

The Democratic Audit of The Netherlands; Its approach, criteria, results, and impact

Rudy B. Andeweg (Leiden University)
and
Jacques Thomassen (University of Twente)

Paper for presentation to the Workshop ‘Democratic Audits in Comparative Perspective:
Approaches, Results, Impact’,
Leiden University
January 18-19, 2013



Universiteit Leiden



Universiteit Twente
de ondernemende universiteit

The Democratic Audit of The Netherlands

Rudy B. Andeweg (Leiden University) and Jacques Thomassen (University of Twente)

Approach

The Dutch Democratic Audit was developed in response to a debate in politics and to a development in political science. The debate in politics is about the quality of Dutch democracy. It is a long-standing debate with several royal commissions having issued reports and recommendations for democratic reform from the 1950s to the first decade of the current century (Andeweg 1989, 1997; Van der Kolk & Thomassen 2006). The debate has never resulted in fundamental reforms, but it received a new impetus with ‘the long year of 2002’ (the meteoric rise of populist leader Pim Fortuyn, his assassination shortly before elections, and a subsequent period of government instability). Although political scientists were not absent in this debate, the discourse lacked systematic input based both on empirical research on the diagnosis of the ailments of Dutch democracy, and on systematic comparisons of the effects of institutional design and potential reforms. Paradoxically, one of the causes of this lacuna, was the professionalization of Dutch academic political science. Research had become more inspired by theoretical debates than by public debates and its increasing reliance on sophisticated methodology made it less accessible to non-colleagues. Above all, the internationalization of the discipline forces Dutch political scientists to publish their results in English: publications in Dutch have become rare, and the journal of the Dutch Political Science Association (NKWP), *Acta Politica*, switched to English in 1997. Assessments of political change in the Netherlands are written in English (Daalder & Irwin 1989, Keman 2008), and the textbook used in most undergraduate courses on Dutch politics is also in English (Andeweg & Irwin 2009). In summary: at the time that knowledge produced by Dutch political scientists could play a useful role in public debate, that knowledge was no longer accessible to the general public. Meeting in 2008 at the Dutch Royal Academy to discuss the future of Dutch political science, a group of university professors decided to join forces to conduct a Democratic Audit of the Dutch political system as a collective contribution by Dutch political science to the ongoing debate on the democratic quality of

that system. It was hoped that this exercise would eventually also lead to new plans for future research.

This Dutch Democratic Audit followed in the footsteps of similar projects in other countries. Democratic Audits, first developed in the United Kingdom under the direction of David Beetham, have been held in many polities across the globe by now. All these audits share two important characteristics:

- The study is an assessment of the democratic quality of a political system. This implies that the functioning of the political system is compared to particular standards of democracy.
- The study seeks to contribute to public debate about the functioning of the political system, targeting a broader audience than that of fellow academics.

We shall elaborate on these two common denominators momentarily, but democratic audits also vary in their approach. Within this variety, we can roughly distinguish two types of audit. One type focuses primarily on the formal criteria that a democratic political system must meet. This is the approach of the British pioneers, adopted and further developed by the Stockholm based *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)*. In 2002, the latter institute has published a handbook containing a checklist with 56 categories of formal criteria that can be used to assess the extent to which a political system complies with the formal requirements (freedom of speech, fair elections, etc.) (Landman 2012). A Democratic Audit based on this checklist had already been conducted in the Netherlands, by the government's Department of Internal Affairs. The report, entitled *De Staat van Onze Democratie* (The State of Our Democracy) was published in 2006. (For an English language summary, see http://www.idea.int/sod/worldwide/summary_netherlands_sod.cfm).

The second type of Democratic Audit focuses less on the formal criteria, and more on the actual functioning of the political system. This approach makes use of empirical research and has been used for the democratic audits of countries such as Australia, Canada and Sweden. This has been the approach adopted by the Dutch Democratic Audit, also

Table 1: an overview of the Dutch democratic audit

I Citizens	
Mark Bovens & Anchrit Wille	Political trust in the Netherlands: temporary dip or permanent decline?
Bengü Hosch-Dayican	Individualisation and political trust in the Netherlands
Jan Vis & Wijbrandt van Schuur	Political knowledge of citizens
Monique Leyenaar & Kristof Jacobs	Citizen participation: burden or asset?
Anchrit Wille	Democratic inequalities: the troublesome relation between participation and democracy
Bas Denters, Elwin Reimink, Mijke Boedeltje & Peter Geurts	Political Equality and forms of electoral and non-electoral participation
Caelesta Braun-Poppelaars, Joost Berkhout & Marcel Hanegraaff	Interest groups in Dutch democracy: experts or representatives
II Political Parties	
Josje den Ridder, Joop van Holsteyn & Ruud Koole	The representativeness of party members in the Netherlands
Paul Lucardie & Gerrit Voerman	Democracy within political parties
Gerrit Voermans & Wijbrandt van Schuur	The membership of Dutch political parties (1945-2010)
Ruud Koole	Party Finance in the Netherlands
III Elections	
Hans Keman & Paul Pennings	Old and new lines of conflict in Dutch politics post 1989
Henk van der Kolk & Kees Aarts	Are Dutch parties different in the eyes of the voters?
Wouter van der Brug, Catherine de Vries & Joost van Spanje	New issues, new cleavages?
Stijn van Kessel en André Krouwel	New political parties in the Netherlands
Sarah L. de Lange & Matthijs Rooduijn	A populist Zeitgeist in the Netherlands?
Galen Irwin & Joop van Holsteyn	Voters, elections and the electoral system
IV Policy representation	
Erik van der Kouwe, Paul Pennings & Hans Keman	From mandate to result
Bas Denters, Merel de Groot & Pieter-Jan Klok	Standing for and acting for
V Media and Democracy	
Jos de Beus, Kees Brants & Philip van Praag	Media and their role in Dutch democracy
Jan Kleinnijenhuis & Janet Takens	The news according to newspapers and television: objective and pluriform?
VI Bureaucracy and Democracy	
Frank Hendriks	Effectiveness and credibility of Dutch democracy
Mark Bovens & Thomas Schillemans	Public Accountability
Sandra van Thiel	Quangos and the limits of ministerial responsibility
Gjalt de Graaf & Leo Huberts	Integrity and Dutch public administration
VII Europe and Dutch Democracy	
Bernard Steunenberg	European policy-making and the role of the Dutch parliament
Marianne van der Steeg	Europeanisation and parliamentary scrutiny of the Dutch government
Rik de Ruiter	The impact of EU soft law on the functioning of the Dutch parliament

because the approach using the formal criteria has already been used. From the outset, the idea was not to conduct any new research, but to bring together existing research on Dutch politics, mould it into an evaluative framework, and present it in a form that would be accessible to a wider audience (which implied that the language of publication would be Dutch). An open call for papers was more successful than expected, even although the focus of the audit had been restricted to the national level, and to the chain linking citizens to public policy (not including, for example, local democracy, the rule of law, etc.¹). The papers were discussed at a meeting preceding the annual conference of the Dutch Political Science Association in May 2009. During 2009 and 2010 meetings in subgroups served to further coordinate and improve the papers. In November 2010, the Social Science Council of the Dutch Royal Academy devoted a conference to a discussion of the first results. The papers were published in an edited volume (47 authors, 28 chapters; see Table 1), and to fill in some gaps and provide an overall view, the directors also published a book accompanying the edited volume (Andeweg & Thomassen 2011a, 2011b).

Evaluation criteria

One of the problems in using this approach was the development of yardsticks against which to evaluate the quality of Dutch democracy. This is probably less of a problem when using formal criteria, as these are often minimal requirements that apply to any type of democratic system (Cf Costa Pinto et al 2012). The evaluation of the actual working of the system runs into the problem that democracy is a contested concept: there is not just one legitimate normative theory of democracy. On the one hand it would be impossible to impose one conceptualization of democracy without being accused of contaminating a scientific project with a personal bias, but on the other hand it would not be a joint project if each researcher would develop her own standards for democratic quality. Fortunately, the various alternative views of democracy appear to cluster together into two rival perspectives: a populist or majoritarian conceptualization of democracy and a ‘Madisonian’ or consensual conceptualization. In the majoritarian view classical direct

¹ A Democratic Audit of Dutch local democracy is currently under preparation.

democracy serves as the ideal, and representative democracy is, in Robert Dahl's words (1982), no more than a 'sorry substitute for the real thing'. In that view, representative democracy ought to function in such a way that public policy is congruent with the desires of the voters. As voters do not all agree on the same wishes while they are all equal in a democracy, the will of the voters is the will of the majority of the voters. The electoral system increases the probability that there is a majority party in parliament, members of parliament regard themselves as delegates whose role is restricted to represent their voters' or their party's views, government and parliamentary majority form one block determining public policy without much interference by subnational authorities or by the judiciary. In the 'Madisonian' view, representative democracy is not a sorry substitute, but is regarded as superior to direct democracy. The purpose of democracy is not majority rule, but protection of minorities even against a democratic majority. The electoral system facilitates proportional representation of minorities in parliament, members of parliament see themselves as trustees who should serve not their own voters, but the national interest, there is a separation of powers between government and parliament, and subnational authorities and the judiciary act as checks and balances.

The debate on the advantages and disadvantages of both models of democracy centers not only on abstract value judgments, but also recognizes that no size fits all; that different models of democracy are appropriate for different types of society. It is this recognition that is central to the Dutch democratic audit. The Netherlands has been a prototype of a consensus democracy (the classic reference is to Lijphart 1975). From the introduction of universal suffrage, the emphasis has been on the inclusion of the interests and views of the various political minorities: from an electoral system based on extreme proportional representation to the concern for sufficient popular support in policy making. This emphasis on representativeness has served the Netherlands well for a long time. It has made it possible to accommodate the emancipation of the working class and of religious minorities without great conflict. The same accessibility that once allowed for the representation of the various 'pillars' in politics also facilitated the entry into the political arena of other disadvantaged or forgotten groups in society: farmers, retailers, pensioners, people committed to animal rights, people concerned over immigration and multi-

culturalism. It is for good reasons that many balked each time fundamental political reforms have been proposed. At the same time, the social conditions that once gave reason to stress representativeness in politics have changed radically. Social developments such as individualization, horizontalization of authority relations, globalization, and mediatization now pose new challenges to the Dutch political system. The core research question in the Dutch democratic audit is whether the type of democracy that was designed in the 19th and early 20th century is still appropriate for the social and political conditions of the 21st century. The Dutch democratic audit is not so much an evaluation of the current political system using the criteria of a particular normative model of democracy, but rather an evaluation of the fit of the model of democracy that inspired the design of the Dutch system and the social and political context that now confronts the Dutch system.

Outcome

The Dutch democratic audit looked at many facets of Dutch political life (see Table 1), and it is impossible to summarize the outcome of the audit as such. Here, we confine ourselves to some of the common threads that emerged in several of the audit's projects. The social developments referred to above are often referred to as a process of modernization. This modernization has resulted in the emancipation of the individual citizen. The spectacular rise in the level of education has produced a 'cognitive mobilization' which makes citizens less dependent on collective representation by leaders of social and political organizations. This development has had significant consequences for the political participation of citizens. In the traditional political system, taking part in elections and related activities was virtually the only form of participation open to ordinary citizens. Compulsory voting, but above all the view that voting in elections is a civic duty, resulted in a high turnout, long after the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970. The allegiance of many voters to a particular political party also contributed to this high turnout. However, civic duty and party loyalty have weakened considerably as motives to go out and vote. Increasingly, voters make up their individual minds whether it is worthwhile to participate in the elections. This does not necessarily lead to a decline

in voter turnout: since the abolition of compulsory voting there has hardly been a downward trend in turnout in national parliamentary elections. Such a decline is visible for local elections, and in particular for provincial elections and elections to the European parliament. Apparently, many voters decide whether to vote on the basis of what is at stake and what is on offer, and other than in national elections, the differences between the parties are unclear and the assembly that is elected is not regarded as very powerful. The decline in turnout in these ‘second order’ elections is therefore no indication that citizens turn their back on politics.

Moreover, citizens have found other, possibly more effective, means to put their demands forward. Party-related participation, such as membership of a political party and actively contributing to campaign activities may have declined since the late 1980s, but political activities outside the traditional partisan arena has actually increased. At the local level, the authorities have reacted to this development by sometimes engaging citizens directly into the policy process through what has become known as ‘interactive policy making’. This reaction is logical and positive, but it also has disadvantages. These forms of political participation make greater demands on citizens’ cognitive and social skills, and consequently the inequality, particularly in terms of level of education, between participants and non-participants is greater than with voting. Although current research found no evidence of this, it may cause a biased representation of the interests and demands of citizens. Interactive policy making is a useful complement to representative democracy, especially at the local level, but it is no replacement.

The most striking development in political behaviour concerns party choice. In the days of pillarization elections could be described as a ritual census of which the outcome in large part was known in advance. The weakening of party loyalties that was part of the process of depillarization has made voters more autonomous, making their own individual choices and no longer automatically voting for the same party in each election. As a consequence, the election results have become less predictable and party strengths fluctuate considerable between elections. In particular since the mid-1990s, electoral volatility has increased to a level unequalled elsewhere in Europe. There is little

disagreement about the scale of this change, but there is debate about its meaning. For some, the volatility is a sign of the fickleness of the electorate; Dutch sociologist Schuyt has compared voter preferences to shifting sands, blown in whatever direction by the most recent media hype. This is not what the Democratic Audit finds. Individual changes in party choice are generally restricted to parties that are relatively close in ideological terms. The political orientations of voters appear to be quite stable, but as parties have converged programmatically, it is often trivial factors that break the tie and determine the eventual party choice. The person of the party leader is one of these factors, but other than it is often assumed, the impact of leader personality is almost completely subordinated to the voters' programmatic considerations.

Another misunderstanding is that the increase in volatility is a sign of a widening confidence gap between citizens and politics. In the Netherlands, however, trust in political institutions and political actors, and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy have not declined since measurement started in the 1970s. There is considerable fluctuation over time – with a pronounced dip around 2002, for example, but in the long run some of the indicators of political trust actually show an upward rather than a downward trend. Another interpretation of 'the gap' between citizens and politics is a decreasing congruence between the political orientations of the voters and those of their representatives: politicians and political parties. Looking at the Dutch parliament as a whole, the opposite appears to be the case: with respect to political positions on a Left-Right dimension, the Dutch Lower House has gradually become more representative of its electorate. The explanation is probably rooted in the increase of volatility: now that political parties are ideologically closer to each other, and now that the parties are no longer assured of the voters' party loyalty, they must be more responsive to public opinion in order to compete successfully in elections.

This does not imply that political representation is without problems. It is now generally accepted that voting behaviour in the Netherlands is best modeled with two dimensions: a traditional socio-economic Left-Right dimension and a more recent cultural Left-Right dimension (the cultural Right standing for conservative monoculturalism, the cultural Left for a more libertarian multi-culturalism). On this cultural dimension, conservative voters were poorly represented, for example with regard to issues such as European

integration, immigration, and multi-culturalism. The emergence of the cultural dimension in voting behaviour largely explains the rise of populist leaders and parties, such as Pim Fortuyn and the LPF first, and Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party later. The rise of populism has been interpreted as a sign of disaffection with the political system and the functioning of democracy, but this interpretation is only partially correct. The success of these parties is primarily the result of a rational choice by voters who see the integration of minorities and immigration as the most pressing social problems, and who feel that the established parties tend to ignore these problems. Only because the established parties for a long time formed a closed cartel with regard to these cultural issues, and did not compete with each other on these issues, is the electoral success of Fortuyn and Wilders also a rebellion against the established political elite.

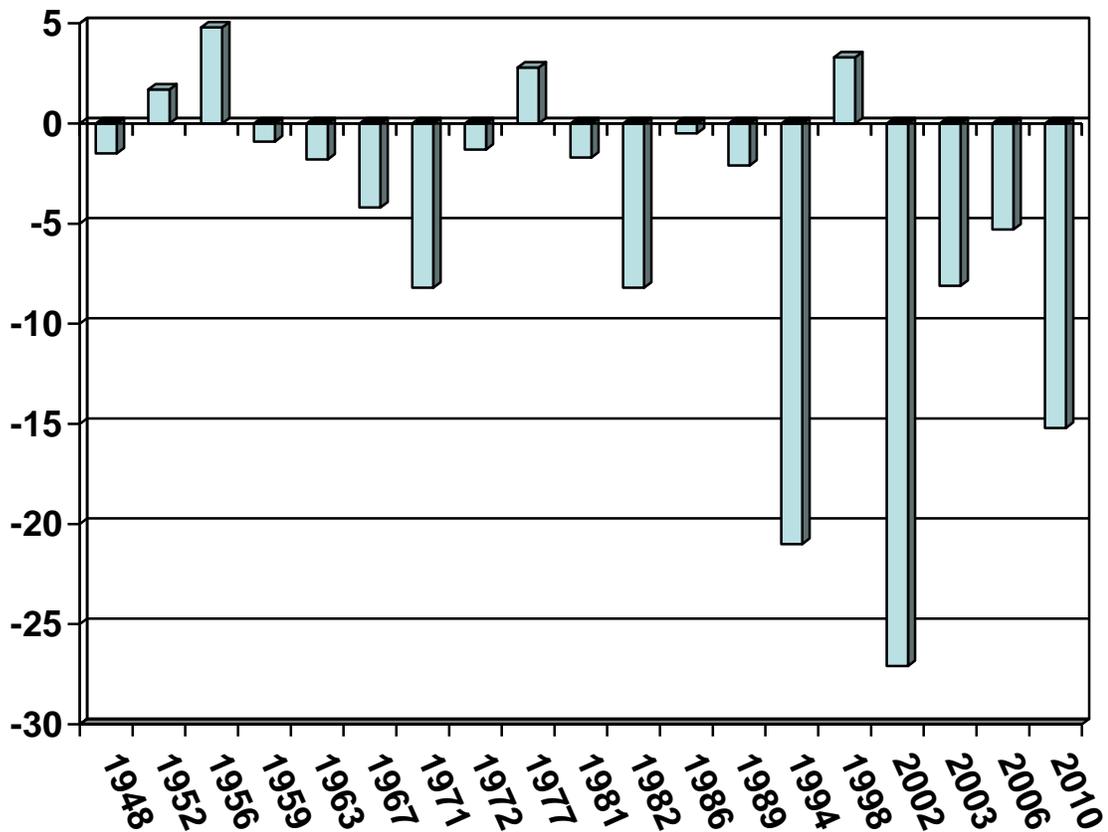
The rise of the populist right has not solved the problem of political representation of the cultural dimension entirely. If we dichotomize both the socio-economic and the cultural dimension, in combination they define four categories of voters. The largest of these four categories contains voters who are socio-economically to the Left, and culturally to the Right. No political party caters to this combination of political views, although both the Freedom Party and the Socialist Party have made attempts to conquer this niche. In each election, these voters have to decide whether they should give priority to their culturally conservative views or to their Leftist socio-economic position. This adds to the volatility of the elections.

The convergence of parties on socio-economic issues and the lack of a party that is culturally to the right and economically to the left make it difficult for Dutch voters to cast a prospective vote. In a more radical diagnosis prospective voting has become less meaningful anyway. Prospective voting implies that the political agenda for the next four years is known in advance. With one of the most open economies in the world, and with one of the highest densities of membership in international organizations, the Netherlands has lost control over its political agenda to a considerable extent. The Dutch government is confronted with an increasing tension between its electoral promises and its international obligations and economic parameters. It is telling that the Democratic Audit found good correspondence between voters and parliament and between voter demands

and election manifestos, but progressively less between voter demands and the coalition agreement, and the annual Queen's Speech outlining the government's policies for the coming year. If mandates lose impact, accountability may become more relevant.

As a consequence, a shift from prospective to retrospective voting is to be expected. An important indication that this is indeed occurring is that governing coalitions rarely win votes in elections, and since 1994 in particular, they seem to book ever heavier losses.

Figure 1: Gains and losses of governing coalitions, 1948-2010

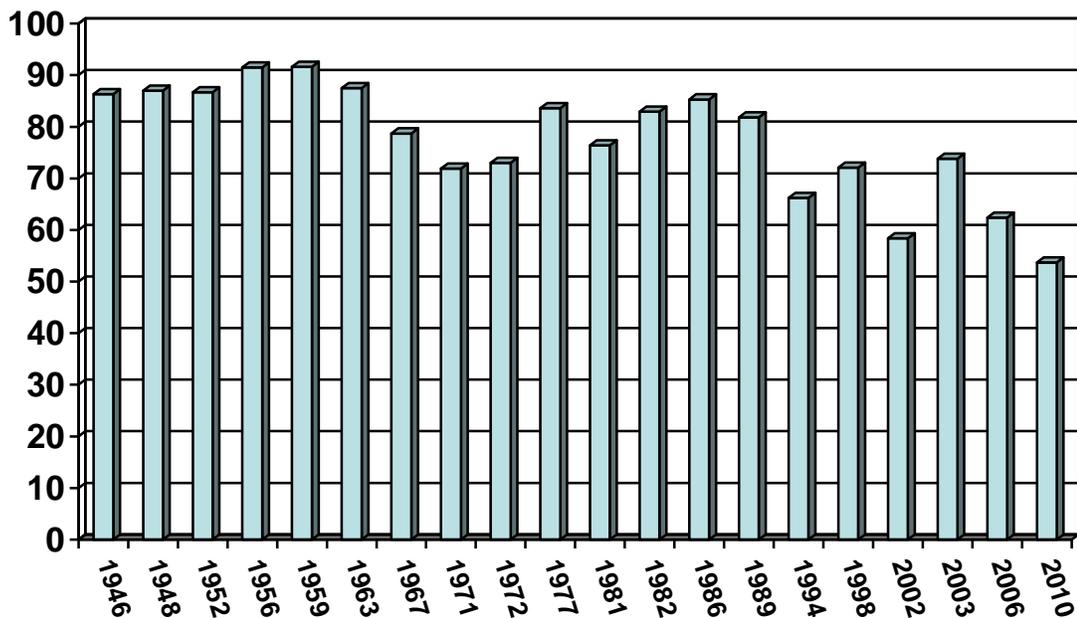


From a democratic point of view, it would seem that there is nothing to reproach the voters with: other than in the past, they do not obediently and automatically vote for the same party, but they choose the party that represents their own political opinions best, or they reward or punish the governing parties for their performance.

The question is whether the traditional political institutions and processes have adapted to this emancipation of the citizens. Voters no longer want to express their subcultural loyalty in elections, but they want to influence public policy. They want to choose, but they are offered less choice: parties converge on the socio-economic Left-Right dimension and the combination of socio-economic left and cultural right is missing. Voters who, perhaps as a result, look less at party promises and more at performance are confronted with a similar problem. According to Figure 1, they are willing ‘to throw the rascals out’, but they cannot prevent that at least some of the ‘rascals’ return in a new government after the elections. They are unable to translate their discontent over public policy into a change of power.

The absence of alternation in power has contributed to voters leaving the traditional established powers, strengthening the Socialist Party on the Left and the Freedom Party on the Right, and weakening the political centre (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Proportion of the traditional established parties (CDA, PvdA, and VVD) of the Seats in Parliament, 1946-2010.



Coalition formations are becoming more complicated, with unusual combinations ('Purple' in 1994-2002), the inclusion of new or inexperienced parties (LPF in 2002, Christian Union in 2006), or minority governments with structural support of an opposition party (the Freedom Party in 2010). Most recently, this seems to have affected governmental stability (five different coalitions between 2002 and 2012).

The conclusion must be that the consensus model of democracy that has served Dutch society so well for so long is at odds with contemporary social conditions. Through its emphasis on representativeness, the model facilitated the inclusion and protection of minorities. It is also a rather elitist model, with leaders as trustees and a strong role for non-majoritarian (and non-elected) institutions such as the monarch and the judiciary as checks and balances. The erosion of distinct subcultures in Dutch society, and the emancipation of the voters, have reduced the need for representativeness and elitism. The electorate has already shifted from a passive and loyal role to actively seeking to influence future policy or holding parties accountable. The current system does not give sufficient effect to this modern electoral behaviour. Any reform to give it more effect implies a change in emphasis from representativeness to accountability, and thus from a Madisonian view of democracy to a more populist view of democracy. The electoral system would be an important target for any such reform. In addition to adaptations of representative democracy, the debate should also include complements to representative democracy. The emancipation of citizens has already led to interactive policy making at the local level. At the national level such a development has not yet taken place, and the disadvantages of scale and unequal participation make it also less appropriate. Other options are available to offer citizens more say in national politics, such as the popular veto. The referendum on the EU constitutional treaty, the outcome of which was an unpleasant surprise for most political parties, has considerably dampened the enthusiasm for any form of referendum among the established parties. Internationally, this places the Netherlands in the rearguard in terms of the democratization of political decision-making.

Impact

With this analysis and diagnosis, the Democratic Audit hopes to contribute to public debate in the Netherlands on the quality of democracy and a potential direction for improvements. On March 17, 2011, the Audit was presented to the Speaker of the Dutch Lower House in the form of two books: *Democratie Doorgelicht; Het Functioneren van de Nederlandse Democratie* (Democracy X-Rayed: the functioning of the Dutch democratic system, a 576 pp. edited volume) and *Van Afspiegelen naar Afrekenen? De Toekomst van de Nederlandse Democratie* (From Representativeness to Accountability? The Future of the Dutch Democratic System, a 120 pp. book). The occasion for the presentation of the two books was a conference, organized by the government's Department of Internal Affairs. The key note speech at this conference was delivered by Mr Wim Deetman, a member of the Council of State and a former Minister of Education, Speaker of the Lower House, and chair of a committee of party leaders that had issued a report on democratic reform in the early 1990s. The conference also provided a reason for many newspapers to pay attention to the Democratic Audit, but it was ignored by the electronic media. If the Audit had any impact, it was marginal and short-term. Its impact has probably been strongest within the discipline of political science itself: many welcomed the collaborative effort of colleagues from so many different universities, and the use of an open call for papers provided access to young researchers as well as established names. The lack of an impact on public debate remains a definite disappointment. The reason is not that commentators regarded the Audit as useless or of mediocre quality: the reviews were generally favourable. As one such favourable review put it: 'the fact that it has drawn so little attention is probably caused by the fact that the Audit primarily contains good news.' (Jansen van Galen, *Het Parool*).

Bibliography

- Andeweg, R.B., 1989, 'Institutional Conservatism in the Netherlands: Proposals for and Resistance to Change', *West European Politics* 12:1, 41-60
- Andeweg, R.B., 1997, 'Institutional Reform in Dutch Politics: Elected Prime Minister, Personalized PR, and Popular Veto in Comparative Perspective', *Acta Politica*, 32, 227-57
- Andeweg, R.B. and Irwin, G.A. 2009, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, 3d ed. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan
- Andeweg, R.B. and Thomassen, J. (eds) 2011, *Democratie Doorgelicht; Het Functioneren van de Nederlandse Democratie*, Leiden: Leiden University Press
- Andeweg R.B. and Thomassen, J. 2011, *Van Afspiegelen naar Afrekenen? De Toekomst van de Nederlandse Democratie*, Leiden: Leiden University Press
- Costa Pinto, A., Magalhaes, P.C. and De Sousa, L. 2012, 'Is the Good Polity Attainable? Measuring the Quality of Democracy', *European Political Science* 11, 447-55
- Daalder, H. and Irwin, G.A. (eds) 1989, *Politics in the Netherlands, How Much Change?*, London: Frank Cass (special issue of *West European Politics* 12:1)
- Keman, H. (ed.) 2008, *Special Issue: Dutch Politics*, *Acta Politica* 43:3/4
- Landman, T. 2012 'Assessing the Quality of Democracy: The International IDEA Framework', *European Political Science* 11, 456-68
- Lijphart, A. 1975. *The Politics of Accommodation; Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, (first ed. 1968), Berkeley: University of California Press
- Van der Kolk, H. and Thomassen, J. 2006, 'Introduction: The Dutch Electoral System on Trial', *Acta Politica*, 41, 117-32