on their vote, the information about parties' position in the polls should be accurate, and the information about parties' issue positions should be complete, just as estimations of parties' willingness to

cooperate. Finally, to estimate the change of parties willingness to cooperate 'people should have some knowledge about the central dimensions of conflict in politics' (Strömbäck, 2005: 334-335).

3.2.3 PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system. The Queen, or King, is the head of state, while the prime minister is the head of government. A parliamentary system differs from a presidential system in three ways: in a parliamentary system the prime minister and his cabinet need the confidence of parliament to stay in power, the head of government is not elected by citizens, and the most important decisions are made by the cabinet as a whole rather than by the head of government (Lijphart, 1999).

Prime ministers in parliamentary systems are not elected. In the Netherlands, the party leader of the largest party usually becomes the prime minister but this is not necessarily the case. In 1971, 1977, and 1982 *PvdA* won the election but she did not take part in the coalition and consequently did not deliver the prime minister. In 1982 not *CDA* party leader Dries van Agt but Ruud Lubbers became prime minister. Although party leaders usually express their desire to become prime minister, in some instances party leaders remain silent about their aspirations. During the 2006 campaign, Mark Rutte, the party leader of the *VVD* – who four years later did become prime minister - refused to tell for a long time who would become the prime minister if his party would win the elections.

It is less sensible to consider party leader evaluations when electing a candidate on a party list in a parliamentary democracy than to consider a presidential candidate's qualities when electing a president. Yet, how effective is it to cast a vote based on a candidate's qualities? The Netherlands has a proportional representation system with partly open lists. Voters elect a candidate on a party list. Parties nominate the candidates on this party list. That the lists are partly open means that voters can cast a preferential vote for a specific candidate on a list. Yet, the order of the list as decided on by a party prevails over voters' preferences. Only candidates who receive more than a quarter of the required quota for a seat are elected based on preferential votes. In the period from

1998 to 2010, each election year only one or two candidates were elected this way, which shows that the significance of preferential voting is limited. Yet the number of voters who cast a preferential vote has steadily increased in the post war period (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2012).

After the election, parties also dominate over politicians. Although the Dutch Constitution explicitly states that parliamentarians vote freely,⁶ parliamentarians belonging to the same party rarely vote differently. Party unity in the Netherlands is high due to homogeneity of preferences, party loyalty, and division of labour (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011).

In a parliamentary system it is thus less effective to cast a vote based on a party leaders' or another candidate's qualities than in a presidential system. It is risky to vote for a party because of its leader's suitability for office since the leader of the largest party does not automatically become the prime minister. If he does become the prime minister, his powers are limited. Preferential voting for low-ranked candidates also sorts limited effects since few candidates are elected by preferential votes. Moreover, the discretionary power of a single candidate is limited due to strongly united parties. As Schoenbach (1996: 95) summarises, 'a personalized proportional voting system is self-contradictory'.

In a parliamentary democracy with proportional representation, voters consequently need information on a party's manifesto and the standing of parties rather than information on individual politicians' plans and their chances of becoming prime minister. Voters need to understand the working of the democratic system and they need to realize that the formal decision making power of individual politicians is limited. A focus on party leaders and other individual politicians would give voters a wrong impression about the importance of party leaders. A focus on party leaders in the media is believed to translate into a focus on party leaders in the voter's mind. This would in turn lead to personalised voting behaviour, a voting decision that is predominantly based on impressions of party leaders. This assumption will be empirically tested in *chapter 8*.

⁶ Article 67, Dutch constitution.

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The requirements on the media depend on normative perspectives on democracy (Strömbäck, 2005). From the normative perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy, media need to provide information that enables voters to make a well-informed voting decision based on policy preferences. The requirements on the media are furthermore shaped by the needs of a country's democratic institutions. Multiparty systems require diverse coverage. The mandate function of democracy requires that media focus on societal developments and parties' policy preferences. If media cover the electoral contest, a system based on coalition governments requires that coverage of – for example – the polls is accurate. Finally, parliamentary systems require media to focus on political parties rather than on individual politicians.