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Work in Progress

Class and Voter Interaction in Election Campaigns of Dutch Social Democrats, c. 1945 to the 1970s

Abstract: This article discusses the post-war history of the Dutch social-democratic Partij van de Arbeid. It takes as its point of departure the fact that the two elements at the heart of contemporary discussions about the future of social democracy – struggles over the definition of its constituency, particularly the role class should play in it, and attempts to revitalize its interaction with the electorate – are present throughout the post-war history of the PvdA. The article explores both the content and mode of political representation: it investigates the representative claims of the Dutch social democrats and the communicative practices through which these claims were made in order to establish how the PvdA imagined and tried to constitute its constituency. Who, which groups of voters, were the social democrats claiming to represent? How did they try to reach voters? How did their interaction with the electorate develop against the background of the rise of – new forms of – mass media?

Keywords: social democracy – the Netherlands – electoral culture – political representation

On 15 March 2017, Dutch voters inflicted a crushing defeat on the social democratic *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA): only 9 social democratic MPs – out of a total of 150 – were elected. Five years earlier, the PvdA had won 38 seats in the general elections and had become the second biggest party in parliament. Subsequently, the social democrats had entered into a coalition government with the liberal party *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (in short: VVD). In 2017, for the first time in its long history, the PvdA lost its position as the leading party of the left. It was now out-

numbered by both *Groen Links* – a party formed in the 1980s out of the remnants of pacifist and communist parties – and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) – which had first entered parliament in 1994 and boasted strong grassroots activism and a more militant socialism.

Although the blow the PvdA suffered was unprecedented – it constituted the biggest electoral defeat a Dutch political party had ever faced – it was far from the first setback the party had experienced in recent years. As the Graph (figure 1) indicates, its recent historical trajectory is marked by ups and downs, but also by gradual decline overall. Despite these setbacks, the social democrats have shown resilience: in 2003 the party managed to recover from the heavy loss it suffered in 2002 when populist politician Pim Fortuyn, murdered just days before the general election, shook up the Dutch political landscape. Two disappointing elections, in turn, preceded the victory of 2012.

In the face of defeat, social democrats have not been averse to self-castigation. One can easily fill a bookshelf with reports analysing the party’s downfall and attempting to offer a new way forward.¹ The heavy loss of 2017 has also triggered numerous reflections on the path(s) that might lead the party out of the desert. Two reflections stand out. First of all, defeat has resulted in calls for a new narrative that connects various groups of voters – various in terms of age, education, income, gender and ethnicity – to the party. Commentators seem to agree that this requires the party to revitalize its core political values, which are based on the ‘classic socio-economic divide’, arguing that this divide has not lost its political relevance.² Digging

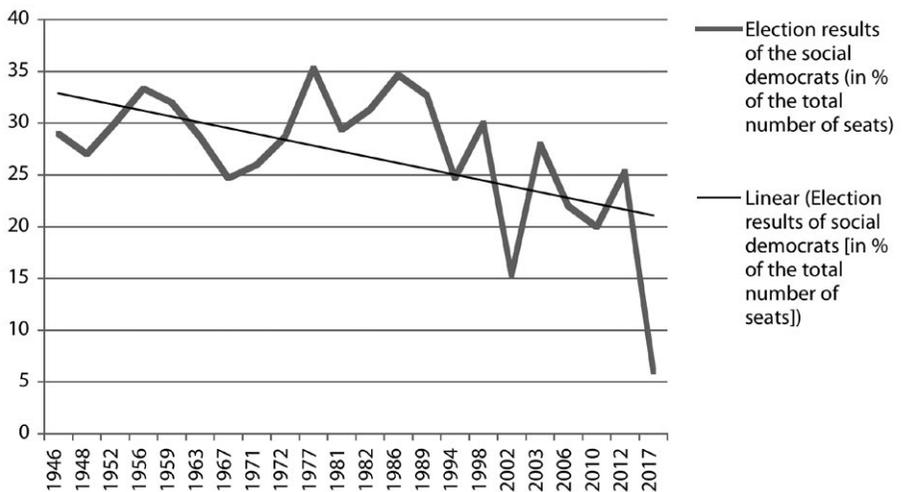


Figure 1: Election results of the Partij van de Arbeid, 1946–2017 (in %)

a little deeper, one finds the party's complicated relationship with class is one of the key issues the social democrats are currently facing. In 2016, when opinion polls already indicated that the PvdA was heavily losing ground among the electorate, former party chairman, former member of the Senate, and professor of political science Ruud Koole issued a call to re-embrace class as one of the party's key political concepts. Koole argued that, when the PvdA started riding the waves of third way socialism in the 1990s, social democrats wrongly believed that class antagonism had come to an end. The party had begun digging its own grave by turning itself into a party for the middle class, ignoring the fact that this section of the population was actually shrinking. The best way forward for Dutch social democrats according to Koole is to reinvent themselves as the defenders of social security and the welfare state, a state social democrats helped to dismantle when they adopted a neo-liberal agenda in the 1990s. The party needs to re-embrace a strong socio-economic agenda centered on issues like employment and social justice in order to make up its loss.³

The second road out of misery is paved by new forms of interaction with voters. In the latest review of the party's future, commissioned by the party board and published in June 2017, the social democrat mayor of the city of Breda, Paul Depla, advises the party to turn itself into a 'people's movement'.⁴ Depla warns against what he calls the 'netflixization' of society: the fragmentation of society and political constituencies into small groups of people living in their own 'information bubble'. The PvdA needs to overcome this fragmentation by connecting people around the key issues societies are currently facing, first and foremost social security. Moreover, Depla urges the party to shake off its image as a club of both effective administrators and of people who lose themselves in endless, grumpy and cantankerous discussions about past mistakes. Instead, social democrats should be proud of who they are and what they have achieved over the years and invest more in interaction with the people they aim to represent. This article does not tackle the issue of the current crisis of social democracy. It does, however, aim to show that the two elements at the heart of contemporary discussions about the future of social democracy – struggles over the definition of its constituency, particularly the role class should play in it, and attempts to revitalize its interaction with the electorate – are present throughout the post-war history of the PvdA.

Historiography on Dutch social democracy

For historians, too, the rise and fall of Dutch social democracy has long been an important topic of interest. Dutch historiography on social democracy is largely in sync with broader trends. Recent studies have taught us much about the political

culture of social democracy both in its infancy and in the interwar years. Inspired by Thomas Welskopp's seminal study on nineteenth-century German social democrats, Dutch historians have delved into the cultural history of the first generation of social democrats and their organizations in the second half of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century.⁵ Historians of the interwar years have explored how Dutch social democrats tried to instrumentalize mass psychology and advertising in an – ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to broaden the party's support beyond the working class, as Bernard Rulof has shown.⁶ Rulof's study bears resemblance to Laura Beers's work on interwar Labour, which discusses how British social democrats used the mass media to mould Labour into a popular, broad-based people's party.⁷ Others have focused on the language of politics to explore the efforts of social democratic parties in the interwar years to move beyond class towards a 'more inclusive politics'.⁸ In addition, quite a number of studies have been devoted to social democratic responses to the challenge of fascism and communism in Western European countries. In a convincing study, Kristian Mennen investigates the discussions among German and Dutch social democrats in the interwar years about the need to adopt and adapt the rich symbolism, mass mobilization and youthful image of national socialism in order to keep the extreme right at bay.⁹

As far as the post-war years are concerned, however, the historiography on Dutch social democracy lags somewhat behind international trends. Cultural approaches and a focus on politics as communication are few and far between. In his important comparative study on the post-war history of social democratic parties in Germany, France and the Netherlands, Dietrich Orlow maps their 'common destiny': their transition from Marxist, class-oriented social democratic parties to people's parties with a much less clear political profile.¹⁰ Orlow's main focus is on internal discussions about ideology, party programmes and policy issues and less on the party's response to new forms of mass media, its communication strategy and language of politics.¹¹ Moreover, Dutch scholars working on post-war social democracy have been mainly interested in the late 1960s and 1970s, when a new left movement within the party gained influence and party leader Joop den Uyl became the third social democratic prime minister (1973–1977) after Willem Schermerhorn (1945–1946) and Willem Drees (1948–1958).¹² That said, over the past few years the historiography on Dutch social democracy has been enriched with a series of excellent biographies, including a monumental, four-volume biography of party leader and prime minister Drees.¹³ One of the few studies to offer a discussion of communicative strategies is Philip van Praag's dissertation, which, again, focuses on the Dutch social democrats in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Van Praag explores the party's political and electoral strategies: the strategies used in the pursuit of power in government and victory at the ballot box. In the Dutch political context, marked by coalition

governments, electoral triumphs did not necessarily result in power in government. His use of the concept of 'strategies' implies a focus on the intentions of historical actors. Combined with an analysis of the actual outcome of the political process, van Praag shows that the party's strategies were effective in terms of electoral success, but ineffective when it came to getting into government. In this article, I will adopt a different conceptual framework moving away from strategies to practices of political communication.

The conceptual framework applied here is inspired by the work of political scientist Michael Saward. Saward has reconceptualized the notion of political representation as the product of claim-making. In his analysis of political representation, he moves away from a focus on 'forms' of representation (like trustees or delegates) and hones in on the question of 'what is going on *in* representation.' His answer to this question is that political actors make representative claims. Saward sees political representation as a 'dynamic relationship' and stresses its 'performative' and 'aesthetic' aspects: 'representing is performing [...] and the performance [...] adds up to a claim that someone is or can be "representative"'.¹⁵ Saward thus contests the claim of Carl Schmitt that representation is to be understood as the 'realization of the unity of an authentic community'. Referring to Benedict Anderson and Pierre Bourdieu, Saward contends that '[c]onstituencies, like communities, have to be "imagined"' and that by making representative claims politicians are engaged in the 'active constitution of constituencies'.¹⁶

This article explores both the content and mode of political representation: it investigates the representative claims of the Dutch social democrats and the communicative practices through which these claims were made in order to establish how the PvdA imagined and tried to constitute its constituency. Who, which groups of voters, were the social democrats claiming to represent? How did they try to reach voters? How did their interaction with the electorate develop against the background of the rise of – new forms of – mass media? These are particularly relevant questions for a political party that historically presented itself as a mass party, as a political *movement*, a community of socialists that united politicians and the people they represented around a strong sense of class and a common struggle against capitalism.

Jon Lawrence and Thomas Mergel have shown the benefits of such a focus on political communication in their respective studies on British and German electoral culture, that is, on the norms, conventions, attitudes and emotions that guide the conduct of politicians and the people in election campaigns. 'By focusing on political interaction,' Lawrence argues, 'we focus on the key point at which two very separate worlds collide – the formal political world of "representation" and the informal political world of everyday life'.¹⁷ By analyzing political communication we are able to determine how social democrats tried to develop links between themselves

and the electorate they aimed to represent. In addition, such an approach allows us to move away from interpretations of political parties 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

The article focuses on the period between 1945 and the early 1980s, a period in which the social democrats tried to end the hegemonic position of the confessional parties KVP (*Katholieke Volkspartij*), ARP (*Antirevolutionaire Partij*) and CHU (*Christelijk-Historische Unie*). They had been in government since 1918 and united voters from all social strata around a common confessional identity. The PvdA attempted to lure progressive voters away from the confessional parties and thought that these parties were rushing to perdition because of the unsolvable tension between their progressive and conservative wings. The failure of this attempt was marked by the establishment of a Christian-democratic party in 1980. The three major confessional parties merged into the *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) and this party would provide the prime minister between 1977 and 1994. The research for this article is based on an analysis of general election campaigns, with sources ranging from propaganda – brochures, pamphlets, newspaper ads, speeches, radio broadcasts and the like – to internal discussions about election and communication strategy. The article opens with a discussion of the election campaigns roughly between 1945 and the mid-1950s. The next section explores the party's attempts to increase its interaction with the electorate, including the use of the new opportunities offered by television. The third section analyses the impact of the new left on the party's representative claims from the late 1960s onwards and discusses the culture of confrontation that defined the political climate of the 1970s.

Constructing a cross-class constituency: the electoral culture of the social democrats in the first post-war decade¹⁹

Dutch election campaigns of the interwar years had been marked by mass manifestations and demonstrations of party strength and unity. Defensive strategies abounded among the major parties, who were mainly trying to keep their community together by keeping fringe parties at bay, like the communist party and other revolutionary socialist groups in the case of the social democrats. The *Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij* (Social Democratic Workers' Party, SDAP) did adopt a more expansive strategy in the mid-1930s, when it launched its *Plan van de Arbeid* (Labour Plan) in an attempt to counter mass unemployment and win the support of, among others, people who were losing their trust in parliamentary politics and

were moving towards left and right-wing extremist parties.²⁰ In the end, however, all the major parties were locked in a contest that only resulted in minor victories and defeats.

The social democrats emerged from the war years with the desire to change the lay-out of the Dutch political landscape, in which religion was one of the most prominent dividing lines. It was their ambition to form a new political party of the left that could attract support from all voters who favored progressive politics, independent of religion. Although the initiative drew support from a number of Catholic and Protestant politicians, the social democrats could not prevent the return of confessional political parties after the war. The Catholic party changed its name to *Katholieke Volkspartij* (Catholic People's Party) and the Protestant parties ARP and CHU also returned to the stage. The social democrats nonetheless pushed through with their attempt to form a new, broad-based party of the left. Joined by a progressive liberal party and a Christian-democratic fringe party, they entered the first post-war general elections under the name of the *Partij van de Arbeid* (Labour Party).²¹ For party leader Willem Drees, the socialist nature of the new party was beyond dispute.²² The PvdA indeed turned out to be a social democratic party, both in terms of its political manifesto and in its symbolic expressions: the PvdA tapped into the repertoire used by the prewar SDAP, like the use of the red flag and socialist songs. As a result, disappointed liberal politicians soon left the PvdA to form a new liberal people's party: the VVD.

Despite the failed attempt to form a broad-based people's party of the left, the social democrats' key political strategy was, and remained to be, to realize a breakthrough: a *doorbraak* in Dutch. This concept referred to the party's attempt to break the close ties between religion and politics in the Netherlands.²³ The strategy was aimed at Catholic and Protestant voters who voted for the Catholic and Protestant political parties KVP, ARP and CHU. It was a strategy that did not bring (immediate) success: the confessional parties managed to maintain their strong position in the heart of the political spectrum throughout the 1950s. The PvdA kept on trying nonetheless: the breakthrough attempt remained part and parcel of the party's strategy up until the 1960s and to a certain degree even into the 1970s.²⁴

An often-ignored element of the social democrats' breakthrough strategy was the attempt to turn the PvdA into a cross-class people's party.²⁵ Already in the inter-war years, the social democrats had claimed to defend the interests of groups that did not necessarily identify themselves as 'working class', such as non-manual workers (or: brain workers), shopkeepers, farmers and small employers.²⁶ This continued in the post-war years. The party, however, struggled to develop a new, more inclusive political vocabulary. Social democrats conceptualized their constituency in different terms. Party ideologists and members of the social democratic think tank WBS

stuck to discourses and representative claims built around social-structuralist and social-determinist notions of class: voters were put in specific categories based on their profession and the way in which each category voted was read as class behavior. For instance, they blamed the party's limited success in establishing a foothold among middle class voters on the 'pretty negative' feelings towards politics among this part of the electorate.²⁷ The vocabulary used in election propaganda was, however, far more diffuse. A campaign song used the word 'werkers' (workers) instead of 'arbeiders', which had a stronger socialist connotation, and referred to the PvdA as a party in which brain and manual workers were united.²⁸ In election propaganda too, inclusive concepts like 'the people' and 'the common man' were used to appeal to both working and middle class voters – a strategy the British Labour Party also used in the early post-war years.²⁹

The party's preoccupation with middle class voters was caused by a fear of the effects of *embourgeoisement*. This fear worked two ways. First of all, social democrats were afraid that all too explicit an attempt to win the support of middle class voters would alienate their working class, 'core' electorate; the social democrats themselves risked becoming too bourgeois. Second, by stimulating the rise of the welfare state, the social democrats feared that they were digging their own grave. After all, welfarist policies could lead to an *embourgeoisement* of the working classes. Selfish materialism would replace a critical social perspective and a strong sense of solidarity. The fear of *embourgeoisement* also reveals the persistence of a traditional, Marxist reading of class behavior. Social democrats believed that converging levels of affluence among working and middle-class voters had catalysed a defensive reflex among members of the middle class who cultivated sociocultural differences in order to demarcate themselves from the working class.³⁰ An analysis of the failed attempts by the British Labour party to win the support of middle-class voters learned that *not* voting for a social democratic party was one of the key elements of cultivating a middle-class identity.³¹

The fact that the party continued to perceive the middle class as 'the other' hampered its attempt to construct a cross-class constituency.³² People within the party repeatedly made derogatory comments about the middle class, characterizing it as a group of people marked by political ignorance and a lack of solidarity with members of the working class.³³ Although the PvdA did make more inclusive representative claims in its election propaganda, in 1958 a sociologist affiliated with the party warned that its Marxist idiom and working-class party culture interfered with the attempt to appeal to middle-class voters.³⁴

Towards a new, more interactive electoral culture

In the 1950s election, meetings suffered from a poor turnout. Voters were no longer eager to flock to meeting halls and public squares to consume political speeches. What also worried the party boards was a lack of dedication and enthusiasm among their local branches. The central offices of the party were responsible for designing the election strategy, planning meetings and printing brochures, but depended on local party activists to carry out the campaign, get people to attend meetings, and distribute brochures and pamphlets door-to-door. Election campaigns were therefore often preceded by campaigns aimed at reinvigorating local party branches. In the 1950s the PvdA initiated a 'torchbearers' campaign, which amounted to the establishment of local associations of active party members. The 'torchbearers' hosted living room meetings to stir up political discussions in their own neighbourhood. The Catholic party adopted a similar initiative in the run-up to the 1956 campaign.³⁵ On occasions, the political climate indeed heated up. In 1956, the rivalry between the PvdA and the KVP in the southern, predominantly Catholic provinces of the Netherlands resulted in a range of incidents with efforts on both parts to sabotage each other's election campaign. Overall, however, the election campaigns of the 1950s were 'apathetic' (*lusteloos*), 'dull' (*mat*) and 'tame' (*tam*).³⁶ Political historian Piet de Rooy has linked the discussions about political apathy in the 1950s to a strong sense of a moral and cultural crisis. Journalists and intellectuals complained about a lack of political ideals and visions. Politics no longer managed to create notions of belonging, but had turned into a technocratic arena in which elites solved problems by way of consensus. Indeed, most political parties were far too preoccupied with themselves and failed to present the electorate with a clear view of the differences between the parties.³⁷

In the 1950s, the social democratic think tank WBS started to conduct electoral research in an attempt to help the party to reconnect with the electorate. Its research showed that compared to other major parties, the PvdA had a smaller group of loyal 'core' voters. Therefore, time and time again, the social democrats had to make a real effort to convince voters to support their party. Research also showed that textual propaganda and election meetings were far less effective than approaching voters in person through house visits. Based on the results of British studies, the think tank also recommended the use of radio and film in order to reach voters across the country.³⁸ Indeed, a 1956 campaign handbook mentioned 'personal contact' with voters as a key element of a successful election campaign.³⁹ The need to knock on doors, hand out pamphlets and speak to voters directly was also acknowledged by other political parties.⁴⁰

Martin Conway has characterized this as a shift towards 'more private methods of electioneering'.⁴¹ These methods might have been far from new – door-to-door canvassing had been a key element of interwar election campaigns – but what was new was that leading politicians were increasingly eager to display their receptiveness and responsiveness to the voice of the people. They toured the country not to give speeches in auditoriums filled with the party faithful, but to interact with voters, answering their questions, showing interest in the issues they had on their minds.⁴²

In the case of the PvdA, the transition towards a new electoral culture, marked by new forms of political communication, took place when a new generation of social democrats took hold of crucial positions within the party at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s. In 1958 the party ousted Meyer Sluijser, the man responsible for social democratic election campaigns since the 1930s and famous for introducing techniques used in advertising and public relations. Meyer Sluijser had fiercely resisted the decision of the party board to call in the help of an external advertising agency, fearing that the party would lose control over its political message.⁴³ Sluijser's spot was filled by people who were trained in academia, in the social sciences mostly, and who brought with them new ideas, techniques and a network of scholars and experts eager to contribute to the party's campaign. In the 1960s, campaign committees counted among their members copywriters, heads of polling agencies and a range of social scientists.⁴⁴

One of the advocates of a more 'professional' approach to the party's electoral communication was Anne Vondeling, who led the PvdA from 1962 to 1966. He pushed the party to organize working visits for MPs and other political representatives and urged MPs to focus their campaigns on door-to-door canvassing.⁴⁵ Candidate MPs were instructed not to spend too much time in the 'traditional' surroundings of local party activists, at local party meetings, but to get in touch with voters face-to-face.⁴⁶ Following in the footsteps of John F. Kennedy and Willy Brandt, the PvdA introduced an 'election caravan' in the 1967 campaign. A fleet of Volkswagen vans filled with politicians toured across the country in order to 'hear from the people what [...] they want from us'.⁴⁷ Vondeling was one of the first Dutch politicians to acknowledge the impact television could have on the nature of political communication. He urged his party to enter the elections with politicians who knew how to act in front of a TV camera. Vondeling himself became a popular political figure in the 1963 general elections thanks to his successful appearances in a series of election debates.⁴⁸ Finally, Vondeling was a fervent supporter of the use of opinion research, which, he argued, could help MPs to better place themselves in the service of the people.⁴⁹ In the early post-war years, social democrats had been critical towards the

use of opinion research, fearing that it would hollow out the position of parliament as the institute that represented the public interest. In the 1960s, however, the party embraced opinion polls in an attempt to find explanations for the disappointing elections results.⁵⁰

For Vondeling, new ways of interacting with the electorate went hand in hand with new representative claims. The key goal behind his efforts was to urge social democratic politicians to develop an interest in voters, to hear them out and to tap into the issues that concerned them most. Vondeling was one of the driving forces behind a new form of electoral research that no longer leaned heavily on Marxist class analysis, but aimed to unearth voters' opinions on politics. Research commissioned by the party in the early 1960s indicated that most people felt that there were no clear differences between the parties. Moreover, there appeared to be hardly any match between key platforms of the PvdA and the issues on the minds of the voters. Trips abroad, to Britain and Germany, had taught the social democrats that their sister parties heavily focused their campaigns on specific groups of voters – 'target voters' or 'Zielgruppen' – who had not yet made up their mind on which party to support. By tapping into the issues that concerned these 'floating voters' most – a concept introduced in the Netherlands by the social democratic political scientist Hans Daudt – the PvdA could try to win them over to its side.⁵¹ Vondeling therefore wanted election campaigns to focus on four or five distinctive issues, instead of too long and detailed a list of political concerns for which voters did not care. These issues were also preferably to have a certain emotional appeal in order to mobilize voters to get behind the PvdA.⁵²

Opinion research also showed that voters perceived the PvdA as a party that represented the interests of the working class. And since many workers – and to the shock of social democrats also manual labourers – did not identify themselves as working class, their support for the PvdA was far from self-evident.⁵³ In response to this, Vondeling urged the party to no longer claim to represent 'workers' but to adopt a more inclusive, catch-all terminology. Concepts like 'the average voter' and 'every Dutchman' (*elke Nederlander*) started to pop up when Vondeling and others discussed campaign strategies in the first half of the 1960s.⁵⁴ In the end, however, Vondeling's attempts to change the party's representative claims had limited effect. The disappointing results of the 1966 provincial elections and the resignation of the centre-left coalition government – in which Vondeling had acted as finance minister – later that year resulted in a party crisis that eroded his position and ended in his resignation as party leader. The next couple of years were dominated by the rise of a 'new left' movement within the party.

The new left and the culture of confrontation in the long 1960s

In October 1966 a group of young party activists published a manifesto in which they lambasted the PvdA for its lack of a clear political profile. The group of activists, soon better known as *Nieuw Links* (New Left), resisted an instrumental approach to politics that centered on getting things done and settling issues by way of compromise. Instead, it favored a more 'expressive politics' of voicing opinions and concerns that was characterized by a strong desire for confrontation.⁵⁵ Moreover, new leftists rejected the tendencies within the party in the mid-1960s towards a catch-all approach. Instead, they pushed for a re-ideologization of the party and for instance made the redistribution of wealth one of their key goals. They believed that the party should continue to build its constituency around the lower socio-economic strata, particularly since the ongoing secularization presented the party with a growing number of potential voters among the working classes.⁵⁶ *Nieuw Links*'s confrontational approach tied in with the political culture of the late 1960s and the 1970s and enabled the social democrats to develop close ties with a range of new social movements, including the peace movement, environmental actions groups, and second-wave feminists.⁵⁷

Developments in the Netherlands were similar to those among social democratic parties in Norway, Great Britain, Germany and France.⁵⁸ First of all, in most of these countries new leftists within social democratic parties were mainly aiming for a 'regeneration' of social democracy in an almost literal sense: bringing in young people with fresh ideas. Across Western Europe the voting age was lowered to 18 around 1970.⁵⁹ Second, they tried to open up their own party by promoting new ways of member participation. One of the changes initiated by the Dutch new left was the regionalization of the selection of candidates for parliament, which materialized in 1969. Candidate selection was placed in the hands of the party's regional federations. Moreover, if elected, candidates were required to move to the region that had supported their candidacy. This reintroduction of some form of district representation, formally abolished in the Netherlands in 1918, was motivated by repeated calls in the 1960s to bring politicians and the people closer together.⁶⁰

Despite their heavy criticism of *Vondeling*, when it came to political communication, members of the new left continued his attempts to adjust the party to the emerging audience democracy. This concept, coined by Bernard Manin, refers to a new mode of representative government marked by a personalization of electoral choice, with parties developing into 'instruments in the service of a leader'.⁶¹ Moreover, in an audience democracy the mass media, particularly television, play a crucial role in offering opportunities for politicians to reach voters. It results in a situation in which 'personalities are favoured over the party, performance over the programme

and authenticity over competence.⁶² New leftists like André van der Louw – the unofficial leader of Nieuw Links – and Tom Pauka continued Vondeling's professionalization of the party's election campaign from the late 1960s onwards, for instance bringing in communication experts to prepare politicians for battle with mock election debates (including a noisy, unwelcoming audience) and to help them to communicate effectively with voters.⁶³ The party also benefitted from the close ties between members of the new left and the progressive public broadcaster VARA. The culture of confrontation initiated by the new left was also adopted by VARA journalists who did not hesitate to put politicians to the test live on television, bar-raiding them with critical questions or exposing them to a hostile studio audience.⁶⁴

Against this background, politics changed from a rather serious, dignified and dull endeavour into a subject of popular interest. In the 1970s, women's magazines, fashion and sport magazines and the yellow press all featured pieces on the key political figures of the day. Leading politicians turned into celebrities who discussed both their private life and political ideas in well-illustrated pieces.⁶⁵ Politicians also started to appear in popular entertainment shows on television, using this stage during election campaigns to cultivate a popular image. Even party leader Joop den Uyl, who always seemed a bit out of his depth when he was treated as a celebrity, agreed to appear in an entertainment show of VARA to cultivate a more popular image of himself by playing a game of table tennis with Dutch football star Willem van Hanegem.⁶⁶ Another key indicator of their celebrity status was the fact that leading politicians were commonly addressed by their first name – Joop (den Uyl), Dries (van Agt, leader of the Christian-democrats) and Hans (Wiegel, leader of the liberal party) – found themselves mobbed by autograph hunters and became the subject of gossip.⁶⁷ This tapping into popular culture was again inspired by foreign examples. Election campaigns abroad had taught Dutch social democrats that voters perceived meetings and canvassing tours as 'party' events. Parties therefore started to look for new ways to reach the electorate. Engaging celebrities could help to draw people's attention, but were not meant to trivialize politics.⁶⁸ The PvdA made sure that the celebrities' performances tied in with the representative claims the social democrats were making. In the end, celebrities were 'used' in order to communicate the party's political agenda to as broad an audience as possible.⁶⁹ Moreover, many social democratic politicians might be media savvy, but this did not imply that the PvdA was completely in the spell of an audience democracy. Although party leader Joop den Uyl was catapulted to celebrity status in the 1970s, his popularity largely stemmed from the dedication he showed to using the political arena to change society.⁷⁰ The social democrats were keen to show that the form and content of their political communication were in sync and that form did not prevail over content.

Also, the fact that the party continued to commission electoral and opinion research illustrated that the PvdA did not completely break with the changes that had been set in motion by Vondeling and others in the first half of the 1960s. Ed van Thijn, who had a background in political science, stepped into Vondeling's shoes and emerged as the party's most influential political and electoral strategist in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷¹ The results of electoral and opinion research and his inspections of election campaigns of Labour and the SPD convinced Van Thijn that the social democrats could potentially reach a majority in Parliament if they managed to fundamentally transform the Dutch political landscape. His 'polarization strategy' was aimed at forcing the KVP – the biggest of the three confessional parties – out of the political centre and compelling confessional politicians to take sides. From their convenient position in the political centre, the Catholic party had managed to take the lead in virtually all post-war coalition governments, by reaching an agreement with either the social democrats or the liberal party VVD. The PvdA, van Thijn and others argued, needed to frame elections as a decision about which party would govern: either the progressive 'pole' of the political spectrum, formed by the social democrats and progressive confessional politicians, or the conservative 'pole', formed by the liberal party and conservative confessional politicians.⁷² The social democrats presented their strategy as a matter of offering voters 'clarity' (*duidelijkheid* in Dutch): by casting their ballot, voters needed to be given the opportunity to decide on the kind of government they wanted to have.⁷³

A series of electoral victories in the 1970s, and the fact that confessional parties, particularly the KVP, were losing ground, seemed to indicate that polarization was a success.⁷⁴ The social democrats returned to government in 1973: den Uyl acted as prime minister of the most progressive Dutch government in history. The PvdA and their partners of the left – the socio-liberals of D66 (*Democraten 1966*) and the PPR (*Politieke Partij Radicalen*), a progressive off-shoot of the confessional parties – formed a coalition government that also included members of the KVP and ARP. Yet while the social democrats might have returned to power, a progressive parliamentary majority was still a long way off. Voters did not conform to the progressive/conservative divide the PvdA aimed to project onto the Dutch political landscape. The social democrats disregarded research conducted by their own think tank which showed that they lacked support among voters that labelled themselves as middle class and who saw themselves in the centre of the political spectrum. D66, the VVD and the confessional parties claimed to represent these groups of voters, whereas the PvdA risked alienating them with its confrontational, strongly progressive approach. Warning signs that the polarization strategy might backfire were, however, systematically ignored by the party leadership.⁷⁵

In 1977, the social democrats faced the consequences of their stubbornness. Instead of splitting the confessional parties, polarization had pulled them together. From the late 1960s onwards, the confessional parties KVP, ARP and CHU had been negotiating about the establishment of a Christian-democratic party. In 1976 they finally decided to join forces for the general elections of 1977 under the name of the *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (Christian-Democratic Appeal). The merger of the three confessional parties was formally established in 1980. The elections were a success: the Christian democrats managed to halt the loss the confessional parties had experienced over the past decade.⁷⁶ Time and time again, Christian democratic politicians countered the social democrats' polarization strategy by framing it as unreasonable, extreme, a politics of 'alienation', and juxtaposed polarization with concepts like 'synthesis', 'general interest', 'solidarity' and 'reason'.⁷⁷ Polarization thus offered the Christian democrats the opportunity to claim that they united the people and served the 'general interest', whereas parties to their left and right were preoccupied with a confrontation (polarization!) between different social groups and parties.⁷⁸ Although the social democrats did win the elections by four seats (PvdA: 53; CDA: 49), the culture of polarization within the party made it impossible to reach an agreement with the Christian-democrats about the formation of a coalition government. In 1977, the social democrats ended up in opposition again, where, except for a short interlude, they would remain until 1989.

In the first half of the 1980s, the PvdA gradually came to realize that its polarization strategy had failed. Research showed that the party suffered from a negative image of constant complaining about the ideas and actions of the other major parties. The need to 'create an image', a better, positive image, became the key word of social democratic election campaigns in the 1980s.⁷⁹ The end of polarization was marked by the transition of the party leadership in 1986. New leftists had been in the running to succeed Joop den Uyl, but they were sidelined, also at the instigation of den Uyl himself. In the end an outsider, hand-picked by den Uyl, took over his position: Wim Kok, former leader of the trade union federation FNV (*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging*).⁸⁰ Together with CDA leader Ruud Lubbers, Kok personified the new political culture of the 1980s and 1990s, which was marked by a managerial and 'boring' style of political leadership. Within the PvdA, ideological quibbling made way for a hands-on approach to the profound issues of the day, such as the high unemployment rates and the rising costs of the welfare state.⁸¹

Conclusion

This analysis of the mode and content of the representative claims of the social democrats has shown that throughout the post-war years they were more willing to adapt the mode – using new forms of political communication that were part of the emerging audience democracy – than the content of political representation. The PvdA struggled to develop a new language of politics that could effectively draw the support of what it still perceived to be its ‘core’ working class electorate, as well as groups of voters for whom class lacked strong resonance.

The social democrats were one of the first parties in the Netherlands to acknowledge the opportunities television offered to reach voters in new ways. They also stood out for their use of electoral and opinion research as early as the 1960s. Unlike the SPD and Labour, however, the results of this research did not prompt the PvdA to turn itself into a broad-based people’s party. In West Germany and Britain, two parties dominated the political scene, whereas the Dutch social democrats operated in a multi-party system. Although the PvdA tried to rearrange the Dutch political landscape along the lines of Britain and Germany, it continued to face competition from parties at their fringes, such as the progressive liberals of D66 and the radical Christian-democrats of the PPR – competition from the Communist party had already subsided in the 1950s. This political context triggered the social democrats to keep positioning themselves strongly on the left of the political spectrum. This is not to say that the PvdA remained a ‘traditional’ working-class party. Through the new leftists within the party, the social democrats also appealed to the growing number of well-educated, young, middle-class voters out of whom the new left movement had emerged. The polarization frame they helped to introduce was, however, rooted in the belief that class still formed the overriding political identity marker. The success of the Christian democrats proved them wrong.

In the 1980s, with polarization finally overcome, the social democrats made the move both towards voters who placed themselves in the increasingly crowded centre of the political spectrum – and floated between the PvdA, the CDA, D66 and the VVD – and towards those who labelled themselves as middle class – two distinct, albeit highly overlapping categories of voters. The PvdA indeed managed to draw increasing support from middle-class voters in competition with the CDA and the liberal party VVD.⁸² Throughout the 1980s, these three dwarfed all the other parties and together occupied between 83 and 89 per cent of the seats in parliament.⁸³ In 1989, the social democrats finally re-entered government and five years later Wim Kok succeeded den Uyl as the next social democratic prime minister. Kok led a coalition government that also included D66 and the VVD, known in the Netherlands as the ‘purple’ (*paarse*) coalition. For the first time since the First World War, the con-

fessional parties found themselves in the opposition. The PvdA and the VVD, parties that had formed each other's antipode in the years of polarization, now worked together in implementing a highly neo-liberal agenda. The lack of ideological quibbling that had enabled the formation of 'paars' backlashed at the turn of the millennium. The social democrats faced increasing competition from a militant Socialist Party (the SP), the Green Left (Groen Links) and from populist politicians such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders. As a result, the once stable and crowded centre of the political spectre, co-habited by the PvdA, the CDA and the VVD, crumbled.⁸⁴ As so often before, with the dust still settling, social democrats once more took up their pens to analyse defeat and get the party back on course. As the results of the 2017 elections indicate, however, the party has yet to convincingly solve the conundrum posed by present-day populism and a highly volatile electorate.

Notes

- 1 In 2002 for instance: Werkgroep Politiek Inhoudelijke Koers [Commissie-De Boer], *De kaasstolp aan diggelen. De PvdA na de dreun van 15 mei*, Amsterdam 2002; Werkgroep Organisatie en Politieke Cultuur [Commissie-Andersson], *Onder een gesloten dak groeit geen gras*, Amsterdam 2002; after the defeat of 2006: Commissie-Vreeman, *De scherven opgeveegd. Een bericht aan onze partijgenoten*, s.l. 2007.
- 2 See for instance: Dirk-Jan van Baar, *Niet hip of sexy, maar noodzakelijk*, in: *Socialisme & Democratie (S&D) 74/1 (2017)*, 8–10, 8; Ruud Koole, *Toekomst voor de sociaal-democratie*, in: *S&D 73/1 (2016)*, 58–61, 58.
- 3 Koole, *Toekomst*.
- 4 See: <https://voordetoeekomst.pvd.nl/> (21 June 2017). This report was released on 20 June 2017.
- 5 Thomas Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz*, Bonn 2000; Dennis Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden. De vroege socialis-tische beweging in Amsterdam, 1848–1894*, Amsterdam 2001; Adriaan van Veldhuizen, *De Partij. Over het politieke leven in de vroege S.D.A.P.*, Amsterdam 2015; relevant English-language publica-tions include: Henk te Velde, *The Religious Side of Democracy. Early Socialism, 21st-century Popu-lism and the Sacralization of Politics*, in: Joost Augusteijn/Patrick Dassen/Maartje Janse (ed.), *Political Religion Beyond Totalitarianism. The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy*, Basingstoke/New York 2013; Adriaan van Veldhuizen, *A Grassroots Sacred Socialist History. Dutch Social Democrats (1894–1920)*, in: *ibid.*, 115–136.
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- 8 Jon Lawrence, *Labour and the Politics of Class, 1900–1940*, in: David Feldman/Jon Lawrence (ed.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History. Essays for Gareth Stedman Jones*, Cam-bridge 2011, 237–260, 239; Harm Kaal, *Constructing a Socialist Constituency. The Social-Democratic Language of Politics in the Netherlands, c. 1890–1950*, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 53 (2013)*, 175–202; Joris Gijsenbergh, *The Semantics of 'Democracy' in Social Democratic Parties. Nether-lands, Germany and Sweden, 1917–1939*, in: *ibid.*, 147–173; not so recent, but still a key publica-

- tion is: Thomas Childers, *The Social Language of Politics in Germany. The Sociology of Political Discourse in the Weimar Republic*, in: *The American Historical Review* 95/2 (1990), 331–358.
- 9 Kristian Mennen, *Selbstinszenierung im öffentlichen Raum. Katholische und sozialdemokratische Repertoire Diskussionen um 1930*, Münster 2013; see also: Rob Hartmans, *Vijandige broeders? De Nederlandse sociaal-democratie en het nationaal-socialisme, 1922–1940*, Amsterdam 2012; J.A.A. van Doorn, *Duits socialisme. Het falen van de sociaal-democratie en de triomf van het nationaal-socialisme*, Amsterdam 2007.
 - 10 Dietrich Orlow, *Common Destiny. A Comparative History of the Dutch, French, and German Social Democratic Parties, 1945–1969*, New York/Oxford 2000.
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 - 15 Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim*, in: *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006), 297–318, 302.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 313–314.
 - 17 Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford 2009, 4;
 - 18 Jon Lawrence, *Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880–1914*, in: *English Historical Review* 108 (1993), 629–652, 630; see also Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 313–314.
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