

16 THE WILL OF POLITICIANS AND THE UNWILLINGNESS OF THE PEOPLE*

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16.1 Introduction

The theme of this chapter, *The will of politicians and the unwillingness of the people*, sounds a little dramatic and perhaps even slightly demagogical. It suggests that politicians constantly want something different from the people, and that this is a bad thing.

The subject of this chapter was prompted by the incidents surrounding the recently held referenda in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Proposals to form an urban authority and split both cities up into boroughs at the same time, to which the city councils had committed themselves, encountered massive rejection in the referendum. The preamble to this referendum did not lack drama and was sometimes not without a light form of demagoguery.

Let us not discuss the dramatics of the urban authorities any further though. Fascinating though they may be, they still only serve as a pretext to raise a number of classical questions regarding representative democracy: are there, in fact, differences of opinion between electors and those elected; if so, is that fitting in a democracy, can these differences be explained, and what solutions can be found in order to bridge the gap between electors and the elected?

* English translation by Karin van den Berg.

context. This model is based on the reasoning that the existence of political parties makes a possible mechanism of decision making, which enforces the identity between government policy and the will of the majority of voters. According to the model, that decision making mechanism is present if the following conditions are met:

- (1) political parties present clear and coherent programmes;
- (2) voters express their preferences on the basis of a comparison of the various programmes;
- (3) the party that wins the elections thus also gets government power and implements its programme;
- (4) at subsequent elections, voters express their opinions about the way the party in power has carried out its programme (Thomassen, 1994).

If only political parties and voters would stick to these simple rules, government policy would be in accordance with the will of the (majority of the) voters. At any rate, this is what the model claims. Unfortunately for the adherents of this model of democracy, however, the world is not that simple. The reality content of this model is very questionable indeed. I will limit myself here to mentioning what I will call, for convenience's sake, an *empirical* and a *logical* problem.

The *empirical* problem concerns voter behaviour. Even in the sixties, almost throughout the western world, most voters seemed to have no idea what the various political parties stood for intrinsically, often did not even have an opinion about important political issues, and were even less able to choose a particular party on the basis of a comparison of their own ideas with the political parties' political intentions. In addition to this, the choice of a party turned out to be almost completely determined by the voters' social position, which left little opportunity for independent evaluation of the various political parties' policy plans. In the Netherlands, with its segregated political system, most citizens' party preferences were completely determined by the sociopolitical bloc to which they belonged. The thought that voters would let their votes depend on their assessment of the policy plans presented by the various political parties did not have a lot of bearing on reality.

By now this image has changed considerably. Modernization processes have led to voters' choice of party being determined to a lessening extent by their social position. The result of this, in combination with better education, as well as more information as a result of the growing development of modern mass media, is that more voters attach greater importance to a comparison of what the various political parties have to offer, and are also more capable of making that comparison. In the meantime, that development has already led to jubilation in the literature that the *homo politicus* of classical democratic theory, who casts his vote on the basis of a comparison of his own political preferences with those of the political parties, has finally arisen, and that this has brought nearer the democratic ideal in which the voter is in charge (Dalton, 1988: 28-29). Voters have begun to choose (Rose and McAllister, 1986).

For convenience's sake let us assume that the abovementioned conclusions from empirical studies are correct, and that voters by now actually vote in accordance with their policy preferences. Does this ensure that government policy will be in accordance with the preference of the majority of voters?

The answer is still no, unless we manage to solve a *logical* problem as well. Social choice theory has presented the enthusiasts with a number of interesting paradoxes. Their essence is that rational behaviour on an individual level does not necessarily lead to rational collective results. No higher mathematics is needed to understand the issue in question. In the theories about democracy which are based on the social choice theory, democracy is often depicted by analogy with the market economy. But that analogy only applies in part. On the goods and services market, the consumer can decide to do all his shopping in a single department store, but he can also buy his shoes in one store and his clothing somewhere else, while booking his flight at the travel agent's. On the political market, however, the voter cannot differentiate, because he only has one vote. His choice is limited, as it were, to the question of what department store he wants to do *all* his shopping in. Political parties and their programmes are like department stores with an array of goods, and the voter has to choose one single store even though he might have preferred to buy some goods in another, or rather, even though he may agree more with a different political party on some points. All those individual choice processes may lead to a situation in which the political party that wins the elections actually takes up a minority position on each separate issue (Dahl, 1956; Daudt, 1978). This is why, on election night, it is always moving to hear the somewhat solemnly delivered conclusion that the voter has spoken, whereas we do not actually have the faintest idea of what the voter wants, at least not from looking at the election results.

Can this logical problem be solved? In theory it can, for this problem would not exist if two conditions were met. The first is that voters do not choose their party on the basis of their opinion about separate issues, but on the basis of an underlying one-dimensional ideology. The second condition is that the ideas about concrete political issues are completely determined by this ideological dimension. In that case the choice of a specific political party is unequivocal and the problem does not occur.²

Naturally these are no easy conditions. To what extent are they being met? There is a strong tendency in the international literature, based on empirical studies, which actually leads to the conclusion that the relevant political contrasts in most western democracies can be reduced to a single dimension, the *Left-Right dimension*. Voters allegedly make their choice of a specific party largely on the basis of the gap which separates them from the various political parties, and vote for the party which is closest to their own position (Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983). One may argue about the

² Mind you: this reasoning is geared to a two-party system.

extent to which this is really so, but that is less important here, because the second condition remains an obstacle. For more than thirty years it has been repeatedly shown that there is a considerable difference between the political elite and the electorate with regard to the extent in which their viewpoints about various issues are linked together. In contrast to the political elite, such mutual coherence turns out to be extremely limited among the electorate, let alone that it would be possible to reduce opinions about various issues to one single dimension. Hence it is only logical that coherence between opinions about various issues and the Left-Right dimension is also generally relatively limited. So even if voters vote on the basis of the Left-Right dimension, this still will not reveal very much about their ideas on specific issues (Converse, 1964; Converse and Pierce, 1986; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Thomassen, 1976 and 1997).

16.5 The Explanation for Differences of Opinion Between Electors and the Elected

This phenomenon probably also offers the most significant explanation for the above-mentioned differences of opinion which are frequently found between electors and the elected. Among the political elite, ideologies have, so to speak, a greater reach than among the electorate. The essence of the Left-Right dimension concerns socio-economic relations,³ but also extends to opinions about non-economic questions. In this way libertarian standpoints are also associated with the Left, more traditional values with the Right. But relations on this higher level of abstraction are much stronger among the political elite than among the electorate. The result of this is that, even if both the political elite and the electorate are led by their places on the Left-Right dimension, this position has far less predictive value to a random voter than to the political elite. Apart from their shared grasp of socio-economic relations they have hardly any shared discourse.

This also explains why, inside a socialist party, the voters and the political elite are unlikely to manifest a fundamental difference of opinion about the role of the government, or about the distribution of incomes. In this way, the differences within the PvdA between electors and the elected almost always concern non-material issues. Within a Christian party a fundamental difference of opinion about the role of the family in society is not likely to occur. In either case, the core of the ideology is at stake. But relations between voters and the political elite become less predictable outside that core.

³ If we go back into history far enough this turns out to be not quite true. In the Netherlands (but also in a country such as France) the Left-Right antithesis as the beginning of opinion between advocates and opponents of the principles of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. That denotation can still be retraced, but in the meantime it still has become clearly dominated by the socio-economic meaning.

And they become completely unpredictable if a viewpoint on a specific issue is also hard to deduce from the politico-philosophical content of the ideology in question, and if the elite can no longer refer to its own principles either. For example, it is not clear in advance according to which socialist ideology Amsterdam should or should not be split up into boroughs. But even if the relation between ideology and the opinion about the specific problem is only lacking with the voters, that should suffice to ensure that the mechanism of the elections does not create consensus between the electors and the elected.

Neither is it to be expected that the 'cognitive mobilization', the development that an increasing number of voters possess the political knowledge and skills to operate effectively in politics, will change this. It is more likely that the opposite will happen. Ideologies that are based on traditional social contrasts tend to lose importance as a result of the abovementioned modernization processes.

Although some observers perceive the old lines of conflict being replaced by new ones (Inglehart, 1984; Lijphart, 1984), there is little reason to assume that, in the short term, new lines of conflict will develop which have as structured an outlook on society as the traditional ones. The process of modernization leads to individualization, also in politics. This means that an increasing number of voters will be led by extremely individual motives in their choice for one party or another. The more this is the case, the less will a collective translation of those motives be possible.

The inevitable conclusion is that the idea that elections can forcefully lead to a government policy which is in accordance with the views of the majority of voters is unsustainable on logical as well as empirical grounds.

A very different question is whether this gives us cause for lament. According to the adherents of a *pluralistic* (Dahl, 1956) or *liberal* concept of democracy, the opposite is true. Democracy, seen as decision making by a majority of votes, is not only associated with the level of democracy, but also embodies the age-old fear of the dictatorship of a plebeian majority. That is why someone like Robert Dahl, democracy expert *par excellence*, greets the above conclusion with great joy: if the majority is not actually in charge at all there can be no majority dictatorship. As far as political ideas are concerned, an electoral majority will always consist of a coalition of variable minorities (Dahl, 1956).

The conclusion that elections will not allow any deduction about the policy preferences of the majority of voters leads to two follow-up questions: what is the function of elections, and is there - provided one would want there to be - a different way of giving citizens some influence on government policy?

16.6 The Function of Elections in the Netherlands

The most elementary significance of elections will always be that they constitute a legitimization of power, and that they give the voters, if anything, an instrument which they can use to express their satisfaction or discontent with the current government and government policy. Or, as the Americans summarize it, 'to throw the rascals out'. Even in the most conservative views on political representation (Burke, Schumpeter), voters, although they do not actually determine policy, still reward or punish politicians and political parties for what they have done with their free mandate. But even this is not possible, or only barely so in the Netherlands, because there is no mandatory relation between the outcome of the election and the formation of a cabinet.

As early as 1967, Van Thijn raised this problem with great discernment in his well-known essay *From parties to electoral pacts*. He proposed to renew the existing political order in such a way that two groups of parties would remain, which would present themselves to the voters with two different programmes. The winning party or group of parties would take over government power from the incumbent coalition. The thus legitimized majority would also remain undisturbed by a dualistic relation between parliament and cabinet. The separation of powers which such a system is really concerned with, according to Van Thijn, is the separation of powers between the government coalition on the one hand, which consists of the cabinet and the parties in the Second Chamber by which it is supported, and the opposition on the other (Van Thijn, 1967). This *pendulum democracy*, as Van Thijn called it, is essentially based on the same line of reasoning which is the basis of the *Responsible Party Model*.⁴

Both the 1971 and 1972 electoral pacts with their shadow cabinets were faithful approximations of this line of reasoning. Only one detail was less than satisfactory: the intended left-wing majority was not very successful. As a strategy to conquer government power, polarization eventually turned out to be counterproductive (Van Praag, 1990)⁵ and by now has been quite abandoned.

⁴ Essentially the same model can be found in the literature under various names. Lijphart (1984) speaks of the Majoritarian Model. The common source of inspiration is the British political system, which is why Lijphart also speaks of the Westminster Model.

⁵ Quite paradoxically it was the CDA, which was constantly being challenged by the PvdA to show its colours, that eventually used the polarization strategy in an extremely effective way. In 1986, the second Lubbers cabinet was made the main issue of the elections ("Let Lubbers finish the job"), which was very advantageous to the CDA. I believe I am correct in assuming that the second Lubbers cabinet is the only cabinet which was established fully in accordance to Van Thijn's rules.

Almost thirty years after Ed van Thijn presented his proposals for political renewal, the political system remains virtually unchanged and the cartel democracy⁶ has received its ultimate accolade in the formation of a 'purple' cabinet, a coalition government supported by the social democratic and liberal democratic parties.

Now that the PvdA and VVD parties no longer exclude each other as possible coalition partners, and everybody is keen on everybody else, the voter is in effect deprived of any hold, any relation between his choice of party and the possible composition of the government. This seems to take us back to the fifties: the election battle was between Drees and Romme, and after the elections we got both Drees and Romme, read: Kok and Bolkestein, with Van Mierlo thrown in for good measure.⁷ But from the viewpoint of democratic legitimization the situation only seems to have got worse in comparison to that in the fifties. In the heyday of sectarianism there were still close ties between voters and political parties because voters as well as political parties, at least for a large part, were part of the same social complex, one of the sociopolitical blocs. If there is no direct relation between the results of the elections and the allocation of government power, one could raise questions from the standpoint of democratic theory, but it is unlikely that many voters experienced it that way. After all, one's own party would ensure that the ideas and interests of the population group in question were being heard.

This situation has changed fundamentally. The fixed relation between political parties and a specific social backing has almost completely disappeared. Voters decide on their vote anew at every election, and through this vote they express their opinion about government policy, even if only in very general terms. The 1994 elections are a clear example of this. The trust in the policy of the departing cabinet was less than for any other cabinet in the past 25 years. The loss sustained by the government parties, CDA and PvdA, was of historic dimensions. If the PvdA can subsequently celebrate the largest electoral loss in history as a victory, because the still greater loss of the CDA has suddenly turned PvdA into the largest party, enabling it to supply a prime minister for a cabinet composed of PvdA and the two most important opposition parties, this effectively takes the sting out of political competition: Drees and Romme both. To an electorate which concentrates more than ever on expressing an opinion about policy, this could mean that, in the long term, one can only get one's own back by voting for a party which is not part of the cartel. This might lead to fragmentation of the party system.

⁶ The term cartel democracy comes from Lijphart (1976: 228) and stands for a type of democracy which is characterized by a homogeneous political culture, and by political elites which would sooner aim for cooperation than for competition. Such a system would run the risk of extinction by implosion, because there is little left to choose for the voters.

⁷ Drees and Romme were the political leader of the PvdA and the Catholic People's Party (KVP), respectively, in the 1950s. Kok, Bolkestein and Van Mierlo are the present Political leaders of PvdA, VVD and D66, respectively.

The alternative is in itself clear enough: a dichotomy in Dutch politics between a left-wing/libertarian and a right-wing/conservative bloc. To prevent these blocs from still becoming dependent on, and so open to blackmail by, smaller parties in order to form a majority, an electoral threshold of 5% should be introduced.⁸ These kinds of ideas obviously have no bearing whatsoever on the political reality of the moment. All the same, a dichotomy might lead to a reinforcement of the democratic legitimization of the existing parliamentary order, even if this would still not give voters a decisive vote in the decision making about concrete political issues. The above goes to show that elections are not a suitable instrument to attain this.

The legitimacy of the existing parliamentary order is further undermined by the monistic character it has gradually come to manifest, without adopting the corresponding system.

Essential to the *democratic model* as described by, among others, Van Thijn (see Figure 1 for a schematic representation), is not only the political dichotomy, but also the monistic relation between the political majority in parliament and the cabinet. That monism has a democratic legitimization. The winning party has been given a mandate to execute its electoral programme by the majority of the voters. The electoral programme becomes the government programme. In this line of reasoning, a parliamentary majority which does not commit itself unconditionally to that programme only hampers the voters' will. In a multi-party system, in which the government programme is the result of, usually laborious negotiations between the coalition partners, that direct mandate from the voters is lacking. Precisely because the programme has often been painstakingly drawn up, and is the result of a game of give and take, parties are forced to grimly stick to the agreement, even if this might mean going against developing public opinion. That is why a monistic relation under these circumstances not only lacks democratic

⁸ A wishy-washy district system like the one that is currently up for discussion, however, really has no effect whatsoever on the enforcement of a political majority. Only the introduction of a 'single-member' constituency system will do that. But nobody in the Netherlands would seriously suggest it, and even in Great Britain it has become discredited because it can have such a devastating effect on the proportional representation of even medium-sized parties. The proposal for direct election of the prime minister has also often been defended with the argument that it would compel the political parties to work together. At recent elections in Israel, voters could for the first time cast two votes, one for the prime minister and one for a political party. The results should give us something to think about. The composition of the Knesset is now more fragmented than ever. A possible explanation is that, because attention is predominantly given to the election of the prime minister, the parliamentary elections, even if they are being held at the same time, become 'second order', as a result of which voters choose 'with their hearts', without taking into account the potential position of power of the party for which they vote (compare Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Perlmutter, 1996).

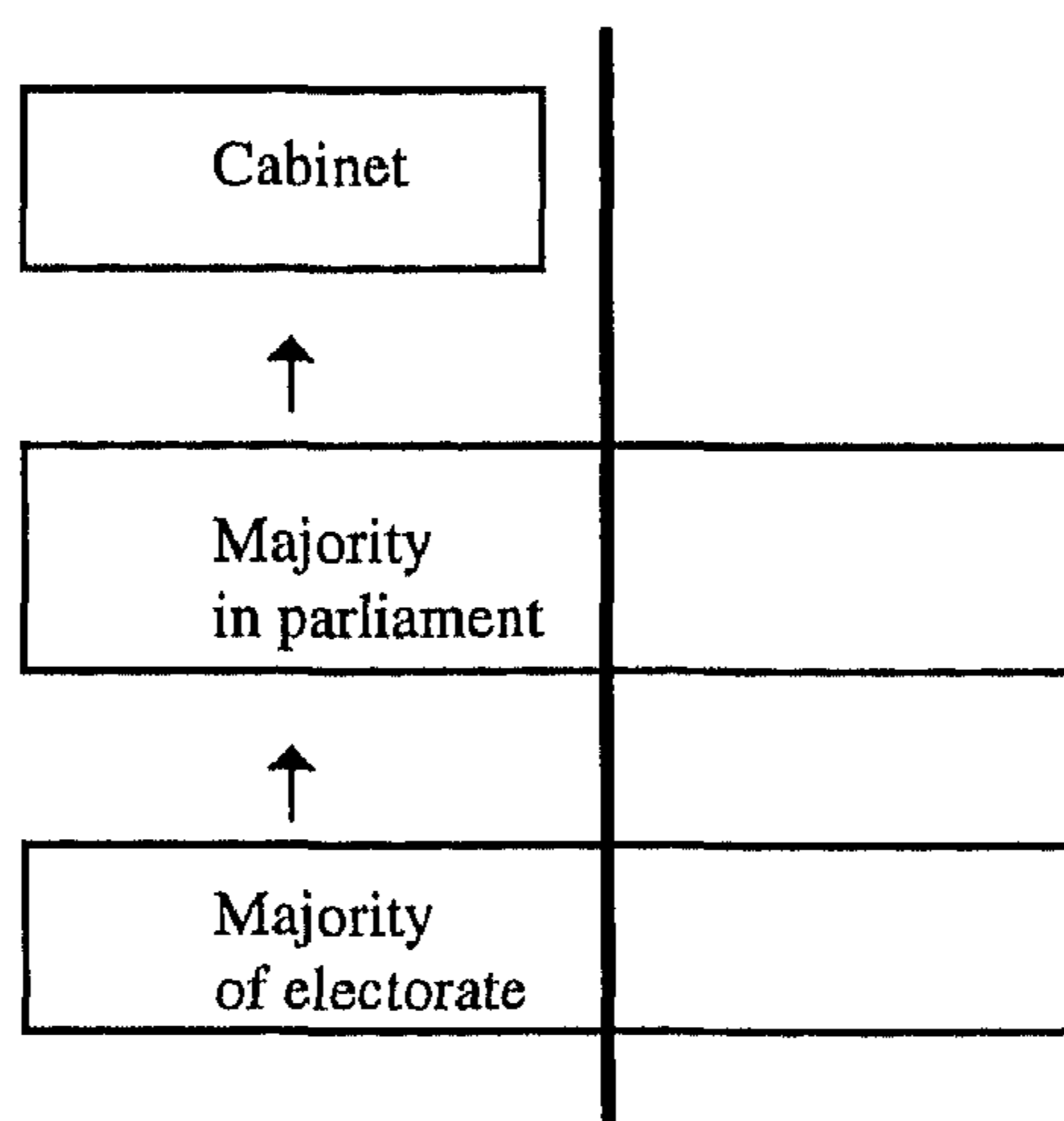


Figure 1. Political Representation. The democratic model.

legitimization, but threatens to go the opposite way. Because every attempt to bring (parts of) the coalition agreement up for discussion already provokes a sense of crisis, coalition partners tend to close their eyes and ears to developments and opinions in society which do not correspond to the coalition agreement. According to the democratic model (Figure 1), a monistic relation which is not based on a voters' mandate not only lacks democratic legitimization, it is also in breach of the principles of the classical constitutional state, to which the separation of powers, including a dualistic relation between the government and the people's representatives, is central (Figure 2). This relation, in other words, cannot be legitimized on the basis of either concept of democracy.

The democratic model features, at least in theory, a triple identity: the majority of the voters, the majority in the representative body, and the cabinet. There are, as it were, only two kinds of actors in the process of political representation: those represented and the representatives, of which latter group the majority also rules. In a purely dualistic system there are three groups of actors: the represented, the representatives and those in relation to whom representation takes place: the government. In a purely dualistic system voters can identify with 'their' representatives, who defend their ideas and interests *vis-à-vis* the government. In a monistic system which is not based on a direct voters' mandate, representatives risk being identified with the executive power. In this case another dichotomy arises, this time between those represented and the The Hague's conglomerate of powers. This may give rise to the logical question of who still

represents 'us' *vis-à-vis* the representatives. A more open dialogue between the (government parties in) the Second Chamber and the government might lead to greater responsiveness of the Second Chamber *vis-à-vis* society, thus seemingly enhancing its legitimacy.

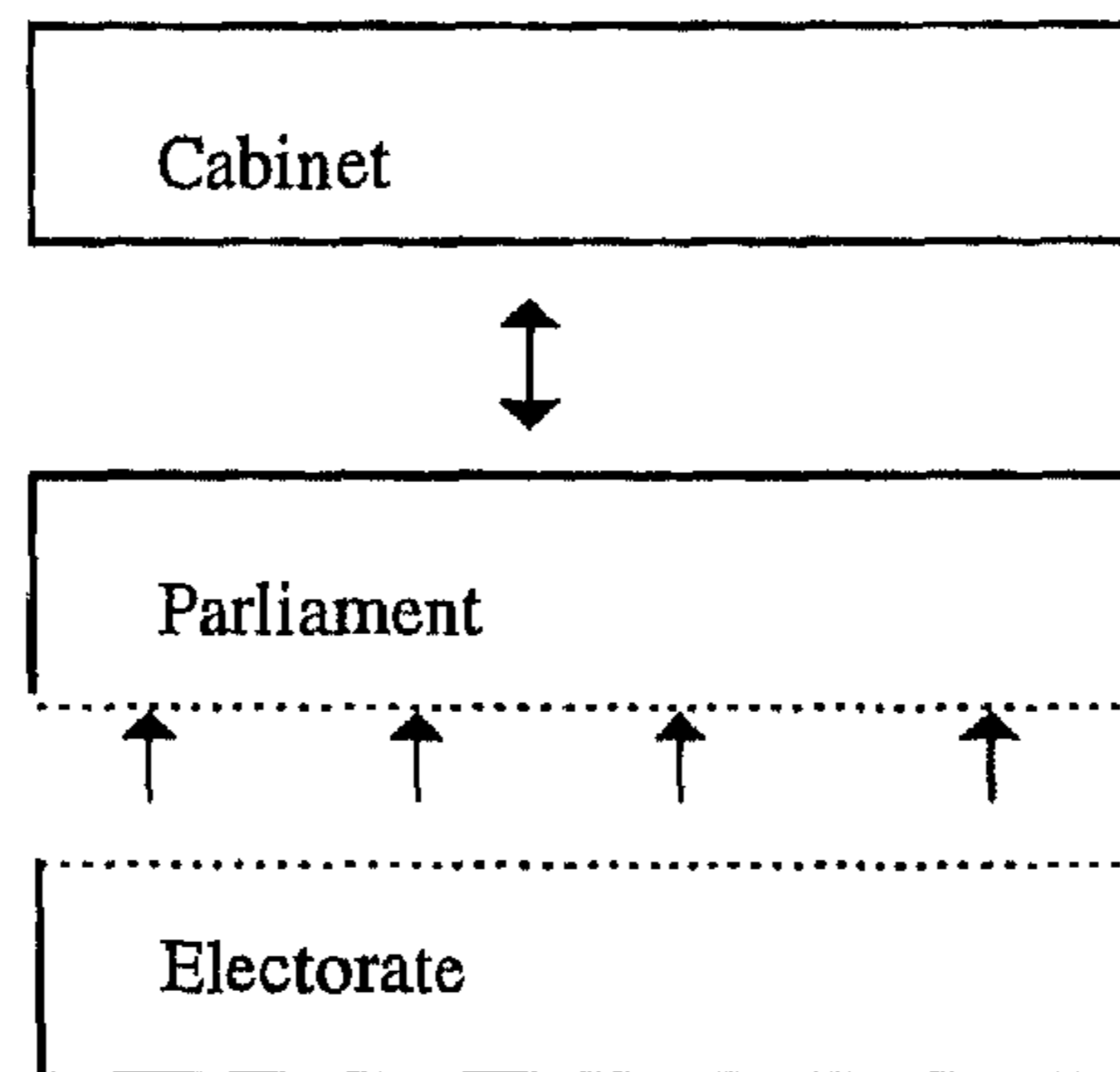


Figure 2. Political Representation. The "dualistic" model.

The logical conclusion to this line of reasoning is probably that a dualistic two-party system or two-block system is the optimum one from a viewpoint of legitimacy. Such a system still does not give the electorate a decisive voice in decision making about concrete issues. But that is not really a problem in this line of thought. The electoral majority legitimizes the power to decide, but does not itself make decisions.

16.7 Referendum and Participation

Mind you, this is a purely theoretical line of reasoning. We have not asked the citizens what they think of this. Many citizens evidently do *not* find this such a good idea. In an emancipated society such as ours, the classical vision of representative democracy, in which the right to take political decisions as regards content is withheld from the citizens, seems somewhat paternalistic. Citizens demand a decisive vote in decision making. The only way to meet that demand is by introducing a referendum.

Although we should not expect miracles from it, the referendum as an instrument of political decision making has a number of attractive aspects. It not only gives voters direct influence with regard to a specific issue; a referendum, and the discussion which

precedes it, almost inevitably leads to an increase of political consciousness and political knowledge about the topic in question. Political knowledge about the European Union, in countries such as France, Denmark and Ireland, where a referendum was held about it after Maastricht, thus turned out to have increased by leaps and bounds and to compare favourably with that of countries in which no referendum was held. A corrective referendum such as the kind that is currently up for discussion is a splendid instrument, because it may take away many of the classical objections to a referendum. One of those classical objections is that voters are badly informed and will act primarily out of self-interest instead of in the general interest.

However, the argument that politicians, the members of the Second Chamber, are better informed is not very convincing. This places *the* politicians opposite *the* citizens. But how often does a situation arise in which the majority of the population turns against a decision which the large majority of parliament has accepted? And if that situation were to occur this would mean a serious problem of legitimacy. It is to be expected, however, that the call for a referendum will generally speaking only be heard in the context of a bill which is extremely controversial also in parliament, and for which in the end only a limited parliamentary majority has been found. A referendum in such a case is a continuation of the political battle by other means. A classical example could be the final parliamentary decision making on the placing of cruise missiles in the Netherlands, elevated by some to a decision which would decide the continuation of mankind. Up to the last moment it was unclear how the decision making would turn out (this in addition to the conceivable complications on account of the existence of party discipline). Under such circumstances to maintain that the outcome of the election has yielded the best possible results, on the basis of the parliamentary debate, necessitates a Rousseau-like reasoning: the minority has not just lost, it has also misunderstood the general interest and, in that notorious Rousseau phrase, has to be forced to be free. Such an argument cannot be sustained, particularly in circumstances such as the ones which prevailed in the cruise missile debate. In such a case a referendum might not necessarily have led to a better, but in any case to a better-legitimized decision. Ultimately, also parliamentary decision making is not about being right, but about being put in the right.

A corrective referendum also meets another traditional objection. In itself a corrective referendum is a fairly blunt instrument, which enforces a majority decision at the end of the policy process, but is fairly insensitive to the interests and feelings of individuals and minorities. If all has been done properly, those interests and feelings have already been taken into account and allowed for in the parliamentary decision making which, by definition, precedes the corrective referendum. That is why it is rather strange that in the parliamentary debate, the possible introduction of a referendum seems to be weighed against participation in the earlier stages of the policy process. The discussion which has been held up to now about the introduction of a corrective referendum is fraught with a lot of hesitation about whether the decision making about

large projects concerning the infrastructure should also be taken into consideration for a corrective referendum. It has been proposed that, if this were to take place at all, it would in any case have to go hand in hand with a reduction of participation in the preliminary stages of decision making. All this on the principle: no participation at both front and back door. This last consideration is - by your leave - a ridiculous one. A referendum can in no way replace participation and legal protection in the preliminary stages of the decision making process. On the contrary, participation and legal protection need all the emphasis possible, the more so because a referendum is such a blunt instrument. If the decision to construct the Betuwerailway line were subjected to a referendum, all voters from Zeeuws-Vlaanderen to Groningen would have an equal say. But a someone living in the Betuwe who does not want a railway in his back yard wants his objections to be noted. That does not necessarily mean that those objections will be recognized, but they will be considered in the decision making process. For this, a referendum is totally unsuitable. An extension of the rights of citizens in the democratic process can not be swapped against their rights as legal subjects. The constitutional state cannot be exchanged for democracy.

The abovementioned process of *individual modernization* causes the pressure on a reinforcement of the citizen's position as a legal subject to get much higher than the pressure on the reinforcement of the citizen's role in the collective decision making process (Thomassen, 1995).⁹ A referendum matches the second role, participation and legal protection the first. A greater *responsiveness* of politicians and political parties with regard to the problems and desires of individual citizens and groups of citizens would be a fitting answer to this development. In practice, politicians take a very defensive attitude when it comes to putting forward individual citizens' desires in the political process. That defense is largely based on the idea that citizens are primarily led by their own interests, while politicians see it as their role to defend the common interest (Thomassen and Zielonka-Goei, 1992). That notion is fully understandable, but also looks like an attempt to go against the tide. A greater responsiveness with regard to individual citizens and groups of citizens does not mean that they necessarily have to get their way, but the fact that they are being listened to, and that arguments and reasons are given if and when they do not get their way, could make an important contribution to the legitimacy of the political system.

Greater responsiveness of the people's representatives almost by definition goes hand in hand with a reinforcement of the dualistic relation between the government and the people's representatives. Only in a dualistic relation can social debate be of great enough consequence in political decision making.

⁹ It can hardly be a coincidence that all proposals for political and constitutional reform which are supposed to reinforce the position of the citizen in the democratic process have come to nothing, whereas the position of the citizen in the constitutional state has been reinforced with very little noise (Wet Openbaarheid Bestuur, AROB-legislation, Ombudsman).

The fact that the politicians' will incidentally comes up against the unwillingness of the people is not by definition contrary to the principles of representative democracy, as long as the conflict does not emanate from an unwillingness of politicians to listen.

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