

The Irrational Dutch Voter
On Causal Heterogeneity in Basis of Evaluation

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Abstract

Elections in the Netherlands have transformed from the dullest in the world in the 1950s to the most volatile in recent decades. In light of this, the question arises what factors account for the increased volatility of the Dutch electorate. This paper examines one possible answer: voters have changed the basis upon which they evaluate the competing parties. Findings indicate that this is indeed the case, although it appears not to be the whole story. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the basis of evaluation varies across parties. This has important implications for modelling vote choice. More specifically, the findings imply that the use of spatial models, which are arguably the most popular theoretical framework of electoral researchers, is highly problematic.

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Introduction

Half a century ago Dutch elections were arguably the duller in the world. Cleavage-based voting was the rule and because citizens' position in the segmented society hardly changed, neither did election outcomes. Indeed, in their seminal study *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (1967) Lipset and Rokkan referred to the Netherlands as the most typical example of institutionalised segmentation and cleavage-based voting. Voters apparently judged parties on the basis of a single and simple criterion: parties' relationship with particular segments of society, such as the Catholic community or secular working class. The fact that much has changed since, is clear from the level of electoral volatility, which is today virtually nowhere as high as in that same country (Mair, in press). This is arguably best illustrated by the sudden rise of Fortuyn in the 2002 elections, who entered parliament with 26 out of 150 seats.

In principle, there are three sorts of possible explanations for such electoral change. The first is that there have been changes in either the supply side (different parties competed) or the demand side (different citizens voted). In the case of Fortuyn it is self-evident that changes in the supply side played a crucial role. The second explanation is that across time characteristics of either parties or voters have changed, or both. Processes of polarisation and depolarisation are an excellent example of such an effect. More specifically, the mid 1980s were characterised by sharp ideological divisions between the left and the right, whereas since these differences have weakened (Thomassen et al., 2000; Van Wijnen, 2001). Although both factors may to some extent have contributed to increased electoral volatility, this paper focuses on a third possible explanation, namely changes in the basis for evaluation of political parties. After all, if voters would change the yardstick they use to judge parties, different outcomes should not come as a surprise either. For example, if in the campaign of one election economics issues are central whereas the next election focuses on moral values, voters may well end up with different vote preferences. The first aim of this paper is to examine to what extent such changes have taken place in the Netherlands.

The second issue that this paper addresses is whether voters use the same or different yardsticks to evaluate the political parties. As will be argued below, models of voting usually build on the assumption that all parties are evaluated on the basis of the same set of criteria. This paper challenges that assumption and examines the differences in basis for evaluation across parties. The idea that voters may evaluate parties on the basis of different criteria is clearly at odds with the notion of rationality. If the basis for evaluation would vary across parties, this has important implications for modelling vote choice. More specifically, it would

imply that the use of spatial models, which are arguably the most popular theoretical framework of electoral researchers, is highly problematic. The spatial model of voting assumes that both parties and voters take positions on a particular set of conflict dimensions and that voters cast their ballot in favour of the party that is closest. The best known example is a unidimensional model in which parties and voters are positioned on a single left/right continuum and voters are presumed to vote for the most proximate party (cf. Downs, 1957). In the Netherlands the Downsian framework has been employed by Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983), who found that in the 1980s a majority of Dutch citizens voted accordingly. Left/right has since been regarded as the single most important factor structuring electoral competition in the Netherlands, although it has not remained uncontested (see, e.g. Middendorp, 1991; Irwin and Van Holteyn, 1997).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next two paragraphs discuss the theoretical background. More specific, the next paragraph posits that evaluations of individual parties mediate the impact of factors such as social or ideological identity or policy preferences on vote choice and voting can thus be conceived of as a two-stage process. Then the theoretical foundation of the proposition that the basis of evaluation may differ across parties will be elaborated upon. Having discussed data and measurement, we proceed with the empirical analyses. In the final paragraph the findings are summarised and its major implications discussed.

Voting as a two-stage process

In electoral research voting behaviour is usually analysed in terms of a single categorical variable, namely vote choice in terms of the party or candidate voted for, and one set of explanatory variables. The latter may include concepts such as religion, social class, ideological positions, policy preferences, and so forth. Some scholars have argued that voting can best be analysed in another way. The most notable example are the Michigan scholars, who in *The American Voter* introduced the notion of a 'funnel of causality' (Campbell et al., 1960). According to this notion, "events are conceived to follow each other in a converging sequence of causal chains, moving from the mouth to the stem of the funnel." (p. 24). In the Michigan model voting behaviour was seen most directly as a consequence of attitudes towards candidates, policies, and group benefits. These attitudes are influenced by voters' party-identification, which in turn is determined by social characteristics, which are located in the mouth of the funnel.

In European electoral research applying the Michigan model appeared to be problematic, because party identification ‘behaved’ differently than in the United States. On the basis of a study by Thomassen the Netherlands have been considered the oddest case (Miller and Shanks, 1996, p. 117). Thomassen (1976) questioned whether the party identification concept could be applied to the Netherlands. On the basis of an analysis of panel data from the 1970-1972 period he concluded that it probably could not. This conclusion was based on three findings: (1) party identification was less stable than vote choice, (2) the distinction between party identification and vote choice could be due to unreliability of the measurement, and (3) party identification seemed not to be prior to vote choice (p. 77). Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983, chap. 8) also concluded that in the Netherlands party identification was (too) instable. Although some scholars assumed that these findings resulted from particularities of that time in the Netherlands, further analyses revealed that these problems have persisted and also occur in other European countries (Thomassen and Rosema, in press). Furthermore, Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983, chap. 8) pointed to another problem, namely that in the Netherlands voters frequently identified with more than one party. This is incompatible with the concept of party identification, they concluded (see also Niemöller and Van der Eijk, 1984, pp. 533-534).

The finding that the concept of party identification cannot be applied to the Netherlands, has led these scholars to conclude that we should instead focus on identification in terms of social groups (Thomassen, 1976) or ideology (Niemöller and Van der Eijk, 1984). It should be questioned, however, whether this is the best strategy. Political parties are such central objects in the electoral process, that how voters feel about them cannot be ignored if one wants to understand their behaviour. The only question, then, is *how* the influence of those feelings on voting behaviour has to be analysed. In my view the solution is to be found in an alternative conceptualisation of partisanship (Rosema, 2006). Arguably, in the European context partisanship can best be conceptualised in terms of evaluation instead of identification. Such a conceptualisation builds on the social psychological notion of attitudes (Greene, 1999). This means that the link between parties and voters is conceptualised in terms of liking versus disliking, rather than in terms of a social identity. This difference in conceptualisation can be expressed by modifying the vocabulary and discussing partisanship in terms of party evaluations (analogous to the notion of candidate evaluations, which are commonly focused on in American electoral research) instead of party identification.

With respect to the causal structure of voting models, this implies that voting may be viewed as the result of a two-stage process (see Rosema, 2006). The first stage consists of the

formation and change of images of parties, candidates, and governments, as well as the formation and change of evaluations of those same objects. The second stage is one of decision-making in relation to a specific upcoming election. According to the view proposed, voters decide on the basis of the evaluations created in the first stage, in particular the evaluations of the parties. This implies that the main task of electoral researchers is three-fold: (1) to examine to what extent people vote in line with their party evaluations, (2) to explain why some people prefer to vote for a party they do not like best (e.g. strategic voting), and (3) to explain why voters like or dislike political parties to a certain degree. Elsewhere I have focused on the first task (Rosema, 2006) and the second (Bäck and Rosema, 2008; Rosema, under review). In this paper the third task is central.

Causal heterogeneity in basis of evaluation

Focusing on party evaluations instead of vote choice may be considered interesting for one reason in particular. In voting theory it is usually assumed that what matters with respect to how voters feel about parties (or candidates) is the same across all parties (or candidates). The same set of characteristics that make up the image one has of a party is assumed to be relevant for how voters evaluate each party. For example, the proximity model of issue voting assumes that voters evaluate all parties or candidates on the basis of the same ideological space or set of issues (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984). Each issue is assumed to be equally important for each party or candidate. We may refer to this as the assumption of homogeneity in basis of evaluation.

Explaining party evaluations and performing separate analyses for each party enables us to examine whether in practice this assumption is accurate. If it would be, then we should find that particular phenomena have a similar impact on voters' evaluations, irrespective of which party is focused on. According to an alternative view, one party may be evaluated on the basis of one issue, while another party is evaluated on the basis of another. Note that the idea that different parties may be evaluated on the basis of different criteria not only applies to the kinds of issues, but also to the kinds of characteristics. It is possible that one party is liked or disliked because of its policy positions, while another is because of the personal competence of its leader or because of the way it performed in the government. In voting research such differences are often not taken into account.

Indeed, several studies have shown that voters do not use the same yardstick to evaluate different candidates or parties. Macdonald et al. (1988), for example, examined

whether evaluations of different U.S. presidential candidates and senatorial candidates were influenced in similar ways by party identification, perceived ideological proximity, and candidate images. Their data were taken from a sample of undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina. They observed clear differences across the candidates. For example, whereas presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale as well as incumbent North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms were evaluated on the basis of ideological proximity, evaluations of senatorial challenger Jim Hunt were not influenced by this factor. Differences were also observed in analyses of evaluations of presidential candidates in the 1980 race, which utilised data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). For example, the impact of party identification on evaluations was much stronger for Reagan and Carter than for several other candidates. Such differences may be referred to as causal heterogeneity in basis of evaluation.

Further research has shown that differences in the basis of evaluation is not limited to candidates, but also applied to political parties. In the United States partisanship turned out to be in different ways depending on whether Democratic or Republican attachments are focused on. Martinez and Gant (1990) found that changes in the strength of identification with the Democrats was influenced by other issue domains than identification with the Republicans. More specifically, using ANES panel data from the 1970s they examined the impact of changes in voters' positions vis-à-vis both parties in three issue domains on party identification. They found that the strength of identification with the Republicans was influenced most strongly by shifts in terms of racial issues (e.g. busing), whereas the strength of identification with the Democrats was affected most strongly by New Deal issues (e.g. job guarantees and standard of living).

Most theories of voting are at odds with such findings, but some are not. In particular Rabinowitz and Macdonald's (1989) directional theory of issue voting allows for differences in the importance of each issue across parties. Their theory emphasises that different parties and candidates may evoke emotions with respect to different issues and consequently the basis of evaluation may vary across parties. In the literature on partisanship there are also studies that support this line of argument. Weisberg (1980), for example, stressed that partisanship is not best conceptualised and operationalised as a position on a single continuum, because it involves the evaluation of three different objects: Democrats, Republicans and independents. If one conceptualises partisanship in such a way, causal heterogeneity in basis of evaluation is what one would indeed expect.

Determinants of vote choice in the Netherlands

In order to be able to analyse the impact of different bases of evaluation across parties and across time, one first needs to identify what factors play a role. In earlier decades, vote choice in the Netherlands could be explained successfully on the basis of a so-called sociological approach (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Lijphart, 1974; Andeweg, 1982). If one knew voters' religious denomination, frequency of church attendance, and social class self-image, their choice at the polls could be predicted fairly accurately. Across the years, however, the impact of religion and social class has decreased substantially (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 1989; Van Holsteyn and Irwin, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2000). Nevertheless, in response to the 1994 election Rudy Andeweg (1995, p. 125) concluded that with the present speed of developments it would still take three decades before their impact had disappeared. So the first factors to be included in the analyses are voters' social identity in terms of religion and social class.

The decline of the explanatory power of models of voting based on religion and social class has resulted in a search for other explanations. Among the alternatives proposed is that of ideology in terms of left-right. Downs (1957) argued that if voters want to vote for a party whose policy proposals they prefer, they do not need to know the positions of political parties on all kinds of issues. They may rely on ideological agreement as a short cut, for example in terms of a left-right continuum. Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) argued that in the Netherlands both voters and parties can indeed be characterised by a particular position on an ideological continuum of left-right, and that voters' choices at the polls can be explained well in those terms. The model states that voters perceive the left-right positions of the various parties, compare these to their own left-right position, and vote for the party that is closest to them. Left/right has since been viewed a key factor in Dutch elections.

Another explanation of vote choice that has been suggested after the decline of cleavage-based voting, are the notions of policy voting and issue voting (Van Cuilenburg et al., 1980; Middendorp et al., 1993; Van Wijnen, 2001). According to these notions, voters regard political parties as packages of policy preferences or issue stands. When faced with an election, voters are expected to choose the party whose package comes closest to their own policy preferences. The corresponding model assumes that the agreement or disagreement between voters and parties in terms of a number of salient issues determines how voters evaluate the various parties, which in turn determines their vote choice.

A final factor included in the below analyses that may influence how voters evaluate parties are their feelings about the performance of the incumbent government. According to the notion of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981), voters' choices are based primarily on judgements about the past. In the Dutch context government parties may be expected to benefit from satisfaction with the government, whereas opposition parties may benefit from dissatisfaction with the government. Various more nuanced effects are possible. One is a positive effect of satisfaction for all government parties and a negative effect for all opposition parties. With respect to dissatisfaction a reversed pattern may be expected. These expectations are based on the idea that government parties benefit from satisfaction with the government, and opposition parties from dissatisfaction. Another possibility is that government satisfaction affects only voters' evaluations of the government parties, and that evaluations of the opposition parties are thus based solely on other factors. A third possibility is that some government parties benefit from satisfaction with the government, whereas others do not. Likewise, some opposition parties may benefit from dissatisfaction with the government, while others do not. The latter would be the most heterogeneous outcome.

Data and measurement

This paper focuses on the explanation of party evaluations in the Netherlands. Basis for analysis are data from three Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (1986, 1998, and 2002).¹ Party evaluations will be analysed in relation to variables that tap the aforementioned factors: voters' social characteristics, ideological positions, policy preferences, and government satisfaction. The parties that will be focused on are the Labour Party, Liberal Party, Christian Democrats, D66, GreenLeft, Socialist Party, orthodox Protestant parties, and List Pim Fortuyn. For the sake of convenience the evaluations of the orthodox Protestant parties, and in 1970 also those of the predecessors of the Christian Democrats (CDA) and in 1986 those of the predecessors of GreenLeft, are analysed jointly.² The impact of the four sorts of factors is analysed on the basis of multiple regression analyses with the evaluation score awarded to a particular party as dependent variable.³

Party evaluations have been measured in electoral research by various procedures. The method used in the surveys upon which this paper is based more or less corresponds with the feeling thermometer that has been used to measure candidate evaluations in the American National Election Studies. The question was worded as follows.

There are many political parties in our country. I would like to know from you how sympathetic you find these parties. You can give each party a score between 0 and 100. The more sympathetic you find a party, the higher the score you give. A score of 50 means that you find a party neither sympathetic nor unsympathetic. If you don't know a party, please feel free to say so. First we take the Labour Party. Which score would you give the Labour Party?

Respondents were shown a card with a horizontal line with at equal distance eleven numbers, which ranged from 0 to 100 (all multiples of ten). Both end-points and the mid-point were labelled. The score of 0 was labelled "very unsympathetic", the score of 50 was labelled "neither sympathetic, nor unsympathetic", and the score of 100 was labelled "very sympathetic".⁴

Voters' religious identity has been operationalised on the basis of questions about church membership and attendance of religious services. The latter is used as a proxy measure for the strength of voters' religious identification. Voters who attend religious services more often, presumably identify more strongly with that religious community than voters who attend such services less often. Social class identity has been operationalised on the basis of a question that asks voters to classify themselves as upper class, upper middle class, ordinary middle class, upper working class, or ordinary working class. Answers to these questions have been operationalised in the form of four so-called dummy variables, which indicate whether voters had a particular identity (coded 1 if voters had such an identity, coded 0 if not). If voters considered themselves member of a Christian church and attended religious services at least once a week, they are classified as having a strong Christian identity. If they considered themselves member of a Christian church and attended religious services less often, they are classified as having a weak Christian identity. If voters assigned themselves to the ordinary working class or the upper working class, they are classified as having a working class identity. If voters assigned themselves to the upper middle class or the upper class, they are classified as having an upper middle class identity. This means that evaluation scores awarded by secular middle class voters are in a sense used as a baseline. In analyses that involve the orthodox Protestant parties, religious identity has been conceptualised in terms of a *Protestant* identity (instead of a Christian identity). Hence, in those analyses voters are classified not on the basis of whether or not they considered themselves member of a Christian church, but whether they considered themselves member of a Protestant church.

The impact of left/right ideology is analysed on the basis of questions that asked voters to position themselves as well as the political parties in terms of a left-right scale (usually a ten-point scale). Measures that indicate how much agreement voters perceived between their own position and those of the various parties, have been constructed by subtracting the score voters assigned to a particular party from the score they said applied to themselves; the absolute values of the resulting figures have been taken.⁵ Hence, a value of 0 means that voters perceived no difference between their own left-right position and that of the party in question. As the ideological difference increases, so does the measure. The maximum score on this scale equals 9; this score results if respondents position themselves at one end of the scale, and the party at the other end.

Additionally, the surveys questioned voters about several issues. With respect to each issue respondents were shown a card with a seven-point scale at which both end-points were labelled. Voters were then asked to indicate how they perceived the positions of various political parties and what their own position was. In this way voters were asked about policies concerning euthanasia, abortion, income inequality, building nuclear plants, arms reduction, corporate democracy, pace of the European integration, government action against crime, integration of ethnic minorities, and admission of asylum seekers. Which issues were included in the survey, to a considerable varied across years. Nevertheless, each survey included at least one issue related to religious values (abortion or euthanasia), one issue concerning to economic issues (income inequality), and one issue related to postmaterialist values (arms reduction or nuclear plants). Because voters' opinions regarding the integration of ethnic minorities and the admission of asylum seekers were fairly strongly correlated, only one of these issues has been included in the analyses (asylum seekers).⁶

Government satisfaction has been operationalised on the basis of a question that asked voters to indicate whether in general they were very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with what the incumbent government had done. Because few voters indicated they were *very* satisfied or *very* dissatisfied, these are joined with those who said they were satisfied or dissatisfied, respectively. These responses have been used to create two dummy variables, which indicate whether or not voters were satisfied, and whether or not voters were dissatisfied (each coded 1 if they were, coded 0 if they were not).

Results

The findings of the analyses will be presented in two steps. First, the explanatory power of each of the four models will be discussed: social identity model, ideological proximity model, policy preferences model, and government approval model. These models reflect four modes of voting: cleavage-based voting, ideological voting, issue voting, and retrospective voting. In the next step the four models will be combined into one model that includes all these factors and the impact of each variable is discussed across parties and across time (composite model).

Let us start with the social identity model, which includes measures for religious and social class identity. The explanatory power of this model varied considerably across parties, and within some parties also across years (Table 1). In each year, evaluations of the Christian Democrats and the orthodox Protestant parties could be explained relatively well by the social identity model (explained variance mostly varied between 14 and 20 per cent). In 1986 evaluations of the Labour Party could be explained relatively well too, but since 1998 this was no longer the case. Evaluations of the Liberal Party could also be explained to some extent in 1970 and 1986, but less so in later years. One party shows the reversed pattern. While evaluations of D66 could initially be explained poorly, in later years the model performed better. With respect to GreenLeft (and their predecessors), Socialist Party, and List Pim Fortuyn, the model did not substantially contribute to the explanation of how voters evaluated them in any year.

The explanatory power of the ideological proximity model, which is based on perceived agreement in terms of left/right, also varied considerably across parties and across years. This means that other factors than perceived agreement in terms of left-right were more important for some parties than for others. In 1986 the model performed best with respect to evaluations of the Labour Party (the explained variance as indicated by the amount of explained variance was 40 per cent). In that year the model also performed fairly well with respect to the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats (explained variance was about 30 per cent). Regarding the other parties the corresponding figures varied between 10 and 20 per cent. On the whole, in 1998 and 2002 the explanatory power of the model was somewhat weaker, but ideological agreement in terms of left-right still mattered. In 2002 the explained variance was about 20 per cent with respect to GreenLeft, Liberal Party, and List Pim Fortuyn, about 15 per cent with respect to Labour Party and Christian Democrats, and about 10 per cent with respect to Socialist Party, orthodox Protestant parties, and D66. The most strik-

ing differences across the years concern the Labour Party. While in 1986 the explanatory power was 40 per cent, by 1998 it had decreased to only 8 per cent. In 2002 the figure was again higher, but still far behind that of 1986.

TABLE 1 The explanatory power of four models to explain party evaluations in the Netherlands (explained variance in multiple regression analysis, adjusted R²)

<i>model</i>	Labour Party			Liberal Party		
	1986	1998	2002	1986	1998	2002
social identity	0.15	0.02	0.03	0.09	0.03	0.03
ideological proximity	0.40	0.08	0.16	0.30	0.23	0.20
policy preferences	0.20	0.07	0.15	0.20	0.16	0.14
government approval	0.27	0.08	0.15	0.27	0.03	0.01
<i>composite model</i>	<i>0.52</i>	<i>0.21</i>	<i>0.31</i>	<i>0.46</i>	<i>0.32</i>	<i>0.28</i>

<i>model</i>	Christian Democrats			D66		
	1986	1998	2002	1986	1998	2002
social identity	0.17	0.14	0.15	0.04	0.07	0.11
ideological proximity	0.14	0.15	0.22	0.11	0.07	0.10
policy preferences	0.15	0.08	0.10	0.02	0.09	0.16
government approval	0.35	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.07	0.10
<i>composite model</i>	<i>0.50</i>	<i>0.23</i>	<i>0.25</i>	<i>0.13</i>	<i>0.21</i>	<i>0.28</i>

<i>model</i>	GreenLeft			Socialist Party	
	1986	1998	2002	1998	2002
social identity	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
ideological proximity	0.14	0.15	0.22	0.14	0.12
policy preferences	0.07	0.17	0.25	0.10	0.12
government approval	0.11	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00
<i>composite model</i>	<i>0.22</i>	<i>0.25</i>	<i>0.34</i>	<i>0.21</i>	<i>0.19</i>

<i>model</i>	Orthodox Protestant			List Pim Fortuyn
	1986	1998	2002	2002
social identity	0.16	0.19	0.20	0.00
ideological proximity	0.18	0.14	0.11	0.18
policy preferences	0.14	0.17	0.22	0.24
government approval	0.11	0.01	0.02	0.05
<i>composite model</i>	<i>0.34</i>	<i>0.33</i>	<i>0.33</i>	<i>0.31</i>

Notes: The social identity model includes effects of weak Christian identity, strong Christian identity, working class identity and upper middle class identify (dummy variables). With respect to the orthodox Protestant parties the effects of a religious identity concern a Protestant identity instead of a Christian identity. The ideological proximity model includes the effect of perceived proximity in terms of left/right. The policy preferences model includes effects of the following issues: euthanasia, income inequality, nuclear plants, European integration, crime, asylum seekers (when included in the DPES data set). The government approval model includes effects for satisfaction and for dissatisfaction with government performance (dummy variables). The composite model combines the aforementioned factors.

How well party evaluations could be explained on the basis of policy preferences also varied across parties, and within parties across years. For example, in 1970 the explanatory power varied between 12 per cent (Liberal Party and Christian Democrats) and 20 per cent (Labour Party). In 1986 evaluations of the Labour Party and the Liberal Party could both be

explained fairly well on the basis of voters' policy preferences (the explained variance was 20 per cent), while evaluations of the Christian Democrats and orthodox Protestant parties could be explained only slightly worse. Evaluations of GreenLeft and D66, however, could not be explained well. In later years the evaluations of the Labour Party, Liberal Party, and Christian Democrats could not be explained as well as in 1986, but policy preferences still mattered. With respect to GreenLeft and D66, the explanatory power of the model increased. In fact, none of the party evaluations could be explained as well as those of GreenLeft in 2002 (explained variance equalled 25 per cent). Evaluations of the orthodox Protestant parties could also be explained fairly well in 2002, and so could those of List Pim Fortuyn.

The final model to be discussed is the government approval model, which includes the effects of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbent government. In 1986 evaluations of the Labour Party, Liberal Party, and Christian Democrats could be explained particularly well. The explained variance was 25 per cent with respect to the former two parties, and even 35 per cent with respect to the latter. Evaluations of the predecessors of GreenLeft and orthodox Protestant parties could be explained to some extent too (explained variance equalled 11 per cent). In subsequent years with respect to the government parties the explained variance was at most as high as 15 per cent (Labour Party in 2002), but sometimes as low as 1 per cent (Liberal Party in 2002). After 1986, the only two opposition parties for whom the model resulted in an explained variance of 5 per cent were GreenLeft and List Pim Fortuyn in 2002. In all other cases the explanatory power of the model was very limited. Hence, the model based on government satisfaction cannot be applied successfully with respect to all parties and all years. However, in some instances government satisfaction appeared to play an important role, in particular in relation to government parties.

If we shift our focus to the multivariate analyses concerning the composite model, we can see that all factors influenced party evaluations to some extent (Table 2). This means that the effect of none of the factors was mediated – at least not fully – by other factors. So, the effects of religious and social class identity were not mediated fully by policy preferences, and the effects of policy preferences were not mediated fully by perceived left-right agreement either (nor the other way round). Second, the size of the impact of the various factors varied clearly across parties, and within parties sometimes across time. Third, earlier conclusions concerning the size of the impact of the various factors are supported by the multivariate analyses. Let us focus on these in some more detail.

TABLE 2 Multivariate models to explain party evaluations
(beta coefficients, constant, and adjusted R² in multiple regression analysis)

	Labour Party			Liberal Party		
	1986	1998	2002	1986	1998	2002
<i>social identity</i>						
weak Christian id.	n.s.	n.s.	- 0.04	- 0.05	n.s.	n.s.
strong Christian id.	n.s.	- 0.08	n.s.	- 0.07	- 0.08	- 0.05
working class id.	0.11	0.06	0.06	- 0.05	- 0.10	- 0.05
upper middle class id.	n.s.	- 0.05	n.s.	0.09	n.s.	0.07
<i>ideological proximity</i>						
left-right disagreement	- 0.41	- 0.21	- 0.22	- 0.27	- 0.35	- 0.37
<i>policy preferences</i>						
euthanasia	0.05	n.s.	0.08	0.06	n.s.	0.07
income inequality	0.16	0.14	0.14	- 0.15	- 0.18	- 0.12
nuclear plants	0.08	0.06	0.09	- 0.12	- 0.04	- 0.09
European integration		0.08	0.07		n.s.	n.s.
crime			0.06			n.s.
asylum seekers		0.09	0.10		- 0.14	- 0.12
<i>government approval</i>						
satisfied with gov.	- 0.13	0.17	0.14	0.17	0.06	0.07
dissatisfied with gov.	0.10	- 0.16	- 0.20	- 0.18	- 0.08	- 0.09
constant	67.5	65.6	60.7	60.7	65.0	63.3
explained variance	0.52	0.21	0.31	0.46	0.32	0.28
	Christian Democrats			D66		
	1986	1998	2002	1986	1998	2002
<i>social identity</i>						
weak Christian id.	0.13	0.26	0.24	- 0.06	- 0.07	- 0.05
strong Christian id.	0.16	0.24	0.22	- 0.09	- 0.19	- 0.18
working class id.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
upper middle class id.	- 0.04	- 0.05	n.s.	0.10	0.07	0.07
<i>ideological proximity</i>						
left-right disagreement	- 0.24	- 0.22	- 0.29	- 0.29	- 0.20	- 0.17
<i>policy preferences</i>						
euthanasia	- 0.11	- 0.10	- 0.08	0.07	0.06	0.14
income inequality	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.08	0.10
nuclear plants	- 0.05	n.s.	n.s.	0.07	0.07	0.05
European integration		0.08	0.05		0.08	0.10
crime			- 0.08			0.07
asylum seekers		n.s.	n.s.		0.11	0.06
<i>government approval</i>						
satisfied with gov.	0.20	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.14	0.08
dissatisfied with gov.	- 0.26	- 0.08	n.s.	- 0.08	- 0.09	- 0.16
constant	62.2	56.8	57.8	61.7	56.0	57.0
explained variance	0.50	0.23	0.25	0.13	0.21	0.28

n.s. indicates an effect is not significant

TABLE 2 continued
(beta coefficients, constant, and adjusted R² in multiple regression analysis)

	GreenLeft			Socialist Party	
	1986	1998	2002	1998	2002
<i>social identity</i>					
weak Christian id.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	- 0.08	n.s.
strong Christian id.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	- 0.12	n.s.
working class id.	- 0.09	n.s.	- 0.06	n.s.	n.s.
upper middle class id.	n.s.	n.s.	0.07	n.s.	0.11
<i>ideological proximity</i>					
left-right disagreement	- 0.27	- 0.25	- 0.26	- 0.26	- 0.25
<i>policy preferences</i>					
euthanasia	n.s.	0.12	0.10	n.s.	0.07
income inequality	0.15	0.13	0.19	0.10	0.13
nuclear plants	0.11	0.10	0.10	n.s.	0.08
European integration		n.s.	0.09	n.s.	n.s.
crime			0.08		n.s.
asylum seekers		0.24	0.17	0.20	0.14
<i>government approval</i>					
satisfied with gov.	- 0.15	n.s.	n.s.	- 0.07	n.s.
dissatisfied with gov.	n.s.	- 0.06	- 0.07	n.s.	n.s.
constant	51.4	60.2	62.0	58.4	52.8
explained variance	0.22	0.25	0.34	0.21	0.19
	Orthodox Protestant			List Pim Fortuyn	
	1986	1998	2002	2002	
<i>social identity</i>					
weak Christian id.	0.06	0.09	0.13	n.s.	
strong Christian id.	0.25	0.28	0.26	n.s.	
working class id.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	
upper middle class id.	n.s.	- 0.06	n.s.	n.s.	
<i>ideological proximity</i>					
left-right disagreement	- 0.24	- 0.22	- 0.23	- 0.26	
<i>policy preferences</i>					
euthanasia	- 0.22	- 0.25	- 0.27	0.06	
income inequality	n.s.	n.s.	0.07	- 0.06	
nuclear plants	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	
European integration		- 0.05	n.s.	n.s.	
crime			n.s.	n.s.	
asylum seekers		n.s.	0.08	- 0.32	
<i>government approval</i>					
satisfied with gov.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	- 0.08	
dissatisfied with gov.	- 0.14	n.s.	0.07	0.09	
constant	43.5	49.4	49.3	41.9	
explained variance	0.34	0.33	0.33	0.31	

Notes: n.s. indicates an effect is not significant. With respect to the orthodox Protestant parties the model includes dummy variables for a weak or strong Protestant identity instead of a weak or strong Christian identity.

The size of the impact of social identity varied strongly across parties, and within parties to a limited extent across time. Voters' religious identity had a strong impact on their evaluations of the Christian Democrats (beta varied roughly between 0.15 and 0.25) and, especially among voters with a strong Protestant identity, on their evaluations of the orthodox Protestant parties (beta varied between 0.25 and 0.30). Evaluations of D66, GreenLeft, and Socialist Party were sometimes also affected by voters' religious identity (four beta's varied between 0.10 to 0.20), while evaluations of the Labour Party, Liberal Party, and List Pim Fortuyn were virtually unaffected. The impact of social class identity was limited with respect to all parties. If effects were at all significant, their size was limited (beta's mostly varied between 0.05 and 0.10).

The impact of policy preferences also differed across parties. With respect to the Labour Party and Liberal Party the issue of income inequality mattered most (beta's varied between 0.12 and 0.18), while the influence of the asylum seekers issue was only slightly weaker (beta's varied between 0.09 and 0.14). Evaluations of the Christian Democrats and D66 were not affected that strongly by opinions on any issue, although various issues mattered somewhat. The position of GreenLeft, and to a more limited extent also that of the Socialist Party, was different. Their evaluations were affected fairly strongly by various issues, in particular those of asylum seekers and income inequality. The orthodox Protestant parties and List Pim Fortuyn took a different position: only one issue mattered, and it did so strongly. In the case of the orthodox Protestant parties this concerned the euthanasia issue (beta's varied between 0.14 and 0.27), while voters' evaluations of List Pim Fortuyn were affected very strongly by their opinions about asylum seekers (beta equalled 0.32). No issue had such a strong impact in any year.

The only factor that had a relatively similar impact across parties, was left-right agreement. In general, evaluations of the various parties were affected fairly strongly by perceived ideological disagreement (most beta's were close to 0.25). The most notable exceptions are that evaluations of the Labour Party in 1986 and of the Liberal Party in 1998 and 2002 were affected by left-right disagreement more strongly (beta's varied between 0.35 and 0.41), while in 2002 evaluations of D66 were affected by left-right ideology less strongly (beta equalled 0.17). This is not to say, however, that no change took place in terms of ideology. The meaning of the terms 'left' and 'right' may have changed across time. Indeed, this is what appears to have happened (Rosema et al. 2007). More specific, across time the left/right continuum has become more strongly associated with issues of migration and integration. Hence, even behind the stable impact of left/right ideology changes can be found.

Finally, the impact of government satisfaction varied across parties in a particular way. Among government parties satisfaction and dissatisfaction usually had a fairly strong impact, while evaluations of the opposition parties were not affected much. An exception concerns the evaluations of the Labour Party in 1986, which were affected in the opposite way. With respect to the evaluations of government parties it is noteworthy that the effect of satisfaction was slightly weaker than that of dissatisfaction. Note also that evaluations of the Christian Democrats in 1986 were affected relatively strongly by satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the Lubbers-I government, while evaluations of the Liberal Party in 1998 and 2002 were not affected much by voters' evaluations of the two purple coalitions led by Kok. Hence, the degree to which satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the government affected evaluations of government parties, varied somewhat across them. In each election, the strongest effects found involved the prime minister's party.

Given the differences across parties in the size of the effect of various factors, it is no surprise that a similar observation can be made regarding the explanatory power of the multivariate model. In particular, evaluations of the Labour Party, Liberal Party, and Christian Democrats could be explained well in 1986 (explained variance was about 50 per cent), while in later years the model performed less well. Nevertheless, evaluations of these three parties could also be explained to a considerable extent in later years (explained variance varied between 20 and 35 per cent). Figures regarding the evaluations of the orthodox Protestant parties and GreenLeft did not deviate much. The same applies to evaluations of List Pim Fortuyn in 2002, which could be explained as well as those of most other parties. The model performed relatively poorly, on the other hand, with respect to evaluations of the Socialist Party (explained variance equalled 20 per cent) and with respect to D66 when they were in opposition (explained variance equalled 13 per cent).

Another thing to note concerns the constants in the regression analyses, which varied across parties and time as well. These values refer to a rather peculiar class of voters: secular middle class voters who had no pronounced views on the various issues, perceived full agreement in terms of left-right, and were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the government. Nevertheless, these values do tell us something about how voters evaluated the various parties, irrespective of the factors included in the model. The most noteworthy changes across time were that the evaluations of GreenLeft were considerably more positive than those of their predecessors. The findings furthermore indicate that the orthodox Protestant parties and List Pim Fortuyn were evaluated relatively negatively. With respect to the former this can be understood if one realises that the reference group to which the

constant refers concerns secular voters. This may also explain why the constant regarding the Christian Democrats was usually slightly lower than that of most other parties. For the negative evaluations of List Pim Fortuyn such a straightforward explanation is not available. This implies that the question is not why (List Pim) Fortuyn was liked by those who supported him and provided them with 26 seats. The real ‘mystery’ is why voters did not like his party better.

Conclusion

Previous electoral research has focused on various factors to explain vote choice in the Netherlands. These include social identity, left-right ideology, policy preferences, and government satisfaction. In this paper their impact on the evaluations of individual parties has been examined. The analyses have shown that virtually all factors contribute to our understanding of why voters evaluate parties as they do.

Perhaps the most striking observation is that the explanatory power of the models varied considerably across parties, and within parties across time. Evaluations of the Labour Party could be explained best in 1986 on the basis of left-right agreement, while in 1998 and 2002 models including left-right agreement, policy preferences, and government satisfaction performed about equally well. Evaluations of the Liberal Party could also be explained best on the basis of left-right agreement, while the model that included policy preferences clearly outperformed the other two models. The only exception was 1986, when evaluations of the Liberal Party could also be explained well on the basis of government satisfaction. With respect to the evaluations of the Christian Democrats in 1986 government satisfaction and left-right agreement resulted in the best explanations, in 2002 left-right agreement and social identity did, while in 1998 the model based on social identity performed best. With respect to the evaluations of D66 the most notable observation is that each model had only limited explanatory power. Evaluations of GreenLeft, on the other hand, could usually be explained rather well on the basis of voters’ policy preferences as well as in terms of perceived left-right agreement. With respect to the Socialist Party models including these factors had less explanatory power, but more than the other two. With respect to the orthodox Protestant parties social identity and policy preferences both explained evaluations rather well, and more so than left-right agreement. Finally, evaluations of List Pim Fortuyn could be explained best on the basis of policy preferences, while the model based on left-right agreement outperformed the other two.

These findings illustrate that each model tells a part of the story. This in a sense justifies the application of a model that combines the various concepts. In such a multivariate model perceived left-right agreement played a major role, irrespective of which party was focused on. Apparently, voters perception regarding the extent to which parties' political views correspond with their own opinions in terms of this general ideological dimension always matter. With respect to government parties voters' satisfaction with the incumbent government more often than not played an important role too, in particular if the party of the prime minister was involved. Additionally, voters' Christian identity was highly relevant regarding the Christian Democrats and the orthodox Protestant parties, and to a more limited extent with respect to D66. Social class identity, on the other hand, played only a minor role. Finally, in some instances particular issues had an impact that could not be accounted for by the notions of left and right, nor by any of the other factors. The most noteworthy case concerns List Pim Fortuyn. Evaluations of this newcomer were affected very strongly by voters' opinions regarding the issue of asylum seekers. The same issue played a role, although less strongly and with effects in the opposite direction, with respect to evaluations of GreenLeft and Socialist Party. Another case where opinions on a particular issue had a large impact, concerns the issue of euthanasia in relation to the orthodox Protestant parties.

The fundamental implication of these findings is that one of the assumptions that underlie virtually all electoral research, should be considered false. After all, most models of voting build on the idea that the degree to which voters like or dislike parties depends on their image of those parties, that the image of each party consists of the same set of elements, and that the evaluations of those elements jointly determine the overall evaluation of a party. Parties are thus assumed to be liked and disliked for the same reasons. According to the view adopted in this paper, evaluations of different parties may have different bases. Media reports and personal conversations about one party may involve different subjects than those concerning another party. Consequently, whereas evaluations of one party may be explained well on the basis of a particular factor, evaluations of another party may not. The analyses presented provide support for this view. The extent to which voters' social identity, policy preferences, perceived ideological agreement with parties, and satisfaction with the incumbent government affected their party evaluations, clearly differed across those parties. Contrary to what models of voting often assume, the bases of evaluation are not the same across parties. Voters do not like or dislike different parties for the same reasons. Voters like or dislike different parties for different reasons.

Notes

¹ Documentation on these studies is provided in Van der Eijk et al. (1986), Aarts et al. (1999); and Irwin et al. (2005).

² Evaluations of the orthodox Protestant parties (SGP, GPV, RPF, and Christian Union) are analysed in terms of the highest evaluation score awarded to any of these parties. Similarly, the evaluations of the predecessors of the Christian Democrats (ARP, KVP, and CHU) and the predecessors of GreenLeft (CPN, PPR, PSP, and EVP) are analysed in terms of the highest evaluation score awarded to any of them.

³ In order to exclude effects that are not statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), in all multivariate analyses a backward procedure has been used. In each analysis dummy variables were coded '1' if voters belonged to a particular category, and '0' if they did not.

⁴ Analysis using data from the DPES are based on evaluation scores that have been rounded off to the nearest multiple of ten, in order to make findings of the various years more comparable (cf. Rosema, 2004).

⁵ In order to make findings comparable, scales have all been transformed (if necessary) into a scale with values ranging between 1 and 10.

⁶ Note that testing the impact of policy preferences on the basis of the proximity model (Enelow and Hinich, 1981) or the directional theory of issue voting (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989) would require the inclusion of data concerning voters' perceptions of parties' positions with respect to the various issues. As such data are mostly not available in the surveys used, the analyses presented only include voters' own policy preferences. With respect to ideology in terms of left-right, on the other hand, these data are available and the proximity model may thus be applied.

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