Towards the next Dutch general election: party credibility on different issues

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As seen in the [Emanuele, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume](#), the survey data we collected on Dutch public opinion includes information on agreement and priority about a series of important policy goals. By looking at those we were able to map the general state of Dutch public opinion and the structure of opportunity on various issue dimensions. However, the data we collected also include information concerning the *credibility* of each of the different parties. Basically, respondents were asked to indicate all parties that they considered credible to achieve a particular goal. In Table 1 we report this information. For each of the included goals, ranked in terms of the support they enjoy among the Dutch electorate, we also report the priority attributed by those favouring the goal and the list of the four parties considered most credible to achieve that goal, followed by the percentage of respondents (again in favour of that goal) who actually listed each of them as credible.

We start with the five valence issues (i.e. shared goals) included in our investigation, which by definition enjoy a 100% support ([Stokes 1963](#)). On those, the only party that ranks first on more than one shared goal is the right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), ranking first on economic growth and protection from terrorism. On both of them, more than a Dutch citizen out of three considers the VVD credible. However, on the latter, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) has a very similar credibility score. The Labour Party (PVDA) is considered the most credible on fighting unemployment. 50Plus (50P) and the Socialist Party (SP) are tied for most credible on elderly care. Finally, the green party GroenLinks (GL) is the most credible, as expectable, on environment protection. It has the largest lead on the second-most credible party (over 20 percentage points) of all valence issues, although this happens on the issue which is least salient – roughly a 10-point lower priority score.

From these initial pieces of evidence, it appears safe to say that mainstream parties appear to be quite strong on valence issues according to Dutch voters.

The main challenger (PVV) only appears once among the four most-credible parties (ranking second on protection from terrorism), out of the five overall valence goals. Moreover, more than one mainstream party shows pretty large credibility scores on the various shared goals.

Below shared goals, Table 1 also reports data on the 30 rival goals. On 15 positional issues we offered respondents two opposed goals to achieve, and we asked them to select their preferred goal. Then, as for valence goals, respondents were asked to indicate credible parties for the selected goal, and assign that goal a level of priority. We begin our discussion by looking at the fifteen goals that were chosen by a majority of Dutch voters (i.e. goals whose support exceeds 50%). On those, there are six different parties considered most credible, and none ranks first on more than three goals. These are the Socialist Party (SP), the PVV and the two current government partners – PVDA and VVD. The social-liberal party Democrats 66 (D66) is understandably considered the party of free choice, as they are the most credible on two related goals, namely extending euthanasia rights and marijuana legalization. Finally, and not surprisingly, 50Plus (50P) is the most credible on reducing pension age.

The SP appears particularly credible on welfare and inequality. It enjoys a double-digit lead on the second-most credible party (PVDA) on both reducing income differences and healthcare reform, on which over a third of Dutch voters considers it credible. The SP is also the most credible on student loans abolition, but here only a respondent out of six has selected the party among the list of credible and a bunch of other parties are basically just as credible. Still, it is worth noticing that these three issues are quite consensual and important among Dutch voters. They are supported by over two thirds of respondents and the priority scores range between 64 and 73%.

The PVDA appears as the party of social inclusion and job stability. It is the most credible party to maintain borders open and ensure social services for all residents. However, both these goals are now far from unanimous among Dutch voters. Actually they are among the ones that are more controversial: in both cases no more than 57% of respondents agreed. Among those issues where the PVDA is the most credible, the only one that is strongly supported in our sample concerns the law provision for a fixed contract after two years. This is actually the most consensual among all rival goals included in our investigation – equalling support for introducing completed file assistance. However, on all these issues seeing the PVDA first (thus including the job market regulation) the fraction of Dutch voters trusting the PVDA does not exceed one third, and the lead on the second-most credible party is just between 1 and 3 percentage points.

The VVD is the most credible party on keeping current foreign policy choices and not increasing taxes on meat. The latter is the most agreed of the three goals, with over 70% of respondents in favour. However, it is one of the

least important goals for Dutch respondents and only a sixth of the sample considered the VVD credible to achieve it. On the two foreign-policy related goals (staying in the EU and achieving NATO requirements for defence spending) there is a quite strong opposition: roughly 40% of the sample is against them. The VVD is perceived as credible by a large fraction of respondents who preferred those goals (37 and 43%), and staying in the EU is particularly important to them, but especially on that goal all mainstream parties are considered quite credible.

Finally, the PVV emerges as the party that stands for cultural demarcation and populism. On taking less refugees and requiring immigrants to adapt to the Dutch culture (goals that are shared by 60 and 69% of respondents respectively), the PVV shows by far the highest leads on the second-most credible party (the VVD). The latter is considered credible on both these goals by 19% of respondents, while the PVV is credible for 43% on cultural assimilation and 58% on refugees. And here comes one of the key findings of this analysis: this is the only instance in which a party is considered credible on a goal by over 50% of respondents. All that means that the leads in credibility on the VVD are 24 and 39 percentage points. To put these into context, no other party on no other issue has a lead exceeding 14 points. Furthermore, these two goals are the two most important in terms of priority of all those on positional issues – thus excluding valence issues, but including minority goals, which are selected by a smaller fraction of respondents, and thus could be more easily salient among them. The third goal on which the PVV is the most credible is related to giving more voice to the people – the introduction of binding referenda.

As mentioned above, Table 1 also includes data on the 15 minority goals (coloured in grey), those that received less support among Dutch respondents than their rival goal. One might argue that such goals are of no substantive interest, as they are shared by a minority of voters and, as such, will hardly become a government policy. However, we believe that in an intensely competitive multi-party system such as the one characterizing the Netherlands, and in particular in presence of a perfect proportional representation, minority goals do provide useful competition opportunities. As emphasized in issue yield theory (De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2014; De Sio, Franklin and Weber 2016), for a small party enjoying 10% support, even a policy "only" supported by 30% of voters can be a very attractive opportunity for electoral expansion.

As a result, we take into account minority goals, and two additional party join the club of those that are the most credible on at least one goal, as predictable. These are the Christian Union (CU) and the Party for the Animals (PVDD). CU is the most credible party to not extend euthanasia rights, while the PVDD is the most credible on increasing the tax on meat. These goals are among the least agreed-upon, as only 21% of Dutch voters does not want to

introduce completed life assistance, and only a few more want to increase the meat tax. Still, they offer to these parties a level of support that is significantly higher than each party's current voter base: this is why, in line with issue yield theory, these issues provide a formidable campaign weapon for the two small parties.

Interestingly, on almost half of these minority goals (7) the most credible party is the one that has expressed the Prime Minister for the past six-and-a-half years– the VVD. They include job market regulation, health insurance deductibles, student loans, pension age, and others. However, this piece of evidence is less counterintuitive considered that all the seven goals have a clear connection to the status quo, most of the times in the statement itself (such as "keep the current…", "maintain the current…"). The only two goals, out of the seven, that are shared by over a third of Dutch respondents (not introducing binding referenda and not fully legalizing marijuana), are also among the least salient and the ones on which the VVD, though first in credibility, is considered credible by the smallest fractions.

The PVDA is the most credible on two minority goals, both related (once again) to social inclusion: not reducing refugees and not imposing cultural assimilation, while the SP is the most credible party to not increase defence spending – though only 14% of respondents selected it, which indicates that Dutch voters appear pretty doubtful about the actual possibility not to increase defence spending.

Finally, the PVV is the most credible party on three of the minority goals, all concerning the protection of Dutch culture. Namely these are closing the borders, leaving the EU, and welfare chauvinism. It is worth underlying that, on the latter, almost 50% of Dutch voters agree, and roughly 40% on the other two. This is to say that these are not goals shared by a tiny minority: they are quite shared among the Dutch electorate. Furthermore, they are first, second, and fourth among minority goals in terms of priority – only the non-reduction of refugees is at that level. And, as observed on the majority goals, the PVV is most capable to differentiate itself from other parties: it has the largest, the second-largest and the fourth-largest lead on the second-most credible party. Only on welfare chauvinism the lead is inferior to 30 percentage points and to the one emerging for the PVDD on the meat tax.

Overall the picture that emerges from the data presented here shows the Dutch party system as complex and fragmented. However, our data also indicate that the system does not appear to be extremely polarized. The only significant segmentation that emerges separates the PVV from all other parties. On the contrary, the long-term tradition of elite cooperation (Lijphart 1968) appears to have strong roots in the Dutch society. Our findings clearly show that voters tend to assign the credibility patent not only to their own party, but also to other parties – that maybe have experienced concurrent or anyway

Table 1. Shared and divisive goals, by public opinion support, with most credible parties

Statement	% Support	% Priority	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		Δ 1st-2nd
Keep growth	100%	79%	VVD	37%	CDA	26%	D66	24%	PVDA	20%	11%
Reduce unemployment	100%	82%	PVDA	31%	SP	24%	VVD	24%	D66	22%	7%
Better care for elderly	100%	81%	50P	32%	SP	32%	CDA	26%	PVDA	23%	0%
Fight pollution	100%	70%	GL	47%	PVDD	26%	D66	17%	PVDA	14%	21%
Protect from terrorism	100%	85%	VVD	35%	PVV	32%	CDA	29%	D66	26%	2%
Completed life assistance	79%	61%	D66	28%	VVD	18%	PVDA	17%	GL	15%	10%
Fixed contract after 2 years	79%	72%	PVDA	28%	SP	26%	GL	17%	CDA	16%	2%
No higher meat tax	73%	53%	VVD	16%	CDA	13%	PVDA	11%	PVV	8%	3%
Reduce income differences	73%	67%	SP	35%	PVDA	23%	GL	22%	D66	15%	12%
Abolish student loans	73%	64%	SP	18%	D66	18%	PVDA	17%	CDA	15%	0%
Reduce pension age	69%	75%	50P	34%	SP	24%	PVV	17%	PVDA	13%	11%
Foreigners should adapt	69%	76%	PVV	43%	VVD	19%	CDA	13%	VNL	9%	24%
Abolish healthcare deductible	67%	73%	SP	34%	PVDA	20%	GL	18%	PVV	14%	14%
Stay in EU	62%	76%	VVD	46%	D66	40%	CDA	36%	PVDA	36%	6%
Introduce binding referendum	61%	50%	PVV	18%	SP	12%	D66	11%	PVDA	11%	6%
Less refugees	60%	79%	PVV	58%	VVD	19%	VNL	10%	CDA	9%	39%
Increase defence spending	60%	62%	VVD	37%	CDA	26%	D66	16%	PVDA	13%	11%
Don't close to immigrants	57%	63%	PVDA	33%	GL	30%	SP	26%	D66	25%	3%
Legalize weed	52%	53%	D66	27%	PVDA	20%	GL	18%	SP	13%	7%
No welfare chauvinism	50%	53%	PVDA	27%	GL	26%	SP	23%	D66	18%	1%

Statement	% Support	% Priority	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		Δ 1st-2nd
Welfare chauvinism	50%	67%	PVV	43%	VVD	18%	CDA	10%	VNL	8%	25%
Keep weed illegal	48%	50%	VVD	16%	CDA	14%	PVDA	11%	SP	9%	2%
Close to immigrants	43%	74%	PVV	49%	VVD	12%	VNL	9%	PVDA	7%	37%
No more defence spending	40%	51%	SP	14%	PVDA	11%	GL	10%	CDA	9%	3%
Keep refugees coming	40%	64%	PVDA	34%	GL	33%	D66	27%	SP	23%	1%
No binding referendum	39%	40%	VVD	27%	CDA	22%	PVDA	17%	D66	14%	5%
Leave EU	38%	63%	PVV	43%	PVDA	8%	SP	7%	VNL	7%	35%
Keep healthcare deductible	33%	59%	VVD	32%	CDA	20%	D66	18%	PVDA	11%	12%
Foreigners keep culture	31%	54%	PVDA	37%	GL	31%	D66	28%	SP	23%	6%
Keep pension age	31%	63%	VVD	45%	CDA	37%	D66	33%	PVDA	31%	8%
Keep student loans	27%	47%	VVD	24%	PVDA	14%	CDA	14%	D66	13%	11%
Don't reduce income differences	27%	52%	VVD	40%	CDA	19%	PVV	15%	D66	15%	21%
Higher meat tax	27%	52%	PVDD	50%	GL	21%	VVD	12%	PVDA	12%	29%
No fixed contract after 2 years	21%	52%	VVD	30%	CDA	17%	D66	16%	PVDA	14%	13%
No completed life assistance	21%	61%	CU	30%	CDA	27%	SGP	26%	PVDA	7%	3%

repeated government responsibilities. To corroborate this claim we present Table 2, which reports for each party the vote intentions they received in our sample (as percentages on all respondents), the average credibility scores on valence and positional goals, and the ratio among those. We can see that, for all mainstream parties, the share of voters considering them credible is way larger than their own voters. The only relevant party for which this is not true is the PVV. This is particularly evident on shared goals. The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), PVDA, VVD, GL, and D66 all have credibility at least twice as large than vote share. Just consider the case of the CDA, the once-pivotal element of the Dutch party system, which since its foundation in the 1970s participated in almost all cabinets, holding the Prime Minister chair in most of them. Our evidence shows that it is never the most-credible party (not in a single one of the included 35 goals), but it is among the top-four most-credible parties on three of the five shared goals, with an average credibility of 23% among the whole electorate – while only 10% intend to vote for it.

In conclusion, our investigation shows that in the fragmented Dutch party system, the multi-dimensionality of policy issues provides a multiplicity of competition choices. In particular, we have shown that various parties have been able to develop their own area of issue ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), and that such credibility patterns resonate with the relatively narrow set of issues that these parties usually emphasize, in line with the predictions of issue yield theory. The PVV owns cultural demarcation, just as the PVDD owns animal protection, and GL environment protection. The D66 is the party of free choice on social issues, 50P is the party of the elderly, the SP is the party for welfare increase, the CU is the pro-life party, the PVDA is the party of social inclusion, while the VVD is associated with economic issues and, more in general, maintaining the status quo. But their ownerships appear much less strong, as a few parties are comparably credible.

Finally, our evidence shows that Dutch mainstream parties might have troubles in focusing on positional issues, as they are generally less credible than some more niche party which is particularly devoted to that specific goal. Furthermore, as remainder of once large catch-all parties (Kirchheimer 1966), they might alienate part of their electoral constituency by placing strong emphasis on divisive goals. On the contrary, they appeared better-equipped to campaign on valence issues. Our data clearly indicate that they enjoy higher credibility in achieving the related shared goals, and, moreover, that such goals are particularly important to Dutch voters.

Table 2. Party vote shares and credibility scores in the whole sample

	CDA	PVDA	VVD	GL	SP	D66	CU	SGP	PVV	PVDD	50P	DENK	FVD	VNL
Party vote intention	10%	7%	12%	10%	13%	11%	3%	2%	17%	4%	6%	1%	3%	1%
Average credibility														
Valence goals	23%	22%	23%	24%	21%	22%	12%	9%	14%	9%	11%	3%	4%	4%
Positional goals (all)	15%	17%	18%	13%	14%	15%	7%	6%	15%	5%	5%	3%	3%	4%
Ratios (credibility/votes)														
Shared goals	2.3	3.2	1.9	2.4	1.6	2.0	3.9	4.4	0.8	2.2	1.8	2.8	1.2	4.4
Divisive goals (all)	1.5	2.4	1.5	1.3	1.1	1.3	2.3	2.9	0.9	1.2	0.8	2.6	1.0	3.5

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