

Summary

Tricky issues

Eight focus groups on representation and voting

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Eight focus groups on representation and (not) voting

This report is an account, summary description and analysis of discussions held in eight focus groups in 2017 in four locations throughout the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Assen, Dordrecht and Eindhoven) on representation and (not) voting. We organised the groups for an SCP study of non-voting and at the request of the Dutch State Commission on the Parliamentary System (henceforth the ‘State Commission’). Focus groups supplement (proposed) quantitative insights for both the study of non-voting and for the State Commission into the concerns, wishes and behavioural motivations of Dutch citizens with respect to Dutch Parliamentary democracy and elections. This focus group study was based around a three-part question:

What ideas do people have, and develop in conversation with each other, about 1) representation in general and representation in national politics, 2) non-voting and 3) a number of topics in the remit of the State Commission?

Chapter 2 looks in detail at the selection and composition of the focus groups. These aspects are left out of consideration in the following summary of substantive findings. It is good to note that the questions we put to the focus groups were complex; in all cases, the focus groups initially fell silent when asked about representation – this is not a word that people use every day. Ultimately, however, all groups succeeded – often surprisingly well – in discussing representation in their own circle and representation in the seat of government (The Hague). The discussions of voting and not voting also went well. The conversation on the themes with which the State Commission is concerned were less easy. Not everyone understood what it was that we wanted them to discuss; those with a lower education level, in particular, had difficulty with this. Some terms (‘split-offs’) provoked immediate reactions, but little reflection and nuance, while nuanced dilemmas proposed by us (e.g. concerning the role of the judiciary) elicited virtually no reactions, despite the best efforts of the facilitator. The topics about which people had more to say are accordingly given more space in this report than those topics on which little conversation proved possible.

Representation in general

People more often react to the term ‘representation’ by thinking spontaneously of an individual relationship (child-parent; client-lawyer) than a collective relationship (employees-trade union; parents-parents’ council). Any conflicts of interest are consequently not apparent. Poor representation occurs if the representative loses sight of the interests of those they represent or fails to achieve anything. Good representation achieves results that are in the interests of those represented. Good representatives do this by empathising with those they represent, communicating well (openly, specifically) and displaying an above-average interest in and knowledge of the subject. This view also fits in well with the now classical

definition of political representation as, ‘acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ by Hanna Pitkin (1967: 209).

Representation in ‘The Hague’: bad experiences

If people’s opinions on representation in general are nuanced, their views on representation at political/national government level are predominantly negative. People are able to think of more examples of poor than good representation. Many focus group participants – though lower-educated and young people more than higher-educated and older people – feel they are not (or badly) represented by MPs. They have the feeling that politicians do not speak their language and neither understand nor resolve their problems. They gauge this based on particular statements by politicians or on proposed or actual policies in relation to health care, housing and refugees.

Representation through consensus on standpoints – does that actually work?

Both voters and non-voters endorse the norm that political representation is achieved through shared standpoints: a person votes (or is expected to vote) for a party that comes closest to espousing their views. In the focus groups, however, it became clear that this substantive representation via political parties creates problems for citizens. Many focus group members have difficulty choosing between parties: they do not have a clear idea of precisely what different parties stand for and indicate that the elector rarely agrees with all the standpoints embraced by a particular party. And then if an elector votes for a party in an election with which they largely agree or vote for an issue which the elector considers important at that particular point in time, it is not uncommon for the party they vote for to amend or abandon its standpoints on that issue after the elections, for example when negotiating a Coalition Agreement with other parties. In short: what does the notion of shared standpoints actually mean?

Voting: a hard-won right and opportunity to influence, but difficult to choose

Many focus group participants see voting as an opportunity to exert influence on the direction taken by the Netherlands. People see voting as an important right and still feel obliged to cast their vote. Reasons for not voting are both practical (no time, no polling card) and more cynical (‘it makes no difference who you vote for’), or due to lack of interest. For some, it is unclear what parties stand for, the information they receive about this is complex or they have no interest in immersing themselves in it. Because they are unable to make a reasoned choice, they stay at home. Although people regard it as the individual’s own responsibility whether or not they vote, there is support for measures to promote electoral turnout. Suggestions include a financial incentive to vote, more information, online voting and a more trustworthy stance by politicians. There was no support for compulsory voting in these focus groups.

The State Commission: tricky issues

We presented a total of five themes to the focus groups (two or three per group) which are also on the agenda of the State Commission. We did this by framing the questions in the form of oppositions to make the choice as simple as possible (see chapter 5), but these were still complex topics. These are not issues which occupy people in their daily lives or which they spend much time thinking about. The dilemmas involved were only clear to the occasional focus group member, and were often not really clear even after further explanation. People did engage with some topics, and sometimes these topics had already arisen spontaneously during the discussion. Two topics stand out because of the relatively strong engagement and the consensus:

- *Too many parties*
Most importantly, most focus group members feel there are too many political parties in the Netherlands. There are too many names on the ballot paper (this also received a great deal of attention in the run-up to the general election in 2017). There are too many to choose from, and this leads to fragmentation which – as borne out by the long process of attempting to form a government in September 2017 – makes it difficult to form a government coalition. People would like greater simplicity, less fragmentation and a clear idea of what a party stands for.
- *Seat-stealing*
People regard ‘seat-stealing’ (retaining a seat after leaving the party for which one was elected to that seat) as one of the reasons for the excessive number of parties. Generally speaking, focus group members think it is wrong that someone who quits their party should be able to retain their seat (though some caveats are applied, for example if someone has won a seat through preferential votes).

Other topics on which there was some consensus in the focus groups:

- *Binding referendum*
Although there is some debate about which topics should be eligible for a referendum (some issues are too complex to be able to make simple judgement), there was support in the focus groups (as there is in large-scale surveys) for a greater influence for citizens as a supplement to representative democracy. According to the focus group members, referendums should also preferably be binding: experiences with referendums to date have not made people optimistic. For some – particularly those who support the right-wing populist pvv party and those who are far removed from politics – such a referendum would serve as a backstop for changing the political course: voting in elections does not help (nothing changes anyway, the pvv is excluded from the government formation negotiations).

- *More influence on cabinet formation and allocation of power*
Although people do not themselves use terms such as 'allocation of power', it was clear from the focus groups that people would like more influence over what happens after elections. Precisely what form that should take is not clear. One member spontaneously suggested electoral pacts between parties, and when asked other participants also showed some support for this idea. This could make it easier for people to make choices at elections (and therefore offer a solution to the excessive number of parties). Tactical voting often achieves little, because parties still cooperate. The great lack of clarity about the ultimate compromises that will be arrived at may also play a role here. Electors not only do not know who will work with whom, but during the government formation process it appears as if just about any outcome is possible on every topic.

- *Debating major problems in Parliament*
The major problems in Dutch society should be debated in this most important national representative body, even where there is no direct policy responsibility. This topic did not arise spontaneously, but when asked people were found to regard Parliament as an important arena for debate. Even where Parliament no longer has direct responsibility for a particular theme because of devolution, privatisation, agencification or internationalisation, it should still debate these issues in broad terms. Parties would then make clear where they stand on the substance of these issues. Moreover, attention in Parliament (and, by extension, the national media) can sometimes also lead to changes at decentralised level and Parliament can also decide to centralise issues once again.

Changes to Dutch Parliamentary democracy?

In large-scale surveys, the Dutch show themselves to be relatively satisfied with Dutch democracy, especially compared with other countries and with earlier times. At the same time, such surveys show that large groups of citizens harbour feelings of political discontent, and that discontent is often also dominant in qualitative research (open responses, in-depth interviews, focus groups). The same applies in this study: many focus group members feel they are not well represented and feel very remote from politics. This is particularly evident among people with a lower education level and younger participants. It is unclear how this distance can be bridged by making changes to the political system. Some authors feel it is not so much a matter of changing institutions or systems, but rather of changing the political or administrative culture: politicians need to adopt a different stance. Others argue that such changes can only be brought about through institutional change. Politicians must be forced to be responsive to the wishes of the people, for example by supplementing representative democracy with forms of direct public influence. The focus group members did not conduct this discussion in those terms, but the impression did emerge (as it has in earlier studies) that citizens would like politicians to listen better and would like to be able to raise the alarm if they feel things are moving in the

wrong direction. Improvements to the parliamentary system proposed by focus group members themselves mainly relate to reducing the number of parties (by increasing the minimum vote threshold or forbidding ‘seat-stealing’), offering clear substantive choices and making realistic promises prior to elections, increasing the transparency regarding the allocation of power and increasing the opportunities for people to have a say and exert influence. So in fact, citizens are calling here both for changes to the political system and for a different political culture.

In the concluding discussion we go into three topics: 1) the surprising (for us) finding that citizens do not primarily see voting as a means of representing themselves; 2) two potential improvements to Parliamentary democracy (strengthening the broad value orientations of parties and introducing meaningful opportunities for citizens to make corrections); and 3) the possibilities of focus groups in opinion-building about politics. The latter is a corollary to chapter 2 of this report, which looks in detail at the specific characteristics of focus groups and the reasons for using them in this study.

Finally, this report is a summary of and reflection on focus group research about which a more detailed report was published at an earlier date by the researchers, namely Ferro Explore! en Kantar Public (Ferro 2017; Kantar 2017). Their reports offer more insight into the individual groups and can be found at www.scp.nl