

Summary

More democracy, less politics?

A study of public opinion in the Netherlands

Concerns about the functioning and future of democracy in the Netherlands can have a variety of causes. For example, European integration and other international dependencies may be perceived as a threat, as may increasing administrative complexity or shortcomings of politicians and political organisations and procedures. Not least among the causes for concern are developments in the attitudes of the *demos* of democracy. Whether or not influenced by the factors just cited, there appear to be signs of growing political dissatisfaction and declining democratic engagement. How future-proof is Dutch democracy, and what scope is there for improving it, in the light of the views and wishes of the populace? This question prompted this small study of public opinion in the Netherlands, carried out at the request of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. Based on earlier research and literature and in particular on re-analyses of available survey data, this report presents a picture of public opinion in the Netherlands and looks briefly at ideas for democratic renewal and the desirability of new research.

In the first chapter we outline the four goals of this exploratory study: to characterise Dutch attitudes to democracy and politics; to look in more depth at standardised opinions and attitudes through the responses of citizens themselves; to divide the Dutch population into segments with related attitudes and opinions; and to suggest topics for further research.

As the starting point for the study, the second chapter places the present public mood and preferences in the Netherlands in a broader perspective and considers how attitudes to democracy and politics have developed since the 1970s and how public opinion in the Netherlands compares with other European countries. In line with earlier studies, long-term survey research provides no indications of a fundamental decline in support for the idea of democracy, nor of reducing satisfaction with democratic practice or a major reduction in political trust. The degree of satisfaction with democracy, and above all trust in politics, is however highly volatile and dependent on political and economic developments. To the extent that it can be said that there is a crisis of democracy, it is certainly not new, nor is it more pronounced than elsewhere. Compared with other European countries, the Netherlands is not in a bad situation. The level of support for democracy as a form of government is comparable with elsewhere, while satisfaction with democratic practice and political trust are higher. Only the populations of the Nordic countries hold – slightly – more positive attitudes.

In the third chapter we look at the attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the Dutch public regarding democracy in the 21st century. The Dutch regard free elections and equal treatment before the courts as important characteristics of a democracy and, when asked to

assess the degree to which these characteristics are present in the Netherlands, many believe that there are free elections in the Netherlands. Opinions are more divided on equal treatment by the courts. The Dutch public take a positive view on the presence of a free media and freedom of opposition. More than 90% support democracy as an idea, and more than 70% are sufficiently satisfied with its functioning. People are less satisfied with the way in which democracy is put into practice – with politics, in other words. A good deal of criticism is levelled at elected politicians, and there is wide support for citizens having a greater say and for more direct democracy (such as referenda on key issues or elected mayors). However, the majority do not think it necessary that citizens should be able to influence *all* laws, and many prefer representative democracy to a model in which as many issues as possible are decided by referendum. This would seem to suggest that at least a proportion of the Dutch public see direct democracy mainly as a way of adding to or improving representative democracy rather than as an alternative to it. A large group believe that the government could be run more efficiently and that politicians should tackle problems rather than talking about them. However, the Dutch show little support for decisions being taken by business leaders or independent experts; the majority prefer elected politicians. Voting in elections, especially national elections, is still a common form of political participation. Other forms, such as attending public consultation meetings or taking part in campaigns, are much less used.

Chapter 4 presents the views of citizens themselves on democracy and politics, based on open responses to survey questions. It looks at what associations the word ‘democracy’ elicits in Dutch citizens and why they believe that Dutch democracy is functional (or not), and also at how they talk about politics. The Dutch associate the word ‘democracy’ with freedom (including freedom of expression) and of democracy as a decision-making procedure (a system in which everyone has the right to vote or to express his or her opinion). A third association – mentioned rather less often – is ‘equality’. Not everyone has the same (instant) association: university graduates, for example, less often associate democracy with ‘freedom’ and more often see it as a decision-making procedure. People who associate democracy with ‘freedom’ are more often satisfied with the functioning of democracy than people with different associations. We asked people to explain in their own words why they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in the Netherlands. Most people tended to cite reasons for dissatisfaction; despite the relatively good overall assessment of democracy, arguments for being satisfied were less common. The main reasons put forward for dissatisfaction were that politicians do not listen and simply do what they want, that citizens have too little say and that politicians talk too much and act too little; or else they were dissatisfied with current policy at the time of the survey. People who are satisfied mainly mention the right to vote. Where people spontaneously express their concerns about politics, those concerns are often directed at politicians who do not listen or who promise much but deliver little. People who feel that things are moving in the wrong direction in a societal policy domain (e.g. care, integration of minorities) hold politicians responsible for this. They have the idea that politicians pay too little

attention to what citizens want and sometimes go against public opinion by pushing through their own personal agenda.

To portray the diversity in Dutch public opinion, in chapter 5 we classify citizens into groups based on their democratic preferences and attitudes to politics. A latent class analysis of support for representative, direct and antipolitical democracy enabled the population to be divided into three groups: 12% who are satisfied with the existing representative system and its bearers, 16% who are dissatisfied with this system (and who are more in favour of direct and antipolitical democracy) and, between these two, the largest group of 72% who tend not to have very pronounced preferences and who sometimes exhibit unusual combinations. If we look at a larger range of opinions on democracy, politicians and engagement in politics, cluster analysis enables five groups to be identified. In the centre there is now a group of 29% with low political engagement and fairly average opinions. On one side of this group is a cluster of 26% who are dissatisfied and 11% who reject the current system. The second group are substantially more negative about politicians and the institutions of representative democracy. Members of this group are also more often not interested in politics and are slightly more strongly in favour of direct democracy. On the other side of the indifferent central group is a cluster of 17% who are satisfied and a group of 17% who are critically positive. The satisfied group are the most positive of all and see the least need for change or greater influence for themselves. The 'critical positives' are less exuberant about present-day politics, more often see benefits in elements of direct democracy and would like to have more political influence themselves. Women are slightly overrepresented in the indifferent group, young people in the satisfied group and 35-54 year-olds in the group who reject the current system. However, the biggest sociodemographic differences are associated with education level. The lower-educated are overrepresented in the rejecting and indifferent clusters, the higher-educated in the satisfied cluster and to a lesser extent in the critical positive cluster. The satisfied group are the most involved with political parties (as supporters or members), while those who reject the system are the least engaged, though there is no difference between them in terms of political activity. The rejecting group cannot be placed either to the left or right of the political spectrum, though they are the most in favour of less lower income inequality. They are also the most opposed to the multicultural society and to the European Union.

In the concluding chapter (chapter 6) we describe the main findings of this study, examine the associations found in the light of discussions about the future of democracy and outline three possible paths for follow-up research. Support for the principle of democracy is and remains high, but people are less positive about 'politics'. Political dissatisfaction is focused mainly on a lack of political responsiveness. There is strong support for more direct democracy, mainly as an addition to representative democracy. There is clear dissatisfaction about political responsiveness and – as a consequence of this – a desire for greater representation and a bigger say. But it is also clear that citizens do not always want to be consulted on everything. The fact that citizens want more opportunity to participate in decision-making therefore does not automatically mean that they will actually do so.

Based on existing research and re-analyses of survey data, we have portrayed a proportion of the democratic and political dissatisfaction in the Netherlands, but this does not in itself produce an answer to the question of whether Dutch democracy is future-proof. In order to help answer this question, more information and debate are needed, and we outline three possible pathways for further research. First, more extensive and broader opinion research could be carried out so as to make a better contribution to the public debate. That research would need to focus on a wider array of forms of democracy, would need to take into account differences between the local and national level, would have to allow people to choose between alternatives and explicitly ask about the judgements they make, and would have to focus more on the question of how things could be done differently (rather than on what is bad about the present system). Second, future research could focus more specifically on groups of ‘outsiders’ or ‘dropouts’. These (sometimes marginal or hard to reach) groups are often ignored in existing research, which means that the share of people with a-democratic opinions or who are far removed from democracy and politics is underestimated. Third, future research could focus on problems with representation in a broad sense. One of the concerns about modern Western democracies relates to the issue of representation, which is broader than representation via political parties because it also includes representation in civil society through membership and donor organisations. It is unclear how representative these organisations are of their members and precisely who those members are. The norm of representation may still be deeply rooted in the Netherlands, but traditional forms of institutional representation appear to be becoming more fragile and disputed at the start of the 21st century.