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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

sometimes indicated as 'putting hot potatoes in the refrigerator' (Lijphart, 1968; Andeweg and Irwin, 2002, 30).

The Netherlands and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems

The discussion in the Netherlands leading to the 2005 bill and the bill itself are clear indications of the unease many feel with (extremely) proportional electoral systems. As Norris observes, the potential danger of proportional systems is that it 'may lead to problems of governance associated with extreme multiparty fragmentation, unstable governments, lack of accountability for the government and for elected representatives, and indecisive election results' (Norris, 2004, 69). These dangers are especially relevant for the Netherlands. The Dutch system is designed to enable almost any party, including extremely small ones, to enter parliament. At the same time, it is a system giving much weight to national party machines (Blais, 1991, 248–249). In addition, although it is often presented as an extreme empirical example of proportionality, it is seldom set as a normative example worthy of imitation, mainly because a nationwide district is considered to give national parties too much power.

The relevance of the contributions to this special issue goes beyond the discussion in the Netherlands. The developments in the Netherlands offer an ideal opportunity to assess the potential impact of a change in the electoral system on various aspects of a specific political system. We think this type of analysis is the core business of political scientists. According to the philosopher Arnold Brecht, answering policy questions is at the heart of political science: 'It is the function of the political theorist to see, sooner than others, and to analyze, more profoundly than others, the immediate and the potential problems of the political life of society; to supply the practical politician, well in advance, with alternative courses of action, the foreseeable consequences of which have been fully thought through; and to supply him not only with brilliant asides, but with a solid block of knowledge on which to build' (Brecht, 1959, 20). As Norris concluded in her recent volume on *Electoral Engineering*: 'electoral systems represent some of the most powerful instruments available for institutional engineering, with far reaching consequences' (Norris, 2004, 261). In the past decades, political scientists have gathered a vast amount of knowledge regarding many aspects of electoral systems.[2] The differences between electoral systems are well described and there is a substantial body of knowledge on the consequences of these differences. This means that political scientists are well placed to advise policymakers in order to help them to avoid some potential problems with the introduction and implementation of changes in the electoral system.[3]

Describing differences between electoral systems and explaining the consequences of these differences, however, is not the same thing as predicting what will happen once a particular system is introduced. Sometimes, for example, alleged consequences of a change in the electoral system, seem to occur *before* instead of after the actual change (Shugart, 1992). As Weaver and Rockman observed: 'In any given setting, it is hard to prove that proposed reforms would improve government effectiveness because claims must be either counterfactual or based on evidence from other countries that lack exactly equivalent social and political conditions. It is impossible, in other words, to provide 'proof' of institutional effects for institutions that do not yet exist' (Weaver and Rockman, 1993, 466–467).

In this special issue, we intend to show to what extent empirical knowledge regarding electoral systems can be used to predict the impact of an institutional change. Since many countries have considered changing their electoral system (and since some already have), such an assessment is of general interest.[4]

The Development of the Dutch Electoral System

In order to understand why the Dutch government proposed to change the country's electoral system, we first need to understand the present system and its historical roots.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the introduction of a system of proportional representation was part of a package deal intended to solve the three political problems that caused an increasing tension within Dutch politics and society: the funding of non-state (mainly Christian) schools as demanded by Catholics and Protestants, the limited (male) suffrage, and the social problems caused by the rapid industrialization of the country (Lijphart, 1975/1968). In the so-called 'pacification of 1917' the major political parties came to an agreement that non-state schools would be financed by the central government on an equal footing with state schools. At the same time, the system of limited suffrage in single-member districts with a two-round system was to be replaced by full male suffrage and proportional representation, thus enabling all social groups to be represented and the emerging political parties to fully blossom.

The introduction of proportional representation in the Netherlands was by no means a unique event; Belgium (1893), Finland (1906) and Sweden (1909) preceded the Netherlands (Nohlen, 2000, 210). In many of these countries and other countries that introduced proportional representation, the change was intertwined with the introduction of full male suffrage.

The electoral system introduced in 1917 is, with some relatively minor changes to be outlined below, still in use in 2006. This system is extremely

proportional. Without major restrictions, political parties are allowed to present lists of candidates in (now 19) electoral units. These electoral units do not have a substantive meaning with regard to the allocation of seats to political parties, since all votes for a party in all electoral units are added before the seats are allocated. However, political parties are allowed to present different lists of candidates tailor-made for each electoral unit.[5] Voters can only vote for one of the candidates on one of the lists presented in their electoral unit. Voting for the list as such is not allowed.

The electoral system introduced in 1917 boosted the formation of modern political parties. Political parties became more hierarchical and more centralized (Loots, 2004b, 185–203). Political parties and their political programs, representing the now well-defined groups in society, became the main vehicle for political representation. The loosely organized and heterogeneous liberals lost and never regained the dominant position they had in the 19th century. While the emerging political parties changed the electoral system in order to more fairly represent the different social groups, the electoral system in turn helped the emerging political parties to become modern mass parties.

Once the modern political parties were in charge they began to dislike a few 'details' of the Dutch electoral system as introduced in 1917. The virtually unrestricted possibilities to present a list of candidates, the low electoral threshold (only 50% of the electoral quota), and the system of the largest remainders (Hare)[6], caused an increase of the number of (small) political parties. In 1917 only seven political parties were represented in parliament. In 1918, this number increased to 17, mainly very small parties. Moreover, the position of individual candidates within political parties was very strong. Candidates trying to win a seat at the cost of candidates placed higher on the list could easily do so (Elzinga, 1997, 197). As a consequence, the list-order was less relevant than was to the liking of the party organizations[7] (Loots, 2004b, 196, etc.).

Between 1918 and 1937, political parties tried to remedy these two problems. In order to reduce the number of (small) political parties, the electoral threshold was increased from 50% (1918) to 75% (1922) and finally 100% (1937) of the electoral quota. In addition, in 1937 Hare was replaced by the somewhat less proportional system of D'Hondt. In addition, in order to limit the power of individual candidates, only candidates receiving at least 50% of the votes needed for a full seat were enabled to break the list order.[8] This meant virtually no candidate could be elected outside the list order.[9] In comparative perspective, these small changes were not unique, but in most other countries the changes were towards *more* proportionality (Nohlen, 2000, 211). Sweden, for example, increased its district magnitude in 1921 in order to enable small parties to win seats (Shugart, 1992). However, given the extreme proportionality

of the system introduced in 1917, the minor changes in the Netherlands can also be seen as a 'regression towards the mean'.

The electoral system designed in 1917 and fine-tuned between 1917 and 1937 reflected a core element of Dutch politics and Dutch society. Until the 1960s, 'pillarization' was the dominant social characteristic of the Netherlands. Catholics, Secular workers, and Protestants all established their own social networks, including labour unions, newspapers, broadcasting organizations, etc. Each network, or pillar, was represented by its own political party. Many members of the pillars voted for the political party representing their pillar and elections were often seen as a mere census. The electoral system guaranteed all major groups to be represented in parliament. Since the relative strength of the groups did not change very much, and because turning out to vote was compulsory, the net change of seats between two elections was virtually negligible.

In a way, the strong popular footing of the existing political parties was exemplified in 1956. In that year, it was decided to increase the size of parliament from 100 to 150 members. Since the electoral threshold was defined as a full electoral quota, and because the full quota decreased from 1 to 0.67% of the popular vote, the actual threshold was lowered. This was of course observed in parliament and plans were made to re-adjust the percentage back to 1% of the popular vote, but this was never done. More importantly, the number of political parties was not substantially affected in the elections of 1959 and 1963, showing the strong footing of the existing political parties (see also Shugart, 1992).

As from the 1960s, radical changes affected Dutch society. Decline of religious orthodoxy, decline of church membership and secularization caused the religious pillars to break down (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002, 34–38). In the elections of 1967, 15 parliamentary seats changed hands. This was considered as an unprecedented landslide.

As the politics of accommodation and its extremely proportional electoral system were so strongly related to the system of pillarization, it is no wonder both the politics of accommodation and the proportional electoral system became a matter of dispute once pillarization started to crumble. Against this background, a new political party, D'66, entered parliament in 1967, promising a radical break with existing institutions, promoting an elected prime minister (which would basically lead to a presidential system) and a majoritarian electoral system. According to D'66, this was an effective way to give voters a say in the formation of the government.

Impressed by the entry of D'66 and by the decline of the electoral fortune of some of the major political parties, the government in 1967 asked a committee to advice on 'updating the constitution and the electoral law' (Daudt, 1989/1995). In 1969, this committee proposed to change the electoral system into a

proportional system with multi-member districts and to introduce a directly elected 'formateur'. Despite several attempts of the Social Democrats of the PvdA and of D'66 to implement these proposals, and despite public support for these changes (Andeweg, 1989, 54) they were never accepted by parliament. The only thing that changed in 1970 was the abolishment of compulsory voting, a change which was *not* supported by a majority of the electorate (Andeweg, 1989, 55).

After this, the political discussion about the electoral system almost came to a standstill until 1989. In that year another committee was instituted. This committee made an inventory of 'points to be discussed and analysed'. Among these points was a new electoral system. The main reason to address this subject again was no longer the lack of voters' influence on coalition formation, but a perceived gap between citizens and politicians. On the basis of this report, three alternatives to the existing electoral system were considered, but only a minor change was adopted. The German 'mixed' system was rejected because it would be confusing and would not accomplish any of the stated goals. The idea of multi-member districts was rejected once again because it would harm the smaller political parties. According to the committee, only the strengthening of preferential voting (reducing the percentage from 50 to 25% of the electoral quota) was to be recommended. Partly as a result of this discussion, the threshold for individual candidates was indeed lowered.

After the 1994 elections, the government consisting of PvdA, VVD and D66[10] proposed a *parallel* system: 75 MPs would be elected according to the existing system of proportional representation and 75 members would be elected in multi-member districts. The proposal was not supported by a majority in parliament and withdrawn by the government (Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of the major changes in the Dutch electoral system 1917–2005

1917	Full suffrage for men over 25, electoral threshold 50% of the electoral quota, candidates elected using vote transfer and otherwise giving priority to candidates with the most individual votes. Compulsory voting
1919	Full female suffrage introduced (used first in 1922)
1921	Threshold for the direct election of individual candidates increased to 50% of the list quota
1922	Electoral threshold (parties) increased to 75% of the electoral quota
1937	D'Hondt replaces Hare for the distribution of seats and the electoral threshold (parties) increases to 100% of the electoral quota
1946	Voting age lowered to 23 years
1956	Size of parliament increased from 100 to 150 seats (electoral threshold not changed)
1970	Abolishment of compulsory voting
1972	Voting age lowered to 18 years
1989	Abolishment of the vote transfer rule. Votes for the same candidate in different electoral units are added
1997	Threshold for the direct election of individual candidates lowered to 25% of the electoral quota

The Short-Lived Proposal of 2005 and its Aftermath

In 2003, D66 once again played a key role in the coalition negotiations. The List Pim Fortuyn was no longer acceptable as a coalition partner for CDA and VVD. Its instability had caused the breakdown of the short-lived cabinet Balkenende I (2002–2003). After a half-hearted attempt to form a coalition of CDA and PvdA, the only feasible alternative left was a coalition of CDA and VVD. In order to get a majority in parliament, this coalition of Christian Democrats and Conservative Liberals depended on the willingness of D66 to join them. This time D66 exploited its pivotal position by demanding a change of the electoral system as part of the written policy agreement of the new coalition. CDA and VVD reluctantly agreed to this, partly because the outcome of the recent elections was interpreted as a sign of a huge gap between politics and the mass public.

In 2005 the government proposed a mixed system, giving people the opportunity to cast two votes. The first vote was to determine the allocation of seats. It was not cast for the party as such, but for a candidate on a *national* party list. This first vote simply implied that the existing system of proportional representation was kept in tact. In addition to this first vote, voters would cast a second vote in multi-member districts. In these districts, candidates were to be elected under the system of a Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV); voters were given one district vote and the candidates winning most votes were elected.[11] A maximum of 75 MPs was to be elected in these multi-member districts. The proposal can be classified as a mixed system, because it combines a plurality part (SNTV) with a proportional part. Had it been implemented, however, it would have been unique, since the plurality part would have been organized in multi-member districts.

According to the original proposal of the cabinet, discussed in 2004, candidates could not be standing on the national list and at the same time run in one of the districts. This would have made the district elections more relevant. Losing the district election would block the way to winning a seat in parliament. However, after a preliminary discussion with parliament, the government changed the proposal. Candidates were now allowed to run in a district as well as to stand on the national list. This meant that the incentive for politicians to win the district election, and the incentive for voters to vote for a good district candidate was substantially reduced.

Since the SNTV elections would have relatively proportional outcomes and involved 75 candidates only, parties would probably never win district-seats beyond their 'fair' share according to the first ' national list' votes (Van der Kolk, 2004a, b). However, in order to avoid the potential problem of *Überhangmandaten*, full quota seats were to be distributed first.[12] Remaining seats were to be used to solve the potential problem of 'too many district seats'.

The minister hoped this new electoral system would strengthen the bond between representatives and represented. He argued that at least some representatives would no longer be elected on the coattails of the party leader. They would have a firm footing in one of the districts. This strong footing would improve the relationship between representatives and represented, it might help to strengthen the position of the second chamber *vis-à-vis* the cabinet, and even help to revitalize the political parties by attracting stronger politicians. At the same time, he claimed that proportionality was *not* affected: smaller parties would still be able to win seats and to be represented in parliament.

On Wednesday 23 March 2005, the Minister of Institutional Renewal, Thom de Graaf (D66), responsible for the new bill, resigned. He was unable to convince a 2/3 majority in the First Chamber to support his proposal for a constitutional change needed to introduce the directly elected mayor. And when he found out that solid support for a change of the electoral system was missing too, he decided to resign.

After new negotiations, the VVD, CDA, D66-coalition agreed that several options for a new electoral system (including the system introduced in parliament just months before) were to be studied longer and more in depth. A newly appointed D66 minister was given the responsibility to initiate these studies. In a way this development confirms the typically Dutch way of handling these kinds of discussions; committees are formed, consensus is aimed for and at the end almost nothing changes (Andeweg, 1989, 1997). And since the prime minister in an interview in September 2005 revealed that he was against reforming the electoral system, the chances of reform seemed to be virtually non-existent.

The new minister, however, inspired by the citizens' assembly for electoral reform in British Columbia, decided to try something new. Instead of forming yet another committee of party representatives, he proposed to organize a citizens' assembly. By asking a random group of citizens how to change (or not change) the electoral system, the minister tried to 'depoliticize' the issue. Unlike the procedure followed in British Columbia, there will not be a referendum on the final proposal. The citizens' assembly seems to face at least four options. The first option is of course to leave the system at it is. Despite strong criticisms, the system is remarkably stable and the idea that minor parties are to be valued is pretty strong in the Netherlands. A second option might be to further decrease the individual threshold, changing the system to an even more open list system (with an individual threshold of 12.5%). This option was discussed as an alternative to the proposals of 2005. In January 2005, for example, it was proposed by the Council of State as a simple alternative to the system developed by De Graaf. In September 2005 it was discussed again (and rejected) by the Dutch Electoral Council, an advisory body on electoral

matters. The third option still on the table is the system designed by De Graaf. As we have shown, this proposal was a carefully designed compromise between various interests. A final option has been proposed by some representatives of the two biggest parties: simply introducing a Mixed Member Proportional system 'German' style (without the possibility of *Überhangsmandaten*). In the parliamentary discussions about the citizens' assembly, however, it was explicitly stated that the assembly should not be restricted to the study of a limited set of options only. This means that all options are open. The assembly was installed in March 2006 and is supposed to report no later than November 2006.

Outline of the Special Issue

The main objective of this special issue is to discuss potential alternatives to the current Dutch electoral system based on what is known from comparative research. By doing so, it will offer a state-of-the-art overview of the literature on this subject. Most contributions assess the possible effects of the introduction of another electoral system in the Netherlands. Each contribution focuses on a different 'dependent variable', or aspect of the political system.[13] These dependent variables are related to political parties (their number and their candidate selection procedures, including gender representation), voters (turnout and their willingness to split votes once they are allowed to do so), individual politicians (their role orientations) parliamentary parties (their internal cohesion). This list of consequences pretty well covers the potential consequences of electoral systems.

The range of available options is large. Therefore, we asked all authors to focus more specifically on the four main options presently discussed in the Dutch context: the current electoral system, an electoral system with a substantially reduced individual threshold, the system as presented by De Graaf and the more common Mixed Member Proportional system as used in Germany. All authors were also asked to discuss possibly better alternatives to reach the aims the Dutch government had in mind with its proposal to reform the electoral system (Table 2).

The contributions discussing one of the dependent variables all have the same structure. The core of each chapter is an overview of the state-of-the-art of comparative research about the main determinants of this specific dependent variable. All authors focus on the effects of introducing one of the three alternatives mentioned earlier as compared to keeping the current system and discuss both the intended and unintended effects of each of them.

All authors show that many potential or at least alleged effects of electoral systems are not *directly* related to variations in the electoral system. They trace

Table 2 Contributions to this special issue

Part I	*Part II*
I. Introduction	VII: Role orientations of MPs
II. Number of political parties	VIII: Internal cohesion of parties
III. Candidate selection	IX: Legislative and government
IV. Split ticket voting	X: New Zealand
V. Voter turnout	XI: Italy
VI. Representation of women	XII: Scotland and Wales

the mechanisms by which the electoral system indirectly affects the dependent variable.

In his contribution on the effect of electoral systems on the number of parties, *Cox* distinguishes various ways through which the introduction of districts will affect the willingness of political parties to either ally or merge. He hypothesizes that in mixed systems (either the system developed by former minister De Graaf with multi-member districts or the German type with single-member districts), the incentives to merge are present, but the condition under which this mechanism operates largely depends on the beliefs of political parties. Since these beliefs are unknown, it is hard to predict whether the number of political parties will indeed decrease. Cox also hypothesizes that the reduction of the individual threshold will stimulate mergers between parties. Since candidates of small groups can campaign for seats within a long list, the incentive to found a separate party disappears. This means that *if* anything happens in the Netherlands along one of the proposed lines, it will probably be a *reduction* of the number of political parties.

Hazan and Voerman pay attention to candidate selection rules within political parties. They argue that candidate selection rules within political parties often change regardless of the electoral system. Still, substantial changes in the electoral system will force political parties to revise their candidate selection rules. Hazan and Voerman focus primarily on the introduction of districts. They argue that this will further decentralize candidate selection. This will influence party unity on a scale from moderate to significant. Lowering the individual threshold will have a limited effect on candidate selection rules only since it will retain the nationwide list.

In their chapter on split ticket voting, *Gschwend and Van der Kolk* try to predict the number of voters willing to 'split' their ticket in mixed member proportional systems. Ticket splitting may effect both the distribution of seats and may put some stress on the system once its effects are seen as leading to a deviation from proportionality. They show, however, that despite the limited evidence from comparative research, split ticket voting will either not affect the proportionality of the system at all or to a limited extent only.

The study of *Blais and Aarts* on the relationship between electoral systems and turnout concludes that the effect of a change within the class of proportional systems, in all likelihood would be minimal and negligible.

Proportional party list systems as the one currently used in the Netherlands have a positive effect on the selection of women for elected office, as *Norris* argues in her contribution about the representation of women under various electoral systems. Although the reduction of the individual threshold will probably not affect the number of women in parliament, the introduction of an MMP system with single member districts might somewhat reduce the number of women in the Second Chamber. This effect will be minimal under a MMP system with multi-member districts.

The second volume of this special issue will contain contributions focusing on the functioning of Members of Parliament, parliamentary parties and parliament. As far as these aspects of the political system are influenced by a change in the electoral system, these effects are largely indirect. *Thomassen and Esaiasson* pay attention to the bond between individual MPs and their voters. They argue that the introduction of districts probably will make MPs more sensitive to the specific interests of people in their districts. This, however, will partly depend on the introduction of a more decentralized candidate selection procedure. Since Hazan and Voerman argue that the introduction of districts will indeed decentralize candidate selection, it is safe to hypothesize that this will indeed happen. The consequences of a reduction of the individual threshold, by contrast, are more difficult to predict. According to Thomassen and Esaiason, it is safe to assume that individual candidates in a more open list system will try to find a niche by focusing on the interests of specific (not necessarily regionally organized) groups.

Following the argument of Hazan and Voerman, one would expect that the unity of parliamentary parties would be reduced by a more decentralized selection of candidates within political parties. *Heidar,* however, argues that other factors override the incentives for MPs to act more independently. Thus party unity is *not* threatened by a more decentralized selection of MPs. Even a more open list system will hardly affect party unity, according to Heidar.

Andeweg starts from the claim of the Dutch government that a more direct election of parliament will strengthen parliament's overall position in relation to that government. He argues that there is hardly any empirical evidence in support of such a claim. As far as there is a relationship between the electoral system and executive relations, this relationship is indirect. Ironically, the current system of proportional representation is theoretically more consistent with a strong parliament than any of the alternative electoral systems presently discussed.

The last three contributions focus on an actual reform of an electoral system. Each of the chapters describes details of the reform, the intended consequences

of this change, evaluates the extent to which these expectations were met and also describes some unintended consequences of the change.

The contribution of *Vowles et al.* describes the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional system in 1996 in New Zealand, which had hitherto used a plurality system. As Vowles *et al.* show, the aim of the electoral reform was to increase proportionality by making it easier for political parties to be represented in parliament. This aim was met. The reform also improved the representation of women and minorities in parliament. Also, it seems to have improved the legitimacy of government. At the same time the increase of the number of political parties has made coalition formation more difficult.

The electoral reform in Italy, described by *Katz*, is the most similar case compared to the plans currently discussed in the Netherlands. Italy used to have a system of proportional representation and changed it into a mixed system in 1993. According to Katz, there can be no doubt that this reform was related to major changes in Italian politics, but whether specific intended expectations formulated before the reform were met is hard to tell. On the basis of the Italian case, Katz cautions any electoral engineer: precise predictions are difficult to make, changes are path dependent and once started, electoral reforms are hard to stop.

The difficulty to make precise predictions about the impact of electoral reform is finally shown in the contribution of *Curtice* who describes the introduction of a mixed electoral system in Scotland and Wales. Curtice draws attention to the fact that political parties can craft systems to serve their interests in rather subtle ways. At the same time, voters are not as predictable as parties sometimes seem to think. In Scotland, for example, parties deliberately tried to block the entrance of minor parties, but despite this, several seats were allocated to these parties. In addition, the attempt to increase the number of female representatives through a change of the electoral system largely failed, or at least worked out differently than expected. This case study, like the other two, is a tale of both political calculation and unintended consequences.

Conclusion

This special issue summarizes and extends some of the findings of comparative politics in the past decades. By doing so, we are able to assess the potential impact of a change in the electoral system on various aspects of a specific political system, including the behaviour of politicians. We hope this will facilitate not just the work of scholars interested in the political consequences of electoral systems, but also the work of a politician or member of a citizens'

assembly who well in advance, wants to understand the foreseeable consequences of a change in the electoral system.

Based on the contributions in this special issue, it is safe to expect that all four proposals currently discussed in the Netherlands, will at most slightly reduce the number of political parties, either by merger or by alliance. The introduction of an open list system will probably not affect the way candidates are recruited within political parties. The introduction of (either single-member or multi-member) districts, however, may decentralize candidate selection procedures. Partly because of changing candidate selection procedures, the introduction of districts will probably somewhat decrease the number of women selected for parliament, although the effect will be small. None of the proposed changes will affect voter turnout.

The introduction of districts in the Netherlands will probably change the role orientations of MPs somewhat. They will pay slightly more attention to regional interests. Neither the internal cohesion of parliamentary parties nor the position of parliament *vis-à-vis* government will be affected by a reform of the electoral system along the lines currently discussed.

As helpful as these findings are for the debate on electoral reforms, we should also recognize that the utility of our knowledge for electoral engineering is limited. For that purpose, it is just not precise enough. We can foresee some general changes in the party system, in the behaviour of politicians and among voters, but the consequences of relatively minor changes are largely hidden in the future and changes have unintended consequences as well. According to Weaver and Rockman, however, 'these complications should not stifle a lively debate among policymakers and the public about institutional innovation, but they ought to provide a note of caution about the likelihood that an institutional fix will be successful' (Weaver and Rockman, 1993).

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Notes

1 Additional information about the Revolt of 2002 and 2003 can be found in a special issue of *Acta Politica* (volume 38, number 1) edited by Wouter van der Brug and Huib Pellikaan.

2 Relatively recent overviews are: Blais (1991), Lijphart (1994), Cox (1997), Norris (2004), Reynolds *et al*. (2005) and Taagepera and Shugart (1989).
3 Again according to Brecht, one of the areas of political science is the study of electoral systems: 'Frequently, we come to think, after our first trial — in the political field for example, after trying out a new electoral system — that we might have avoided the error from the outset had we invested a bit more of hard thinking before the trial' (Brecht, 1959, 17).
4 An overview of recent changes of electoral systems can be found in Reynolds *et al*. (2005).
5 In the 1920s and 1930s, political parties indeed used the opportunity to present different party leaders in different electoral units. In 1918, the Social Democrats (SDAP), for example, presented 10 different leaders in the then 18 electoral units. The Catholics presented nine different leaders (De Jong, 2004). In the past decades, however, for most political parties the top of the list has been identical in all units.
6 In the original proposal discussed in 1916 and 1917, seats were distributed using the system of D'Hondt, but since bigger parties should not be favored at the cost of smaller parties, Prime Minister Cort van der Linden decided to propose Hare (Loots, 2004a).
7 Like the choice for the system of largest remainders, the relative ease to break the list order was a consciously designed elements of the system meant to allow 'strong' and 'exceptional' politicians lacking support from a party organization to enter parliament. The strongest fear before the introduction of the proportional system was the emergence of strong yet closed party organizations.
8 And since votes for the same candidate in different electoral units were almost never added, candidates were in effect required to win half a seat in one electoral unit. Only if a party did have *identical* lists in all electoral units, votes for a specific candidate were added.
9 Between 1945 and 1989, only three persons were directly elected in this way.
10 In 1985 the spelling of D'66 was changed into D66.
11 SNTV and its consequences without the moderating effects of a mixed system are extensively described in Grofman *et al*. (1999).
12 The number of parliamentary seats in the Netherlands is constitutionally fixed at 150.
13 The focus in much of the existing literature is on the *disproportionality* of electoral systems (see e.g. Rae, 1967; Lijphart, 1994). Since we think this aspect of the literature is well covered, it was decided *not* to focus on disproportionality.