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Constructing a socialist constituency. The social-democratic language of politics in the Netherlands, c. 1890-1950

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Introduction

In 1894 the Dutch equivalent of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* was founded: the *Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij* (SDAP). The party's foundation resulted from a debate within the Dutch socialist movement about its political strategy. Where the movement's first leader, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, disappointed after a short spell as member of Parliament in the 1880s, embraced anarchism, the 'parliamentary socialists' argued that political action was necessary in order to better the cause of the working class, although they still acknowledged the necessity and inevitability of a revolution.¹ The SDAP first participated in parliamentary elections in 1897 and managed to claim two seats: one for a rural district in the north of the Netherlands, the heartland of the early socialist movement, and one in the industrial city of Enschede in the east. The following elections the SDAP managed to expand its electorate, claiming 18 seats in the 1913 elections. The party had its strongest turnout in the urban districts in the west of the country. The introduction of general male suffrage did not bring the SDAP the huge victory it had hoped for; in 1918 the SDAP emerged as the second biggest party in Parliament after the Roman Catholic party, a status they managed to uphold up until 1952 when they surpassed the Roman Catholics for the first time. After many revolutionary Marxists had left the party in 1909, the SDAP seemed ready to participate in a coalition government, but it took until 1939 before the first socialist ministers were sworn in by the Queen. After the war, however, the social democrats would be included in a coalition government continuously up until 1959.

The dominant narrative explaining the history of Dutch social democratic politics in the first half of the twentieth century is the narrative of pillarisation: the vertical division of society along religious and ideological lines which resulted in the establishment of four distinct, closely-knit networks of political, social, religious and economic organisations: the socialist pillar, the catholic pillar, the orthodox-protestant pillar and the neutral or liberal pillar. From this follows that political parties represented the interests of the members of their pillar: the SDAP catered to the needs of the secularized working class, the RKSP represented the interests of Dutch Catholics, the Antirevolutionary Party (ARP) and Christian-Historical Union (CHU) represented different sections of the Dutch Protestant Churches and the liberal parties appealed to the votes of the remaining – secular and liberal-Protestant sections of society. The pillarisation of Dutch society is dated between the late 19th century and the 1960s when the self-evident relation between political parties and particular groups of voters evaporated.²

This narrative of pillarization, which – despite the fierce scholarly criticism it has met in recent years – still dominates the representation of modern Dutch political history, has resulted in a misinterpretation of the nature of elections.³ Parliamentary elections have been characterized as mere censuses, with each party mobilising its 'own' supporters, rather than as true contests between parties fighting for the support of overlapping constituencies.⁴ By

¹ D.J. Wansink, *Het socialisme op de tweesprong. De geboorte van de S.D.A.P.*, Haarlem 1939, pp. 123-125.

² A. Lijphart, *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek*, Amsterdam, 1968. For a critical recent overview of pillarisation historiography see: *Peter van Dam*, *Staat van verzuiling. Over een Nederlandse mythe*, Amsterdam 2011.

³ Van Dam's study is the latest in a range of critical investigations into the usefulness of the concept of pillarisation for Dutch political history writing. See also: *P. de Rooy*, *Voorbij de verzuiling?*, in: *BMGN* 116, 2001, pp. 45-57.

⁴ *R.B. Andeweg*, *De burger in de Nederlandse politiek*, in: *R.B. Andeweg/A. Hoogerwerf/J.J.A. Thomassen* (eds.), *Politiek in Nederland*, Alphen aan den Rijn en Brussel 1981, pp. 79-103.

treating political constituencies as the result of existing cleavages in society, pillarisation historiography has tended to ignore the constructed nature of political constituencies.⁵ After all, political stability in the terms of the distribution of seats in Parliament does not necessarily implicate that political parties during their election campaigns were merely focused on mobilizing ‘their’ grassroots supporters. Since in most studies on the SDAP and the PvdA elections are only discussed in terms of the results we, however, still know very little about the way in which the social democrats approached voters, how they tried to include them in their political constituency.⁶

Furthermore, the pillarization narrative has been accompanied by a historiographical focus on the (isolated) histories of the various political parties that represented the pillars politically. The key issues within this historiography are the parties’ ideological reorientation, and their institutional and parliamentary history.⁷ In the case of the SDAP, the first decades of its existence have been thoroughly researched by scholars focusing on the debate within the party about the preferred course somewhere between reformism and revolution.⁸ This has resulted in a rather progressive narrative with regard to the history of Dutch social democracy that moves ever closer to the pragmatic reformism of the postwar PvdA, which enabled the party to play a key role in postwar politics.⁹ Moreover, a focus on the party’s internal debate, which reached its climax in the mid 1930s only serves to confirm the idea that political parties were inward looking. In fact, within pillarisation historiography the interwar years have been portrayed as years of ‘consolidation’ in which the Netherlands was dominated by a ‘defensive’ party system, with parties chiefly being immersed in the preservation of their constituency.¹⁰ It, however, remains to be seen if this can be maintained when one leaves the perspective of internal party affairs and focuses on the party’s external communication with voters.¹¹

⁵ See the critical review by Peter van Rooden of several studies on Dutch pillarised society: *Peter van Rooden*, *Studies naar verzuiling als toegang tot de geschiedenis van de constructie van religieuze verschillen in Nederland*, *Theoretische Geschiedenis* 20, 1993, pp. 439-454. In his history of political representation, the French social scientists Bernard Manin also hints at the stability of political constituencies. In the “era of party democracy” political representation is based upon existing cleavages in society. As long as these cleavages were “real”, political representation was self-evident. *Bernard Manin*, *The principles of representative government*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 223.

⁶ *Henny Buiting*, *Richtingen- en partijstrijd in de SDAP. Het ontstaan van de Sociaal-Democratische Partij in Nederland (SDP)*, Amsterdam 1989; *H.F. Cohen*, *Om de vernieuwing van het socialisme. De politieke oriëntatie van de Nederlandse sociaal-democratie, 1919-1930*, Leiden 1974; *Annemieke Klijn*, *Arbeiders- of volkspartij. Een vergelijkende studie van het Belgisch en Nederlands socialisme, 1933-1946*, Maastricht 1990; *Peter Jan Knegtman*, *De jaren 1919-1946*, in: *Honderd jaar sociaal-democratie in Nederland, 1894-1994*, 1994, pp. 62-117; *Jos Perry*, *Roomsche kinine tegen roode koorts. Arbeidersbeweging en katholieke kerk in Maastricht 1880-1920*, Amsterdam 1983.

⁷ *Gerrit Voerman*, *De stand van de geschiedschrijving van de Nederlandse politieke partijen*, in: *BMGN* 120, 2005, pp. 226-269, there 235.

⁸ *Cohen*, *Om de vernieuwing*; *Rob Hartmans*, *Vijandige broeders? De Nederlandse sociaal-democratie en het nationaal-socialisme, 1922-1940*, Amsterdam 2012; *Peter Jan Knegtman*, *Socialisme en democratie. De SDAP tussen klasse en natie, 1929-1939*, Amsterdam 1989; *J.S. Wijne*, *Tussen dogma en werkelijkheid. De ideologische gijzeling van de sociaal-democratie in Nederland als bijdrage tot haar isolement tijdens het Interbellum*, Amsterdam 1992; *Klijn*, *Arbeiders- of volkspartij*; *Buiting*, *Richtingen- en partijstrijd*; *Bas van Dongen*, *Revolutie of integratie. De Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij in Nederland (SDAP) tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Amsterdam 1992.

⁹ *Dietrich Orlow*, *The paradoxes of success. Dutch Social Democracy and its Historiography*, in: *BMGN* 110, 1995, pp. 40-51, there 40.

¹⁰ *Henk te Velde*, *De spiegel van de negentiende eeuw. Partij, representatie en geschiedenis*, in: *Jaarboek DNPP* 2000, pp. 19-40, there 29; *H.W. von der Dunk*, *De partijen en de parlementaire democratie in het interbellum*, in: *R.A. Koole* (ed.), *Het belang van politieke partijen*, Groningen 1984, pp. 41-61; *Lijphart*, *Verzuiling*.

¹¹ See also: *Bernard Rulof*, *Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen? Reclame en ‘massapsychologische actie’ van de SDAP*, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 2, 2005, pp. 84-104, there 86.

Some progress has been made by the cultural turn in political history, which has promoted the exploration of party cultures and the “meaning of a party for its supporters”.¹² Although such an approach is promising – political alliances, after all, are also forged through the cultural and “social form of politics”¹³ – it still tends to ignore the importance of political discourse for the construction of political constituencies.¹⁴ Moreover, a focus on party culture still bears the risk of treating political movements as closed off communities and as such would fail to put the narrative of pillarisation seriously to the test.¹⁵ An exploration of the party’s electoral language of politics offers a way out of this pillarization paradigm.

Up until now, the electoral history of the SDAP has largely been ignored by scholars. In an article on the “white spots in the historiography of Dutch social democracy” published in 1994 Lipschits included “the electoral business in all its bearings” as one of the historiographical *terra incognita*.¹⁶ Since then, not much has changed.¹⁷ Lipschits’ interpretation of electoral research is predominantly social scientific – he calls for studies on electoral geography and sociology. Such investigations start from what one could call the ‘voter perspective’: the characteristics of voters are at the centre of attention. This, then, brings us back to the pillarization narrative because it tends to result in straightforward interpretations of the relationship between politicians and voters that consider political affiliation to be chiefly determined by voter characteristics such as religion and social and economic interests. In this case, political parties are treated as the “passive beneficiaries of structural divisions within society, rather than as dynamic organizations actively involved in the definition of political interests and the construction of political alliances”.¹⁸

This article therefore starts from the ‘party perspective’: the ways in which political parties have approached elections and how they have communicated with the electorate.¹⁹ Studying the language of this type of political communication enables us to identify to what kind of voters the social democrats appealed to, and how they tried to include them in their

¹² *Henk te Velde*, Het wij-gevoel van een morele gemeenschap: een politiek-culturele benadering van partijgeschiedenis in: Jaarboek DNPP 2004, pp. 106-123; *Gerrit Voerman*, Partijcultuur in Nederland. Naar nieuwe invalshoeken in de studie van de politieke partij, in: *Gerrit Voerman/Dirk Jan Wolffram* (eds.), Kossmann Instituut: benaderingen van de geschiedenis van politiek, Groningen 2006, pp. 43-49, there 44.

¹³ *Jon Lawrence*, Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914, in: *English Historical Review* 108, 1993, pp. 629-652, there 631. Rulof’s investigation of the SDAP as an interwar mass movement is a case in point: *Bernard Rulof*, ‘Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak’. SDAP, politieke manifestaties en massapolitiek, 1918-1940, Amsterdam 2007.

¹⁴ *P. de Rooy*, Begeerten en idealen. Een eeuw sociaal-democratie in Nederland, in: *De rode droom. Een eeuw sociaal-democratie in Nederland*, 1995; *Bernard Rulof*, Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands: Activism and its Sources of Inspiration during the 1930s, in: *Contemporary European History* 18, 2009, pp. 475-497; *Dennis Bos*, Waarachtige volksvrienden. De vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam, 1848-1894, Amsterdam 2001.

¹⁵ Studies on party culture are as yet scarcely available. At Leiden University Adriaan van Veldhuizen is preparing a dissertation on the party culture of the SDAP.

¹⁶ *I. Lipschits*, Witte plekken in de geschiedschrijving van de Nederlandse sociaaldemocratie, in: *Socialisme en democratie* 51, 1994, p. 372.

¹⁷ The studies by Ron de Jong on Dutch electoral culture form a favourable exception: *Ron de Jong*, *Electoral culture en politieke oriëntatie. Verkiezingen in Gelderland, 1888-1940*, Hilversum 2005; *Ibid.*, *Verkiezingen in Nederland 1888-1917. Een strijd om de kiezers of rituele volkstellingen?* in: *De negentiende eeuw* 29, 2005, pp. 115-134.

¹⁸ *Lawrence*, *Class and Gender*, p. 630.

¹⁹ Up until now, studies on the parties’ electoral culture and strategy have been in short supply. Kramer is preparing a dissertation on the electoral culture in the interwar years and the political scientist Van Praag has published a book on the internal debate about the party’s electoral strategy in the decade following the emergence of the New Left-movement. *Flip Kramer*, *De rituele census van 1925. Verkiezingsstrijd in verzuild Nederland*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 119, 2006, pp. 218-229; *Philip van Praag Jr.*, *Strategie en illusie. Elf jaar intern debat in de PvdA (1966-1977)*, Amsterdam 1990.

political constituency.²⁰ Research on the construction of political constituencies through political discourse has a long tradition in Britain, starting with Gareth Stedman Jones famous work on Chartism.²¹ Along similar lines, Jon Lawrence has investigated the language of Labour in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, highlighting its use of a non-class based language of politics that centred around male virtues.²² In his study on the early decades of the German social democratic movement, the German political historian Thomas Welskopp also pays attention to the discursive construction of political identity, while Thomas Mergel has explored the *Sprache des Wahlkampfes* in a more general sense as part of his wider investigation of the electoral culture in postwar Western Germany.²³ This article adds to these recent investigations of (socialist) political discourse an exploration of the electoral language of politics of the SDAP and its postwar successor, the PvdA, against the background of the internal debates about the party's ideology. Research is based on election brochures, pamphlets, newspaper ads, speeches and radio broadcasts used in election campaigns between the late 19th century and 1948. The article will show how Dutch social democrats have tried to expand their electoral base to include non-working class voters, women, who were granted suffrage in 1919, and confessional voters, while maintaining their credibility as a socialist party.

I

Ideological versus electoral language of politics

In 1895, a year after its foundation, the SDAP issued its first Political Manifesto. It was based on the Erfurter Program of the German SPD; the Marxist nature of the party was beyond doubt.²⁴ The party's position in the political landscape was based on a rivalry with various other political organisations. First of all, the SDAP met competition from the antiparliamentarian SDB from which it had defected. The SDB remained very influential in cities in the western part of the Netherlands where workers were at first reluctant to accept the SDAP as a force in parliamentary politics. Towards the turn of the century, however, the SDB fell apart and the SDAP managed to turn cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam into one of their electoral strongholds. Second, through its Marxist ideology of class struggle, the SDAP positioned itself against other 'bourgeois' left-leaning and progressive-liberal parties. Third, the SDAP competed with confessional political parties the two most prominent of which were the Antirevolutionary Party, which aimed for the vote of Orthodox-Protestants, and the less well-organised Roman-Catholic Party. The constituencies of these confessional parties did not show any overlap, but they competed with the SDAP and the progressive liberals for the support of the workers' vote.

²⁰ Recent investigations have shown the importance of the language of politics for our understanding of the distribution of political power in general and the way in which political alliances are forged or contested more in particular: Willibald Steinmetz, (ed.) *Political languages in the age of extremes*, Oxford 2011; Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the people. Party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge/New York 1998; Thomas Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfes in der Bundesrepublik 1949-1990*, Göttingen 2010. The *Sonderforschungsbereich* The Political as Communicative Space in History at the University of Bielefeld is also a case in point: <<http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/geschichte/forschung/sfb584/>> [21.12.2012].

²¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *The Language of Chartism*, in: James Epstein/Dorothy Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-60*, London 1982, pp. 3-58; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of class. Studies in English working class history*, Cambridge 1983.

²² Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 151-158.

²³ Thomas Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz*, Bonn 2000, pp. 257-333.

²⁴ Bart Tromp, *Het sociaal-democratisch programma. De beginselprogramma's van SDB, SDAP en PvdA, 1878-1977. Een onderzoek naar de ontwikkeling van een politieke stroming*, 2002, pp. 76-81.

The SDAP emerged at a time when a mere 11% of the Dutch population had been granted suffrage. Votes were casted according to a district voting system with candidates needing to win more than 50% of the votes in order to be elected to Parliament. These circumstances contributed to the adoption of an inclusive socialist language of politics. Although the party's 1895 manifesto hinted at an exclusive focus on workers, in (electoral) practice the party tried to appeal to a much broader constituency in order to stand a chance of winning a few seats. In party leader Pieter Jelles Troelstra's speeches and publications tenant farmers, shopkeepers and small employers were included in the socialist constituency. Their interests were framed in class terms; they represented labour in its struggle against capitalism.²⁵ In 1905 the prominent socialist J.H. Schaper argued for the inclusive nature of the concept of "working men". Although the "proletarian class" formed the heart of the SDAP, the social democrats according to Schaper represented the "common man".²⁶ Troelstra's and Schaper's language was in line with the electoral language used by early socialists. In 1888, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, the first socialist elected to Parliament, had argued that workers and *Kleinbürger* represented 'labour' in its battle against capital.²⁷ Domela's inclusion of the petty bourgeoisie had also been a matter of electoral strategy since most workers still lacked the right to vote.

Buiting has shown that the obvious tensions between the electoral language of politics and the core tenets of the party's Marxist ideology were fiercely debated. The party's appeal to tenant farmers in particular was heavily contested.²⁸ In the end, Troelstra's pragmatic approach prevailed; many determined Marxists left the party in the 1909 schism.²⁹ This debate shows that, on the hand, the party ideology *limits* the range of discourses and concepts available in electoral politics, because parties consider their ideology to be a mobilizing force and because they tend to see discrepancies between ideology and the electoral language of politics as hypocritical and deceiving.³⁰ On the other hand, however, the context of electoral politics asks for a specific language of politics. The nature of the electorate combined with a party's wish to win votes will often result in an electoral language that stretches beyond the boundaries of the ideological linguistic framework. The fact that the SDAP choose to draw up electoral programmes for each parliamentary election underlines the marginal role of the political manifesto in the party's electoral propaganda.³¹ Seen from this perspective, the introduction of a new political manifesto, which the SDAP did in 1912 and 1937, is not merely the result of an internal debate about the party's ideology, but also catalysed by the existence of an electoral language of politics that has lost touch with the core of the party's official ideology. This article, however, does not aim to 'judge' the electoral propaganda for consistency with the party's ideology. Instead it explores the electoral language as a distinct and flexible set of discourses that is linked to the party's ideology, but is not necessarily completely consistent with it, and is used by politicians in order to win over voters for their party and their political ideas.

²⁵ Buiting, *Richtingen- en partijstrijd*, pp. 65-67. See: J.H. Schaper, *De sociaaldemokratie...en...wat er van gezegd wordt*, Amsterdam 1905; *Het socialisme komt*, in: *Het Tweede District. Verkiezingsblad van de Arbeiders-Kiesvereniging Amsterdam II*, 6.1905, International Institute of Social History (IISG), SDAP-Amsterdam Archive, Reg. 267

²⁶ Schaper, *De sociaaldemokratie*; see also: *Zijn de Sociaaldemokraten vijanden van ...den Godsdienst?* IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 267.

²⁷ *Sociaal politiek overzicht*, in: *Recht voor allen*, 5 March 1888.

²⁸ Buiting, *Richtingen- en partijstrijd*, pp. 81-82, 118-120.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 69; Gerrit Voerman, *De meridiaan van Moskou. De CPN en de Communistische Internationale (1919-1930)*, Amsterdam 2001, p. 26.

³⁰ Tromp, *Het sociaal-democratisch programma*, p. 104; Wijne has shown that in the 1920s forced adherence to socialist dogma stood in the way of a broader appeal of the SDAP. *Wijne*, *Tussen dogma*, pp. 117-118.

³¹ Tromp, *Het sociaal-democratisch programma*, pp. 102-103, 146.

II

Discourses of religion, duty and education in the socialist language of politics

In his seminal work on the political manifestos of the Dutch social democrats, Tromp argues that based on the first manifesto of 1895, socialism cannot be described as a *Weltanschauung*. Not only were no references made to religion, but also the party's materialism was not elaborated in terms of an all-encompassing world view.³² When one compares this ideological language with the electoral language of politics of the SDAP the differences are striking. A key feature of the early socialist electoral propaganda is the abundant use of religious discourse. For one, socialists and others portrayed the rise of the socialist movement in religious terms.³³ The founders of the SDAP were called the “twelve apostles” and many prominent socialists have described their entrance in the socialist movement as a ‘conversion’. Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis and Pieter Jelles Troelstra were characterized as the preachers of the socialist faith. When Domela competed for a seat in Parliament in several districts across the Netherlands in the 1880s he described his speeches across the country as “preaching the Gospel of Dissatisfaction” and referred to the “blood of the martyrs who had suffered and fought for the cause of the workers”.³⁴ In his campaign in May 1891 Domela spoke of socialism as “our Pentecostal Gospel” and urged his followers to consider themselves to be the “apostles of the Gospel of the Future” and convince others to “join our ranks”.³⁵

One could argue that this religious rhetoric was an obvious element in Domela's language of politics because of his background as a former Dutch-Reformed minister. However, as we have seen, other socialist politicians used a religious repertoire as well. In 1902, long after Domela's departure from the spotlight of politics, Troelstra argued that socialists saw Jesus as the “brother of the common men and the oppressed”.³⁶ In order to persuade confessional voters to join the SDAP social democratic politicians argued that the Bible contained an “anti-capitalist and democratic spirit” and referred to ancient Christian philosophers as “Christian-socialists”.³⁷ Moreover, in a brochure for the 1905 elections, the SDAP rejected the claim that socialists were by definition antireligious.³⁸ Troelstra clarified his stance by condemning the liberals for their use of the antithesis of reason versus religion; the social democrats did not want to fight against religion, but against capitalism.³⁹ Not religion was the enemy, put elites who used it to oppress the people.⁴⁰ Christian politicians

³² Ibid, 89.

³³ *Henk te Velde*, The religious side of democracy. Early socialism, 21st-century populism and the sacralization of politics, in: *Joost Augusteijn/Patrick G.C. Dassen/Maartje J. Janse* (eds.), *Political religion beyond totalitarianism. The sacralization of politics in the age of democracy*, Basingstoke 2013; *A. van Veldhuizen*, A grassroots sacred socialist history. Dutch social democrats (1894-1920) in: *Ibid*; see also *Te Velde*, *Het wij-gevoel*, pp. 111-116.

³⁴ Aan alle arbeiders!, in: *Recht voor Allen*, 2 January 1888.

³⁵ Ons Pinksterevangelie, in: *ibid.*, 16-17 May 1891.

³⁶ *Pieter Jelles Troelstra*, *Sociaal christendom. Bijdrage tot den strijd over de verhouding van christendom en socialisme*, Amsterdam 1902.

³⁷ *J.H. Schaper*, *De sociaaldemokratie .. en .. wat er van gezegd wordt*, Amsterdam 1905.

³⁸ One of the pamphlets used in the 1905 elections opened with the rhetorical question: ‘are social democrats enemies of religion?’. *Zijn den sociaaldemokraten vijanden van...den godsdienst*, 1905, IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 267; *Schaper*, *De sociaaldemokratie*.

³⁹ *Pieter Jelles Troelstra*, *Voorwaarts, marsch! Ons standpunt bij de verkiezingen. Rede gehouden op het kongres der SDAP op den Eersten Paaschdag 1905*, Amsterdam 1905.

⁴⁰ See also: *Perry*, *Roomsche kinine*, p. 270; the SDAP often shied away from portraying their enemies as religious or confessional parties and labelled them instead as “clerical parties”. “Clericalism” was a pejorative term that referred to the inappropriate involvement of members of the clergy in another domain, the domain of

were therefore often described as “so-called Christians”. Where they failed to put their faith into practice, the SDAP framed socialism as the political translation of the mission of Christ.⁴¹

Although the religious discourse of the SDAP was often targeted at specific groups of voters in districts with a high degree of confessional voters, it would be wrong to interpret it solely as an effort to win over confessional voters for the SDAP.⁴² As the authors of a recent volume on political religion have made clear, “politics and religion are very much interwoven and cannot be clearly separated”.⁴³ Politics in general, across all parties, was phrased in religious terms because religion, despite a slowly growing rate of secularization, was still a dominant force in society. Many organisations were connected to the church or otherwise affiliated with religion, like schools, trade unions and sports clubs. Against this background, religious terms and phrases formed the obvious vocabulary with which to describe the new phenomenon of mass political parties. Also in scholarly works of the early 20th century religious language was used to explain the operations of political parties, which were explicitly compared with the church.⁴⁴

It is, however, precisely this religious discourse that probably hampered the social democrats in appealing to the confessional vote. In his investigation of internal debates about the tensions between socialist doctrines and political ‘reality’ in the interwar years, Wijne convincingly argues that the party’s lack of success in extending its constituency cannot be solely blamed on forces outside the party, like the ability of the clergy to keep its hold on the confessional electorate.⁴⁵ Where Wijne focuses on ideology by arguing that fear to act contrary to their socialist principles hampered their appeal to a broader public, also the nature of socialist discourse needs to be taken into consideration. Through its political discourse and its public manifestations, socialism was presented to the public as a political religion and although many social democrats were keen not to present themselves as anti-religious, this religious nature of socialism turned it into a competitor of Protestantism and Catholicism. Since supporting the socialist cause was often framed in terms of a conversion, confessional voters were left to ponder the question if such a conversion would be reconcilable with their faith. As we will see, leading social democrats confronted this issue in the 1930s as they urged for the formulation of social democracy as a political doctrine instead of a quasi-religious political philosophy.

For now, however, religious discourse seemed to fit well with a movement that presented socialism to the public as a principle, as a doctrine that required the workers to study socialist texts – much like reading the Bible – in order to be able to convert others to become a member of the socialist movement. This task of studying and converting was phrased as a “duty” of all members of the socialist movement: it was a labourer’s “highest duty” to help “free society of the pressing load of capitalism”.⁴⁶ Disobeying this duty was

politics. SDAP Amsterdam I, IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, 1905, Reg. 267; see also Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij. Amsterdam I en VI, Ibid.

⁴¹ *J.H. Schaper*, *De vrouw in den strijd. Een woord aan de vrouwen*, Amsterdam 1922; *Troelstra*, *Sociaal christendom*.

⁴² see *H.M.T.M. Giebels*, *Katholicisme en socialisme. Het zelfbeeld van de Eindhovense christen-socialisten in het spanningsveld tussen traditie en moderniteit, 1885-1920*, Tilburg 1994.

⁴³ *Joost Augusteijn/ Patrick G. C. Dassen/Maartje J. Janse* (eds.), Concluding remarks, in: *Ibid.*, *Political religion beyond totalitarianism. The sacralization of politics in the age of democracy*, Basingstoke 2013; see also *Te Velde*, *De spiegel*, pp. 19-40, there: 23. In 1938 the German political philosopher Erich Voegelin argued that a political community per definition was also a religious order. *Eric Voegelin*, *Die politischen Religionen*, Vienna 1938. The book was published shortly before Voegelin’s emigration to the USA.

⁴⁴ *Te Velde*, *Het wij-gevoel*, pp. 106-123, there: 112; for the debate on a similar process in Germany see: *Wolfgang Hardtwig*, *Political Religion in Modern Germany: Reflections on Nationalism, Socialism, and National Socialism*, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 28, 2001.

⁴⁵ *Wijne*, *Tussen dogma*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ *Schaper*, *De sociaaldemokratie*.

described as an act of betrayal: as a “lapse of virtue”.⁴⁷ This discourse of virtue and duty was also evident in the electoral language of politics. Since party membership was presented as a holy alliance, voters were reminded of the electoral obligations that resulted from their membership of the socialist movement: “comrades, beware of your duty” and vote for the party “of your fellow class members”.⁴⁸ This language of politics responded to still very dominant patriarchal and paternalistic notions of good moral and ethical behaviour that characterized 19th century Dutch society. While trying to free the working class from the shackles of a patriarchal society, the SDAP therefore used similar discourses as those which underpinned it.

The discourse of duty often went hand in hand with the use of a discourse of education. Socialist electoral politics in essence came down to making people aware of their political identity, to teach them what their interests actually were and which party served them best.⁴⁹ Voters who were still ignorant of the ‘real’ situation of oppression in which they were held captive, needed to be made aware of their fate and were urged to take matters into their own hands.⁵⁰ Election pamphlets for instance incited workers to “think for themselves” instead of simply following instructions from the media or the clergy.⁵¹ In fact, of course, it was the social democratic party that instructed voters how to think.

Finally, the discourse of duty and education was also evident in the portrayal of voters as “indifferent”.⁵² Voters were warned that those who considered their own misery to be a good excuse to ignore politics were to blame for the fact that capitalism still ruled. Bourgeois parties benefited from their “ignorance and gullibility”.⁵³ On numerous occasions voters who remained “indifferent” to the cause of the SDAP were accused of committing a “crime against themselves and against their class”.⁵⁴ Those who did vote for the social democrats did so because they “wanted to show that they understand the power of the ballot”, rather than being ignorant or indifferent.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the SDAP, in order to free the workers from the duties and obligations of a paternalistic, capitalist society, also showed itself to be a paternalistic organisation that used discourses of indifference, awakening, education and duty in order to attract voters to their party.

III Elections in the interwar years

The effects of the new electoral system on the socialist language of politics

In July 1918 for the first time the parliamentary elections were conducted according to the principles of nationwide proportional representation. The abolishment of the district voting

⁴⁷ Lijst van wenschen, in: *Recht voor Allen*, 22 February 1888.

⁴⁸ Pamphlet, *Een ernstig woord tot de Arbeiders-kiezers*, 1918, IISG, SDAP Archive, Reg. 2185.

⁴⁹ *Te Velde*, *De spiegel*, pp. 19-40, there: 24; see also *Welskopp*, *Das Banner*, pp. 579-584; *Margaret Anderson*, *Lehrjahre der Demokratie. Wahlen und politische Kultur im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, Stuttgart 2009, p. 443 and *Mergel*, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfs in der Bundesrepublik 1949-1990*, pp. 41-62.

⁵⁰ *Kiezers van Schoterland*, in: *Recht voor Allen*, 30 March 1888; *Het socialisme komt*, in: *Het Tweede District. Verkiezingsblad van de Arbeiders-Kiesvereniging Amsterdam II*, 6.1905, IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 267.

⁵¹ SDAP. Amsterdam I, [1905], IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 267.

⁵² Pamphlet, *Aan het arbeidende volk van Nederland*, 1918, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185.

⁵³ *Verkiezingsmanifest van de Federatie Amsterdam van de SDAP*, Nu is het uw beurt. Een ernstig woord aan de Amsterdamsche arbeiders, 1918, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185; *Troelstra*, *Voorwaarts, marsch!*; Such voters were also called “stubborn and forgetful”: SDAP Amsterdam I, 1905, IISG, Arch. SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 267.

⁵⁴ *P. Hiemstra*, *De landarbeiders en de politieke strijd*, Amsterdam 1913, p. 5; *De stembus en het rijkspersoneel*. *Opgepast!*, in: *Het Volk*, 4 July 1922.

⁵⁵ *De militairen stemmen rood*, in: *De Reveille. Orgaan van den Bond van Nederlandsche Dienstplichtigen*, [1918], IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185.

system went hand in hand with the introduction of universal male suffrage, which nearly doubled the electorate. Women were included in the suffrage a year later and casted their first ballots in the 1922 general election. These changes had a profound influence on the language and culture of electoral politics.

As a result of the introduction of a nation-wide constituency, the central offices of political parties started to strengthen their grip on the election campaign. Local branches of the parties were still involved: they were, among others, expected to mobilize party members for canvassing neighbourhoods and were responsible for the organisation of local meetings, but their room for manoeuvre diminished. The central offices issued guidelines for election propaganda, designed brochures and pamphlets and assigned prominent members of the party to speaking engagements across the country. Not all of this was new: the SDAP headquarters had already distributed guidelines on canvassing and instructions for speakers before the 1918 elections, but the abolishment of the district voting system did force parties to reconsider their propaganda strategies and would result in a professionalization of the election campaigns from the mid-1920s onwards.⁵⁶ That said, parties still tailored their propaganda to specific regions. The person heading the list of candidates varied per region in order to benefit from the popularity of a local or regional politician. Moreover, local and regional branches of the parties were still allowed to also issue their own brochures, which appealed to the specific nature of the local electorate.

In the past the district voting system had forced parties to forge temporary bonds with other political parties in order to win a majority of the votes. In 1903 Troelstra for instance had been elected for the seat of Amsterdam's third district in the second round of voting thanks to support from confessional voters, who favoured Troelstra over a representative of the liberal party.⁵⁷ Confessional voters were willing to support the social democrats because the SDAP had agreed to back their fight for the equal state funding of state and private (confessional) schools.⁵⁸ From 1918 onwards, these often rather awkward coalitions belonged to the past. In turn, parties now aimed to maximize their following across the country. Whereas the district voting system had resulted in 'lost votes' – after all, votes casted for those who eventually lost the election had been of no value – in the system of proportional representation every vote counted.

In order to maximize their following, the SDAP used at least two strategies. Neither of these strategies was entirely new, but the introduction of proportional representation forced the SDAP to explicitly contemplate its electoral operations. First of all, the party tried to win over confessional workers for the SDAP. As a result, the Catholic south of the Netherlands, which for long had been the exclusive domain of politicians of the Catholic party – who had been often elected unopposed - was turned into a socialist 'missionary area'. Much like the religious discourse discussed earlier, the SDAP issued brochures in the southern, Catholic part of the Netherlands that evoked images of Jesus and the Bible and described socialism as a "lighting sun" that brought "hope to mankind in the dark night of despair". The SDAP identified itself with Jesus, who had also fought for "unity among all people" and, like the social democrats, had been denounced as 'the enemy of faith and religion'.⁵⁹ Class discourse played a minor role. Voters were still addressed as workers, but also in religious terms as "the underprivileged, the oppressed, the starvelings" for whom Jesus had cared so deeply.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁶ *Kramer*, *De rituele census*, pp. 218-229.

⁵⁷ *Gert van Klinken*, *Actieve burgers: Nederlanders en hun politieke partijen 1870-1918*, Amsterdam 2003, p. 428.

⁵⁸ The party was willing to do so, hoping that the realization of this key issue would leave the confessional parties without a mobilizing issue that would appeal to the confessional voters. *Ibid*, p. 411.

⁵⁹ *Stemt rood! Verkiezingsorgaan van de SDAP voor de kieskringen 's-Hertogenbosch, Tilburg en Zeeland*, no. 4, 1918, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

brochures, however, also explicitly stated that social democrats focused on life on earth and not in the hereafter, and cherished the freedom of religion.⁶¹

Second, the SDAP tried to turn the concept of the working class into a more inclusive notion, which also encompassed non-manual workers, shopkeepers, farmers and small employers. In the 1918 campaign the SDAP appealed to the vote of “brain or manual workers, small entrepreneurs, small tenant farmers, and civil servants [...] office and shop workers, field, workshop and factory workers”.⁶² In the 1922 campaign the SDAP appealed to the interests of “all social elements among our people” versus “small, greedy sections” of the population and described itself as the “people’s party par excellence”.⁶³ The use of this more inclusive discourse had much to do with the fact that the SDAP now appealed to a *national* audience of voters, rather than a local, district-based constituency. In addition, the party also needed an inclusive discourse in order to appeal to women who had been granted suffrage in 1919.⁶⁴

Female suffrage and the socialist language of politics

The influence of the introduction of female suffrage on the socialist language of politics has been underrated. Jansz has argued that the socialist language of politics in general was a male discourse, also after women were included in the suffrage. Concepts such as ‘the people’, small farmers, shopkeepers, intellectuals and civil servants were and remained to be male categories.⁶⁵ As far as the language of politics of the early years of the SDAP is concerned, Jansz is right. In the early years of the 20th century women figured in the socialist language of politics chiefly as the wives of labourers, who were assigned the task to support their husbands in their fight against capitalism, instead of ‘pestering them’ for their socialist sympathies.⁶⁶ In order to keep women away from the bourgeois feminist movement that pitted women against men, they were reminded of the fact that they were the “natural allies” of their “male class-members”.⁶⁷ The political fight against capitalism, however, was an almost exclusively male cause.

The introduction of female suffrage forced parties to reconsider their approach of women. Although the electoral language shows that the SDAP wholeheartedly tried to include women in their constituency, the discourses directed at them reveal that they were not treated on the same par as men. In brochures aimed at women the SDAP started to denounce capitalism through the use of an anti-male discourse that evoked the male oppression of women.⁶⁸ Moreover, much like the language of politics that had been used by late 19th century social democrats to awaken the (male) working class, the SDAP expressed its attempts to win over female voters for the party through discourses of duty and education. The party feared that women would still shy away from politics; according to Schaper, if women read a

⁶¹ Ibid., no. 1. IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185.

⁶² Ibid., no. 4. IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2185.

⁶³ Verkiezingsmanifest der SDAP, in: *Het Volk*, 3 June 1922; Speech by Troelstra: De betekenis van den komenden strijd, 1922, IISG, Troelstra Archive, Reg. 868; De strijd van 5 juli. Verkiezingsblad van de Gewestelijke Federaties Groningen en Drente der SDAP, 1922, IISG, SDAP-Groningen Archive, Reg. 114; *Pieter Jelles Troelstra*, De verkiezingen van 1922, Amsterdam 1922, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Speech by Troelstra, report in the *Middelburgsche Courant*, d.d. 18 april 1922. IISG, Troelstra, 868.

⁶⁵ *Ulla Jansz*, De vernieuwing in de SDAP en het vrouwenvraagstuk. Humanisme, socialisme en democratie in het interbellum, in: *Voor menselijkheid of tegen godsdienst? Humanisme in Nederland, 1850-1960*, 1998, pp. 117-131, there 120.

⁶⁶ *Schaper*, De sociaaldemocratie. See also: *Suze Groeneweg*, Welk belang heeft de arbeidervrouw bij het werken der SDAP?, Rotterdam 1906, p. 13. Within the German social democratic movement women were also expected not to obstruct their husbands’ activities. *Welskopp*, Das Banner, p. 483.

⁶⁷ *Henriette Roland Holst - van der Schalk*, Een woord aan de vrouwen der arbeidende klasse naar aanleiding der nat. tentoonstelling van vrouwen-arbeid, Amsterdam 1898, p. 16.

⁶⁸ *M. Wibaut-B.v.B.*, De gouden boot. Een woord aan de vrouwen, Amsterdam 1922.

newspaper at all, they tended to ignore the political pieces and only read the serials.⁶⁹ This indifference to politics would turn them into putty in the hands of shrewd politicians. The SDAP therefore started to denounce female non-involvement in politics as despondent and selfish behaviour: “you are a nobody, if you do not vote”.⁷⁰ Women were reminded of their “duty” to get involved and to encourage their husbands to fulfil their “duty” as member of the working class as well. It was “women’s duty” to care for the “less privileged” and their “duty before God” to take matters into their own hands – and not to leave politics to men.⁷¹ When the turnout of the women’s vote turned out to be disappointing, the SDAP described the behaviour of female voters as “wrong” and argued that in the future they should be better “informed how to vote”.⁷²

Another prominent feature of the language directed at women was a focus on immaterial issues. Although material issues were not the exclusive domain of men – after all as housewives and mothers women were also confronted with the tough material conditions of the working class – they did not dominate the propaganda that was aimed at women.⁷³ Disarmament did. Already in the 1918 electoral campaign, when the introduction of female suffrage was just a matter of time, pamphlets aimed at women started with a description of the horrors of war in which the “sons of mothers” had fallen victim to “capitalistic Murder”.⁷⁴ According to Gerhard, women, “because of their femininity, would be more ruthless, more severe” enemies of militarism, referring to the harm war had done to family life, when women had lost their husbands, and mothers their sons. The fact that women had been granted suffrage was therefore described as the “biggest blow to militarism”.⁷⁵ Moreover, together with capitalism, militarism was framed as the enemy of female, immaterial issues such as “motherhood care”.⁷⁶ Casting their vote, women had to choose between either the destructive powers of war, or youth, child and motherhood care.⁷⁷ The focus on disarmament found resonance among socialist women: the women’s association within the party remained fiercely antimilitaristic, even when the party itself changed its stance in the 1930s in response to the growing threat of national socialism.

All in all, this language of politics suggests that the SDAP abided by a traditional role pattern that assigned women specific tasks and a particular position in society that was based on their gender.⁷⁸ This, nonetheless, does not alter the fact that the introduction of female suffrage had a profound impact on the socialist language of politics. The fact that women were now included in the franchise was also mirrored in the internal discussions of the 1920s and 30s about the reformulation of socialism in terms of “community” and “the people” rather than class and in the party’s attention for moral issues besides its economic agenda.

⁶⁹ *Schaper*, *De vrouw*.

⁷⁰ *Aan de vrouwen der arbeidersklasse!*, 1918, IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 328. For a similar treatment of women voters in Germany see: *Welskopp*, *Das Banner*, p. 734.

⁷¹ Pamphlet, *Verkiezingen voor de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. Aan de vrouwen*, 1922, IISG, SDAP-Groningen, Reg. 114; *A.B. Kleerekoper*, *Aan de vrouwen*, 1922, IISG, SDAP-Groningen, Reg. 114.

⁷² Report of the election campaign of 1922, *Termunten*, 11.1922, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2198a.

⁷³ Speech by Gerhard: *Onze eerste verkiezingsvergadering*, in: *Het Volk*, 22 May 1922. The importance of immaterial issues for the post-1918 SDAP has been acknowledged by Knegtman, but he does not relate this focus on non-economical, moral issues to the introduction of female suffrage. *Knegtman*, *Socialisme en democratie*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *Aan de vrouwen der arbeidersklasse!*, 1918, IISG, SDAP-Amsterdam, Reg. 328.

⁷⁵ Speech by Gerhard: ‘*Onze eerste verkiezingsvergadering*’, in: *Het Volk*, 22 May 1922.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; see also: *Wibaut-B.v.B.*, *De gouden boot*; *Kleerekoper*, *Aan de vrouwen*, 1922, IISG, SDAP-Groningen, Reg. 114; Pamphlet, *Voor moeder de vrouw*, 1922, IISG, SDAP-Groningen, Reg. 114.

⁷⁸ *Agneta Fischer/ Katja van Vliet*, *Geslachtsverschillen. Idealen en ideologieën*, in: *Jaap van Ginneken* (ed.), *Psychologische praktijken. Een twintigste-eeuwse geschiedenis*, Amsterdam 1986, pp. 119-121; *Dennis Bos*, *De echte mannen van het socialisme*, in: *Groniek* 158/159 (2002) pp. 119-130.

Democratic socialism: the socialist language of politics in the 1930s

The first election results after the introduction of general suffrage and proportional representation were disappointing. Not the SDAP, but the Roman Catholic Party emerged as the biggest force in parliament. The party also suffered from a failed attempt at a revolution by party leader Troelstra. In November 1918, during a parliamentary session just days after the German emperor had sought refuge in the Netherlands, Troelstra called for a revolution. Soon, however, he had to acknowledge the fact that he had overestimated revolutionary sentiment in the Netherlands. Troelstra's 'mistake' was a big blow for the SDAP. When in the 1920s the party tried to convince the Roman Catholic Party to form a coalition government, the Roman Catholics refused to cooperate with a party that found it hard to renounce its revolutionary aims.

The Troelstra debacle and the party's failure to expand its electorate resulted in an internal debate about a new interpretation of socialism. In the 1920s party ideologists such as the religious socialist Willem Banning and Koos Vorrink, leader of the party's youth movement AJC, opened the debate on the ultimate goal of socialism: the realization of a new society. Although both acknowledged the need to overcome class differences, Marxist ideas were not at the heart of their political ideal. Instead, they advocated the construction of a new 'mentality' based on socialist norms and values. It took until the 1930s before their value-centred approach would strike a sympathetic cord within the party at large.⁷⁹ The disappointing result of the 1933 elections, which saw the party lose two seats, catalyzed a debate about the party's course.⁸⁰ By then, also members of the board of the SDAP started to argue for a focus on the "moral nature" of socialism, as opposed to the "revolutionary romanticism" which had dominated socialist discourse before, in order to appeal to female and middle class voters like clerks, intellectuals and shopkeepers.⁸¹ Other party officials also acknowledged the need to revitalize socialism by both adding immaterial ideals to the socialist agenda and stressing the differences between socialism and communism. These discussions about the interpretation of socialism resulted in the use in socialist discourse of inclusive concepts like "people's community" instead of "the working class" and "community spirit" instead of "class consciousness".⁸² In the 1930s, the salutation of brochures no longer exclusively mentioned "the working class" or equivalent phrases, but also "to the people of the Netherlands".⁸³ Moreover, socialist language was enriched with a new, more inclusive key concept: "democratic socialism".⁸⁴ In 1936, a major (non-socialist) Dutch newspaper called it the "newest buzzword" in politics.⁸⁵ In the new Political Manifesto, adopted by the party in 1937, the concept was defined as "a society characterized by collective ownership of the means of production and collective management of industries in which religious and political freedom is guaranteed".⁸⁶

The concept of democratic socialism had popped up for the first time in the early twentieth century in intellectual debates among Dutch socialists where it was used as an

⁷⁹ *Cohen*, *Om de vernieuwing*, pp. 224-225.

⁸⁰ *Tromp*, *Het sociaal-democratisch programma*, p. 155.

⁸¹ *Knegtmans*, *De jaren 1919-1946*, pp. 62-117, there: 94-97.

⁸² See for instance: *Democratie*, in: *Het Volk*, 14 December 1933, evening paper (e).

⁸³ Pamphlet, *Aan het Nederlandsche volk!*, 1933, Historic Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism (HDC), ARP Archive (052), Reg. 30.

⁸⁴ *Knegtmans*, *Socialisme en democratie*, pp. 89-91.

⁸⁵ *Democratisch socialisme*, in: *Leeuwarder nieuwsblad*, 27.08.1936, which refers to the *Algemeen Handelsblad* which had called democratic socialism the 'newest buzzword'.

⁸⁶ Political manifesto of the SDAP, 1937, see:

<http://pubnpp.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root/beginselprogramma/sdap1937/> [7.2.2013].

alternative for state socialism.⁸⁷ After the First World War the Second International adopted the concept to refer to her battle against “the slavery of capitalism on the one side, and the tyrannical dictatorship of bolshevism on the other side”.⁸⁸ The concept, however, only rose to prominence in the 1930s when socialist newspaper *Het Volk* started to use it to clearly demarcate the (*democratic*) socialism of the SDAP from the so-called socialism of the communist party and the national socialists.⁸⁹ In the mid-1930s the party presented a Labour Plan (‘Plan van de Arbeid’) as one of the steppingstones towards achieving a democratic socialist society. The plan offered a socioeconomic agenda in response to the economic crisis of the 1930s and was used in political propaganda in order to appeal to non-working class voters who also suffered badly from the crisis.⁹⁰ Using techniques borrowed from advertising and insights derived from mass psychology, the SDAP tried to ‘sell’ the Plan to the public.⁹¹ With a minimum of socialist rhetoric the plan was presented as a practical solution to the difficulties of the time.⁹²

In socialist discourse democratic socialism, however, was not chiefly clarified in economic terms; the resonance of the concept was much broader. “Democratic socialism”, according to Vorrink, was a “shining ideal” that called for “equal rights” for all members of the “people’s community”.⁹³ Vorrink referred to the French socialist leader Jean Jaurès who had defined socialism as the “social realization of moral value”, in this case: democracy. Vorrink also linked other values to it, like respect and freedom.⁹⁴ Although for much of the 1930s the concept’s use remained limited to ideological discourse – democratic socialism for instance did not appear in the election programme of 1937 – its connotations were clearly evident in the party’s electoral language of politics, particularly through the use of the discourse of community and the framing of the SDAP as the main guardian of democracy.

The latter approach was potentially very powerful in a time of crisis. Since democracy was obviously under threat in the 1930s, the party could hope to attract the vote of those who feared that democracy might not prevail. The SDAP portrayed itself as the protector of the Dutch against ‘foreign’ threats of communism and national socialism, hoping that this would also help to convince voters that the party had abandoned its revolutionary marxist legacy. Moreover, supporters of democracy were reminded of the fact that democracy presupposed the notion of solidarity and therefore could only be achieved in a socialist society.⁹⁵ Parliamentary democracy, however, was not uncontested in the Netherlands. Prime minister Hendrikus Colijn had flirted with fascism in the 1920s and successfully presented himself as a powerful leader in the 1930s.⁹⁶ Moreover, democratic socialism was only one of several

⁸⁷ *Daan van der Zee*, Het gevaar van staatsocialisme, in: *De Beweging* 5 (1909) pp. 79-84.

⁸⁸ *De Tweede Internationale*, in: *Leidsch Dagblad*, 8 November 1920.

⁸⁹ *Steeds verder*, in: *Het Volk*, 20 February 1931, (e); *R. Kuijper*, Istrati en Marion over Sovjet-Rusland, in: *Het Volk*, 12 June 1931, morning paper (m). See also: *Rede van den leider der SDAP te Groningen*, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 25-01-1934.

⁹⁰ *R. Abma*, Het Plan van de Arbeid en de SDAP, in: *BMGN* 92 (1977) pp. 37-68, there: 54.

⁹¹ *Rulof*, Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?, pp. 84-104; see also: *Rulof*, Selling social democracy, pp. 475-497.

⁹² *Abma*, Het Plan, p. 66.

⁹³ *De manifestatie op het Arsenaalplein*, in: *Het Volk*, 31 July 1933, (e); *Na honderd jaar*, in: *Het Volk*, 19 July 1932, (m).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* The concept was also used by the Belgian social democrats H. de Man and E. Vandervelde: *Woodbrookersdagen te Bentveld*, in: *Het Volk*, 24 January 1933, (e); *Staatskapitalisme is dictatuur*, in: *Het Volk*, 24 April 1933, (e). See also *Knegtmans*, Socialisme en democratie, p. 99.

⁹⁵ *Het roer moet om, 1937*, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221; *Vrije mensen in een vrij land...*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221.

⁹⁶ *Herman Langeveld*, *Schipper naast God. Hendrikus Colijn, 1933-1944*, Amsterdam 2004.

interpretations of democracy that were put forward by Dutch political movements in the 1930s.⁹⁷

Another prominent feature of the socialist language of politics, particularly in the 1937 elections, was its inclusive nature. Inspired by the campaign for the ‘Plan van de Arbeid’, socialist propaganda was tailored to the background and interests of different groups of voters.⁹⁸ The party issued brochures that were specifically aimed at the unemployed, young people, intellectuals, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, small farmers, tenant farmers, market gardeners, teachers and mothers.⁹⁹ In order to unite these disparate groups as members of its constituency, the SDAP used concepts such as “the whole of the people” and “our people’s community”, which included “a rich variety of groups”.¹⁰⁰ Election brochures were illustrated with pictures that represented the socialist community as a coming together of workers, the middle class and women. The party even claimed to defend “the public interest” – a term which used to be associated with liberal political discourse.¹⁰¹ This trajectory of the Dutch social democrats to a certain extent corresponds with the history of the SPD in Germany: albeit much earlier than their Dutch counterpart, the SPD, too, had “made important steps towards becoming a catch-all party (*Volkspartei*)”.¹⁰²

In the 1930s, the SDAP also still aimed to attract confessional voters. With a focus on moral issues and (social) justice Banning and others hoped to convince them to join the ranks of the party. This approach was, however, hardly uncontested within the party. Some feared that the use of a quasi-religious or progressive-humanistic language would estrange members of religious groups from the SDAP.¹⁰³ Moreover, the use of religious discourse clashed with the party’s efforts to appeal to middle class voters through its economic agenda. In the 1937 campaign, the SDAP therefore stressed its nature as a “*political party*” that did not want to interfere with the “religious and philosophical issues” of its supporters, hoping that this could also convince confessional voters to give their vote to the SDAP.¹⁰⁴

The debate about the party’s strategy to gain the support of confessional voters continued in the late 1930s. In line with the new manifesto of 1937, in which socialism was presented as a “political doctrine” and not as a *Weltanschauung*,¹⁰⁵ party leader J.W. Albarda resisted the tendency to adopt a religious-socialist discourse. Instead of resorting to language in order to present the SDAP as a party for both non-religious and religious voters, Albarda fought for the inclusion of the SDAP in a coalition government. Only then, he argued, the SDAP could truly show the voters that it was able to defend the interests of the entire people of the Netherlands. In September 1939 two socialist ministers – Albarda was one of them – were sworn into office, but but the debate about the revitalization of socialism and the party’s relationship towards confessional voters was far from over yet.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁷ A corporatist alternative was particularly well received among Dutch Catholics; *Stefan Couperus*, *Fixing Democracy? Political Representation and the Crisis of Democracy in Interwar Europe and the Netherlands*, in: *Joris Gijsenbergh et al.* (eds.), *Creative Crises of Democracy*, Brussels 2012, pp. 269-290.

⁹⁸ *Rulof*, *Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?*, pp. 92, 93, 100.

⁹⁹ *Colijn verdedigt zich...maar hoe?*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221; see also *Waarom?*, [1937], National Archive (NA), Drees Archive, Reg. 287.

¹⁰⁰ *Het roer moet om*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221; see also *Vrije mensen in een vrij land...*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221; see also *Verkiezingsprogramma 1937*, NA, Drees, Reg. 287; *Rulof*, *Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?*, p. 101.

¹⁰¹ *Het roer moet om*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221.

¹⁰² *Stefan Berger*, *Social democracy and the working class in nineteenth and twentieth century Germany*, Harlow 2000, pp. 117, 119.

¹⁰³ *Knegtmans*, *Socialisme en democratie*, pp. 90, 182, 192.

¹⁰⁴ *Vrije mensen in een vrij land...*, 1937, IISG, SDAP, Reg. 2221.

¹⁰⁵ *Tromp*, *Het sociaal-democratisch programma*, pp. 184, 193, 345.

¹⁰⁶ *Knegtmans*, *Socialisme en democratie*, pp. 232, 255.

IV

The Partij van de Arbeid and the immediate postwar socialist language of politics

A new political party

In the early months of the German occupation of the Netherlands, Reich Commissioner Arthur Seyss-Inquart tried to Nazify the SDAP, but failed to do so because the party leadership had instructed party members to give up their membership.¹⁰⁷ Many prominent social democrats were subsequently held hostage by the Germans in internment camps in Germany and the Netherlands where they were accompanied by intellectuals and politicians from other political movements. During their imprisonment, they started to discuss the postwar political order. One of the key issues was the perceived need to overcome the prewar ‘parochialism’: the division of society along ideological and religious lines – the term pillarisation was not yet commonly used. Eventually this resulted in the foundation of the Dutch People’s Movement (Nederlandse Volksbeweging) immediately after the liberation of the Netherlands.¹⁰⁸ The NVB aimed to cut across party lines and end the antithesis between confessional and non-confessional parties that had dominated prewar Dutch politics. The movement, in which some prominent social democrats were involved, promoted the formation of a broad-based progressive political party that should replace the SDAP and also include progressive Protestants and Catholics. In the end, after the NVB had failed to get the Roman Catholic Party on board because it refused to accept the new party’s socialist ideology, the SDAP agreed to merge with the progressive liberal VDB and the Christian-Democratic Union to form the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA).¹⁰⁹

Despite the failure to win over the Catholics, the PvdA continued to try to realize the so-called “doorbraak” by luring progressive confessional voters away from the confessional political parties.¹¹⁰ Much like the disappointment that had followed the first elections under general suffrage, however, the results of the first postwar elections turned out to be a bitter pill to swallow. Again the Catholic Party, which had changed its name into Catholic People’s Party (KVP), emerged as the biggest force in parliament. The PvdA, however, could comfort itself with the fact that it was now generally accepted as a trustworthy coalition partner. The KVP even allowed the PvdA to supply the prime minister. Social-democratic party leader Willem Drees gained great popularity as the sober leader of four coalition cabinets in the years 1948-1958. In this respect, the Second World War and the subsequent foundation of the PvdA definitely formed a turning point in the history of Dutch social democracy. In other respects, however, the PvdA appeared to be a postwar manifestation of the SDAP. After all, the SDAP had also tried to win over confessional voters. Moreover, the main ideologists of the PvdA were the same as those who had been responsible for the rebranding of the SDAP in the 1930s: Willem Banning and Koos Vorrink, the first party chairman of the PvdA. This section will discuss the electoral language used by the PvdA in the 1946 and 1948 general elections and will explore the similarities and differences with the language used by the prewar SDAP.

Breaking with the past?

¹⁰⁷ *Tromp*, Het sociaal-democratisch programma, p. 189.

¹⁰⁸ *M. de Keizer*, De gijzelaars van St. Michielsgestel. Een eliteberaad in oorlogstijd, Alphen aan den Rijn 1979; *J.Th.M. Bank*, Opkomst en ondergang van de Nederlandse Volksbeweging (NVB), Deventer 1978.

¹⁰⁹ *H.M. Ruitenbeek*, Het ontstaan van de Partij van de Arbeid, Amsterdam 1955.

¹¹⁰ Mellink shows that the ‘doorbraakgedachte’ – the effort to separate religion and politics – despite the disappointing election results, formed the rudiment of social democratic political strategy up until the 1970s. *Bram Mellink*, Tweedracht maakt macht. De PvdA, de doorbraak en de ontluikende polarisatiestrategie (1946-1966), in: BMGN 126, 2011, pp. 30-53, there 33.

In the postwar propaganda of the PvdA the Second World War was framed as a major break with the past. The defeat of national socialism was characterized as a defeat of capitalism: the occupation had laid bare the “degrading nature of the capitalist system”. In addition, the work of the resistance movement had clearly showed that the antithesis between confessional and secular political parties had run out of date; people of different denominations had worked together to fight the enemy.¹¹¹ “Party walls” had been torn down because the Dutch had “learned to look beyond confessional-political demarcations”.¹¹² “Radical reform”, which should bring about a “socialist order”, was framed as the opposite of the prewar “dreadful and extremely disappointing” years of “capitalist chaos”.¹¹³ “Democratic socialism” would help to bring about a “new beginning” and was therefore often framed as the opposite of “dictatorship”.¹¹⁴ The concept was more widely used in political propaganda than before the war. Social democrats were convinced that, compared to the prewar socialism of the SDAP, which had had an “explicit disposition towards the working class”, democratic socialism was a “broader concept” with a wider appeal.¹¹⁵

By identifying itself with postwar change and renewal, the PvdA framed the elections as a choice between a better future or the return to the horrors of recent history. Voters were warned that, where the PvdA looked ahead, supporting others parties would amount to the return of the prewar situation of crisis, unemployment and instability.¹¹⁶ Conservative politics would take the Netherlands back “to April 1940”,¹¹⁷ to a situation of “egoism, petty politics, narrow-minded conservatism and profit seeking”. According to the first postwar Prime Minister Willem Schermerhorn – one of the founding fathers of the PvdA – time was running out: the next five years were decisive in bringing about a “better society” – and socialism offered the only road to a new and better world.¹¹⁸ The call for renewal seemed to be consistent with the nature of the PvdA as a *new* political party. Despite the obvious similarities with the prewar SDAP, like the adoption of socialist symbols, the PvdA claimed to embody the dawn of a new era, symbolized by the repeated use in political images of a sunrise at the horizon.¹¹⁹

The framing of the political system as in urgent need of fundamental reform is a recurring discourse in Dutch politics. The American historian James C. Kennedy has referred to it as the “metanarrative of obsolescence” and pointed at its dominance in Dutch debates

¹¹¹ *J.H. Scheps*, in: Doorbraak, Verkiezingsuitgave no. 1., [1948], NA, Drees, Reg. 352; *Gijs*, Een Christen-Arbeider spreekt tot christelijke arbeiders, in: Idem. See also: Radio broadcast, Corry Tendeloo, Voor de vrouw. Vrouwen spreken mee, 15.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766; *M.A. Reinalda*, Waarheid en waardigheid, ook in de verkiezingsactie, 11.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766.

¹¹² Aan het Nederlandse volk!, 1946, Catholic Documentation Centre (KDC), KVP Archive(266), Reg. 1493.

¹¹³ Boeren en tuinders van Nederland, 1946, KDC, Ruygers Archive, Reg. 92; Aan den Nederlandschen middenstand, 1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

¹¹⁴ *M.A. Reinalda*, Waarheid en waardigheid, ook in de verkiezingsactie, 11.5.1946, IISG, PvdA Archive, Reg. 1766; *Irene Vorrink*, Voor de Vrouw. Voor ’t eerst ter stembus, 6.11.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766; *Vrouwen!*, [1946], IISG, PvdA, Reg. 2087; *Stalin betaalt naar verdienste....* [1946], NA, Drees, Reg. 350.

¹¹⁵ Stand van zaken. Documentatiemateriaal voor sprekers. No. 1., 3.4.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1720.

¹¹⁶ Radio broadcast, A.J. Otte-Arnolli, Voor de huisvrouw, 15.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766; Radio broadcast, Irene Vorrink, Voor de Vrouw. Voor ’t eerst ter stembus, 6.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766; A.J. Otte-Arnolli, Voor de huisvrouw. Wat verwacht de huisvrouw van de overheid?, 26.4.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766.

¹¹⁷ Radio broadcast by Geert Ruygers, Partij van de Arbeid, 1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 95; Brochure, “De spanne tijds, die ons is toegemeten om de wereld te redden van chaos en ongelooft, lijkt mij vrij kort,... vijf jaren”. Een boodschap van Prof. W. Schermerhorn, Minister-President, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Pamphlet, Kiest een nieuwe koers, KDC, KVP, Reg. 1494; Pamphlet, Wij boeren kunnen erover meepraten, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 2087.

about political reform since the Second World War.¹²⁰ The metanarrative of obsolescence went hand in hand with a tendency to discuss political reality in passive terms.¹²¹ In the campaigns of 1946 and 1948 the PvdA for instance argued that “political life” needed to be adjusted to the “necessary shape of this era”.¹²² The social revolution “was knocking at the door”¹²³ and the “time” therefore asked for a “different approach to politics”.¹²⁴ Kennedy argues that such “rhetoric of political reform” was very powerful, because it was hard to resist and refute.¹²⁵ It was after all, not very attractive to characterize oneself as an old-fashioned, stubborn voter who did not want to acknowledge that times were changing. By connecting the necessity of political renewal to the “vision of a new Holland” for which the resistance movement had fought, the PvdA even claimed the moral high ground: “let their vision of a new Holland be a bounden duty for us all.”¹²⁶

A people’s party?

The framing of the war as a major break, with democratic socialism offering the only way towards a better future, remained very powerful up until the 1950s.¹²⁷ It was used to convince voters who had been known as staunch enemies of socialism that the PvdA nonetheless served their interests best. Farmers and shopkeepers, traditionally not very fond of the social democrats’ etatism, were told that a planned economy would help to create a society characterized by social justice, freedom, peace and prosperity. The prewar negligent state and its politics of ‘total freedom’ had left them to fend for themselves. After the war, however, the famous social democratic minister for Agriculture Sicco Mansholt, for instance, soon had managed to revitalize farming through a policy of “efficiency”.¹²⁸

The effort to include farmers and shopkeepers in their constituency was part of the continuing mission of the social democrats to stretch the boundaries of their constituency beyond that of the working class. The PvdA continued along the lines of the SDAP with its self-description as a “people’s party” as opposed to other parties that represented “sectional interests”.¹²⁹ In the 1946 campaign the PvdA also used the inclusive concept of “the common man” to define its own constituency. According to the party’s electoral language of politics, the common man was to be found among workers, farmers and shopkeepers, in short: among “the working masses”.¹³⁰ Much like the 1937 campaign, different groups of voters were targeted with tailor-made brochures. The brochure directed at farmers for instance lacked any reference to socialism, because of their assumed natural aversion for it.¹³¹ Where farmers were told that they were “an essential part of the Dutch people’s community”, young voters

¹²⁰ *James C. Kennedy*, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig*, Amsterdam/Meppel 1995, pp. 27-28.

¹²¹ *James C. Kennedy*, *Crisis en vernieuwing*. in: Rob, *Verslag van de eerste Rob-lezing* (2003) p. 17.

¹²² *J.H. Scheps*, *Doorbraak*, in: *Verkiezingsuitgave no. 1*. NA, Drees, Reg. 352.

¹²³ Zaandam, Noordwijk, Voorburg, Hilversum, 11.5.1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 93.

¹²⁴ *Scheps*, *Doorbraak*.

¹²⁵ *Kennedy*, *Crisis en vernieuwing*, p. 18.

¹²⁶ *De Partij van de Arbeid richt zich tot het gehele Nederlandse volk met de volgende oproep*, [1946], NA, Drees, Reg. 350.

¹²⁷ *Vrouwen weet gij nog wat de crisis van 1930 tot 1940 betekende?*, 1948, NA, VVD Archive (2.19.022), Reg. 7; *Nationale figuur vraagt uw vertrouwen*, 1952, KDC, Cals Archive, Reg. 78.

¹²⁸ *Pamphlet, Wij boeren kunnen erover meepraten*, [1948], IISG, PvdA, Reg. 2087; *Pamphlet, Middenstanders*, [1948], *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Brochure, Ontnuchterende en nuchtere feiten! Een verzameling feitenmateriaal uit het Nederlandse politieke leven; van groot belang voor allen, die op 7 Juli 1948 moeten kiezen in welke geest ons land de volgende vier jaren zal worden geregeerd! Partij van de Arbeid*, [1948], KDC, KVP, Reg. 1494.

¹³⁰ *Radio broadcast by Geert Ruygers, Partij van de Arbeid*, 1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 95.

¹³¹ *Boeren en tuinders van Nederland*, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

were presented with the message that a sense of community was still lacking and were asked to participate in the construction of a “renewed socialist society”.¹³²

The appeal to confessional voters was also in line with the approach already advocated by Albarda in the late 1930s. Compared to the propaganda of the early interwar years, the postwar brochures contained far less religious rhetoric. Instead, politics was framed as a ‘practical’ domain, where ‘social’ issues were discussed. Discussions about religious principles were relegated to the domain of the church.¹³³ According to Ruygers, a Roman Catholic who had joined the ranks of the PvdA and was elected vice chairman in 1946, socialism “no longer aimed to replace the Church” and instead focused on the solution of social problems.¹³⁴ Where marxism had been irreconcilable with Christianity, the PvdA’s postwar socialism therefore was not.¹³⁵ In order to win over the Roman Catholics, the propaganda of the PvdA for instance focused on the ‘socialist’ ideas of prominent Roman Catholics. Ruygers implicitly compared himself and other Catholics within the PvdA with the late 19th century prominent Roman Catholic politician Herman Schaepman whose progressive political views had contrasted sharply with the conservative Roman Catholic elite.¹³⁶ Moreover, the PvdA shied away from an outright confrontation with its main competitor, the Roman-Catholic KVP.¹³⁷

Finally, also women were approached as a distinct group of voters. Much like prewar political discourse they were treated as politically ignorant creatures who often failed to acknowledge the importance of politics. Election brochures aimed at women were full of rather demeaning set-phrases about the nature of elections – “are you aware of the fact that through your vote you help to decide what our government will be like the next few years?”¹³⁸ In radio broadcasts, the PvdA argued that women often only cared about “their own difficulties” and, as a result, had a wrong perception of the political issues at hand and the difficulties involved in governing the country.¹³⁹ If only women would pay as much attention to politics as to their wardrobe, a female socialist propagandist sighed.¹⁴⁰ Simultaneously, however, socialist propaganda also framed the years of German occupation in educatory terms as a time when women “had learned to act more independently” which had made them more “politically conscious”.¹⁴¹

When female involvement in politics was discussed, it was still often cloaked in ‘motherhood’ terms. Much like the propaganda that had been aimed at women in the aftermath of the First World War, election brochures reminded them of the horrors of war when they had had to comfort their kids while fighter planes were flying over their homes and their husbands and sons were enslaved by the enemy.¹⁴² Another brochure contained a picture of a housewife, with an apron and a broom. In the accompanying text the elections were

¹³² Jonge kiezers van Nederland, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

¹³³ Stand van zaken. Documentatiemateriaal voor sprekers. No. 1., 3.4.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1720; see also Corry Tendeloo, Voor de vrouw. Vrouwen spreken mee, 15.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, 1766; Radio broadcast, Vara, 15.5.1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 95.

¹³⁴ Radio broadcast, Vara, 15.5.1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 95.

¹³⁵ Zaandam, Noordwijk, Voorburg, Hilversum, 11.5.1946, KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 93.

¹³⁶ Radio broadcast, Waarom ik als katholiek socialist ben, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 95.

¹³⁷ After the elections of 1948, the PvdA started to become more hostile towards its main competitor. *Mellink*, Tweedracht, pp. 30-53, 40-41.

¹³⁸ Vrouwen!, [1946], IISG, PvdA, Reg. 2087.

¹³⁹ Radio broadcast, A.J. Otte-Arnolli, Voor de huisvrouw, 15.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766; see also Irene Vorrink, Voor de Vrouw. Voor ’t eerst ter stembus, 6.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, 1766.

¹⁴⁰ Irene Irene Vorrink, Voor de Vrouw. Voor ’t eerst ter stembus, 6.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, 1766.

¹⁴¹ *D. I-R*, Bepaalde de Doorbraak zich uitsluitend tot de mannen?, in: Doorbraak. Verkiezingsuitgave no. 1., [1948], NA, Drees, Reg. 352.

¹⁴² De Christen-vrouw en de P.v.d.A. Protestants-Christelijke Werkgemeenschap in de Partij van de Arbeid. Vlugschrift nr. 3., KDC, KVP, Reg. 1494.

framed as a “big cleaning day” when everything “petty, old en finished” would be swept away to make room for a “new and reborn Holland”.¹⁴³ In a radio broadcast, Irene Vorrink, daughter of party chairman Koos Vorrink, pointed out that women had to get involved in politics in order to be able to teach their children how to act as “good members of our society”.¹⁴⁴ Casting their ballot, women could help to ensure their children a “better and happier world” and a “better future”.¹⁴⁵ The social democrats, however, also made it abundantly clear that women were – still – not to play a role on the centre stage of politics. The PvdA was presented as the joint effort of “the sons of one people” who were to build “a just, new, socialist society”.¹⁴⁶ In another pamphlet voters were asked to support “the men who will lead our country to recovery and renewal”.¹⁴⁷ In fact, in the 1946 election, only one of the 29 social democratic MPs was a woman: the former progressive-liberal politician Corry Tendeloo. In one of the party’s radio broadcasts just days before the election, Tendeloo had argued that women needed not to be represented by women. She, however, also encouraged women to join the party’s women’s club where they could get in touch with “their female representatives”.¹⁴⁸ The political renewal promised by the PvdA therefore did not entail a new role for women; they were still largely excluded from the (re)construction of the postwar political order.

V Conclusion

The metanarrative of pillarization has hampered our view on elections in the first half of the twentieth century because it has ignored the momentum, which the elections brought to efforts to broaden the party’s appeal. Although more research, which should also include the language of politics of other major parties, needs to be done, an analysis of the electoral language of the Dutch social democrats shows that they did not adopt a ‘defensive’ strategy that was merely aimed at the mobilization of ‘their’ grassroots supporters. In their electoral propaganda, the social democrats used a range of discourses, aimed at various groups of voters. From the beginning, the SDAP challenged itself to balance its efforts to win over confessional voters and expand its electoral base towards farmers and the middle classes, with its ideology, traditional profile and culture as a socialist, working class party. Although the party’s electoral language reveals that the ideology was interpreted in a flexible way, the tension between both languages resulted in a sometimes heated internal debate and hampered the party’s efforts to construct a more inclusive political constituency.

Initially, the party tended to present socialism as a political religion, using religious discourse to sing the praise of their ideology. Although the language of Domela Nieuwenhuis and the election campaigns of the SDAP exemplify that socialism offered enough leads for an appeal to confessional voters, the party’s atheist Marxist ideology limited its attractiveness. After the First World War, the introduction of proportional representation and general (male and female) suffrage seemed to offer the party a new opportunity to expand its electoral base. Immaterial issues like disarmament were moved to the forefront of politics in order to appeal to female voters. Their inclusion in the suffrage contributed to the adoption of more inclusive concepts such as ‘people’s community’, which were also used to stretch the party’s appeal beyond the working class. That said, women were mainly included in this community as

¹⁴³ Brochure, Grote schoonmaak. De Katholiek in de Partij van de Arbeid, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

¹⁴⁴ Radio broadcast, Irene Vorrink, Voor de Vrouw. Voor ’t eerst ter stembus, 6.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, 1766.

¹⁴⁵ Brochure, Grote schoonmaak. De Katholiek in de Partij van de Arbeid, [1946], KDC, Ruygers, Reg. 92.

¹⁴⁶ C. Kleywegt, Waarom een Partij van de Arbeid, 22.4.1946, IISG, PvdA, Reg. 1766.

¹⁴⁷ Een laatste woord aan de kiezers, 16.5.1946, KDC, KVP, Reg. 1493.

¹⁴⁸ Radio broadcast, Corry Tendeloo, Voor de vrouw. Vrouwen spreken mee, 15.5.1946, IISG, PvdA, 1766.

‘mothers’ and remained to be so for the time being. Social democrats saw no role for them on the centre stage of politics.

In the 1930s, the moral and (quasi-)religious discourse, which was geared towards confessional voters, started to clash with attempts by the party to appeal to middle class voters through the promotion of a practical, socioeconomic agenda that promised to solve the crisis of the 1930s. Those within the party who favored the latter approach feared that an overt use of religious discourse would scare such voters away. The adoption of a new manifesto in 1937 was a decisive moment. With the inclusion of concepts like democratic socialism and ‘people’s community’, which had emerged in socialist political discourse after the First World War, the party aimed to broaden its appeal. In addition, the decision forced by Albarda in the late 1930s to treat socialism as a practical political ideology rather than a political religion would set the tone for the party’s postwar electoral discourse. Tensions between the ideological and electoral language of the social democrats lessened. After the war, the party tried to create a breakthrough in the Dutch political landscape by using a practical, predominantly non-religious and non-Marxist, but nonetheless anti-capitalist language of politics that centred on the party’s social-economic agenda and framed the elections as a choice between renewal or a return to chaos.

The lack of electoral volatility, however, shows that these efforts to broaden the party’s electoral base were not very successful. The PvdA was not alone in this; the other two ‘people’s parties’, the Catholic KVP and the liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), also failed to fundamentally expand their electoral base in the first postwar elections. This brings us back to the masternarrative of pillarisation, which argues that political allegiance often went hand in hand with the participation of voters in social and cultural organisations, which, together with the political party, formed a closely-knit network that spanned pretty much all aspects of life. Voting, in this case, was an expression of a political identity that also manifested itself outside the sphere of party politics. In their quest for the confessional vote, from the late 1930s onwards the social democrats tried to overcome this by relegating religion to the private and personal sphere. A voter could remain active within the Catholic Church and yet vote for the PvdA, because the party promised not to touch upon religious issues. Their attempt to shatter, among others, the automatism of Catholic voters voting for the Catholic Party, nonetheless, failed. This failure cannot be solely attributed to the firm hold of the clergy over the electorate, but also resulted from the fact that, like Catholicism (and the Orthodox Protestantism of the ARP), socialism itself had developed into a way of life that transcended the sphere of party politics and impacted on the private, social and cultural sphere in many respects. Although research that starts from the voter perspective is needed, one could argue that this turned ‘switching sides’ into a complicated issue. Despite the lack of electoral success – after the introduction of general suffrage their share in Parliament continued to fluctuate around one quarter of the seats – the social democrats, however, showed few signs of resignation.¹⁴⁹ Judging from their electoral language, their eagerness to expand their electoral base remained unabated.

¹⁴⁹ The ‘doorbraak’ strategy was used by the PvdA up until the 1960s. *Mellink*, Tweedracht, pp. 30-53.