

## **The reinvention of consensus politics: governing without a legislative majority in the Netherlands 2010–2021**

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# The reinvention of consensus politics: governing without a legislative majority in the Netherlands 2010–2021

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## Abstract

For most of the twentieth century, Dutch governments commanded majorities in both houses of parliament, but after 2010 they mostly lack majorities in the Senate. How did this change from governing with a legislative majority to governing without a legislative majority affect political culture? To what extent did the norms of consensus government developed earlier persist in this period of governing without a legislative majority? We operationalize political culture by means of the seven rules of Dutch politics by Lijphart. We combine in-depth interviews and documentary sources to assess the extent to which these norms persisted or changed. We conclude that Dutch politicians used the existing political–cultural infrastructure of consensus democracy when the government lost its legislative majority, although not all consensual norms persisted.

**Keywords** Consensus democracy · Netherlands · Political culture · Norms · Qualitative research

“Everyone had to reinvent how this works in the Netherlands. Before the atmosphere had been ‘you have a majority in both houses and you have the government agreement and may be the coalition parties will sometimes allow each other to deviate a little from the agreement’ but doing business with the opposition, that was not the regular atmosphere” (Interview 3).

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## Introduction

Consensus democracies are traditionally characterized by inclusive policy-making procedures in which many parties participate in the policy-making process (Andeweg et al. 2008). In some consensus systems, minority governments are common, while in others majority governments are. The Netherlands fell firmly in the latter category between 1946 and 2010; all Dutch non-caretaker governments had a legislative majority: they commanded majorities in both chambers of parliament and thus were able to pass legislation without any opposition support. This changed in 2010 when a right-wing minority cabinet (Rutte I) took office. Since then the Netherlands has been governed almost exclusively by governments that did *not* have a legislative majority. We use the term *legislative majority* to indicate a situation in which the government controls a majority in every chamber of parliament that has a veto over legislation. In such systems having a majority in the upper house is as relevant for law-making as having a majority in the lower house: in its absence, the government majority needs to negotiate with the opposition for supporting legislation (Druckman and Thies 2002; Druckman et al. 2005; Thürk et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup> Rutte II lacked a legislative majority in the Senate and so did the Rutte III government for most of its existence. Therefore, the Rutte governments that were in office between 2010 and 2021 needed to cooperate with opposition parties in order to get legislation passed. As the quote above indicates the existing, majoritarian, ‘way of doing business’ was no longer viable, which despite the characterization of the Netherlands as a consensus system, left relatively little room for opposition party input in the legislative process. In this paper, we examine *to what extent the norms of consensus government developed under governments with a legislative majority persisted in the absence of a legislative majority*.

We select the Netherlands because it is exceptional among established democracies because it went from a situation in which government coalitions always controlled both houses of parliaments to a situation in which it almost never did. Table 1 shows the share of governments with a legislative majority in Western parliamentary systems that have been a democracy since the end of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> There are roughly two groups of countries: there are five countries where governments commanded legislative majorities more frequently in the last decade than before. In

<sup>1</sup> We specifically do not call these governments minority governments because that concerns the situation where the parties that supply ministers do not have a majority in the lower house. Here a government can be dismissed by the lower house and needs the (implicit) support of opposition parties to remain in power. All minority governments lack a legislative majority, but a government without a legislative majority can also occur when the government lacks a majority in an upper house that may not necessarily have the power to dismiss the government.

<sup>2</sup> Countries that score higher on 0.5 on the V-Dem Polyarchy score by 1955 (Lindberg et al. 2014), excluding micro-states (countries with less than 100,000 inhabitants) and systems with an elected president with executive powers or a directorial system of government. In Appendix 4, we show the change in legislative majorities before and after 1990 and 2000 and find similar patterns.



eleven countries, governments commanded legislative majorities less frequently in recent times. The Netherlands and New Zealand went from having legislative majorities for governments all of the time, to almost never having legislative majorities for the government. The unicameral case of New Zealand has been examined in-depth before (Bale and Dann 2002), so we focus on the bicameral case of the Netherlands.

Our central expectation is that pre-existing cultural norms of political cooperation were adapted to facilitate decision-making in ad hoc coalitions. We draw these norms from Lijphart (1968) and their operationalization from Heine (2019). The norms described by Lijphart and their counterfactuals serve as a tool to observe the changes in the political rules of the game due to this change in the legislative majority.

We contrast the decision-making under three successive cabinets that did not control legislative majorities for most of their tenure (Rutte I to Rutte III) with the decision-making under the last cabinet with a legislative majority (Balkenende IV) to examine this change. We use a case study with temporal variation where we can study the effect of a single change (legislative minority/majority) on an otherwise stable system (Gerring 2007). This allows us to observe to what extent entrenched political norms provide continuity when the legislative majority changes or whether they need to be adapted to the new political situation. As a case that saw an extreme shift in the extent to which governments have a legislative majority, the results for the Netherlands speak to a broader literature: by studying this case, we get a better idea of how parties learn to deal with a sudden change in the legislative majority. We focus on a single case (pension reform) to trace more specifically how majorities are constructed. Our qualitative analysis based on interviews with politicians and journalistic accounts supplements earlier quantitative analyses of parliamentary voting behaviour, which showed remarkable stability in voting patterns of opposition and governing parties (Louwse et al. 2017). Whereas the outcomes in terms of opposition support for government legislation might not have changed substantially, this does not mean that the political *process* has remained unaffected by the minority situation in the Senate. It is that process and the norms that are associated with it that are central to the current article.

## Lijphart's seven norms

We examine which elements of Dutch elite political culture allowed for the transition from decision-making by majority coalitions to decision-making by ad hoc coalitions of governments without a legislative majority and constructive opposition parties. Operationalizing elite political culture is notoriously difficult, but we do this on the basis of the seven rules of Lijphart (1968), listed in Table 2. These reflect the Dutch elite political culture between the late 1910s and the early 1960s (but see Heine 2019). These seven rules reflect an elite political culture where, in a fractionalized, multiparty landscape, political parties strike compromises in elite negotiations (Lijphart 1968). Clear-cut, zero-sum yes/no-questions are avoided (Andeweg



**Table 1** Legislative majorities in parliament 1945–2021

Country	Absence of a legislative majority			Senate with an absolute legislative veto
	1946–2010 (%)	2010–2021 (%)	Change (%)	
Italy <sup>a</sup>	37	15	– 23	Yes
Japan	13	0	– 13	No
Finland	16	0	– 16	No
Ireland	41	37	– 4	No
Austria	5	5	– 0	No
Norway	57	60	+ 3	No
Israel	25	30	+ 5	No
Canada	23	29	+ 6	No
Denmark	89	100	+ 11	No
United Kingdom	7	21	+ 14	No
Sweden	77	94	+ 17	No
Belgium	9	27	+ 19	No
Australia <sup>a</sup>	71	100	+ 29	Yes
Germany <sup>ab</sup>	61	96	+ 35	Yes
New Zealand	19	90	+ 71	No
Netherlands <sup>a</sup>	3	86	+ 82	Yes

Share of governments without a legislative majority in days

<sup>a</sup>Upper house included

<sup>b</sup>A German government without a legislative majority is defined as a cabinet that consists out of parties that do not have a majority in the Bundestag *or* in the Bundesrat. The Bundesrat can veto any legislation where states have competences. A Bundesrat majority is defined as a majority of state governments consisting out of parties that are in the national government. ‘Mixed’ governments are counted against this majority. About 60% of German legislation requires consent of the Bundesrat (König and Bräuniger 1997). Historically, opposition majorities in the Bundesrat have forced the government to modify legislation by threatening a blockade (König and Bräuniger 1997)

et al. 2020). We examine whether this elite political culture is still reflected in the ways that governments without a legislative majority operate.

There is some debate about the historical roots of these norms. Lijphart (1968) described them as a specific solution to a specific problem, namely the division of the Dutch society into strongly separated subcultures (secular, Calvinist and Catholic). In order to keep the country together all of these subcultures had to be involved of the running of the country. In contrast, Daalder (1974) emphasizes a more continuous historical line between how the Netherlands was governed under the Dutch Republic (1579–1795), while authors like Prak and Van Zanden (2013) see a culture of consensus-building that dates back to the year 1015. While inevitably some historical periods do reflect these norms (e.g. the culture of parliamentary debates of the mid-1800s focussed on finding rational solutions), one should also not gloss away that there were periods that were characterized by majoritarian and authoritarian politics, such as the Batavian Republic where opponents were disenfranchised and the ensuing four decades of authoritarian monarchy. Since the 1960s scholars



**Table 2** Norms of Lijphart with their counterfactuals

#	Norm of Lijphart	Counterfactual
1	Business-like politics	Polarization
2	Pragmatic tolerance	Policy maximalization
3	Depoliticization	Politicization
4	Proportionality	Winner takes it all
5	Top conferences	Base consultation <i>or</i> decision-making by government parties
6	Government governs	Parliamentary activism
7	Secrecy	Transparency

Adapted from Heine (2019, pp. 330–331)

have seen both the decline and rekindling of this consensual culture (Daalder 1974; Van Praag 1993, 2017; Pennings and Keman 2008; Lijphart 1991; Heine 2019). Given the historical ups and downs of consensus culture, we believe that it is very valuable to determine to what extent these norms persist until the present day. These studies allow us to formulate counterfactuals to these norms: a majoritarian elite political culture. In the operationalization of these norms, we rely on Heine (2019).

To be sure, the norms as described by Lijphart in 1968 did not all persist until 2010. One important change is that in the 1950s and 1960s surplus majority cabinets were the norm (i.e. including parties that were not necessary to obtain a parliamentary majority), whereas since 1967 minimum winning cabinets are the most frequent type of government. The latter often followed a majoritarian logic: the coalition controlled a legislative majority and therefore cooperation with the opposition was not necessary. This affected the norm ‘top conferences’ and ‘the government governs’ in particular, as we will discuss below. Other norms showed more persistence.

As these are cultural norms, one would expect all political actors (parties, politicians, interest groups, ministers) to accept them and that they are applied in decision-making procedures where they are relevant, both during periods of majority and minority government. In the expectations below, we consider under what specific conditions these norms are likely to matter more.

### Business-like politics

The first norm is business-like politics, the notion that the goal of politics is to achieve real results (Lijphart 1968). This principle underpins the other norms. We can see this in three indicators (Heine 2019): firstly, that politics does not emphasize ideological differences between parties (*non-ideological*). Secondly, that political conflict should be avoided (*non-conflictual*). Thirdly, that parties are willing to bargain and to strike compromises (*flexible*). This business-like politics stands opposed to polarization, where parties, steadfast in their ideological differences, seek to create slim majorities to implement their own plans (Heine 2019; Daalder 1974).



1. *Business-like Politics Expectation*: when politicians are forming a majority over policy, they operate in a non-ideological, non-conflictual and flexible way.

### Pragmatic tolerance

In a country of religious minorities, it is difficult to deal with issues of religious principle (Lijphart 1968). Pragmatic tolerance is meant to resolve this. This means that parties approach each other with respect (Heine 2019). If the issue does not need to be resolved immediately parties can 'agree to disagree'. In this way, parties can postpone decision-making. If a decision needs to be made, the majority in the coalition does not overrule the minority, but instead tries to find a compromise that they can all agree on (*majority compromise*). If a party cannot live with the solution than there is the option of *minority veto* (Heine 2019) This stands opposed to policy maximalization where a political majority only accepts their own ideal point as the outcome of decision-making and prizes decisiveness, speed and action over consultation, caution and compromise (Heine 2019).

One would expect this norm to be strongest in the areas that touch upon religious morality (traditional issues like abortion and same-sex marriage but also newer issues like ritual slaughter) and matter less redistributive issues. Yet, Heine (2019) specifically extends this norm to non-moral issues.

2. *Pragmatic Tolerance Expectation*: when politicians who need to form a majority disagree over policy, they first try to postpone the decision, if that is not possible, they seek a majority compromise and if that is not possible the minority can veto the decision.

### Depoliticization

Another way to resolve political issues is depoliticization. This is meant to defuse political issues by reducing them to technical issues (Lijphart 1968). One can reduce questions of economic justice, for instance about the fair distribution of income, to issues of economic science. Important in this process of depoliticization are committees where expertise is more important than ideology. Here, Lijphart (1968) strongly emphasized the importance of corporatist governance, in particular the Social-Economic Council (*Sociaal-Economische Raad*, SER), the corporatist body of representatives of labour unions, business groups and independent experts. By relying on proposals backed by interest groups and/or experts the government pushes decision-making out of the political realm. The opposite would be an elite political culture of politicization where political parties emphasize differences between them and bring new issues into the political arena (Heine 2019). Despite weakening organizations due to societal trends and legal changes (Visser and Hemerijck 1997), corporatism has continued to play an important function in recent years.



3. *Depoliticization Expectation*: when politicians who need to form a majority disagree over policy, they rely on the advice of experts and social partners to come to a decision.

## Proportionality

Resolving issues regarding the distribution of resources can be addressed through proportionality (Lijphart 1968). The size of a group is taken as the objective criterion for how much a group should 'get'. The central idea is that all societal groups *independent* of whether they are part of the coalition should be given their fair, proportional, share. This rule is used for budgetary matters, but also for other things that can be divided like radio air time or political offices.<sup>3</sup> The counterfactual would be if the majority government simply takes all the 'spoils of office' for itself (Heine 2019, p. 61).

Making sure well-defined groups, such as the pillars, get their fair share of political offices (e.g. mayors and crown members of the Social-Economic Council), budgets or air time, seems outdated as the political communities in the Netherlands, due to depillarization are less well-defined.<sup>4</sup>

4. *Proportionality Expectation*: when politicians are forming a majority over a divisible policy issue, the benefits will be distributed proportionally between all societal groups, including those not involved in the decision-making.

## Top conferences

The core of this norm is the principle that the more important the political issues is, the stronger the role of political leaders will be (Lijphart 1968). Major issues are resolved by top conferences of all major party leaders, independent of whether they are in the coalition or opposition. Daalder (1974) and Heine (2019) contrast this with base consultation when a broader group decides on important matters. Van Praag (1993) and Pennings and Keman (2008), in contrast, argue that the alternative is a situation where only the leaders of the governing parties decide and leave the opposition out of these consultations, the so-called selective top conferences.

This is perhaps the weakest of Lijphart's norms. His own example, the decision-making on the marriage of Princess Irene, is a case where representatives of the coalition parties are involved in decision-making, but the largest opposition party was only kept informed (Lijphart 1968, p. 120). Certainly, since the 1980s, selective top conferences were the norm and more and more decision-making occurred

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<sup>3</sup> There is a strong conceptual connection between proportionality as a norm and the proportional electoral system. However, given that the latter is laid down in the constitution, it is a law and not a norm.

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, but outside the remit of the study, the logic still applies to the Dutch public broadcaster, which is responsive to changing orientations among the Dutch population by allowing new broadcasting associations on their network, such as MAX, LLiNK, WNL, PowNed, ZWART and ON!





in coalition meetings of the (vice)prime ministers and the PPG leaders (Van Praag 1993; Pennings and Keman 2008).

5. *Top Conference Expectation*: the more important a decision is, the more likely that it will be decided by party leaders *and* the more likely that party leaders from opposition parties are involved.

### The government governs

The sixth norm, the government governs, concerns the executive–legislative relationship (Lijphart 1968). In principle, the Dutch parliament has far-reaching powers. Often, however, it does not fully exercise its powers and the government ‘possessed a large degree of independence and autonomy’ (Lijphart 1968, p. 128). For instance, almost all legislation is introduced by the government despite the constitutional provision that both parliament and government can initiate bills (*government initiative*). Parliament does not use all of its tools to the largest possible extent (Venice Commission 2021): throughout the legislative process, the government remains ‘in the lead’ (*parliamentary passivity*). This stands opposed to an activist parliament that maintains its primacy, takes the initiative and uses the full range of its powers.

Koole (2021) has observed that the practice of selective top conferences that became more and more common since the 1980s, shifted power away from *both* the government and parliament to these coalition meetings (Koole 2021).

6. *Government Governs Expectation*: during the legislative process, the government has the initiative and the parliament does not use all the tools at its disposal.

### Secrecy

In order to strike political compromises, politicians need to operate in secrecy (Lijphart 1968). If decision-making follows this last rule public political debates rubber stamp the decision made during the closed-door decision-making. This way of doing business stands opposed to a political system where all decisions are made in public (Heine 2019). The Dutch government is quite reticent in actively making information public (Drahmann and Honée 2022). The right of information that MPs or journalists in the Netherlands can get is restricted in a comparative sense (Venice Commission 2021).

There is a methodological problem with this norm: it is impossible to observe something if it is truly secret. Within this study we can only study things that politicians make public during the event or after it (either in journalistic or scientific accounts).

7. *Secrecy Expectation*: when politicians are forming a majority over policy, they negotiate in secret.



## Case selection and description

In addition to selecting the Netherlands as our country case, we make a number of choices in terms of case selection: our analysis of the change and stability in the norms of consensus government between 2007 and 2021 concerns the decision-making procedure and practice on major economic issues, comparing the last government with a legislative majority to the subsequent governments without a legislative majority. We will focus on the issue of pension reform in detail. We select this for an instrumental reason: in the period of interest (2007–2021), multiple reforms of the pension system were attempted. This includes periods of majority and minority government. This allows us to compare how different kinds of cabinets build majorities. Moreover, by focussing on a single issue, we ensure that differences we observe between cabinets are more likely to stem from the cabinet's legislative majority situation rather than specifics of the policy area. Below we provide relevant background information on the political parties in parliament between 2007 and 2021 and on the Dutch pension system.

### Dutch political parties 2006–2021

Political parties are key actors in our analysis (see Table 3). The three main political parties during the period of analysis were the centre-right CDA, the centre-left Labour Party and the Liberal Party which supports individual freedom on economic and moral matters. Every Dutch non-caretaker government since 1946 has consisted out of at least two of these parties (or their predecessors). They are sometimes joined by the social-liberal D66 and the Christian-social Christian Union, both centrist parties. The other parties have been permanently in opposition: SP, PvdD, GL, DENK, 50PLUS, PVV, SGP and FVD (from economic left to right). The Independent Senate Group (OSF), a joint venture of independent regional parties, has a seat in the Senate. Table 4 lists the composition of coalition cabinets in this period.

### Dutch pension system

Our analysis below focusses on the Dutch pension system, which has three pillars. The first is the basic government pension, paid out to every resident over the retirement age. The current generation of working people pay a tax to fund the pensions for the current generation of pensioners (a pay-as-you-go system). The second pillar covers employees, who are required to pay into a collective pension fund, where contributions are invested. These funds are managed by labour unions and employers. Therefore, second pillar pension funds are seen as instrument of wage policy, the purview of employers and labour unions (Anderson 2004). The third pillar is private pension investments. As such the Netherlands combines the “Bismarckian” and “Beveridgean” models (Ebbinghaus 2011): a government-supplied, flat-rate basic pension that ensures that no resident above the pension age is poor and a collective social insurance that provides earnings-related benefits (Anderson 2011).



Table 3 Dutch political parties 2006–2021

Name		Ideology		Left-Right <sup>a</sup>
abb	Dutch	English	Ideology	
VVD	<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i>	Liberal Party	Conservative liberal	8.3
CDA	<i>Christen-Democratische Appèl</i>	Christian-Democratic Appeal	Christian-democrat	6.6
PvdA	<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i>	Labour Party	Social-democrat	3.2
D66	<i>Democraten '66</i>	Democrats 66	Social-liberal	6.4
CU	<i>ChristenUnie</i>	ChristianUnion	Christian-social	4.1
SP	<i>Socialistische Partij</i>	Socialist Party	Socialist	1.0
PVV	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i>	Freedom Party	Radical right-wing populist	4.6
GL	<i>GroenLinks</i>	GreenLeft	New left	2.7
PvdD	<i>Partij voor de Dieren</i>	Party for the Animals	Deep green	2.4
SGP	<i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i>	Political Reformed Party	Christian-conservative	6.9
50PLUS			Seniors' interests	3.7
DENK		Think/Equal <sup>c</sup>	Multiculturalist	3.5 <sup>b</sup>
FVD	<i>Forum voor Democratie</i>	Forum for Democracy	Radical right-wing populist	9.1 <sup>b</sup>
OSF	<i>Onafhankelijke Senaatsfractie</i>	Independent Senate Group	Regional interests	–

<sup>a</sup>Economic Left–Right CHES (2014)<sup>b</sup>2019<sup>c</sup>Think in Dutch and Equal in Turkish

**Table 4** Cabinets 2007–2021

Cabinet	Parties	Start	End	House of representatives (out of 150)	Senate (out of 75)
Balkenende IV	CDA, PvdA, CU	22/2/2007	20/2/2010	80	2007–2010 44 2007–2010 39
Balkenende V	CDA, CU	20/2/2010	14/10/2010	47	2010 25
Rutte I	VVD, CDA	14/10/2010	5/11/2012	52/(76 <sup>a</sup> )	2010–2011 35/(35 <sup>a</sup> ) 2011–2012 27/(37 <sup>a</sup> )
Rutte II	VVD, PvdA	5/11/2012	26/10/2017	79 <sup>b</sup>	2012–2015 30 2015–2017 21
Rutte III	VVD, CDA, D66, CU	26/10/2017	–	76 <sup>c</sup>	2017–2019 38 2019–2021 32

<sup>a</sup>With support party PVV

<sup>b</sup>The cabinet lost its House majority on 8/11/2016 because an MP left the PvdA PPG

<sup>c</sup>The cabinet lost its House majority on 7/10/2019 because an MP left the VVD PPG; it got its majority back on 24/11/2020 when a vacancy was left unfilled

## Method

We assess the continuity and changes in elite political culture in the Netherlands by means of a qualitative analysis. We study the norms underlying political behaviour based on elite interviews and documentary sources. For the interviews, we draw on interviews held by Borgman and Van Weezel (2018), who interviewed sixteen ministers and three leading opposition MPs from the period 2012–2017 (see Online Appendix 1). They focus on the relationship between ministers and between ministers and the leaders of opposition parties and therefore give us a view of the top of the political machinery. What these interviews neglect is how the day-to-day decision-making worked on specific issues in parliament. We therefore added seven additional interviews conducted by the authors. These include backbench MPs, politicians from parties not covered in that volume and, as we study a longer period, politicians that were active outside of the 2012–2017 term (see Online Appendix 2). All these MPs were spokespersons on social affairs. These were semi-structured interviews, which asked the interviewees to reflect on the relationship between government and opposition in specific cases they worked on in the past and in general. They provide insight into the norms and justifications that MPs use for their choices. We use documentary sources (parliamentary documents, journalistic accounts and academic literature) to describe the process of decision-making as well as to corroborate factual claims made in the interviews.



## Results

### Balkenende IV and the proposal to raise the retirement age

In 2007, cabinet Balkenende IV took office. This coalition of CDA, PvdA and CU controlled a majority of seats in both chambers of parliament. Under Balkenende IV, there was close cooperation between the government and the coalition parties in parliament. Where it came to political decision-making within the coalition there was a clear order: the first question was “has something been arranged in the coalition agreement” (Interview 2). This agreement was binding: “if it is agreed on [in the coalition agreement] then it will happen” (Interview 4). If issues were not included in the coalition agreement “you first look at possibilities within the coalition” (Interview 2). Coalition partners have veto power: “if there is no support within the coalition, you check whether it is a no-go for a coalition party. Because, if a party says, ‘I do not want you to propose this’ then you have a cabinet crisis” (Interview 2). These negotiations often occurred in the coordination meetings between the leaders of coalition PPGs and the (vice)prime ministers (Koole 2021). The room to gain support from opposition parties was thus limited by the coalition agreement and by mutual vetoes.

According to a junior minister in the period of Balkenende IV, “the basic attitude of the House is that the opposition in principle is against [legislation]” (Interview 2). Their experience of stands in contrast to the voting patterns, where most legislation is supported by opposition parties and to the experience of opposition party MPs: “for the average MP, the discussion is primarily based on substance (...) Of course, there are party-political considerations but simply voting against because you are not in the coalition fortunately does not occur very often” (Interview 3).

In 2007, the cabinet was confronted with the effects of the Global Financial Crisis. It responded by bailing out a major Dutch bank and counter-cyclical investments. The coalition parties agreed that short-term investments should be accompanied by long-term cuts. Behind closed doors the (vice)prime ministers and the coalition PPG leaders renegotiated the coalition agreement (Van Griensven 2009). Raising the retirement age was chosen as the key long-term austerity measure (Delsen 2016). This plan had been proposed earlier by two different expert committees.<sup>5</sup> The coalition adopted it because *none* of them wanted it: that way none of them could claim it as success.<sup>6</sup>

They defended the measure as a means to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the welfare state. The largest labour union confederation FNV (*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging*/Federation Dutch Labour Union Movement) opposed it. In the spring of 2009, the SER was given the opportunity to formulate an alternative policy plan (Hemerijck et al. 2022).<sup>7</sup> After half a year, the SER concluded that there was no alternative to raising the pension age: the FNV was not supported by

<sup>5</sup> NRC (4/6/2008) “Bakker: pensioenleeftijd hoger”.

<sup>6</sup> Staal, H. (25/3/2009) “Haagse poldermachine verdeelt opnieuw de pijn”.

<sup>7</sup> NRC (25/3/2009) “SER Krijgt half jaar voor advies AOW”.



employers' organizations. The government sent a proposal to parliament in the fall of 2009 (Hemerijck and Van der Meer 2016).

Parallel to these economic decisions, the PvdA retracted its support for the government, over the Dutch military presence in Afghanistan. The cabinet Balkenende IV was succeeded by a minority caretaker cabinet of CDA and CU. The pension issue was not taken up by it (Delsen 2016).

The decision-making process to raise the retirement age displays important elements of the Dutch elite political culture: the decision was made behind closed doors ("secrecy") by the coalition leadership ("selective top conferences"). The compromise was the opposite of policy maximalization: it could not be a policy victory for anyone ("pragmatic tolerance" and "business-like politics"). The initiative for this reform came from the government ("government governs") and was based on expert advice ("depoliticization"). This practice is mainly focussed on the minimal winning coalition rather than all parties in parliament. As we observed above, this majoritarianism differs strongly from the consensus norms of the 1950s.

### **Rutte I and the first pension agreement**

After the 2010 elections, the Rutte I government of VVD and CDA was installed. The PVV signed a confidence and supply agreement covering the budget, migration and healthcare. The PVV explicitly did not commit itself to raising the retirement age and to the cabinet's foreign policy. The three parties had a majority in the House of Representatives, but not in the Senate. The cabinet developed a working relationship with the SGP to ensure this majority. Occasionally, SGP party leader Van der Staaij joined coalition meetings (Interview 3). In exchange for confidence and supply an informal unwritten addendum was added to the coalition agreement: VVD, CDA, PVV and SGP agreed on a pause on moral matters. A third of the bills of the cabinet Rutte I would not have passed in the Senate if the SGP would not have supported them.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this understanding between the SGP and the government only lasted while it was numerically necessary: "if you are no longer necessary for the majority, they no longer talk to you about what you would like" (Interview 3). The government also had to find parliamentary support for the Dutch military presence in Afghanistan, which it found in GL, D66 and CU in January 2012.

Where it came to pension reform, the period between the fall of the cabinet Balkenende IV and installation of Rutte I offered a window of opportunity for the labour unions and employers' organizations. In the summer of 2010, they presented a common proposal as a *fait accompli* to the new government (Delsen 2016). This formed the basis for an agreement between social partners and the government in June 2011.<sup>9</sup> CDA and VVD had to find a parliamentary majority. In parliamentary debate, the PvdA presented a list of concerns. A final compromise was not reached publicly (Interview 5): the government had acquiesced the PvdA's concerns in a

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<sup>8</sup> NRC (4/4/2012) "De SGP als machtsfactor".

<sup>9</sup> NRC (14/9/2011) "Rutte en Kamp gaan langs bij PvdA voor pensioenakkoord".



backroom deal during a parliamentary recess. The minister of social affairs and the PvdA's pension spokesperson struck this deal.<sup>10</sup>

Here, we observe some elements of consensual culture: firstly, the important role of social partners. Agreements between them are a way to remove political controversy ("depoliticization"). They primarily negotiated with the government with parliament in the back seat ("government governs"). Despite the PvdA's opposition to the coalition's broader agenda they did not use the pension issue to bring the coalition down ("business-like politics"). The final deal was reached during a parliamentary recess but without in-person negotiations between the party leaders (no top conference).

### Spring agreement on the 2013 budget

In the Spring of 2012, the PVV pulled out of the confidence and supply agreement. The party was unwilling to accept a reduction of purchasing power for pensioners. An alternative majority was necessary for the 2013 budget. VVD and CDA wanted to present a budget that met EU fiscal limits. They negotiated a spring agreement with D66, GL and CU. This was a comprehensive and far-reaching reform agenda of tax raises, austerity measures, retirement age and labour law reform. PPG leaders of D66, GL and CU took the initiative to find a way to meet EU fiscal targets without resorting to the budget cuts the government had proposed.<sup>11</sup> The leaders of the PPGs of the coalition and these three parties, their finance spokespersons and the minister of finance subsequently hammered out this budget agreement behind closed doors and under a sense of urgency. Parties also saw the moment as an opportunity to make deals on reforms that had been blocked before like a reform of the labour law (Interview 5). Parties accepted proposals that they had opposed before: on the issue of pension reform, the CU had to accept a faster pace of change. FNV publicly opposed the agreement. It also laid the foundations for a cooperative relationship between D66 leader Pechtold and CU leader Slob (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 127).

In the agreement we can see business-like politics, secrecy, but also a selective top-conference, parliamentary initiative and policy maximalization. There is no sign of depoliticization and proportionality.

### Rutte II and the second pension agreement

After the 2012 elections VVD and PvdA formed the Rutte II cabinet. They agreed on an ambitious welfare state, housing and healthcare reform agenda, including a speedier increase of the retirement age (Delsen 2016). VVD and PvdA commanded a majority in the House but not in the Senate. Without a legislative majority they had to find ad hoc support for bills in the Senate. Originally, PvdA and VVD believed

<sup>10</sup> Verlaan, J. (16/9/2011) "Kamer steunt pensioenakkoord Kamp" *NRC*.

<sup>11</sup> Herderscheë, G. (28/07/2017) "Belangrijkste breuklijn door coalitie in wording loopt tussen D66 en CU, maar aan de secondanten zal het niet liggen". *De Volkskrant*.



that CDA Senators would support their plans based on their merits (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, pp. 28–29).

Housing formed the first test of the cabinet's position: the government needed opposition support to pass their housing plans through the Senate. The housing paragraph in the coalition agreement built further on a SER agreement (Hemerijck et al. 2022). The housing minister made a round with the party spokespersons in the House to see who might support his policy: "He went [around] informally, he goes and visits you and or you have [a meeting] in the parliamentary restaurant and you talk about these things" (Interview 1). Negotiations first focussed on the CDA, which publicly stated that it would vote for measures it agreed with but that it would not sign agreements after closed-door negotiations. Starting negotiations was vetoed by the CDA PPG leader Buma (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, pp. 130–132). In the margin of a parliamentary debate, Pechtold, the D66 PPG leader, approached prime minister Mark Rutte. Pechtold said "are you able to count to eight?", referring to the seats necessary for a majority in the Senate. Rutte replied "you have five". To which he answered: "yes, with the CU and SGP I have eight" (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 131). The financial experts of CU, SGP and D66 came up with an alternative package (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 132): these three parties would play an important role in the coming four years, they operated in a business-like way without focussing on their differences (according to Segers in Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 138). These informal coalitions "can only happen when you say, guys, the past is the past, but we feel the responsibility for our common problems, therefore, we will do it. (...) If you only look at your own interest, then it is very simple to say in an oppositional way, it is no good" (Interview 3). They presented their package deal to the housing minister, who adopted it.

After this first initiative, there was a lull in coalition–opposition cooperation. Instead, the cabinet focussed on negotiations with social partners, leading to a social agreement, which covered labour market and pensions (Hemerijck et al. 2022). This altered the coalition agreement (Hemerijck and Van der Meer 2016). In the summer of 2013, PvdA, VVD, GL and D66 talked about a comprehensive agreement on childcare, sustainability and education but they could not come to an agreement.<sup>12</sup>

The government decided to simply 'govern' and submitted a number of bills to parliament, including the implementation of part of the social agreement. This concerned the tax deductibility of 'second pillar' pension policy payments. The proposal passed through the House without opposition support. It then became clear that the Senate would reject it.<sup>13</sup> Opposition MPs staggered at the idea that their only role was to rubber stamp a corporatist agreement: "We still live in a democracy where it is not the social partners that decide on legislation but parliament" (Interview 3). The Senate did not feel bound to this agreement either (Broekers-Knol 2019). The ministers of finance and social affairs negotiated behind closed doors with the financial specialists and the leaders of party groups in the House. Negotiations started with D66, CU, SGP, CDA and GL.<sup>14</sup> But after a few meetings, only

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<sup>12</sup> NOS (19/8/2013) "Kabinet niet verder met oppositie".

<sup>13</sup> NRC (9/10/2013) "Eerste Kamer weigert 'draak van wet' te slikken".

<sup>14</sup> NRC (2/12/2013) "Politiek akkoord in zicht over versobering van pensioenen".





D66, CU and SGP were left: the government had nowhere else to go and had to agree to their demands (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 136).

Parallel to the decision-making on the pension agreement, an ad hoc deal was struck on the 2014 budget (the ‘fall agreement’). The government had initially introduced a budget bill without opposition support. The coalition organized a summit of party leaders (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 135). All party leaders, except the leader of the PVV, participated. The summit was succeeded by closed-door negotiation sessions. The SP and 50PLUS did not participate in those. Subsequently, CDA and then GL backed out (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 31). The CDA refused to negotiate because “there was no willingness [with PvdA and VVD] to make deals about fundamentals of the coalition agreement (...) You could – to put it in oppositional terms – get a few scraps” (Interview 5). When only D66, CU and SGP were left, they played hardball: they demanded visible policy victories (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018 p.136). As one of the negotiators stated: “The atmosphere was one of if the cabinet does not deliver, then we do not support it” (Interview 3). The parties wanted to get something back for their support: “We knew we are going to make budget cuts, so that will hurt. You then tried to have elements in the agreement, that you also had something nice [to sell]” (Interview 3). The opposition parties extracted small budgetary measures meant to support specific organizations close to their key ideological goals.<sup>15</sup>

From that point on D66, CU and SGP became informal support parties of the government, the so-called ‘Constructive Three’ (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 137). The C3 and the coalition agreed on reforms of the long-term care and the welfare bill. The basis for these was laid in the fall agreement: “We had the fall agreement through which you had agreed on an entire package” (Interview 3). The government developed a constructive relationship with the C3. They also supported the 2015 budget. The C3 became irrelevant when the five parties lost their majority in the 2015 Senate elections: “When they no longer need us, then the sympathy for us will dry up: no more phone calls from Rutte” (Pechtold in Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, p. 140).

The government also negotiated with a different set-up of parties (D66 and GL) on student grants and regional government reform (Borgman and Van Weezel 2018, pp. 48–49). The parties only reached an agreement on the former. In 2016, the crucial budget bill was the tax plan. The cabinet sent it to parliament without much prior consultation. It was only supported by the coalition parties and the CDA (without prior consultation). Negotiations with and concessions to D66 ensured a majority for the tax plan.

Here, we see secret negotiations, top conferences and business-like politics. Parties were, however, focussed on policy maximization. Moreover, parliament asserted its own primacy against the government or the tripartite compromise.

<sup>15</sup> Stokmans, D. (17/9/2021) “Politieke deal met SGP leverde bekritiseerde hulporganisatie miljoenen-subsidie op” *NRC*.



### Rutte III and the third pension agreement

After the 2017 elections, the cabinet Rutte III was installed. The coalition agreement of VVD, CDA, D66 and CU included a liberalization of the collective pension fund system. The government started with a slim majority in both houses of parliament, which it lost due to the Senate election and a defection in the House.

The government returned to pension reform. Since the early 2010s experts had criticized the collective nature of the second pillar pension funds. They felt that the link between what people pay into the system and what they get out of it was insufficient (Verbon 2011). Both Rutte I and II had looked for opportunities for reform with social partners but to no avail.<sup>16</sup>

The Rutte III government re-examined this. It negotiated pension reform in parallel on two levels with the unions and employers to ensure support in the SER, and with GL and PvdA to ensure a Senate majority.<sup>17</sup> The two-level game was necessary for three reasons: firstly, the cooperation of unions and employers was necessary for this reform, as they manage the pension funds. Secondly, the reform was expected to take at least eight years (Interview 6 and 7). A broad majority was necessary to ensure that the reform would be implemented even when coalitions changed. Finally, the FNV had made support from the two left-wing parties a condition for signing the agreement.

The main negotiation table was between the government and social partners (Interview 7). These negotiations focussed on the collective nature of the second pillar pension. Here, the actors came to the agreement that the pension savings in pension funds would be more individualized. Furthermore, the system would move from a system with defined benefits paid from a collective fund to system with contributions and the benefits depending upon investment returns. This deal “was delivered to [MPs] ready-made” (Interview 6). The left-wing parties and the FNV accepted this change in exchange for other reforms, including a slower increase of the pension age, early pension possibilities for people with “tough professions” and an obligatory disability insurance for the self-employed. The left-wing parties had more bargaining space in particular where it came to these additional reforms (Interview 7). The minister of social affairs did most of the negotiation with social partner leaders and opposition parties. On 31 May 2023, the Senate adopted the pension reform with support of the coalition, PvdA, GL and SGP.

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<sup>16</sup> Despite its controversy in the FNV (Hemerijck et al. 2022), the Rutte I government had actually reached a deal about this with the FNV leadership, but it had not put it into legislation before its fall in 2012. The Rutte II government had asked the SER for advice on the pension fund system. One of the options it proposed was to liberalize and individualize the pension funds (SER (2015) *Toekomst Pensioenstelsel*. Den Haag.). This proposal did not have the blessing of the unions and the Rutte II government did not pursue it.

<sup>17</sup> Pelgrim, C. & Rijlaarsdam, B. (2019) ‘Eindelijk een pensioenakkoord’ NRC.



The cabinet also found itself in a difficult position on other issues, in particular nitrogen pollution. The highest administrative court struck down the legal structure that allowed for the construction of buildings in the vicinity nature preserves as long as the nitrogen pollution would be compensated in the future. An ad hoc expert committee was appointed to resolve this major political issue. In the fall of 2019, a Senate majority of the coalition, SGP, 50PLUS and four independent senators<sup>18</sup> approved an emergency bill allowing for the start of new construction plans. A year later a new bill was tabled with support of the coalition, SP, 50PLUS and SGP.<sup>19</sup> At the same time the coalition parties successfully bargained with the PvdA and GL about support for the 2021 housing budget.<sup>20</sup>

During the 2020–2021 corona crisis, the cabinet again found itself under an extreme sense of urgency. During the first months of the crisis the parliament left a lot of room for the government to take emergency measures (Louwse et al. 2021). When the emergency measures were set into law, an ad hoc coalition of GL, PvdA, SGP and 50PLUS negotiated with the government to ensure parliamentary support in trade for concessions in particular those that would allow parliament to have a voice in future measures. These changes were made in the open with ad hoc coalition proposing a set of amendments that the coalition endorsed.<sup>21</sup>

The government, however, also found itself ‘bailed out’ twice by opposition parties willing to accept its decisions without negotiations. In 2019, GL announced its unconditional support for the 2020 budget. A proposal to cut corporate taxes, which formed an important part of the 2021 budget plans, was supported by senators elected for the FVD.

In many cases pragmatic negotiations were held (“business-like politics”). Both with regard to pension reform as well as the nitrogen issue, we observe the importance of expert advice and in the latter also tripartite bargaining (“depoliticization”). On the pension issue, the government negotiated with opposition parties before submitting their proposal (so the government did not govern). On the nitrogen and housing issue, parliament had a passive wait-and-see-attitude. During the corona crisis, parliament first left a lot of room the government but later demanded changes to prevent future sidelining. The choice of the left-wing opposition to hinge their support for the third pension reform on reforms in other domains fits with a policy maximalization strategy. The government maximized its own policy preferences by striking deals with many different actors (Table 5).

<sup>18</sup> *Telegraaf* (13/12/2019) “Senaatsfractie Henk Otten schaaft zich achter spoedwet stikstof”.

<sup>19</sup> In exchange for their support, the SP and 50PLUS received more housing for seniors and the SGP got a promise that the government would seek a long-term agreement with the agricultural sector; Geels, M. (9/12/2020) “Kabinet bereikt stikstofakkoord met SP, 50PLUS en SGP” *NRC*.

<sup>20</sup> This was necessary after the minister responsible for housing had been censured by the Senate. GL and PvdA supported the budget in exchange for increased spending on renovation and sustainability.

<sup>21</sup> Lievisse Adriaanse, M. & Van den Dool, P. (7/10/2010) “Kamer steunt coronawet, ondanks veel kritiek van oppositiepartijen” *NRC*.



## Discussion

We asked to what extent existing norms of consensus government, operationalized in terms of Lijphart's rules persisted when governments no longer could rely on a legislative majority. The rule of business-like politics, that is parties avoiding ideological conflict, was found to apply to every round of pension reform negotiation, with and without a legislative majority for the government. Many parties participated in these talks, but some did not: SP and PVV opposed these measures as a matter of principle. The absence of the CDA between 2012 and 2017 was striking as well, given its tradition of government participation.

Pragmatic tolerance is understood here as the opposite of policy maximalization: parties do not need to have a policy win on every issue. That coalition parties originally agreed on raising the pension age because no party wanted it, reflects this. In the other negotiations, we *do* see policy maximalization: opposition parties seek to extract policy concessions for their support. In 2012 and 2019 support for pension reform was part of a larger package where the pain is eased by concessions on other issues.<sup>22</sup>

Depoliticization can be seen in the importance of tripartite bargaining and expertise. The proposal to raise the retirement age and liberalize the second pillar pensions came from policy experts, not politicians. Four out of the five pension agreements occurred in the context of tripartite bargaining. The relationship between corporatist and the political arena is not unproblematic: except for the third pension agreement, negotiations followed a two-round logic, with the government first negotiating with social partners and then with the opposition for a majority in the Senate. Hemerijck et al. (2023) argue that this represents a strong break from the interaction between governments, social partners and political parties in the post-war period, which they describe as "government-led".<sup>23</sup> Because of the lack of a legislative majority, since 2010, governments are not able to lead. We recognize this change, but emphasize that there is continuity in how governments *use* the corporate tier to depoliticize decision-making to ensure support for their legislation.

We find no evidence for proportionality. The reasons for this may be that the pension system left limited room for a proportional arrangement and that Dutch society is no longer segmented in pillarized societal groups.

Top conferences can be contrasted with selective top conferences. Both in the majority situation (2009) and the minority situation (2012 and 2019) decisions are made by top conferences by party leaders who represent a minimal winning majority. Only in 2013 a broader top conference was set up, but a minimal winning

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<sup>22</sup> Under Rutte II the close cooperation between D66, CU and SGP also reflects this notion of pragmatic tolerance: despite fundamental differences on moral issues the parties are able to cooperate respectfully on other matters. This notion of pragmatic tolerance plays a larger role in the realm of moral politics e.g. under Balkenende IV, Rutte I and III medical-ethical reforms were paused.

<sup>23</sup> Although we do want to note that in the 1950s, not all decisions were government-led. The most important example is the design of the AOW where the social-democratic trade union NVV forced the PvdA-led government to adopt a pay-as-you-go system instead of a capital-funded system by building support in the SER (Huetting et al. 1983, pp. 280–282).



**Table 5** Pension reform from the perspective of Lijphart's rules

	Subject	Pension age increase	Pension age increase	Budget agreement	Pension contribution deductibility	Pension liberalization
	Year	2009	2011	2012	2013	2019
1	Business-like politics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Pragmatic tolerance	Yes	No	No	No	No
3	Depoliticization	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
4	Proportionality	No	No	No	No	No
5	Government governs	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
6	Top conferences	Selective	No	Selective	Yes	Selective
7	Secrecy	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

majority struck the final agreement. All in all, we see a strong tradition of bargaining to find a minimal winning majority which differs from Lijphart's norms but this break has occurred already in the 1980s (Van Praag 1993).

Regarding the idea that the 'government governs', our results are more complex: as Koole (2021) observed, before 2010, the weekly coalition meetings between the (vice)prime ministers and coalition PPG chairs, already contradicted the image of the 'government governs'. In the absence of a legislative majority for the government the opposition became more activist: in 2012 and 2019 the cabinet bargained with opposition parties before sending their pension proposals to parliament, in 2011 and 2013 they adapted their pension proposal after sending it to parliament. A broader trend towards a more self-conscious role of parliamentary opposition can also be seen in the 2012 Kunduz mission, the 2013 housing agreement, the 2014 budget and the 2020 corona bill. Furthermore, opposition parties are often incorporated in decision-making before proposals are made by the government. The notion that the government governs does not really apply when governments lack a legislative majority. Involving the opposition was borne out of necessity: when Rutte III took office with a majority in both houses, this practice was largely discontinued, only to be revived again when the majority was lost. A more assertive parliament combined with selective top conferences meant that the key decision-making body has shifted away from the cabinet to coordination meetings of the (vice)prime ministers and leaders of the coalition and constructive opposition PPGs.

The final norm we examined is secrecy. Back-room bargaining occurred in four out of five cases. Only in 2011 most of the bargaining occurred in parliament, but even then during a recess. Back-room negotiations occurred throughout this period for the other agreements as well.



## Conclusion

Our analysis of the norms of political decision-making in the Netherlands, as reflected in Lijphart's seven rules shows that some of these continued to be relevant when governments could no longer rely on a legislative majority in both chambers of parliament. We find strong evidence for business-like politics, depoliticization and closed-door negotiations. Not all of Lijphart's norms applied: there was little evidence for the importance of all-party top conferences and pragmatic tolerance and no evidence for proportionality. Instead of seeing a pattern of minority veto and supermajoritarianism, we see that parties pursue a strategy of policy maximalization and minimal winning coalitions. Political decision-making is and was focussed on finding majorities, while before 2010 this was done in minimal winning coalitions, after 2010 the governing coalition seeks narrow majorities for policy. We found a clear break in 2012 with the notion that the government governs. The parliamentary opposition took a more self-conscious role. In the absence of a legislative majority for the government, the Netherlands used the existing political-cultural infrastructure of consensus democracy: there already were backrooms where parties with a majority in parliament were used to pragmatically negotiating about deals. Now, however, it is ministers, coalition MPs and selected opposition MPs negotiating.

While after 2010 a legislative majority was mostly lacking, the situation is not identical to minority government, i.e. if the governing parties do not command a majority in the House of Representatives. After all, when such a majority is lacking, the House can dismiss the government by a majority vote, whereas the Senate has traditionally been hesitant to involve itself in the confidence question. The Rutte I minority government had a confidence and supply agreement to prevent a no confidence vote. And when Rutte II and III lost their majorities due to people leaving their PPGs, they still commanded exactly half of the parliamentary seats, which means that a no confidence motion would not receive a majority. Moreover, given the complexities of government formation in the Netherlands, even when a majority in the House is lacking, some opposition parties may prefer working together on an ad hoc basis over the uncertainty of new elections.

What do our results say beyond the borders of the Netherlands? Our case study illustrates the continuity in elite political culture under different types of government. We see some signs of adaptation but in particular for norms that had already changed during the 1980s. While the norms we studied are specifically 'Dutch', our study does speak to the broader literature. The consensus cultural norms underlying elite politics are quite resilient: both in the sense that a majority of these norms persist under different legislative majority situations and in the sense that the informal institutions are flexible enough to allow for the incorporation of parties that were previously excluded. Where most of the literature on parliamentary decision-making is strongly focussed on MPs and PPGs rationally pursuing their goals (e.g. Louwse et al. 2017; Thürk et al. 2021), our study shows the long shadow of political norms, role conceptions and moral templates (Hall and Taylor 1996). There is a complex interaction between the normative infrastructure that is available to parties and the rational calculus to maximize payoffs. There is space for opposition parties in the



backrooms of politics (with their own norms and expectations) as long as they are numerically necessary for a majority. Future research of parliamentary decision-making may want to take this interaction between normative and rational factors of decision-making into account.

Our study indicates that other countries experiencing change in the (legislative) majority situation are likely to see continuity in the political culture: they deal with this new type of government within the context of existing cultural norms. In the Dutch case, existing consensual norms were quite suitable for dealing with situations in which there is no legislative majority for the government, which may not necessarily be the case when such legislative minority situations suddenly arise in majoritarian systems.

What is perhaps most striking is that not all parties subscribe to these norms, despite the notion that these reflect a deeply rooted political culture. The more critical, anti-elitist opposition parties of both the left (PvdD, DENK, SP and 50PLUS) and the right (PVV and FVD) are almost completely absent in this story (Louwerse and Otjes 2019). They are resistant to making compromises, instead keeping their hands clean. It appears to be the case that about a third of the parties in parliament does not subscribe to these norms. These parties prefer transparency over backrooms, ideological politics over business-like politics, claim parliamentary supremacy over experts and interest groups. This is not just the case for populist parties, the PvdD for instance made its resistance to what it called ‘compromism’ as a key element of its profile: it rejects “politics as the worship of the process without eye for the long-term effects for humans, animals and the environment”.<sup>24</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to parties like D66 who emphasize the importance of compromise, its leader Sigrid Kaag recently said: “He who rejects compromise blocks progress”.<sup>25</sup> All over the Western world, there is a growing disconnect between the parties that focus on representing societal grievances over working towards political compromises and parties that focus on responsible governing with constitutional and political-cultural norms over representation (Mair 2009). This raises questions how the political system may operate when the mainstream parties continue to dwindle. Future research may want to zoom into individual parties and examine the extent to which parties subscribe to these norms.

As discussed above, we selected the issue of pension reform for instrumental reasons. We certainly do not believe that these patterns of negotiations are limited to the pension issue. Rather in the discussion we highlighted issues in realm of education, healthcare and even defense. Yet, this issue is also of comparative value. It is well known that pension reform is difficult as policy that create long-term commitments, such as how to pay for pensions, lock in particular paths of social development

<sup>24</sup> Engelen, E. & M. Thieme (2017) “Weg met het compromisme!” <https://www.partijvoordedieren.nl/nieuws/weg-met-het-compromisme>

<sup>25</sup> Kaag, S. (2023) “De jeugd is met reden ongeduldig over hun toekomst” <https://d66.nl/nieuws/de-jeugd-is-met-reden-ongeduldig-over-hun-toekomst/> In her speech she suggests that these are words of Obama. The most similar quote we could find was “When the other side refuses to compromise, progress can stall”. from his 2016 DNC speech.





(Pierson 1996). The Netherlands, with its multiparty system, minority governments and complex corporatist system has seen multiple, far-reaching reforms of the pension system in the period of 15 years, without much societal resistance. While it took some time, by 2012 all mainstream parties and the social partners supported raising the retirement age which then passed through parliament relatively quickly. This stands in stark contrast to for instance the French system of majoritarian government, where until recently plans to reform the pension system failed and a recent reform has only been implemented by circumventing parliament and has led to major societal resistance. This shows the resilience of consensus systems and their ability to implement far-reaching reforms.

In this respect, one element that did appear in the analysis but that we did not focus on was urgency.<sup>26</sup> A sense of urgency because of the global financial crisis allowed the coalition parties in 2009 to put raising the retirement age on the agenda. The reforms in 2012 and 2013 were implemented under a great sense of urgency. A great sense of urgency perhaps can also be the pressure that mollifies hardline ideological positions to allow for pragmatic negotiations. The lack of urgency for the regional government reform may have prevented its implementation. Yet, we can see how parties worked on another major reform of the pension system in 2019 under these norms of business-like politics, when such a sense of economic urgency was absent.

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**Data Availability** There is no replication data for this qualitative study.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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