

Reinventing representativity

'They are birds of a feather' has become a common view on politicians in the Netherlands. It seems as if people are getting ever more suspicious towards politics and as if they are feeling less represented than before. This phenomenon has a snowball effect. People stop voting because they think that legislators do not care about their wishes and that they are defending their own interests. This view is then strengthened by some media and extremist parties. It results in lower turnouts at elections, and consequently the system becomes less representative, which undermines the functioning of democracy. It becomes apparent from these developments that there is decreasing social support for the decisions made by the government. So, is our political system representative? Or could we strengthen public support for political decisions by voting not only for a party and a person, but also for viewpoints and approaches towards social issues?

Due to the depillarized, individualistic nature of 21st century-citizenship, voters became less affiliated with political parties. Membership of political parties approximately halved between 1960 and 2012, whilst the population of the Netherlands increased (46%).¹ The vote of many people in Holland is based on viewpoints or feelings rather than on the ideology of a party. This has led to an increase in electoral volatility in the Netherlands. Less than a week before the last parliamentary elections the Netherlands Broadcasting Foundation revealed that 43% of the voters were swing voters, according to a survey by Ipsos Synovate.²

There is another substantial issue, which is electoral absenteeism. At the elections of 2012 the turn-out was 74,6%, the lowest turn-out in Dutch history apart from the elections of 1998 with a turn-out of 73,3%.³ A survey of the University of Twente amongst Dutch enfranchised citizens showed that over 75% of the respondents came up with ideas to boost turn-outs. Most suggestions have a bearing on the relationship between citizen and government. 19,1 % of the ideas suggested that politicians should meet their promises and have to listen to the people.⁴

Thus, people feel like their interests are not looked after. Holland is famous for its

¹ Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse politieke partijen (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen) (2012), *Gezamenlijk ledental van de partijen die in de Tweede Kamer zitting hebben, 1950-2012*, URL: <http://dnpp.ub.rug.nl/dnpp/themas/leden/gezamenlijk>, geraadpleegd op 15 januari 2014.

² Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (2012), *Aantal zwevende kiezers toegenomen*, URL: <http://nos.nl/video/415606-aantal-zwevende-kiezers-toegenomen.html>, geraadpleegd op 13 januari 2014.

³ Parlement & Politiek (g.d.), *Opkomstpercentage*, URL: <http://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrp8wsz/opkomstpercentage>, geraadpleegd op 13 januari 2014.

⁴ Aarts C.W.A.M. (1999), *Opkomst bij verkiezingen*, Universiteit Twente, URL: http://doc.utwente.nl/61192/1/opkomst_verkiezing_8-99-2.pdf, geraadpleegd op 13 januari 2014.

See also:

Publiekrecht & Politiek (2009), *De Ostrogorski Paradox*, URL: <http://www.publiekrechtropolitiek.nl/de-ostrogorski-paradox/>, geraadpleegd in juni 2013.

Rosenthal, U. (2002), *De organisatie van het openbaar bestuur: democratisch tekort? Over de spanning tussen organisatie en democratie*, in: *Het Democratisch Tekort*, 's-Gravenhage, Elsevier, pp. 59-66.

Kemenade, J.A. van (2000), Nijmegen, *Een partijloze democratie?*, in: *Democratie Als Opgave*, 's-Gravenhage, Elsevier, pp. 363-372.

consensus-based 'polder-model', in which compromises are the building blocks for government action. Politicians should not solely be the brokers of the –necessary- compromise but the representatives of visions and interests. In a century with fewer members of political parties and the diminution of the civil society, the visions and interests of the people became unclear.

It is undesirable for a representative democracy that politicians are coerced to gather votes with gratuitous promises. The phenomenon of electoral volatility will become less crucial in our political system when voters do not have to detect which party represents their interest. By voting for viewpoints, swing-voters will be represented no matter which party they voted for. Electoral absenteeism may decrease as well. Non-voters often feel like voting does not influence the political climate. By voting for stances the electorate can see a direct result, because the people of Holland and not the politicians decide the approach towards social issues, and thus could be convinced that voting does matter. Furthermore these guidelines can make it easier for politicians to make compromises because the politicians will not only depend on the members of their party and the media to discover what 'the will of the people' is. Additionally, these guidelines demand from the politicians that they justify their choices.

I think that people should not only vote for political parties and persons but also for viewpoints on social issues. We could enlarge public support for the actions of our government and make our political system more democratic and representative. Consequently, governmental action would be accepted as a more legitimate and credible outcome of interests and convictions.