Introduction

The Dutch Electoral System on Trial

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As in several other countries, the electoral system in the Netherlands is a matter of dispute. The main purpose of this special issue is to assess to what extent the comparative study of electoral systems offers a solid body of knowledge on the possible effects of various proposals to change the electoral system. Such an assessment is not only useful for the ongoing discussion in the Netherlands but also produces a state-of-the-art of the comparative study of electoral systems. In this introduction, we first present an overview of the main characteristics and the historical background of the current Dutch electoral system. Subsequently, we discuss the critique evoked by this extremely proportional system. We then summarize the main objectives of a recent proposal of the Dutch government to change the electoral system. In the second half of this introduction, we present the outline of this special issue. Finally, we evaluate what we have learned about the relevance of the study of electoral systems for specific attempts to reform electoral systems.


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In the early months of 2005, the Dutch government introduced a bill in parliament proposing to change the electoral system. From one of the world’s most extreme systems of proportional representation, the electoral system was to be changed into a system in which 20 electoral districts would play a substantial role. Under this new mixed system, the voter would have two votes; one vote to determine the distribution of seats over political parties as in the current system; and a second vote, cast in 20 multi-member districts, to determine who will represent the political parties in parliament.

Like many stable Western democracies, the Netherlands have had stable electoral rules since a long time. The proportional system was introduced in 1917 and was only slightly changed in the nine decades that followed. The tide of change affecting many other democracies, however, seemed to touch the Netherlands as well. At least five equally well-established democracies fundamentally changed their electoral rules in the 1990s: Israel, Japan, New
Zealand, the United Kingdom (Wales and Scotland) and Italy, whereas some other established democracies adopted substantial changes (Norris, 2004). The Netherlands seemed to join the group of nations changing their electoral system.

The main aim of the bill proposed by the Dutch government was to strengthen the bond between individual members of parliament and voters. Under the existing system of proportional representation, most members of parliament were ‘invisible’ as they were elected on the coattail of the party leader. Although this aim was anything but new, it was boosted by the dramatic elections of 2002 and 2003. In 2002, the charismatic and flamboyant yet contested politician Pim Fortuyn attracted a large number of voters in the polls. And after he was shot just a few days before the elections his party won 26 out of 150 seats in the Second Chamber. Several well-established parties suffered severe losses. Their leaders were suddenly seen as representatives of ‘old politics’ and resigned. Although Pim Fortuyn’s party more or less imploded within a few months after the elections of 2002 due to internal quarrels and lost most of its seats in the elections of 2003, its initial success was interpreted as a sign of a huge gap between traditional politics and the mass public. Electoral reform was seen as a way to bridge this gap. For D66, a relatively small political party founded in 1966 with the main purpose of changing the institutional structure including the electoral system, electoral reform was a condition to join the Christian Democratic CDA and the Conservative liberals of the VVD in a coalition government after the 2003 elections.¹

The subsequent bill was not the first attempt to fundamentally change the electoral system in the Netherlands. But it came closer to the finish than any of the previous ones. Although the main ‘problem’ of Dutch politics was defined by various actors in similar terms, the D66 minister responsible for the new bill, Thom De Graaf, discovered that his plans to change the electoral law were only half heartily supported. Since his plan to change some other features of the Dutch political system failed as well, he decided to resign just a few months after the presentation of the new bill. After his resignation, at the end of March 2005, the government formally withdrew the bill.

The resignation of minister De Graaf led to a short crisis. Many members of D66, disappointed by the failed attempts to change the institutional system of the Netherlands, wanted to withdraw from the coalition. The coalition, however, was saved by a new policy agreement including a new deal on a reform of the electoral system. Instead of binding themselves to a specific electoral reform, the coalition parties now agreed that a study of various possibilities of changing the electoral system was to be made. Paradoxically, this ‘solution’ fits perfectly well in the traditional rules of the Dutch politics of accommodation. It is a typical form of conflict avoidance