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Popular politicians: the interaction between politics and popular culture in the Netherlands, 1950s–1980s

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ABSTRACT

From the late 1950s onwards, the Netherlands witnessed a transformation of the emotional codes of politics. A culture of political leadership marked by notions of duty and restraint, made way for self-expression and authenticity. This article argues that the interaction between the spheres of politics and popular culture played a vital role in this transformation. The practices and discourses of popular culture became a significant part of the repertoire through which politicians articulated representative claims. The article traces how politicians negotiated their interaction with popular culture, started to cultivate a private persona and eventually turned into political celebrities.

KEYWORDS

The Netherlands; politics; popular culture; emotions; celebrity

According to Martin Francis, British prime ministers in the 1950s operated within a ‘culture of restraint’. The control of one’s emotions, which was tied to the cultural norms of British society as a whole, lay at the heart of politicians’ self-understanding.¹ Jon Lawrence’s study of British electoral culture has corroborated Francis’s argument. With the almost complete disappearance of heckling, the 1950s became characterised by a ‘drab, lifeless politics, that was perfectly suited to the post-war age of austerity’.² Britain fitted in with Western European political culture of the early postwar decades, which was, as Martin Conway has observed, ‘neat, controlled and ever so slightly boring’. In an age of ‘muted temper’, governments were dominated by ‘middle-aged and middle-class men in suits’ who ruled in ‘relative anonymity’.³ But the 1950s and early 1960s in Britain were also a period when a culture of leadership marked by notions of duty, restraint, hard work and self-effacement gradually gave way to self-expression, attractiveness and being true to oneself. Building on the work of Warren Susman, Francis links the transformation of the culture of political leadership to broader changes in the emotional culture of British society during this period.

In the Netherlands, a similar transformation took place, as I will discuss in this article. In the early post-war years, fears of moral degeneration caused by the experience of war had triggered calls for rigorous self-discipline. Although restraint remained the norm, in the 1950s social and political elites as well as psychiatric and psychological experts started to promote ‘guided’ or ‘controlled’ self-development as a way of stimulating people to strive to achieve their full potential within established social and
economic communities. In the mid-1960s, the norm radically shifted towards ‘spontaneous self-development’: people should be allowed to express their emotions in order to reveal an ‘authentic self’. This transition coincided with a cultural revolution that involved, among other trends, the emergence of tolerant attitudes towards prostitution, soft drugs and homosexuality.\(^4\) In a study on the changing styles of political leadership in the Netherlands, political historian Henk te Velde has given the initial impetus towards a better understanding of the behaviour of politicians in this new context. He argues that ‘every period asks for its own type of leader’. Prime Minister Willem Drees (who led the nation from 1948 to 1958) epitomised the post-war era of reconstruction. The key ingredients of his governments’ effort to rebuild the country and transform the Netherlands into a welfare state – hard work, austerity and wage restraints – were reflected in his personality: Drees, presenting himself as a restrained, hard-working man, projected himself as the average Dutchman.\(^5\) In the 1960s and 1970s, a period that Te Velde characterises as one of ‘leadership without leaders’, Drees’s paternalism, aloofness and frugality no longer held sway as a leadership style. Now the country’s leaders aimed to come across as approachable, open to criticism and willing to show their emotions.\(^6\)

As is clear, the codes and style of political leadership in Western European countries such as Britain and the Netherlands were fundamentally transformed. What remains to be explored is how these nations’ politicians interacted with their context – their ‘time’ or ‘period’ – to trigger a shift in the emotional economy of politics and to produce new notions of ‘good’ political leadership. In this article, I argue that our understanding of this transformation will improve through an analysis of the interaction between the spheres of popular culture and the political. The use of the term ‘the political’ implies a move away from politics as a stable, self-evident domain. The political, instead, is a historically contingent communicative space whose features and boundaries are subject to reconfiguration. Studying the interaction between the political and other spheres, such as popular culture, shows how these features and boundaries have changed and have thus produced new definitions of what is political.\(^7\)

The interaction with popular culture is particularly relevant because its features have often been defined as the opposite of ‘political’. In the post-war democracies, politicians understood themselves as operating in a depersonalised field characterised by reason and a knowledge-based exchange of ideas.\(^8\) Against this background, discussion of the interaction between the spheres of politics and popular culture has often resulted in normative accounts about the supposedly negative effects of the ‘popularisation’ of politics, including the favouring of form over content and personalities over principles.\(^9\) Recently, however, scholars in cultural studies – and the odd historian – have convincingly argued that political and social historians need to take popular culture seriously because it provides an important frame through which people construct identities and through which they experience, and try to make sense of, the world they live in.\(^10\) By paying attention to popular culture we are responding to Lawrence Black’s call to explore ‘politics in its wider social setting’.\(^11\) John Street, in turn, has argued that we should approach the interaction between politics and a massified, pluralised popular culture as ‘a legitimate part of the complex ways in which political representation functions in modern democracies’.\(^12\) In the period under investigation, the practices and discourses of popular culture became a significant part of the repertoire through
which politicians communicated with the electorate. Elements of communication that are typically associated with popular culture – looks, emotions, dress, body language, a focus on the private self – therefore need to be taken seriously as crucial elements of political communication as well. Although some historians have lately developed an interest in the interaction between politics and popular culture, scholars in cultural studies and media and communication science still dominate the field. A historical approach is, however, needed to overcome the rather presentist bias of the existing literature, which locates the interaction between popular culture and the political in more recent decades, and to situate this interaction in the historical context, linking it with the layout of the political and media landscape and dominant cultural and moral values.

This article, offering an analysis of Dutch politicians’ interaction with popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and the early 1980s, aims to improve our understanding of how these politicians coped with a set of four crucial, closely related criteria that marked political representation in these decades: visibility, simplicity, authenticity and emotionality. Being ‘present’ and visible is crucial political capital, and the possession of these qualities became a concern for politicians in the 1950s and 1960s when, thanks to rising affluence, they had increasingly to compete for visibility, as people were now busying themselves in other spheres of interest: they could watch an entertainment show on TV, go to the movies or read a lifestyle or pop magazine. Politicians came to appreciate the opportunities of enhanced visibility afforded by the arena of popular culture – appearing in illustrated magazines or TV shows, rubbing shoulders with sports stars and other pop-culture icons – and particularly how they could reach groups of voters for whom politics was (perceived to be) a minor interest, like youth and women.

Moreover, politicians instrumentalised popular culture in order to encase politics in a more easily digestible package. Through the post-war rise of opinion polling politicians learned that voters lacked knowledge of political agendas and that the segment of floating voters was rapidly expanding. In the 1950s and 1960s, the linkages connecting class, religion and political identity formation, which had been particularly strong in the Netherlands, gradually loosened and political constituencies lost much of their communal nature. Against this background, popular culture – with its visual instead of textual orientation – provided the framework for a personalisation of politics, for instance by putting political leaders’ personalities centre stage and by framing politics as a clash between these publically conspicuous figures. A focus on political personalities, on the ‘person behind’ the politician, made politics less abstract, offered voters new objects of identification and diverted attention away from the fact that the differences among political parties were marginal.

In addition to visibility and simplicity, politicians came to understand that authenticity and affective affinity were now vital assets. Until the 1950s, political leaders had aimed above all to present themselves as members – and leaders – of a particular constituency united around a shared identity and agenda, and as sincere, serious defenders of their constituency’s interests. They built trust by presenting themselves as embodiments of a particular political community and its political platform. With the demise of these communities, the trust that underpinned political representation became more personal in nature. It was now based on the correspondence between
a politician’s public persona (‘the politician’) and his private identity (‘the person behind the politician’): authentic politicians were those who were ‘representatives of themselves’. This development gave a politician’s private life and emotional makeup political relevance. The (discursive) practices of popular culture became an important means for politicians to display their authenticity and to construct an affective relationship with the electorate by showing their private selves.

This article’s first section discusses how the iconic figures of the post-war culture of restraint – notably Prime Minister Drees, leader of the social democratic Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA), and Carl Romme, leader of the Katholieke Volkspartij (KVP) – negotiated the first cautious forays into the world of popular culture. This is followed by a consideration of how the development of new media formats and styles of journalism fed the rise of a more expressive political culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Zooming in on the emergence of a celebrity culture in these decades – politicians became celebrities, and popular-culture celebrities began entering the political sphere – the third section shows how politicians aimed to turn the celebritisation of politics into political capital. The fourth section explores the gendered nature of the politicians’ negotiation of popular culture. The fifth and final section highlights how politicians coped with criticism directed at their cultivation of a ‘popular’ private persona. The underlying research has been based on an analysis of general election campaigns, since this captures the moment par excellence when politicians sought popular attention. The main sources are the election propaganda of the major political parties and selections from popular cultural media, such as items on politics that were brought to the public through a broad range of popular magazines, newspaper articles and human-interest television broadcasts.

In the 1950s, political leaders in the Netherlands believed that control over their emotions was an essential political virtue. Although such restraint remained the norm, the sober and tame nature of Dutch electoral culture came under criticism. In 1952, a journalist for a Catholic newspaper argued that over the years politicians’ language and behaviour had become too ‘academic’, and thus the common people had lost interest in politics. Political parties, indeed, worried about declining public interest in their campaign events. From the late 1950s onwards, they brought in outside experts to help organise their election campaigns. The social democrats hired an advertising agency, while the Catholic party enlisted Ben Korsten, one of the first Dutch public relations experts. Korsten recommended the publication of ‘human interest’ stories about the party’s leading candidates in the non-partisan press and urged candidates to show up at sporting events or concerts in order to get in touch with the electorate.

Dutch political parties carefully negotiated popular culture. Elements of entertainment were meant to serve a higher purpose: to draw people’s attention to serious issues, to political principles and agendas. The parties enlivened their election meetings, for instance, by combining the traditional speeches with cabaret, music and theatre or by hosting a display of fireworks. Moreover, the first ventures into popular culture were mainly aimed at voters perceived to be politically ignorant, uninterested and therefore less susceptible to standard propaganda: women and young adults. Propaganda targeted
at female voters was packaged as light, accessible reads presented in the format of magazines or glossies: political statements alternated with illustrations, knitting patterns, non-political pieces on fashion, cooking or music, puzzles, prize contests and, last but not least, human interest stories about politicians (and their wives) at home (see Figure 1). In a series of pamphlets aimed at young voters in the 1956 election campaign, the social democrats compared party leader Willem Drees to the famous Dutch football player Abe Lenstra and the popular American jazz artist Louis Armstrong. Quite some effort was made to justify and explain these analogies, which shows that such comparisons were unusual and indeed a bit strained. Voters were told

Figure 1. Propaganda aimed at female voters: ‘The dress of your dreams’ (de jurk van uw dromen). Women were invited to participate in a price contest and in passing were encouraged to support the Catholic party KVP.

Source: KDC, KVP Archive, inv.nr. 1488.
that Armstrong and Drees had both achieved something in life through perseverance. The analogies, however, had clear limits. Drees himself was not presented like a star: unlike Armstrong, he was not someone ‘you could have fun with’, but someone you could trust. Moreover, a discourse of duty and paternalism prevailed: young voters were reminded to treat politics seriously, as doing so was a clear marker of adulthood.24

The persistence of a culture of duty, restraint and hard work among political leaders also attests to their careful negotiation of popular culture. In the 1956 election campaign, the PvdA and KVP, the two largest parties in Parliament, each distributed illustrated campaign magazines that almost completely centred on their respective leaders Drees and Romme, who were both portrayed at home, among family (see Figure 2 and 3). Their private selves were, however, eclipsed by their public personae, even in this domestic setting. Romme’s portrait

Figure 2. Both Romme (Figure 2) and Drees (Figure 3) were portrayed at home, with their family, in campaign magazines distributed across the country in the 1956 general election campaign.
Source: KDC, KVP Archive, inv.nr. 1488 (Romme) and 1496 (Drees).
literally stated that there were ‘no two Rommes’. In private, Romme remained the man he was in public: a ‘self-conscious man’, a man possessing a great sense of ‘responsibility’ towards his fellow citizens. A piece on Drees ‘as his usual self’ contained photographs of the social democratic leader strolling along the coast with his wife. Even when Drees went out for a walk, said the writer, he looked ‘serious, trustworthy and calm’ and was probably ‘thinking about the next budget’. Dressed in the same suit and tie he wore to work, Drees indeed looked like he was ready to head right back to his office. Seeing him out with his wife therefore reminded the journalist of the need to ‘take life seriously’.

The personalisation of politics – more than ever before, the elections of 1956 were framed by the social democrats and the Catholic party as a clash between their leaders – thus did not go hand in hand with the construction of a new code of political leadership. In a newspaper interview, Drees explained that from the start of his political career he had been determined to ‘never show his emotions’ because he considered this to be a sign of bad leadership. The dominant strand of his personality was his ‘unbelievable self-restraint’, according to his campaign manager. As a result, even though Drees was a popular politician – admired beyond his own party – his popularity remained ‘abstract’. His popular nickname ‘Vader Drees’ (Father Drees) showed at least some degree of affective affinity between him and the people, but it also evoked (paternal) authority. The Catholic party nevertheless tried to use Drees’s popularity against him by framing Romme, whom non-Catholic voters clearly did not find sympathetic, as the opposite of Drees. Voters were told that unlike Drees, Romme was not seeking...
'popularity'. He was not like us but was ‘better than us’ – and rightly so because a democracy needed the best, most capable men to be in charge. Romme’s restraint and the distance between him and the electorate were presented as the hallmarks of a true, male political leader and were implicitly contrasted with Drees’s feminine yearning for some form of affective affinity with the electorate. In fact, both Drees and Romme epitomised the culture of restraint that was typical of political leadership in the 1950s.

II

The 1960s witnessed the gradual transformation of the dominant codes of political leadership and the emergence of a more expressive political culture. The exit of Drees (1958) and Romme (1961) from their leadership positions cleared the way for a new generation. These politicians were faced with a less consensual political climate, increasing electoral volatility and changes in the relationship between politics and the mass media. The Social Democrats and the Catholic Party parted ways after more than a decade of ‘Roman-red’ coalition governments. The partisan logic that had dominated the press coverage of Dutch politics, with newspapers and magazines acting as de facto mouthpieces for political parties, yielded to a more critical, investigative approach. Journalists no longer deferred to politicians. Moreover, politicians began to appear on media platforms that had hardly been attentive to politics, such as popular men’s and women’s magazines, and television infotainment programmes. In the 1960s and 1970s, the popular press became increasingly interested in politicians’ private lives, in the ‘human behind the politician’. A focus on emotions, authenticity, and the person behind the politician was aligned with the rise of the psychological sciences in the 1950s and 1960s, which inspired people to explore ‘the depths of their “selves” to reveal a “true” self. The notion of self-fulfilment was reconceptualised: one was allowed (even encouraged) to express rather than repress or sublimate one’s emotions.

Female journalists such as Elisabeth Maria Lampe-Soutberg, better known by her pseudonym Bibeb, and Alice Oppenheim, who both worked for respectable opinion magazines, were at the forefront of the proliferation of the ‘close-up’ interview. This new format promised to uncover the ‘authentic’ human being behind the politician’s public persona. Journalists based their portraits on fieldwork, following a politician in his day-to-day work and in private settings. Bibeb preferred to interview politicians at home. Repeatedly challenging them to reflect on their feelings, their fears in particular, she described the emotions politicians showed during these interviews and paid attention to their physical appearance as well. In 1959 Erving Goffman published his influential study The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, in which he distinguishes the ‘front’ and ‘back stage’ performances of the self. Back stage, out of the public limelight, is where one could be oneself. Journalists like Bibeb sought out access to the back-stage selves of politicians.

That Bibeb and Oppenheim were female journalists is crucially important in understanding the rise of a more expressive political culture. Their personal, indeed intrusive questions seemed acceptable because they accorded with the dominant perception that women were mainly interested in the soft, personal and emotional side of politics and were ignorant about or indifferent to concrete political issues. Strikingly, in 1959, the Partij van de Arbeid asked Bibeb to interview the prominent socialist politician Henk
Hofstra for a glossy campaign magazine aimed at female voters. Although Hofstra was portrayed as ‘restrained’ when it came to discussing his private life, readers did get an idea of his emotional makeup. Descriptions of him as once a sensitive, shy and silent boy, and of his adult appearance as a ‘well-groomed man’, were meant to put him in sync with the female electorate. His private persona was, however, clearly demarcated as separate from his public persona as a politician. One moment he was ‘talking with great emotion’, but when the conversation turned to politics he became ‘the Hofstra like the outside world knows him’. His private emotions were counterbalanced by the ‘calm’ he showed amid political turmoil. Here we see a politician who, unlike Drees and Romme, was developing a distinct private persona, but Hofstra also showed the persistence of the culture of restraint in Dutch politics: he telegraphed the ability to remain in control, to be master of the situation and to keep one’s emotions in check once one entered the political arena.

In the early 1960s, television journalists, too, began to confront politicians with questions about their feelings and private lives. The new interview series FACE TO FACE (in Dutch: ONDER VIER OGEN), based on a British format and first aired in November 1962, was mainly positively received as ‘penetrating, human, revealing and sometimes even poignant television’. The first interviewee, a former politician, had come across as a ‘warm and human personality’. New techniques allowed TV journalists to visualise politics in a novel way. FACE TO FACE – and many similar interview programmes – were filmed in a new, voyeuristic style imported from the United States, characterised by a focus more on intimate images and details like gestures and (facial) expressions and less on distant, static and rather abstract recordings of people talking and answering questions. With its use of hand-held cameras and zoom lenses, TV bridged the gap between politicians and the people by presenting viewers with close-ups of their representatives in what seemed to be an authentic, truthful and realistic atmosphere. The metaphor of the X-ray repeatedly popped up to suggest that TV provided access to the human being behind the politician, his or her ‘true’ self. Not all politicians were up for such proximate encounters, however. In the second episode of FACE TO FACE, the government minister Bauke Rooolvink ‘controlled his emotions’, which, according to a critical newspaper review, resulted in a rather ‘impersonal’ interview. Politicians thus faced firsthand a clash between the dramaturgy of television and the older, not-yet-vanquished culture of restraint.

Politicians, indeed, were now judged on how well they dealt with the new norms of television, and, like it or not, they had to get used to it. In the press and among political parties, television’s impact on politics was repeatedly discussed. Some feared that principles would lose out to the mere appreciation of politicians’ personalities, but others stressed that television could help close the divide between politics and the people. Many politicians and journalists explicitly characterised television as a democratic tool that could help reanimate popular political engagement. Television, however, also had a dynamic of its own, one that politicians could not control. Newspapers reported that TV highlighted previously unnoticed features of politicians: their looks and how they said things, instead of what they said. In the early 1960s, the number of households with a television grew exponentially, even as there remained only two public channels – commercial television and a third public channel were introduced only in the late 1980s. Appearing on TV, therefore, guaranteed a potentially wide audience for politicians, but they also risked being exposed as inept in front of the cameras. Parties thus began recruiting media experts as consultants. Leading social democrats were told
that on television they appeared too intellectual, sharp and humourless; they would have to adopt a more light-hearted approach, particularly if they wanted to attract the support of young voters.  

Illustrated magazines also played a vital role in shaping a new representation of political leadership. In the 1970s, politicians started to appear in popular magazine features which put ‘the person behind the politician’ on centre stage. Women’s magazines like Libelle, Margriet and Avenue and popular men’s magazines like Nieuwe Revu, Accent and Panorama – all catering to large readerships – printed richly illustrated interviews with mainly male politicians who were often portrayed at home amidst family (see Figure 4). In 1971, the editor of Nieuwe Revu announced a series of portraits of leading politicians and remarked that the magazine would print not a ‘political interview, but an open conversation […] about everything which brings the man you want to vote for closer to you’ – namely ‘his own life, his own family, his own views, his own concerns and his own sorrows’. He praised the featured politicians for their ‘courage’ to ‘come out into the open as a human being’. Letters to the editor indicated that the readership appreciated it. Photographs of politicians sitting on the couch with family or playing a game with one of their children illustrated interviews that – in the tradition established by Bibeb – were accompanied by captions that noted how the politician ‘looks young’, or ‘wears a suit that seems to suggest that he slept in it for three weeks’. Still, not every politician was eager to respond to personal questions aimed at uncovering his purportedly true self. Even the media-savvy leader of the

Figure 4. Opening pages of an interview with Catholic party leader Gerhard Veringa in popular magazine Nieuwe Revu, 13–19 March 1971. Veringa is pictured playing Mikado with his wife and children.
liberal-socialist party D’66, Jan Terlouw, wearied of journalists who followed the campaign and hounded him with questions about ’how I feel, if I am tired […] I wish that they would focus more on my political message’. For politicians, to engage with the sphere of popular culture was to blur the boundaries between public and private and to have a spotlight shone on their private lives and emotional makeups. Terlouw might lament that his political message was in danger of being overlooked, but politicians had to acknowledge that their private personae, too, broadcast political messages. These private personae had become politicised; there was now an acceptance that, as the feminist movement (and other liberation movements in its wake) were apt to say, ’the personal is political’. In the democratic climate of the 1960s and 1970s, most politicians were eager to show they had nothing to hide, that the people had the right to keep close track of them, which also meant their private selves. Transparency was essential in closing the ’gap’ between politicians and the people, and therefore politicians were willing to open up their private personae to the public gaze, to provide the public a view behind the scenes. The media of popular culture offered politicians a prominent platform to do so.

III

Out of this interaction between the worlds of politics and popular culture there emerged a celebritisation of politics and a politicisation of popular culture. Being a celebrity suggests a degree of ’affective affinity’ between the celebrity and the public even as the celebrity remains ’like them and above them’. With politicians increasingly appearing in popular-cultural settings – ’allying themselves with the cultural representations of ”the popular”’ as John Street once put it – and trying to connect with the electorate by sharing their emotions and private lives, it hardly comes as a surprise that they, too, were catapulted to celebrity status. The 1960s and 1970s also offered an unprecedented combination of political polarisation and high-profile drama, the latter produced by appealing, controversial political personalities and the entertaining storylines they generated. The rivalry among the social democrats on the left, the confessional parties in the middle and the liberal party on the right reached new heights. The substantial political and ideological disputes of these decades were well suited for the mass-media stage, above all in the battles involving Joop den Uyl, leader of the social democrats and prime minister from 1973 to 1977, Dries van Agt, leader of the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA) and prime minister from 1977 to 1982, and Hans Wiegel, leader of the liberal Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD). Their contrasting personae made for compelling TV and their confrontations generated news on nearly a daily basis. Den Uyl, Van Agt and Wiegel all became political celebrities.

A clear sign of their celebrity status was the fact that politicians now mixed with celebrities from outside the political sphere. In 1977, the women’s magazine Libelle published a series of ’surprising conversations’ between politicians (all male) and celebrities (all female) from the world of sport and entertainment. Unlike earlier half-hearted attempts to compare politicians to celebrities – such as the pamphlets likening Drees to Abe Lenstra and Louis Armstrong – the interviews in Libelle stressed the similarities between these men and their female celebrity counterparts. ’We have quite a lot in common. We speak the same language’, the singer Rita Corita concluded after
meeting with Hans Wiegel: each performed for audiences across the country every week and had to give their best to win them over, they both received fan mail and found it hard to satisfactorily combine work with family life. Another key indicator of the celebrity status of leading politicians was their becoming the focus of gossip. Gossip magazines, first published in the Netherlands during the 1970s, treated politicians no differently than performing artists and sports figures: there were pieces on their marriage troubles, their holidays and appearances at high-society events. This was the final step of a process wherein the Dutch press abandoned its deference towards politicians, although the break with the past was less radical than in Britain and West Germany, where sensational revelations could destroy political careers. The rise of the celebrity politician exemplified a political culture where popularity, transparency and proximity had become important forms of political capital.

Politicians were hardly the ‘passive victims of a celebrity-obsessed culture’; far from it, as Laura Beers has convincingly shown for the British case. Drawing inspiration from American, British and West German election campaigns, virtually all the major Dutch political parties recruited famous sports figures and performing artists for their campaigns in the 1970s. In West Germany, sport celebrities had served as Wahllokomotive for the SPD and CDU in the 1960s through their endorsements in the press or appearances at campaign events and on party broadcasts. In the United Kingdom, the Labour prime minister Harold Wilson also appeared to be well aware of the positive impact of ingratiating oneself with stars from the world of TV and other areas of mass entertainment. Dutch social democratic campaigners concluded that celebrities could help imbue their campaign with a ‘trendy’ atmosphere (a blitze entourage in Dutch) and attract media attention. Because of their prominence in the media and their wide appeal across the electorate, sports figures in particular were perceived to be influential ‘opinion leaders’. Moreover, by associating themselves with successful stars, political parties could project a positive image of themselves.

In the 1970s, the PvdA engaged a range of celebrities who expressed their support in propaganda leaflets and participated in the party’s election tour. The social democrats, however, also reflected on the need to carefully balance entertainment and politics. Too much entertainment, they feared, would undercut their claim that they were fighting for real political change and represented the interests of common people. Musicians were therefore asked to perform songs that fitted with the party’s image and agenda. When an array of celebrities endorsed Den Uyl in an advertisement published in the popular daily de Telegraaf on the day before the 1977 general elections, they praised not Den Uyl as a person, but rather the political agenda he aimed to implement. The social democrats also justified the use of celebrities by arguing that they were instrumental to creating an atmosphere in which the public became susceptible to the party’s political message. This need to carefully negotiate the celebritisation of politics seemed to be of less concern to liberal and Christian-democratic politicians. When several prominent cyclists endorsed Van Agt in 1981 they made no mention of his party and merely praised him as a person: ‘we will vote for Dries. Why? [Because he is] sympathetic, trustworthy and a good sport’. Compared to Den Uyl, Van Agt was indeed more at ease navigating the ‘culture of sensation and self-expression’ that went hand in hand with the celebritisation of politics.
IV

So far, I have discussed the gendered nature of the interaction between politics and popular culture only in passing. But gender merits more attention, because it cuts to the heart of the emergence of the new mode of political representation that I have considered here. Above all, the career of one of the first celebrity politicians in the Netherlands – the female liberal MP Haya van Someren-Downer (1926–1980) – casts light on the key role of gender in the rise of a new emotional culture.

In a world dominated by grey, middle-aged to elderly men, van Someren-Downer, an MP from 1959 to 1968 and the chairwoman of the VVD in the 1970s, was an eye-catching woman who was adept at using media attention to her own advantage. Always smartly dressed, she was repeatedly dubbed the ‘glamour girl’ of Dutch politics. *de Telegraaf* frequently published stories about her private life and invariably she was featured in popular magazines and on TV shows. Her claim to fame was, however, based first and foremost on her appearances in the broadcasted sessions of Parliament, which had begun in the late 1950s. Television cameras recorded how she went against male-dominated norms of political behaviour through an expressive style that freely displayed emotions ranging from ridicule to impatience. A fellow (male) MP claimed that van Someren brought ‘too much emotion’ into debate, which stood in the way of ‘reasonable’ discussion. The press often contrasted her with the most prominent female politician of the post-war years, the influential Catholic MP and long-time cabinet member Marga Klompé. Unlike van Someren-Downer, Klompé, who remained unmarried throughout her life, was not eager to discuss her private life in public and was not very fond of photo and TV cameras. Moreover, in Parliament she did conform to the norm of self-restraint that characterised the overwhelmingly male milieu of post-war political culture.

Van Someren-Downer’s biography substantiates the argument made by Laura Beers that women could effectively use their femininity to become successful celebrity politicians. Van Someren-Downer, who with a background in journalism knew how to handle the press, used the media attention she generated to make the case for her key planks: education policy and the introduction of commercial television in the Netherlands. The reception she received, however, also shows that female politicians who displayed emotions and revealed their private selves were judged differently than their male colleagues. In the case of Britain, Amy Black and Stephen Brooke have shown that female MPs could either conform to established gender roles by focusing on ‘soft’, feminine issues, or try to blend in with their male colleagues by discarding their femininity. That van Someren-Downer refused to do either – she used her femininity to push ‘hard’ political issues – explains why she caused controversy. In a recent study, political historian Carla van Baalen has shown that the press tended to treat the emotions of male politicians as a sign of their ‘humanity’, whereas female politicians risked tarnishing their reputations if they let themselves go. In their case such expressiveness was treated as a sign of their failure to meet the (male) standards of proper political behaviour. For male politicians, Liesbet van Zoonen has argued, it was much easier and more accepted to create a ‘hybrid’ persona out of their private and political performances. Whereas male politicians could give access to their private lives to show a ‘soft’ side, the emotions that draw attention to the human being behind the politician,
female politicians in similar circumstances had to account for their ‘absence’ as a wife or mother, much like women in other professions.66

Second, the gendered nature of the interaction between politics and popular culture speaks to the fact that women themselves were the prime target of the popularisation and celebritisation of politics. Women’s magazines and gossip magazines, which were mainly but not exclusively targeted at a female readership, took the lead in publishing on politicians’ private lives. They enforced the gender binary by framing the public sphere as male and the private sphere as the domain of women. Although magazines like *Libelle* and *Margriet* also occasionally discussed ‘hard’ political content – like political party platforms or the goals of second wave feminism – the personal portraits of politicians offered an excellent and easily accessible way to introduce the female readership – no less than 40% of women above the age of 13 read *Margriet* – to a world of politics they were thought to be unfamiliar with and neatly tied in with the other articles in these weeklies, which predominantly centred on home and family life.67

Unsurprisingly, the female celebrities who were coupled with male politicians in *Libelle*’s ‘surprising conversations’ series were described as being nervous and awed when they entered the office of the politician (who would then immediately make them feel at ease). This again demonstrated that women were somehow perceived to be ‘out of place’ when they entered the political arena.

Third, the interaction between politics and popular culture produced a new conception of political masculinity that turned a politician’s body and appearance into political capital.68 In the Netherlands, discussion about looks and clothing had mostly remained limited to female politicians. Press reports on the first female MPs who entered Parliament in the interwar years are ripe with references to their appearance: some were described as ‘unattractive’ and ‘fat’, others as ‘elegant’.69 In the 1960s and 1970s, journalists in the popular press also started to discuss the looks and dress of male politicians. In 1966, the leaders of the established political parties suddenly looked stiff and dull compared to Hans van Mierlo (1931–2010), the attractive young leader of a new party: D’66, soon called ‘D sexy-sex’. The press attributed his success as a politician – his party shook up the political establishment, winning seven seats in the 1967 general elections – to his appeal among young voters and women.70 In his wake, other politicians were put to the test: Den Uyl was often derided for wearing wrinkled suits besmirched with food stains, while Van Agt was characterised as a fit, well-groomed gentleman, always wearing custom-made suits or – at home – a ‘sporty pullover’.71 His haircut and his decision to have some spots on his face removed also became matters of public discussion.72 In addition, both Van Agt and the man who succeeded him as prime minister in 1982, Ruud Lubbers, were given ample press coverage when they engaged in sports: Van Agt was an avid road cyclist, Lubbers played field hockey and was one of the first European leaders to be seen jogging. As Henk de Smaele has shown, politicians whose physical features turn into a topic of public discussion, are often associated with homosexuality. But since sport served as an important arena where the post-war male stereotype of the athletic, clean-cut, fit man took shape, politicians engaging in sports could draw attention to their bodies without triggering this politically risky association.73
The fruits that politicians hoped to reap from their engagement with popular culture and the opening up of their private personae could, however, easily turn sour. Journalists who joined them on their election tours critically reflected on the ways that politicians sought the media limelight. In the 1970s and early 1980s, many pieces were published on the PR apparatus of political parties and their use of marketing experts and political spin doctors, which were often framed as examples of a questionable – Americanisation of Dutch political culture. Supposedly ‘authentic’ politicians risked being unmasked as poseurs, as players of well-orchestrated roles. How did politicians cope with this?

Although all politicians were put under close scrutiny, liberal and conservative politicians were particularly vulnerable to criticism about their cultivation of a popular persona. This was because most Dutch political journalists in the 1970s sympathised with the left; they, and others, believed that popular culture helped preserve the status quo by diverting attention away from the ‘real’ issues at hand. They expected politicians to dedicate their lives to solving the pressing political issues of the day. Den Uyl lived up to such expectations. In interviews at his home in an Amsterdam suburb he showed that his public and private personae largely overlapped: political discussions continued at the kitchen table, where his politically aware teenage children put him to the test. His wife, active within the feminist movement, travelled with him on the campaign trail – not to shake hands or to serve as background decoration, but to prompt him during speeches or to mount the platform herself. Den Uyl’s political opponents took a different approach. As discussed above, they were less inhibited in their dealings with popular culture and less ambivalent about the celebritisation of politics. Wiegel and Van Agt in particular were keen to tap into anti-political sentiments and to stress their lives beyond politics. In the 1970s they increasingly used popular media outlets like de Telegraaf, Panorama, and the new popular broadcasting organisations TROS and VERONICA to do so. Van Agt took every opportunity to fashion himself as a political outsider who had ended up in politics by accident. His love for cycling was at the heart of his private persona. He did not hesitate to cancel political appointments to travel to the Tour de France or to open a cycling event somewhere in the country. His popularity, based in essence on the emotional intensity he generated among critics and supporters alike, was hardly diminished by doubts among political journalists that his love for cycling was sincere – his biographers claim it was – and their accusations that he did not take seriously his job as a politician. During election campaigns he received many letters from voters who praised him as an ‘honest man’ and felt pity for the attacks he endured in the press.

Politicians were, nonetheless, walking a tightrope, trying to balance authenticity, affective affinity, transparency and sincerity. The intricacies of ‘popular’ politics manifested themselves clearly in an incident involving Wiegel in the middle of the 1981 general election campaign. Wiegel, Terlouw and Den Uyl appeared together on VRAGENVUUR, a TV programme that had party leaders answer political questions from the studio audience. Wiegel, a father of two who had recently lost his wife Jacqueline in a car accident, burst into tears when a widower asked him to comment on his policies with regard to financial compensations for widowers. Den Uyl, who was seated next to
Wiegel, comforted him. Wiegel was the first Dutch politician who shed tears in public (see Figure 5). His tears triggered a debate in the media about whether a politician under all circumstances should be expected to keep his emotions in check.

Several journalists argued that Wiegel had it coming: he himself had contributed to the politicisation of his private life. Well aware of popular culture’s potential to cement affective affinity between himself and the electorate, Wiegel had agreed to several TV portraits of his life as a widower and to interviews in the gossip magazines Privé and Story with him and his two children on the cover. One of his party’s campaign broadcasts stressed his wife’s absence by showing Wiegel dropping off his kids at school in the morning. That this campaign video was shot by a famous Dutch movie producer also exemplified the stylised, dramatic nature of Wiegel’s campaign. The liberal party decided to kill the video after the incident, arguing that it did not want to tap into ‘human sentiments’. Meanwhile, an opinion poll commissioned by the Wiegel-friendly popular weekly Panorama had established that 77% endorsed the rather leading statement that his emotions ‘have at least shown us that a politician is a human being’. The widower who had asked Wiegel the confrontational question, on the other hand, argued that a politician should be able to ‘separate his personal feelings and other business [i.e. his political responsibilities]’. And where one journalist stated that the tears had allowed a glimpse of the ‘real Wiegel’, another was shocked by Weigel’s ‘uncontrolled’ emotions. However mixed the response, the incident once again showed the gendered nature of popular leadership. Female politicians shedding tears risked being ‘unmasked’: in their case tears revealed a ‘true’ feminine self, a self they had tried to hide so they could conform to the dominant, male code of conduct. Although Wiegel himself
reflected that his public tears were an embarrassment, in his case the incident hardly affected his public image as a quick-witted, powerful politician.

From the early 1960s onwards, in an era of growing electoral volatility and an increasingly critical political press, Dutch politicians had gradually come to appreciate the opportunities offered by the platform and formats of popular culture to reach the electorate in new ways. The interaction between popular culture and the political resulted in new ways of political communication and triggered a transformation of the culture of political leadership, as politicians tried to capitalise on the opportunities for visibility, simplicity, authenticity and emotionality held out to them in the practices and discourses of popular culture. The culture of restraint did not jibe well with the formats and discourses of the popular media. Politicians were faced with journalists – in print media and on television – who were eager to uncover the human being behind the politician. When politicians started to publicly display their private personae, authenticity and affective affinity became political capital. Although some female politicians managed to use this new political culture to their advantage, the politicisation of one’s private life and persona was of greater benefit to male politicians. Authentic politicians were those who developed a convincing connection between their private and public personae. Affective affinity, achieved by allowing the people access to one’s emotions, became a crucial means of cementing ties between politicians and the electorate now that class and religion had lost their force as markers for political identity formation. A relationship between politicians and the people characterised by deference and trust yielded to one of accountability, responsiveness and transparency. Yet, to return to Wiegel’s tears, the controversy about it did show the risks involved in blurring the boundaries between one’s private and public personae. Most politicians therefore carefully negotiated their dealings with popular culture. This, and the critical way that the press monitored the politicians’ behaviour, invalidates the narratives of decline that still permeate interpretations of the interaction between popular culture and the political.

Moving away from studies that stress the detrimental effects of popular culture, this article has aimed to add a deeper understanding of shifting notions of political representation to the vast scholarship on the political ideas, institutional relations and the political and social structures of post-war democracy in Western Europe. In the era of ‘party democracy’ interpretations of democracy and representation centred on a parliamentarism of ‘management and control’, not of mobilisation of the masses and civic engagement, and a bureaucratic, top-down culture of government was in place. Studying the interaction between popular culture and the political helps us to better understand the contestation and disintegration of the established institutions of functional representation in the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of individualised approaches to political representation and democracy that centred on personal contact between politicians and the people and an increasing public interest in the personalities of politicians. The platform of popular culture, which played a vital part in this transformation of the political, therefore needs to be taken seriously by any historian interested in conceptions of political representation, the gendered nature of political leadership and the emotional codes of politics in the postwar era.

This article has focused on what in retrospect was a rather short period, stretching roughly from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, when a more popular style of
leadership dominated Dutch politics. In the 1980s, a new generation of politicians entered the political limelight, led by Christian-democratic prime minister Ruud Lubbers (1982–1994) and the new social democratic party leader Wim Kok. Lubbers and Kok represented the ‘boring’ politics of the 1980s, marked by a more detached and distant political culture that built up trust primarily on the ability to ‘get things done’.89 ‘I see and hear no compassion, no emotion […] , no anger’, an advertising expert concluded in a critical review of a range of party election broadcasts in the 1989 campaign.90 As leader of the opposition (1986–1989) and subsequently as deputy prime minister (1989–1994) and prime minister (1994–2002) Kok indeed distanced himself from the political culture of the 1970s by adopting a more realistic, less confrontational approach, which was epitomised by his consensus-oriented leadership of a coalition government with the liberal party. Although he tried to downplay suggestions that he was ‘emotionless’ towards political issues, Kok first and foremost came across as level-headed (nuchter) and ‘boring’.91 Only with the rise of Pim Fortuyn in 2001 and other populist figures who followed in his wake did a more expressive and emotional culture return to the Dutch political stage.

Notes

8. Liesbet van Zoonen, Entertaining the Citizen. When Politics and Popular Culture Converge (Lanham, MD, 2005), 16.


30. Oosterhuis, ‘Mental Health as Civic Virtue’, 166.


34. Kaal, ‘Appealing to the female vote’.


63. Pegtel, Haya, 87–93.
67. These sentences are borrowed from: Kaal, 93.
77. Te Velde, Stijlen, 227–8.
78. Johan van Merriënboer, Peter van Grijensv and Peter Bootsma, van Agt. Biografie (Amsterdam, 2008), 251.
79. For letters written by ‘ordinary citizens’ see: KDC, Van Agt Archive, inv.nr. 619 and 650.
80. VRAGENVUUR, Ned. 1, 26 April 1981, 22:15–23.15; Van Baalen, ‘Cry if I want to?’. 
86. Van Baalen, ‘Cry if I want to?’, 41–43.

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