VOTERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PARTY DYNAMICS

Wouter van der Brug

ABSTRACT

Various authors have argued that the behavior of voters as well as parties in most West European countries is structured mainly by an ideological ‘left–right’ dimension. However, it remains unclear how the dimension labeled ‘left–right’ by those studying party behavior relates to voters’ perceptions of this dimension of conflict. This study assesses the extent to which Dutch voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions reflect policy positions of parties determined by the contents of election programs. The research design is dynamic, allowing one to observe changes in party positions, as well as dynamic changes in the structure of a party system. The analyses show that the contents of party programs are strongly linked to voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions, but that the strength of this linkage has decreased gradually since the late 1970s. Repercussions for political representation are discussed.

KEY WORDS ■ electoral programmes ■ left–right ideology ■ Netherlands ■ party system change ■ voter perception

Introduction

In contemporary democracies elections are the prime instruments of political representation. The notion of representation implies that public policies should reflect the preferences of a majority of the citizens of a country. Given the indirect way in which elections link voters’ preferences to public policies, various scholars have struggled with determining under which conditions meaningful representation can exist. Modern democratic theory – in particular the responsible party model – attributes a key role to political parties in electoral processes (APSA, 1950; Luttbeg, 1968; Thomassen, 1994). The responsible party model defines a number of conditions under which policies will reflect mass opinions. This article concerns one of these conditions: that voters should have accurate perceptions of parties’ policy
positions. It assesses the extent to which this is the case in the Netherlands and whether it has changed during the last 3 decades. For this purpose, voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions will be compared with parties’ ‘actual’ policy positions. The reason this study focusses on left–right perceptions follows from recent findings of electoral research.

Until the late 1960s party choice in the Netherlands was to a large extent structured by two social cleavages: class and religion. One aspect of the rapid depillarization of Dutch society in the 1960s was that voters’ party preferences and social positions became increasingly independent (Franklin et al., 1992). Instead of relying on social positions as a ‘cue’ to decide which party to vote for, voters in the depillarized Dutch society vote largely on the basis of their policy preferences, particularly as summarized by ideological left–right positions (Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983; Oppenhuis, 1995; Van der Eijk, 1995; Tillie, 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). As left–right positions summarize positions on a large number of concrete issues, left–right ideology structures not only voters’ preferences, but may also be used by voters as an information short cut to assess where parties stand on concrete issues (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Van der Brug, 1997).

When voters base their party choice on left–right ideology, how does that lead to meaningful representation? That depends predominantly on the extent to which perceived left–right positions reflect party policies. To the extent that left–right perceptions of voters accurately reflect policy positions of parties, votes based on agreement in left–right terms yield meaningful (albeit general) mandates for the policies parties propose. Various scholars argued that, until quite recently, the left–right dimension has structured party politics to a large extent in the Netherlands (e.g. Dittrich, 1987; Andeweg and Irwin, 1993; Pennings and Keman, 1994). We would therefore expect parties’ policy positions to coincide largely with the left–right dimension. However, for three reasons it is not self-evident that a strong correspondence exists between voters’ perceptions of left–right positions on the one hand, and concrete policy positions of parties on the other.

First, some scholars have criticized the use of the left–right scale in electoral research, arguing that the substantive meaning of positions on a ‘left–right continuum’ is very undetermined (Van Deth, 1986; Middendorp, 1989). They suggest that it is possibly no more than a simple verbal convention without concrete meaning or substantive content. If this were to be true, left–right perceptions of voters would be unrelated to the policy positions of parties.

Second, confusion exists among students of party behavior about the meaning of ‘left–right’. Dittrich’s (1987) analyses indicate that three dimensions of conflict structure political differences between Dutch parties, and argues that these all ‘relate to some kind of left–right division’ (p. 228). Pennings and Keman (1994) also argue that the behavior of Dutch parties is predominantly structured by a (left–right) dimension, but in contrast to Dittrich (rightly) treat it as uni-dimensional. They implicitly consider
left–right to be static in its content, in the sense that over a 40-year period the same issues are presumably indicative of left–right positions. Others have emphasized the dynamic character of ideologies (e.g. Silverman, 1985; Laver, 1989). Ideologies change continuously as a consequence of social changes and subsequent shifts in the focuses of party political conflict. As their meaning is continuously reproduced and transformed in the course of political debates, different focuses of party conflict become associated with ideological terms such as left and right. So, even when a left–right division remains the dominant structuring principle of party political conflicts in the Netherlands, different issues will be associated with this ideological dimension at different moments. Given the confusion that exists among scholars about the meaning of left–right, and given the fact that the left–right dimension is subject to dynamic developments of party systems, it is certainly not self-evident that what voters perceive to be left–right positions of parties is reflected in parties’ actual policy positions.

Finally, recent developments suggest that left–right ideology has become less important in structuring party behavior. Particularly important in this respect is the fact that in 1994, for the first time in 40 years, a coalition cabinet was formed between three parties (the PvdA, D66, and the VVD), which are not ideologically ‘connected’ in terms of left–right positions. If left–right ideology places less constraint on the behavior of parties than it used to, while it remains a strong determinant of party choice of voters, the ‘link’ between voters’ left–right perceptions and policy positions of parties will become less tight.

Assessing such changes requires a research design that ‘links’ party dynamics to voters’ perceptions. Two sorts of party dynamics must be taken into account: how parties change positions relative to each other, and how the space that structures party competition changes, when old problems are resolved, some issues become obsolete, and others reach the party agenda. Such new issues will often be integrated into existing dimensions of party conflict (Schattschneider, 1960; Mair, 1983; Silverman, 1985; Laver, 1989). However, they may also cause realignments that alter the relations between parties significantly.

Parties’ ‘actual’ policy positions will be derived from the contents of election manifestos, which – as official documents, authorized by the party leadership – can be considered valid indicators of parties’ actual policy positions. No direct (causal) links are assumed to exist between manifestos and voters’ perceptions. By using manifestos this study builds a bridge between research on electoral behavior on the one hand and public policy on the other. Klingemann et al. (1994) have recently demonstrated that variations in government policies can be explained well by the policy preferences formulated in the manifestos of incumbent parties. To the extent that contents of party programs are also linked to voters’ left–right perceptions, electoral choices based on left–right proximity connect in a meaningful way voters’ ideological preferences with party policies.
Within the context of spatial models, the relationship between perceptions and contents of party programs involves a comparison between perceived left–right positions and party positions derived from the contents of party programs. A method will be proposed to observe party dynamics by means of spatial analyses of the contents of party programs. This method is applied to data from almost all the post-war election programs of the larger Dutch parties. Following this, the positions derived from these analyses are compared with how parties are perceived by the Dutch electorate in terms of the left–right continuum. First, however, the data used in this study are discussed.

Survey Data and Content Analyses of Party Programs

Voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions are typically measured in surveys with discrete rating scales of which the extremes are labeled ‘left’ and ‘right’. Respondents are then asked to indicate the left–right position of a party on this scale. ‘The’ perceived position of a party thus consists of a sample distribution of responses. This paper focuses solely on a comparison between the central tendencies (measured by the interpolated median) of each of the distributions and contents of party programs.

As voters’ perceptions are to be compared with election programs, this study requires survey data collected around the time of the election for which the programs were drafted. The Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies have been conducted among representative samples of Dutch adults around every general election since 1967, and since 1981 contain items measuring voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions. In addition, such perceptions were measured in 1976 in the ‘continuous survey’. These are compared with the 1977 manifestos.

To determine party positions from contents of party programs, data are used that were collected by the comparative manifesto project, a special research group of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR). This contains coded data for (almost) all post-war election programs of the Dutch parties that joined in at least one coalition cabinet after 1945. The complete dataset contains the coded contents of 79 documents (for details see Volkens, 1992).

The codings of the manifestos reflect the saliency theory of party competition (Budge et al., 1987; Klingemann et al., 1994). According to this, party competition for votes typically does not take the form of direct confrontations between parties on matters about which they disagree. Instead, parties emphasize those issues on which they feel they have a good reputation, while de-emphasizing other topics. This is particularly easy to do when the issues involved are generally desired goods such as high employment and low inflation – i.e. valence issues. Similarly, parties seldom explicitly abandon prior positions on issues. Changes in party positions rather become manifest...
by ‘emphases and de-emphases of traditional issues, along with some picking up of new issues’ (Budge, 1993: 95).

From this perspective it follows that the procedure for coding manifestos focuses on differential emphasis of topics. For the Netherlands, 56 issue categories are defined that purport to cover the entire spectrum of topics discussed in the manifestos. Each sentence in a manifesto is classified in one of these 56 categories. The resulting data contain for each manifesto the proportions of sentences allocated to each of the various issue categories.

Differential emphasis of parties on issues thus reflects differences in the priority the respective party wishes to dedicate to the specific policy area in question. This allows distances between parties to be calculated, based on differential policy priorities. Such policy distances were computed between different parties in the same election year, but also between parties in different election years (see Appendix for details). Therefore, these data allow for analyses of the dynamics of policy differences between parties.

Research Design

To attain spatial representations of parties on the basis of these distances, multidimensional scaling (MDS) was used. This is a class of algorithms designed to determine positions of stimuli (in this case parties) in a multidimensional space while using distances between these stimuli as empirical information.

Over time parties sometimes change their positions on issues or ideological dimensions, partially as a consequence of strategies used in electoral competition, and partially as a reaction to social change and subsequent changes in the political agenda. At the same time, the dimensions that structure party competition change as well. Because of social change, new conflicts may develop and old ones may be resolved or become obsolete. Such changes may or may not be structured along the left–right axis, and the extent these changes are reflected in the left–right perceptions of voters is thus an empirical question. This study therefore needs a method that will uncover the dynamics of the structure of the ideological space in which parties compete for electoral support.

This rules out the possibility of performing a single MDS analysis on the full set of party programs, as such an analysis yields a representation of party programs from all periods in a single time-invariant space. Performing separate analyses on party manifestos from each election year is no option either. These would not permit an assessment of party dynamics because the separate analyses would contain only party programs written in the same year. A solution to this problem, suggested by Torgerson (1958: 191), consists of dividing the total set of objects (in this case parties) into several overlapping subsets that are scaled separately. It was decided to define subsets that contain party programs from all elections taking place
within an interval of 10 years. As a result each analysis includes party programs from at least three subsequent election years, and 10 separate analyses are performed. Table 1 provides an overview of the election years included in each of these analyses.

The first analysis presented in Table 1 includes the distances between all coded party programs from the elections of 1946, 1948, 1952 and 1956. The second analysis contains party programs from the 1952, 1956 and 1959 elections, and so on. The MDS-analyses yield 10 two-dimensional plots of party programs. As data on left–right perceptions have only become available since the 1970s – so that comparisons between contents of party programs and voters’ left–right perceptions are only possible from that moment on – not all configurations are presented here, but only the five that can be compared with voters’ perceptions. The comparisons are presented schematically in Table 2, which should be read as follows: party positions derived from the MDS-analyses of party programs from 1977, 1981 and 1986, can be compared with voters’ perceptions of the left–right positions of corresponding parties in 1976, 1981 and 1986.

In addition to the five MDS-configurations compared with left–right perceptions.

Table 1. Overview of the election years included in each of the 10 analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Election Years Included</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[1946 1948 1952 1956]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[1952 1956 1959]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[1956 1959 1963]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[1959 1963 1967]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[1977 1981 1986]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>[1986 1989 1994]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Overview of the comparisons between party programs and left–right perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Years Included in the MDS-configurations</th>
<th>Election Years from which programs are used for comparisons</th>
<th>Left-right perceptions to be compared with the party program positions</th>
<th>n (total number of parties in the comparisons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
perceptions, one exemplary plot from the earlier period – the one covering 1952–59 – is presented here. This is to show how the dimensions that structure the contents of party programs have changed over the past 50 years, and thus to emphasize the necessity of using the method employed, which allows us not only to observe changes of party positions in an ideological space, but also changes in the structure of this space itself.

Results

Multi-dimensional scaling yields the ‘best’ representation of stimuli in a multi-dimensional space. A first decision to be made is about the dimensionality of the space in which a representation of the distances is sought. Kruskal and Wish (1978) propose a number of criteria to assess the appropriate dimensionality to fit the distances. These criteria (discussed in the Appendix) indicate that for five of the six analyses a two-dimensional solution is most appropriate. Although statistical criteria suggest that the party programs from the period 1971–81 may be adequately represented in a unidimensional space, the two-dimensional solution is also presented for this period in order to make the separate analyses more comparable.

Figure 1 presents the two-dimensional plot of party positions based on the 1952, 1956 and 1959 election programs. Party positions are indicated by black dots. Each party is represented by three different positions, one for each of the three election years in this period. These three positions are connected by a line and the last position of each party (its position in 1959) is marked by an arrowhead. This allows one easily to inspect how each party changed over time. The PvdA, for example, moved between 1952 and 1959 along the first coordinate axis, away from the other parties. The three Christian democratic parties were located quite close together in 1952. In 1952 and 1956 the location of the various parties vis-a-vis each other formed a triangle. The three religious parties (KVP, CHU and ARP) form one corner of this triangle, the PvdA the second, and VVD the third. Between 1956 and 1959 this changed as the KVP moved to a position between the PvdA and the VVD, while the latter two drifted further away from one another.

The results of MDS-analyses are ‘scatterplots’ of stimuli in a space, which in this case is two-dimensional. The coordinate axes of such a plot have no predetermined or fixed substantive meaning, and do not usually coincide with dimensions of substantive importance. To attain an interpretation of what a configuration means substantively, vectors of substantive interest – representing categories emphasized in the party programs – are included in the plots. The directions of these vectors are computed from normalized regressions in which emphasis on each of the 56 categories in the party programs are predicted from the positions in the plot. As there are six configurations and 56 categories, 336 regression analyses were performed.
Table 3 presents the results of those regressions with an $R^2$ larger than .70. How the directions of vectors can be determined from the regression coefficients is discussed in the Appendix. In each of the plots some vectors of substantive importance are included to assist their interpretation. For this purpose two vectors, labeled ‘free enterprise’ and ‘traditional morality’, are included in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that two dimensions in particular describe the structure of parties’ positions vis-a-vis one another (as derived from the contents of the election programs): a socio-economic, and a religious–secular dimension. The vector ‘free enterprise’ is interpreted as marking the ‘free market’ direction of a socio-economic dimension and the ‘traditional morality’ vector as the religious direction of a religious–secular dimension. Judging these results by their face validity, the result of this MDS-analysis is quite satisfactory. Various authors have argued that a socio-economic and a religious–secular dimension structured Dutch party space until the late 1960s (e.g. Lijphart, 1968). These two dimensions reflect the two main conflict domains that gave rise to party formation in the Netherlands in the late 19th century. The analyses presented graphically in Figure 1 provide
confirmatory evidence for the prominence of these two dimensions of party conflict in the Netherlands in this period.

If we now return to Table 3, two general observations can be made about the results it presents. First, in each period either the item ‘free enterprise’ or the item ‘social justice’ is strongly related to party positions in the configurations. Therefore, these items provide a good frame of reference to link the different ‘snapshots’ together. These vectors (‘social justice’ and ‘free enterprise’) are both interpreted as indicative of the prominence of a ‘socio-economic’ dimension in Dutch politics. Second, different issue categories are

Table 3. Multiple regression of issue categories on coordinates in two-dimensional MDS-solutions. Normalized regression coefficients and explained variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Item Label</th>
<th>1st dim.</th>
<th>2nd dim.</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952–9</td>
<td>401 Free enterprise</td>
<td>.414</td>
<td>−.911</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>404 Economic planning</td>
<td>−.998</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>405 Corporatism</td>
<td>.816</td>
<td>.578</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>603 Traditional morality positive</td>
<td>.538</td>
<td>.843</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967–77</td>
<td>503 Social justice</td>
<td>−.994</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971–81</td>
<td>401 Free enterprise</td>
<td>.927</td>
<td>−.377</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>503 Social justice</td>
<td>−.755</td>
<td>−.656</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977–86</td>
<td>202 Democracy</td>
<td>−.984</td>
<td>−.179</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>303 Government-administrative efficiency</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>401 Free enterprise</td>
<td>.537</td>
<td>−.844</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>503 Social justice</td>
<td>−.791</td>
<td>.611</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>504 Welfare positive</td>
<td>−.949</td>
<td>−.316</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>506 Education positive</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>−.999</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>606 Social harmony</td>
<td>.478</td>
<td>−.879</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981–9</td>
<td>104 Military positive</td>
<td>.439</td>
<td>−.899</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>106 Peace</td>
<td>−.924</td>
<td>.383</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>202 Democracy</td>
<td>−.964</td>
<td>.268</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>404 Economic planning</td>
<td>−.967</td>
<td>−.254</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>408 Economic goals</td>
<td>−.855</td>
<td>−.519</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>409 Keynesian demand economy</td>
<td>−.831</td>
<td>−.536</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>411 Infrastructure</td>
<td>.999</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>503 Social justice</td>
<td>−.594</td>
<td>.805</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>504 Welfare positive</td>
<td>−.990</td>
<td>−.142</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986–94</td>
<td>201 Freedom and human rights</td>
<td>−.959</td>
<td>−.285</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>401 Free enterprise</td>
<td>.713</td>
<td>−.701</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>408 Economic goals</td>
<td>.790</td>
<td>.614</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>412 Controlled economy</td>
<td>−.999</td>
<td>−.024</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>503 Social justice</td>
<td>−.878</td>
<td>.479</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>505 Welfare negative</td>
<td>.843</td>
<td>−.538</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>706 Non-economic groups</td>
<td>−.950</td>
<td>.313</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The regression coefficients are normalized so that their sum of squares equals 1.00*
related to party positions in distinct periods. So, parties compete in a space that is indeed variant over time.

The procedure for plotting vectors of issue categories in the various configurations can also be applied to assess the linkage between parties’ positions (derived from their manifestos) and their left–right positions as perceived by voters. Similar regressions are performed in which perceptions of left–right positions are predicted from party positions based on multidimensional scaling. The proportion of variance explained indicates the strength of the relationship between perceptions of party positions and the contents of election programs. Table 4 presents the results of these regressions, and the number of observations (party documents) from which these coefficients are computed.

The regressions presented in Table 4 yield high proportions of explained variance. This demonstrates that voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions are strongly linked to the parties’ positions at that time, as reflected in their election manifestos. So, whatever it is that voters consider to be a left–right dimension, this dimension coincides to a large extent with the differences between the party programs.

At this stage one could object that the configurations of parties based on their election programs are two-dimensional, and that the (one-dimensional) left–right continuum can only account for part of its structure. The two-dimensional configurations contain two elements, however – an inter-party and an across-time component. As will be shown, the dimension of left–right perceptions is particularly related to the inter-party component in the two-dimensional configurations, which itself is more strongly dominated by a single dimension than the whole configuration. In order to assess in more detail the positions of parties in relation to the left–right perceptions, each of the five plots for which a ‘left–right vector’ was estimated is now discussed. This also helps to interpret the substantive meaning of the left–right dimension.

Figure 1 indicated that two dimensions of conflict structured the Dutch party space in the 1950s, a religious–secular and a socio-economic dimension. Figure 2 shows that after the 1960s, the religious–secular dimension no

Table 4. Multiple regression of perceived party positions in terms of ‘left–right’ over coordinates of two-dimensional MDS-solutions. Normalized regression coefficients and explained variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Left–right perceptions</th>
<th>1st dim.</th>
<th>2nd dim.</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967–77</td>
<td>In 1976</td>
<td>.864</td>
<td>.503</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971–81</td>
<td>In 1976 and 1981</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td>–.625</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a The regression coefficients are normalized so that their sum of squares equals 1.00
longer structures the contents of party programs. Although various scholars have emphasized the continuing relevance of the religious–secular dimension in Dutch politics (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 1989; Middendorp, 1991; Hillebrand and Meulman, 1992), their views are not supported by these analyses. Figure 2 (and Figures 3–6) shows that the religious–secular dimension is no longer important for the way parties present themselves to voters. This demonstrates clearly that the Christian parties, in response to rapid secularization and depillarization of Dutch society, chose not to ‘go against the tide’, but instead to de-emphasize their Christian heritage. Because the three Christian parties (KVP, ARP and CHU) moved toward the center of the party space, the space itself became more uni-dimensional in the 1970s. After the merger of these three parties into the CDA, the Christian Democrats presented themselves to the voters as a ‘people’s party’ in the center of this

VAN DER BRUG: VOTERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PARTY DYNAMICS

Figure 2. Plot of party manifestos in 1967, 1971, 1972 and 1977, and the direction of the left–right dimension

uni-dimensional party system. This dominant dimension has a strong linear relationship with voters’ perceptions of left–right positions, as well as with differences in emphasis in party manifestos on ‘social justice’.

The analyses reported above demonstrate that left–right perceptions of voters are strongly related to differences in policy priorities of parties. Consequently, the suggestion that voters’ usage of the left–right dimension as a mapping device is devoid of substantive meaning (see Middendorp, 1989; Van Deth, 1986) is not at all supported by these analyses. A good indication of the meaning of the terms left and right is that in all subsequent configurations, except for Figure 3, the left–right vector coincides strongly with the direction of the ‘social justice’ vector. Two conclusions seem warranted: the left–right dimension structures to a large extent the way parties compete for votes in election campaigns in these years, and it reflects important aspects of the substantive differences between parties, such as the extent to which parties emphasize ‘social justice’.

Figure 3 (1971–81) seems to represent an exception to the general pattern that perceived left–right positions coincide with the ‘social justice’ vector. This is, however, due to a methodological artifact. When distances that are produced by a predominantly uni-dimensional structure are represented in a two-dimensional configuration, the original dimension sometimes becomes ‘bent’ into a U-curve, or ‘horseshoe’ (Kruskal and Wish, 1978). This is especially common when outliers are present. The configuration in Figure 3 indeed displays a curved dimension: following clockwise the curve from the first outlier, the PPR in 1971, to the second outlier, the VVD in 1972. This interpretation of Figure 3 displaying a single dimension in curved form is supported by the following observations. First, on the basis of statistical criteria it seems possible to represent these parties in a uni-dimensional space (see Appendix). The two-dimensional configuration is thus more complex than necessary to adequately represent the empirically observed structure in these data. Moreover, the correlation between left–right perceptions and the coordinates of such a uni-dimensional MDS-solution is .88 (77 percent shared variance). Also, manifesto emphasis on ‘social justice’ is more strongly related to perceptions of left–right positions as well as to the coordinates in a uni-dimensional MDS-configuration than Figure 3 suggests (the former yields an $R^2$ of 66 per cent, while the latter yields an $R^2$ of 67 per cent). In view of all this, the apparent anomaly of Figure 3 appears to be indeed no more than apparent, and does not constitute a deviation from the general patterns discussed so far.

In the period 1977–86 (Figure 4), the direction of left–right perceptions coincides almost perfectly with the vector ‘social justice’. Although large changes over time can be discerned in the positions of each party, their positions vis-a-vis each other in the direction of the left–right vector are quite stable. To see this the party positions should be projected perpendicularly onto the directions indicated by the ‘left–right vector’. While their ordering on the direction of ‘left–right’ remains fairly stable, they move generally in
the same direction, responding to changes in the political agenda. These party dynamics thus display patterns of stability and change discussed by Silverman (1985). Changes in the focuses of party political conflict are integrated within an existing structure, which is left–right. The party system remains stable in terms of parties’ relative positions on an existing dimension of conflict, whereas this dimension gradually attains a different substantive character because of social change and subsequent changes in the political agenda (see also Laver, 1989).

The period 1981–9 (Figure 5) provides a similar impression to Figure 4 of the relationship between left–right perceptions and contents of party programs. Left–right perceptions coincide almost perfectly with two vectors that point in opposite directions – ‘social justice’ and ‘military positive’. Party positions are quite stable over time when projected on the left–right
vector, except for Green Left (GrLi) which emphasized ‘left-wing’ topics in 1989 more than the PPR, one of its predecessors, did in 1986. As in the period 1977–86, the years 1981–9 also display large movements of all parties in a similar direction, indicating changes in the political agenda affecting all parties. The direction of this common movement is opposite to that of the vector ‘welfare positive’. This clearly reflects the reorientation of the public debate on welfare issues since the early 1980s, which involved a shift away from collective responsibility and a greater emphasis on stimulating individual responsibility and on budgetary constraints. The movements of the PvdA and D66 express this reorientation strongest. Although left-wing parties still emphasized ‘social justice’ in 1986 and 1989, such emphasis is not (any more) in terms of support for ‘welfare’.

Because of the overlap of their respective periods, the afore-mentioned changes in the political agenda manifest themselves also in Figure 6 for the period 1986–94. When projected onto the vector that describes parties’
left–right positions as perceived by the electorate, party positions are still rather stable vis-a-vis each other in this period. In Figure 6 ‘left–right’ no longer coincides with the emphasis parties place on ‘social justice’. All five major parties have de-emphasized social justice in 1994, and GrLi, PvdA, D66 and CDA are positioned very close together on this vector. The VVD is situated further away, partly because of its emphasis on negative aspects of welfare arrangements.

Since the early 1980s, changes in party positions over time seem larger than differences between parties at any one moment in time. All parties move simultaneously in the same direction. This suggests that considerable changes have taken place since the 1950s in how substantive issues and policies underlie the way in which parties compete for electoral support. In the early post-war period, each party ‘owned’ to a certain extent its own particular issues that it emphasized in election campaigns. Election manifestos primarily served to reconfirm parties’ ideological predispositions. After the
1960s more changes over time can be observed, most notably a ‘disappearance’ of the religious–secular dimension. In the 1970s, most movement in party positions was along a socio-economic dimension (Figures 2 and 3), which coincided with how voters perceived parties in left–right terms. In the 1980s and early 1990s, however, the analyses show simultaneous movements of all parties in the same direction (Figures 4 to 6). This indicates that they all responded in the same way to changes in the political agenda, adapting their programs in similar ways and similarly changing the topics they emphasized. Yet their positions vis-a-vis one another remain unaltered. So it seems that changes in the political agenda are largely assimilated by an existing dimension of conflict: left–right.

Returning to Table 4, the $R^2$'s show that the linkage between voters’ left–right perceptions and the contents of election programs has become somewhat weaker since the 1970s, although not perfectly monotonously.

**Figure 6.** Plot of party manifestos in 1976, 1989 and 1994, and the direction of the left–right dimension

The explained variance by the regressions decreased from 95 per cent in the 1970s to 70 per cent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although an $R^2$ of .70 still indicates a strong relationship, left–right perceptions can no longer be regarded as near-perfect reflections of programmatic differences between parties. Two interpretations are compatible with these findings. It may be that voters’ perceptions of party policies in general (as opposed to left–right perceptions) have become less strongly related to parties’ campaign promises, or, to put it differently, that voters have become less well aware of where parties stand. An alternative explanation is that voters still perceive party policies as accurately in the 1990s as they did in the 1970s, but that parties’ policy platforms (as reported in their manifestos) have become less tightly structured into a left–right framework. I consider a combination of these two explanations most plausible.

A number of recent developments suggest that the left–right division is becoming less prominent in Dutch party politics. First, the substantive connotation of the left–right dimension has traditionally been cast in terms of socio-economic policies. Dutch parties have converged in those terms (see Figure 6). Second, for the first time since 1917 (when the suffrage was extended to all male adults) a coalition cabinet was formed in 1994 that excluded the Christian democrats, who, in left–right terms, occupied a position in between the two largest incumbents – PvdA (labor) and VVD (liberals). Third, voters perceive parties to be converging on the left–right dimension (Van der Brug, 1997). In view of the fact that citizens use left–right perceptions as a heuristic short cut, or ‘cue’, to reduce their information costs (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983; Van der Brug, 1997), its decreasing importance will have negative ramifications for the extent to which voters are able to accurately perceive party positions on concrete issues.

Conclusions

One of the assumptions of the responsible party model is that voters choose rationally – that they use their ballots to express policy preferences. In order to behave rationally, these voters must have adequate perceptions of the policies parties (or candidates) propose. In the real world of incomplete information we cannot realistically expect each voter to know the positions of parties on each issue. Some authors have argued that voters may compensate for their lack of knowledge of party positions on concrete issues by using ideological positions of parties as cognitive cues. To the extent that party policies are structured by their ideologies this may lead to accurate perceptions of voters. As the relevant literature tells us that left–right ideology is a strong determinant of party choices of Dutch voters, it is essential to assess the degree to which perceptions of parties’ left–right positions are linked to the policies these parties propose.
This study assessed the linkage of aggregate perceptions of left–right positions and party positions derived from the contents of their election programs. One could obviously object that even when aggregate perceptions are strongly linked to actual party positions, individual voters’ party choices may not reflect their policy preferences. However, even a substantial degree of perceptual variation is unlikely to undermine the assumptions of the responsible party model, because aggregation of individual choices into an overall electoral outcome will make the latter a good reflection of the former, as long as these aggregate perceptions are linked to where these parties ‘really’ stand. Lack of such a fit between voters’ perceptions and party policies is likely to generate misunderstandings in mass–elite communication, and a lack of fit between policy preferences of voters and party policies (see also Converse, 1975).

This study has shown that left–right perceptions of Dutch voters are strongly linked to the contents of parties’ election programs. A long-lasting debate has been going on in the political science community about the appropriateness of the Downsian model of party and voting behavior, which assumes proximity relations between voters and parties. In view of this, it is interesting that spatial analyses of party programs, based on a rival theory – the saliency theory of party competition (Budge et al., 1987) – display a similar structure to that often assumed in analyses based on Downsian models. Perhaps the time has come for some kind of synthesis. To arrive at a synthesis, one should acknowledge that the behavior of parties may be structured differently in various political arenas. In political campaigns parties emphasize those topics where they think they have a good reputation. Therefore, the saliency theory of party competition is well suited to understanding how parties present themselves to the electorate. In different arenas (such as the coalitional or legislative arena) party behavior is a mixture of agenda-setting in terms of priorities, and position-taking on matters about which parties disagree. For understanding electoral behavior, on the other hand, the Downsian model seems best suited. The rival theories ‘meet’ not at the level of specific issues and policy domains, but at a higher level of abstraction: the conflict dimensions that structure party and electoral behavior in the different arenas. To the extent that the behavior of parties and voters in each separate political arena is structured by the same ideological dimension(s), the various links in the chain of democratic representation will connect policy preferences of voters in a consistent way to the political domain.

From this perspective the analyses presented in this paper give reason to be rather optimistic. Given that party competition for votes in the Netherlands is structured strongly by a single dimension that largely coincides with left–right ideology, citizens can use the left–right dimension as a cognitive cue to comprehend and store political information. Dutch voters’ perceptions of parties’ left–right positions are good predictors of differences in the priorities parties purport to give to policy areas.
This being said, it must also be noted that the most recent developments observed in this paper provide reason to suspect that in the near future Dutch voters may experience more difficulty in forming adequate perceptions of party policies. The left–right dimension has been, and still is, an important frame of reference for Dutch politicians and voters (e.g. Van der Eijk, 1995; Tillie, 1995). However, in the eyes of the electorate parties have been converging on the left–right dimension since 1986 (Van der Brug, 1997), while the linkage between left–right perceptions and the contents of party programs has been progressively weakening since the 1970s. Moreover, the analyses of party manifestos suggest that important changes are taking place in the contents of the ideological dimensions that structure party conflict in the Netherlands. These developments suggest a decreasing prominence of left–right issues for structuring party behavior. Inadequate perceptions are likely to develop when a party system realigns, so that a traditional dimension of conflict becomes obsolete while voters are not yet fully acquainted with newer dimensions of conflict. The fact that Dutch voters did hold accurate perceptions in the past does not therefore imply that this will invariably be the case in the future.

Appendix: Distance, Dimensionality of MDS Solutions, and Vectors

This appendix discusses how distances between parties were computed, how decisions were reached about the appropriate dimensionality for spatial representations of parties, and how directions of vectors plotted in the graphs were determined.

For a discussion of how to compute distances between parties on the basis of their election programs, we should return to the saliency theory of party competition, which underlies the procedure for content analysis of these documents. Saliency theory characterizes party competition by the different emphases parties place on issues. So, the more different – or in a spatial analogy distant – two parties are, the more they will emphasize different issues. Differential emphasis is coded by the proportion of sentences in each manifesto dedicated to each of the 56 categories in the coding scheme. The distance measure that most directly reflects differences in emphasis is the 'city block metric' represented by the function in equation 1.

\[
d(a,b) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{56} |a_i - b_i|}{2}
\]

where
\[
d(a,b) \quad = \text{distance between documents } a \text{ and } b
\]
\[
a_i \quad = \text{proportion of coded sentences in document } a, \text{ dedicated to category } i
\]
\[
b_i \quad = \text{proportion of coded sentences in document } b, \text{ dedicated to category } i
\]
\[
i \quad = \text{index of issue categories; in this case from } 1 \text{ to } 56.
\]
Equation 1 is computed on the proportion of sentences in each category. Uncoded sentences are not taken into consideration, so that the sum of the proportions in the 56 categories equals 1 for each of the coded documents. Mokken and Stokman (1970) provide mathematical proofs of the properties of the measure, such as non-negativity, symmetry and triangle inequality, which also apply to equation 1 (see also Mokken and Stokman, 1985).

The MDS-analyses in this study were performed with the computer program KYST, which minimizes the so-called ‘stress’ to iterate to an optimal solution. ‘Stress’ describes the badness-of-fit between the distances computed with equation 1 and the distances in the configuration. Naturally, the ‘stress’ decreases if the dimensionality of the space increases: in a ‘larger’ space, there is more ‘room’ to fit the distances. To determine the appropriate dimensionality the procedure proposed by Kruskal and Wish (1978) was used. This entails plotting the dimensionality of the space against the ‘stress’ (the badness-of-fit measure). Monte Carlo simulations show that such plots display an ‘elbow’ at the ‘true’ dimensionality (unless the true dimensionality is 1). Such plots were constructed for the six subsets of parties for which spatial representations were sought in this study. These plots suggest that for five of these six analyses a two-dimensional solution is most appropriate, and that the party programs from the period 1971–81 may possibly be adequately represented in a unidimensional space.

By what procedure are the directions of vectors in each two-dimensional MDS-analysis determined? The party programs were coded in terms of emphases on 56 issue categories. The respective 56 variables are the proportion of sentences included in each of the 56 categories. To determine the directions of vectors associated with these issue categories, each of the 56 variables are regressed over the coordinates of a configuration. So, for each MDS-configuration 56 multiple regressions are performed. The dependent variable of each regression is the emphasis placed on one of the issue categories, the two independent variables the coordinates on both dimensions. The cases are the party documents in each configuration. Normalized regression coefficients – i.e. normalized so that the sum of squares of the coefficients equals 1.00 – can be interpreted geometrically. They are equal to the inverse of the cosine of the angle between the coordinate axis and the associated vector (Kruskal and Wish, 1978).

Further details can be obtained from the author.

Notes

For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this text, I would like to thank Cees van der Eijk and two anonymous reviewers of *Party Politics*.

1 About the capacity of left–right to ‘assimilate’ new issues, see also Sani and Sartori (1983), Inglehart (1984).

2 In many respects, this ‘bridge’ also may be called the ‘missing link’ because little research has been done in which voters’ perceptions of party positions are confronted with other indicators of such positions (but see Page, 1978; Granberg, 1985; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Van der Brug, 1997, 1998; Van der Brug and Van der Eijk, 1999).
VAN DER BRUG: VOTERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PARTY DYNAMICS

3 Left–right positions of all parties represented in Parliament were measured in 1976 in wave 11 of the ‘continuous survey’ conducted by the University of Amsterdam (for details, see Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983: 393). The data can be obtained from the NIWI.

4 These data were kindly made available by Hans Keman and Paul Pennings from the Free University in Amsterdam. The data are part of a large dataset, collected under the auspices of the ‘comparative manifesto project’, science center Berlin (director: H. D. Klingemann), in cooperation with the manifesto research group (chairman: I. Budge).

5 These parties are: the PvdA, the VVD, the KVP, the CHU, the ARP, D66, DS’70, the PPR, the CDA (since 1977 a merger of KVP, CHU, and ARP), and GrLi (since 1989 a merger of PPR, PSP, CPN, and EVP).

6 The choice of 10-year intervals is, of course, arbitrary. It is based on the assumption that the existing social order that confronts parties does not change beyond recognition (and consequently that the political agenda is not likely to change so much that the relevancy of the 56 issue categories is seriously altered) within such a period.

7 The 1982 manifestos are excluded from the analyses, because some parties wrote a new election program for these elections that took place only 15 months after the previous ones, while other parties did not. As a result, the programs are so different in character that they are hardly comparable. Moreover, there are no reasons to expect that the parties’ policies and ideological commitments have changed fundamentally between 1981 and 1982.

8 The coordinates of the party programs in the 10 MDS-configurations are reported elsewhere (Van der Brug, 1997: 210).

9 The higher the explained variance of these regressions, the more confidence can be placed in the accuracy of the direction of the associated vector. This is why only the regressions with the largest proportions of explained variance are included in the plots.

References


Mair, P. (1983) ‘Adaptation and Control: Towards an Understanding of Party and
VAN DER BRUG: VOTERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PARTY DYNAMICS


WOUTER VAN DER BRUG is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. The current article summarizes some findings from his (unpublished) PhD thesis ‘Where’s the Party? Voters’ Perceptions of Party Positions’, which he defended in January 1997. He has also published articles in Acta Politica and Kwantitatieve Methoden.
ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237, 1012 DL Amsterdam, The Netherlands. [email: vanderbrug@pscw.uva.nl]

Paper received 24 March 1997; accepted for publication 19 January 1998.