Citizens and problems of representative democracy: about knowing what democracy you want and not getting it

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A multitude of challenges to the democratic significance of key institutions of representative democracy suggest that citizens will less than before be in a position to experience democracy and enact democratic citizenship through these institutions. This exploratory, interpretative case study of citizenship in the Netherlands seeks to lay bare how citizens experience and evaluate national representative democracy. In line with existing research about representative democracy, the results show that in the day-to-day reality of politics, respondents do not experience democracy through partisan alignment to a satisfactory degree. However, alignment problems do not lead citizens to withdraw from national representative democracy. By employing Charles Taylor's concept of the social imaginary we learn that citizens implicitly employ alternative cues by which to engage with representative democracy. Citizens seek to experience democracy in the practice of policymaking. However, this does not imply that they take over from parties their role of structuring and organizing political conflict, debate and decision making. Experience of democracy is sought in non-processual indications of representation: fixed positions, leadership that suggests action into a direction of choice, and an experienceable orientation to output. The elements of direct experience of democracy that respondents consistently return to are the elements that make representative democracy, otherwise opaque, orientable to them. Politics needs to be a direct experience for these citizens. That which is beyond knowledge and capacity falls outside of the realm in which experience of democracy can be realized. The problems of the party, procedures of decision making, the considerations that come in, and the power politics involved, hardly present themselves as part of respondents' imaginaries of proper democracy. These citizens confidently take their own knowledge and competence as standards for evaluating the experience of democracy, keeping their eye on the specific practices they take up as cues, ignoring the complexities they don't. However, this orientation to democracy that, in its approach, keeps the complexities of political process at bay, finds itself confronted with a political reality that does not accommodate it. Through the experience of practices these complexities come back in, unavoidably. In other words, respondents cannot have democracy the way they want it.

Much research on how citizens relate to representative democracy suggests a destabilizing of citizen relations with democratic institutions. Some analysts point out processes of partisan dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) and a decline in the democratic role of political parties (Mair, 2002, 2005). Others argue that nation-state democracy becomes less and less a realistic option, with political and policy-making arenas pluralized across the bounds of institutions and territories (Warren, 2008), thereby implying that representative democracy becomes less of a possibility. Blühdorn (2007) notes that many analysts of the transformation of democracies point out developments indicating the decreasing relevance of parliament as a central place for political debate and decision making. They observe, for example the coming of a politics of delegation (Flinders 2004), depoliticization (Buller and Flinders 2005) presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb 2005) leadership (Körösényi 2005) and presentation (Sarcinelli 2003). Other authors, focusing on questions of legitimacy suggest we are moving into an era in which the risen complexities that political institutions are confronted with give rise to changes on this front. Some envision a democracy in which citizen roles expand

through reforms, with more citizen involvement through direct as well as indirect democracy (Cain et al., 2003). Others view changes very differently. Blühdorn perceives the coming of simulative democracy, with political parties identifying, stimulating and surfing waves of concern and preferences rather than representing stable identities and preferences (Blühdorn, 2007). Crouch (2004) conceives of a development of post-democracy in which elites are in control, with citizen influence minimalized.

Thus, a multitude of challenges to the democratic significance of key institutions of representative democracy such as parties and parliament suggest that citizens will less than before be in a position to experience democracy and enact democratic citizenship through these institutions. However, how citizens themselves confront and digest the shifts that take place has received little empirical attention. Many citizens who have been socialized into representative democracy, and even now find themselves in a democracy in which national institutions of representative democracy continue to have a central position, will in some way also be engaging themselves with representative democracy. What is representative democracy to them, at present, in the face of all these apparent or suggested challenges to it? Do they too perceive challenges to representative democracy? If so, which, and how are these challenges conceived and confronted? There are different possibilities here. Citizens may experience loss or confusion, and an inability to give shape to democratic citizenship through representative democracy. They may turn away from representative democracy and seek alternative options, such as participation in direct democracy – which would be in line with most research on revitalizing democracy that largely focuses on the development of more direct forms of citizen involvement in democracy (Dalton et al. 2004) such as deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000) and participatory policymaking (Fung and Olin Wright, 2003). Alternatively, citizens could become 'everyday makers' (Bang and Sørensen 1999), who give shape to political citizenship in their own life world and on their own terms rather than in concordance with the rules and rhythm of institutions. But the question then too remains: what then can become of representative democracy? Does it, also for citizens, inevitably recede from the centre stage, as these analyses suggest? There is little research that focuses on citizens' experience of representative democracy per se.

Some research directions do put the question of citizens' relating to representative democracy at the centre, but these tend to theorize and research citizens relatively passively, as spectators (Manin, 1997), consumers (Lewis et al., 2005), or customers (Blühdorn, 2007). These analyses focus on transformations as system changes enforced on citizens, not leaving much room to the interpretations, perspectives and actions of citizens confronted with these changes. The ways in which citizens interpret and evaluate problems of representative democracy, and the norms they thereby employ, here too remain underexplored (cf. Krell-Laluhovà and Schneider 2004). We simply do not know whether citizens share the diagnostic understandings researchers present us with, nor do we know what they deem to be desirable changes in the realities they are confronted with. In this article, I explore these two closely related issues.

The social imaginary
For my exploration of problems citizens perceive in representative democracy and the norms they thereby employ, I here work with a concept developed by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor: that of the social imaginary (Taylor, 2004). For Taylor, the social imaginary consists of the ways in which people imagine their social existence: what their relations with others are like, the practices that are part of that, the expectations that we can hold of each other, and the deeper notions and images that ground these (Taylor, 2004). This imagination cannot be considered as a theory: the way in which people imagine their social existence is usually not expressed in theoretical terms, but carried in images, stories and legends. The social imaginary is also not something that belongs to elites, but to society more broadly. It is a shared understanding that makes possible and legitimates shared practices. This understanding is simultaneously factual and normative. We have an image of how democracy works, but this image is woven together with images of moral order - ideas of how democracy should work. As Taylor illustrates: we know how, in our own country, elections are carried

2

out, and we also know what would invalidate these elections. The shared understanding of how elections should be conducted makes the practice of elections possible. At the same time, it is the practice that carries the understanding. A society or section of society has, at any given moment in time, a repertoire of practices at its disposal, such as ideas about how and when to organize, appeal, protest, and what could be achieved with that. Most of us orient ourselves through these practices, to the extent that we have a grasp of them, without a complete theoretical perspective in which to ground these (Taylor, 2004).

The above presentation of Taylor's concept of the social imaginary focuses, statically, on the connection between images of moral order and social practices. However, Taylor's social imaginary is a dynamic concept, with interplay between these two dimensions. The moral order people imagine can be out of line with the practices at their disposal. Changing norms can clash with practices, delegitimize these, and inspire demands for new practices more befitting to new images of moral order. This means that it is possible to learn what people's ideas are about what democracy should be like by analyzing their portrayal of existing practices and their dissatisfactions with these practices. Following this argumentation, in this research project I explore the social imaginary of citizens who are on the one hand, interested in politics, but dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy – it is with such citizens that one can expect an experience of violation of norms of democratic functioning, as well as a will to confront this violation.

Case: dissatisfied yet interested citizens in the Netherlands
Research in the Netherlands has established a high appreciation for democracy as a political system in this country, combined with a decline (over past decades) in political indifference and a rise in interest in politics. There has also been a rise in the willingness to protest, a rise in appreciation for a range of forms of unconventional political participation, and a will to co-decide in society that covers a large majority of society (Verhoeven, 2004). These developments and characteristics of citizen attitudes towards politics that indicate support for democracy in the Netherlands are combined with developments that indicate a critical attitude towards democratic institutions. Research on citizenship in the Netherlands shows that many Dutch citizens increasingly look upon Dutch politics from a position of independence (Van Den Brink, 2003). Increased electoral volatility has brought an end to an earlier period of relatively stable support bases (Aarts et al., 2007). Trends in trust in political actors such as the Cabinet, Parliament and political parties have been unclear and subject of debate, but in recent years trust rates have seen remarkable lows. According to research administered by government itself in late 2005, for example, a majority of people had a negative attitude towards politics and government. They perceived that the administration does not care about what ordinary people think and that citizens have no way of influencing the government. Only a small minority saw politicians as capable (Voorlichtingsraad, 2005). The Netherlands appear therefore to be a suitable case for the study of how citizens who are supportive of democracy, but dissatisfied with the functioning of democratic institutions, imagine the possibilities of democracy as they know it and the changes that are required.

Methodology
For this study, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Dutch citizens, each lasting 90 minutes on average. Respondents were selected with the aid of a survey, developed in cooperation with Dutch research agency TNS NIPO, and carried out by this same organization. The survey held a set of statements (also used in other political research in the Netherlands), the reactions to which were used to measure the degree to which respondents experience that they have influence on national politics. The statements were about the interest of members of Parliament and political parties in citizens' opinions, estimation of citizen influence on government politics, and the impact of voting. Respondents could indicate their agreement or disagreement with these statements on a Likert scale, in the end obtaining a score of 0 to 4, indicating the degree to which they experienced influence on the key institutions of representative democracy. Respondents with a low score of 0 to 1 were selected as potentially suitable for this study. However, it was also necessary that they showed

interest in politics. It is one thing to not experience influence, but my interest was in people who actually cared about this. The survey therefore also included a number of statements and questions measuring this interest in politics, asking about interest in political news, participation in conversations about politics, and estimation of one's interest in politics. Respondents could answer or indicate their agreement or disagreement with these statements on a Likert scale, in the end obtaining a score of 0 to 4, indicating the degree to which they were interested in politics. For our study, respondents with a score of 1-4 (those with at least some interest in politics), were seen as potentially interesting, in combination with the other criterion of a score of 0-1 on experience of political influence at the national level.

For this survey, carried out in June 2007, TNS NIPO approached 972 member of its national panel TNS NIPObase CASI. After exclusion of respondents that answered 'don't know' to questions, 651 persons remained. Persons with a low experience of political influence (0-1 on scale 0-4) and at least some interest in politics (1-4 on scale 0-1), formed, with 364 persons, 51% of the total. These 364 persons were all approached with the question whether they were willing to agree to an interview. I offered €35 as incentive to prevent overrepresentation of persons with extraordinarily high interest in the subject. Of the 364 potential respondents, 147 agreed. From these 147, I made a selection of 20, seeking differentiation in terms of age, education, sex and region. These people were interviewed at their homes.

The interview addressed, through questions and statements to which respondents could react, national politics. How does national politics work, as a constellation of actors, in the eyes of citizens, and how do these citizens evaluate the functioning in of this constellation in democratic terms? Are alternatives imagined? If yes, how are these described? What is the democratic quality of political processes? Are alternatives imagined, and if yes, how can these be described? The interview encouraged dissatisfied citizens to describe and discuss practices as they saw them (of agenda setting, leadership, representation, responsiveness, accountability, performance and inclusion). To put it in other words: dissatisfied citizens were invited to describe and evaluate politics as they saw it, and complain where they saw fit. The set of complaints respondents came up with made it possible to identify practices respondents were dissatisfied about, but also. images of moral order about democracy (democratic ideals from which they approach politics) could be laid bare.

The first step of the analysis of the interview material consisted of the identification of tensions between practices and images of moral order that could give information about practices deemed problematic as well as the image of moral order that could be derived from complaints. For example, an expression like 'those politicians in The Hague don't pay attention to the problems of ordinary people; they're only involved with themselves' is an expression about practice, as imagined, but also about moral order. The speaker also tells us, implicitly: politicians in The Hague should pay attention to the problems of ordinary people. Moreover, the expression tells us also about the imagined relation between moral order and practices: those politicians in The Hague are supposed to pay attention to the problems of ordinary people, but they don't. We can identify here a tension between an image of moral order (attention to the problems of ordinary people) and a perceived practice (politicians being involved with themselves only). The second step of the analysis of the data consisted of the searching for patterns in the tensions between images of moral order and practices across respondents. The question consistently asked from the material, was that of patterns, and how they could be characterized.

Results

Much recent attention to citizens' relating to representative democracy and its challenges has focused on the political party. Mair (2002) suggests that will be hard to classify present-day democracies as party democracies. The ideological or programmatic identities of these parties have blurred, he states. Voters have become less loyal, and parties have come to share voters. Notions of politics as reflecting social conflict, with competing parties representing opposing social forces, have become less appropriate than before. Rhetorics and appeal to value differences can make it possible for voters to distinguish parties, but in the practice of policy

4

these differences are increasingly difficult to discern. According to Mair, these shifts have contributed to a situation 'in which voters find it increasingly difficult to detect significant ideological or purposive differences between parties, or to see these differences as being particularly relevant to their own particular needs and situations' (Mair 2002, p. 85). Mair concludes here that 'because of the changing relations between parties, as well as changes in the way they present themselves, voters find it less and less easy to think of these parties in traditional representative terms' (Mair 2002, p. 85). Indeed, as Mair suggests, it is in the practice of policy in which representation becomes problematic. In a later publication, Mair argues, on the basis of declines in voter turnout, party membership and alignment that the problems of parties' failure at representation result in citizen withdrawal from the national political arena (Mair 2005). However, this argument supposes that if parties do not represent as before, citizens will withdraw into apathy. The thesis grounding this research project is that this is something we don't know. The results of this project show that citizens cannot simply be said to abandon national representative democracy. Rather, their engagement comes to have an alternative form which could be identified through the interpretative approach employed here.

Representation and political parties
Of the 20 respondents in this study, 19 make distinctions between political parties that were meaningful to them – they show to have clear likes and dislikes. 14 Respondents express preference for a party. Of the six respondents who do not express preference, five gave 'floating voter' explanations. So, most respondents, parties are knowable and preferences can be established. For a substantial part, however, alignment is limited. However, we can note here that the dissatisfaction with representative democracy that we find among these respondents does not seem to lie in failing to find connection with party identity. To note this is important for the argument in this article, in the sense that it provides meaningful context for what we see later: that, across this population, the meanings associated with political parties have little relevance to the social imaginary of representative democracy in more general terms. In their understanding of how representative democracy functions and should function, the different political parties' identities have a limited role to play – other categories come in.

Some respondents couch support for a party in general terms, denoting what a party 'stands for'. A party is, for example 'green' or 'social'. With this, parties provide cues to citizens to define preference without need for much further information on party programs. Bert (60), a retired electrician, explains what is positive about the PvdA, the Dutch Labour Party, to him:

> Well, that they carry the torch for socialism, a little. That's the only thing that attracts me, you know. That there are lots of people who are loaded, whereas there are old people who can't afford turn on the heater, or don't have food to eat.

Other respondents draw a more detailed picture of the party that they support, like Sylvia (51, a health care professional:

> The Socialist Party has good social policy. They do good things for integration of immigrants and education. They do a lot of research and their arguments are good, in my opinion. Good plans for employment. Good viewpoints. I agree with almost everything. European Union and so on.

Some respondents find that their views match those of a party, and they present that as an explanation for their support, like Irene (43), who attended college but presently is not working because of disablement:

> GreenLeft is the party, when I have an opinion about something and I hear them talking, I think, that matches quite a bit. That's also why I vote for them.

The experience of being represented by a party can also lie in the party or leader behaviour. Tanya (23), who works at a debt recovery agency, explains why she feels represented by the Socialist Party:

> I have the impression that they are the ones who listen to the people most. Not agreeing with other parties' viewpoints right away. Rising up for the people. Discussing it. Sure, there shouldn't be too much discussion. But more geared to the people than the others.

Respondents sometimes have positive associations with party but these can be too limited to come to an experience of being represented. 'Nobody stands out' can then be a conclusion, but also that 'there is not a single party that agrees with me'. Marco (25), a student, explains why for him there is no party that can represent him:

> Important ideas, like integration policy, traffic policy, working conditions, things that many parties paid a lot of attention to, the big parties all agreed with me on some small point. But not a single party agreed with me more broadly.

Also when respondents express a preference, they sometimes indicate that 'everybody is unique', and representation of a collective is impossible. Erica (34), a housewife and former nurse, explains why the idea of a party that can truly represent is problematic:

> Impossible. Because, how many people live in the Netherlands? Everybody will start to push for his own little thingy. Because what I think, that's not my husband's opinion. And what my husband thinks, that's not what my brother-in-law thinks and what my brother-in-law thinks, is not what my sister thinks and…It's unattainable.

Other respondents who do not declare a preference do make meaningful distinctions between parties, but explain they 'decide right before the elections' or 'are reconsidering' their preference. So, by and large, respondents see distinctions between parties and their ideas that are meaningful to them, even when they do not state a clear preference.

However, when we consider the perspectives on national politics more generally, we find that the found ability to establish meaningful distinctions between parties has a limited role in their perspective on representative democracy. Whether their alignment with a party is stronger or weaker - in their orientation on national politics other factors come in that put the importance of alignment in perspective. Respondents, 'aligned' and 'non-aligned', do not complain about party identities. Complaints respondents make about the functioning of democracy are rather related to the complexities of representative democracy as such. It is true, as Mair suggests, and as we will see, that in the day-to-day reality of politics they do not experience democracy through partisan alignment to a satisfactory degree. However, this does not lead citizens to withdraw from national representative democracy – because of an inability to relate to what happens. Complaints, as we will see, point to alternative cues for gauging representation that respondents implicitly employ. These complaints can be categorized in three subsets. First, respondents complain about the unreliability of representation. As far as respondents are concerned, a problem they are confronted with is that of changing positions and compromise imply failing voters who have voted for a program or a position. These respondents argue that, in the service of democracy, parties are to represent directly the people's will, and maintain fixed positions. A second, related complaint concerns the quality of leadership. According to respondents, a leader's role is to take and maintain a stand, pushing forth, also in rough weather. Leaders, however, compromise and thereby show themselves to be untrustworthy and, as some suggest, less able to realize the political goals

6

they proclaim to have. A third, again related complaint, concerns the 'misplaced' attention and time politicians spend on differences between them, leading to irrelevant fussing that has little meaning for the attainment of policy results – results that furthermore seem invisible to respondents.

The complaints are related to each other in an interesting way. To respondents, a party or leader is to directly represent voters by way of a position, which to them is a contract between politicians and their electors that is violated by a change in stand. The same demand of directness do we see in the complaint about leaders who, because of their willingness to shift positions, are poor at attaining result. The third complaint, about the irrelevance of difference, again suggests the demand of directness, by devaluing political conflict as distracting from orientation towards output. In this view, political talk should serve the purpose of solving societal problems that are obviously shared. The first two complaints concern the undesirability of compromise. The third complaint is in a sense contradictory to the first two: here, conflict is useless, and compromise is a necessity, in the service of the common good. What all three complaints have in common, however, is their pointing towards a wish for a democracy in which experience of democracy comes in a direct form: in experience of positions that are maintained, in leadership that steers in one clear direction and produces output, and in an orientation towards results that is experienceable through policy. Compromise as well as conflict – both key elements of democratic process – impede directness. Democracy, in this view, is evaluated according to standards of orientability that disregard the intermediation of (party, parliamentary and coalition) politics. These are standards meeting the needs and abilities of outsiders to the complexities of democratic processes, who, as respondents see it, form the population to whom political institutions are truly accountable. The insights presented in this article are therefore insights about a form of democratic citizenship and its relating to existing political institutions. Below, I will present and analyze the three complaints in more detail.

Political process as undemocratic: self-willed politicians
Respondents can find agreement between themselves and the ideas of political parties, but this does not mean to them that parties can represent them. Representation, as experienced, has limited significance for democracy because respondents do not consider politicians to be consistent representatives of their ideas or interests. At the same time, the ideal of representation, with politicians acting in the name of citizens, continues to hold sway. This means that, to respondents, ideals of representations are trampled on by politicians through their actions while in office. Politicians, in respondents' view, act on the basis of self-willedness, and not the opinion of their voters. They decide 'on their own', respondents state dismissively – without attuning with citizens first. Krista (38), a children's care professional, presently not working because of disablement, explains why she is dissatisfied with her political influence:

> Once every four years you get to take part in elections. But apart from that, citizens in this country have little influence. I don't really see politics considering what people think either. So much opinion research is being done. And there's no sign they take it to hear. That's the impression they give. They just do what they want.

Respondents speak of politicians acting on the basis of 'personal opinion' or 'their own interest' as a general problem, but also bring up specific policies that to them illustrate this problem. These are policies that gathered much media attention in the period before the interviews took place or with which respondents were confronted directly. Policy here does not present itself as result of agreement between different parties in a coalition, or even as output brought about by a party, but as politics more generally, enforcing an unwanted decision on the people. As Inge (30), a housewife, Alex (39), a logistics manager, and Krista put it :

7

Inge: That rise in health care costs, that was just forced through. What they should have done: like, in the period of the campaigns, get out on the street. Ask people what they think. That didn't happen.

Alex: Politics decides too much. Citizens aren't consulted enough. At the time there was this general pardon for asylum seekers. There's quite a bit of money involved in that. That's the citizens' money. And they don't have a vote in it, can say whether they agree or not. No, it's decided for you. But it's the taxpayers' money that's being spent.

Krista: It's being said: to get the Netherlands healthy, first people have to take a step back, and back, and back. And then forward. That forward, that doesn't happen, you know. Then I think: this is not the future they promised. They say the economy is doing better. But the people aren't. Then it's not what people have voted for. It all comes from above, it seems to me. And all those measures, everyday a new thing. And then I think: what is this based on? No, to me it's not something we've all voted for.

Preferences for parties or party viewpoints that respondents declare to have are of limited significance for the experience of representation also because respondents take into consideration the indirectness of representation through policy making practices. Policy 'often has little to do with what you've voted for' as Maarten complains. Ideally, according to him and others, time and again citizens should be consulted, to prevent the 'self-willedness' of politicians from raising its head. In the imaginary of respondents, public opinion should overrule representation, but doesn't in practice.

Politics, to many respondents, is a self-referential institution, with 'a number of leading politicians basing their actions on their own ideas without really listening to their supporters', as Maarten (34, a graphic designer) put it. In such situation, one cannot speak of representation, Hans (47), a receptionist, explains:

Hans: They're there to fill their own pockets. Maybe that's a crude thing to say. But if you don't listen to citizens, if citizens don't recognize themselves in your story, if you don't do anything with the people who have voted for you, or who are members of your party, then you're standing there for you. Then the citizen doesn't see himself in you. So the distance between citizens and politics increases…citizens don't see themselves in any party at all. And then I say, take the points of the citizens, and use that in your story. What they come up with now is their own points. That they made up themselves. And they try to project that to the citizens. It's not that citizens can't relate to those points, but their own points aren't taken up. And those are perhaps even more important.

How elected representatives, put in their seat to represent, come to a specific policy, and how that policy is related to party viewpoints, is opaque to respondents. Moreover, this opaqueness is unacceptable: the relation between representation and policymaking should be clear, and clearly representative in nature. We can note here that respondents do not necessarily assume corruption on the side of politicians. Even Hans, who is sharp in his disapproval, still suggests the problem is a matter of unjustified self-willedness rather than depravation.

Political process as undemocratic: unstable positions
When for respondents, politicians apparently act on the basis of self-willedness, the notion of a mandate for political parties and elected politicians to define courses of action is problematic. We saw earlier that in many cases respondents are in fact able to align with party viewpoints. And it is these viewpoints that form reference points for respondents. A party or leaders speaks out for a principle or policy direction, and respondents are able to relate to these statements. However, subsequently respondents find that politicians, in the process of

8

governing, change their viewpoints, weaken them, or throw them off the agenda – all to the betrayal of citizens, who vote to find their 'contract' broken later on. As Harry, (53) former process controller in the music industry, put it:

> They develop a program and don't always carry it out. So, you vote because you agree to a program. And then if they don't carry out the points you feel strongly about, you feel abandoned. Sometimes I think: 'I saw you talking differently two years ago'. Sometimes they rally behind something, and after some time see they can't get the majority, and because of that change position. Or that they stand for something, and then the party votes against. Then you feel screwed. That they stand for something, and then vote against. And then you think: that's not what we agreed.

When representation by parties is problematic because political processes within or between parties pre-empt the idealized form of representation, problems also arise for the legitimacy of coalition government (a permanent feature of Dutch politics). Here too we see that representation is problematic. Also when respondents have some faith in the good intentions of politicians, they interpret non-realization of political goals professed earlier, only in negative terms – as a form of failure. Respondents conceive of such developments in terms of 'not living up to expectations' or 'not acting on promises'. Coalition politics is thereby delegitimized. Battle between conflicting perspectives, power relations and considerations at the basis of outcome are often absent from the view of respondents on these matters. Where these elements do come in, they do so negatively. Ruud (36), a truck driver, sees that political stands are weakened because, 'later on it turns out it's not possible', because not all the necessary support could be gathered around a plan. However, he contrasts such scenarios with an ideal of resolve that he associates with a political leader who rose, individually, to popularity in the Netherlands in 2007:

> Ruud: Rita Verdonk is really firm, that strikes me. She simply states what's in her way. And she carries out her ideas. She's attacked, but she's justified in what she does. And to me, this is positive about her. Not her viewpoints. Here's how I see it: people are often chosen for what they have in their program, at that moment. People take that as their starting point, and vote for that. But then it's weakened. I don't know. It turns out to be impossible. Or not feasible financially. That's often the problem, also for those people. They have to get others along, other parties also. To get something done. And if that doesn't happen, the plan can't be carried out.

Respondents especially bring in the Labour Party and its leader Wouter Bos to explain their aversion to the 'unreliability' of coalition politics. Like Ruud, Alex realizes that politics is not a matter of simply obtaining result, but he, too, idealizes a direct relation between viewpoints and results. Alex describes Wouter Bos as 'a typical example of promising a great deal and then realizing awfully little':

> *MvW: but as a politician one could say: I have to deal with coalition partners and I have to compromise to get anything done at all.*

> Alex: Yes, but that's something you know beforehand. What your chances are. With whom you are going to form a coalition and what those people's ideas are. It's all calculable beforehand, and on the basis of that it's better to make a realistic program and leave out all the heavy topics that you can't get succeed on. But of course it's an election stunt: if I promise and shout enough, people will vote for me. But it's a short-term perspective.

Kasper (34), a high school teacher, too believes that representation demands the maintenance of principles, also in coalition politics. When that does not happen, democracy is harmed and voters are betrayed:

9

Maybe it's part of the political game, but I think that goes too far. It's how I generally feel about leaders who form a coalition. Sure, giving in on something in a coalition, how could it be otherwise? But what I can't accept: that you have key points, that you can let go of that. What you stand for as a party, that you can let go of that for four years. Those people have a hidden agenda. Use their mandate to govern, which they defend: if we don't govern we don't get anything, and something is better than nothing. But politics isn't a game between people…what you promise you should follow up on.

In a way, respondents show consideration for political realities: in a coalition it is not always possible to stick to stated goals. However, this does imply violence to the principle of direct relations between citizens and politicians. Compromise in consistently evaluated negatively, in terms of ineffectiveness or deceit.

'Weak' leadership

Changing positions is evaluated negatively: as a sign of betrayal of voters, but also a sign of weak leadership. Respondents describe party leaders as weak or strong on the basis of this consistency. Bert sees in Jan Marijnissen, leader of the Socialist Party at the time the interviews took place, the consistency he seeks.

Bert: In my opinion it's the only one in The Hague who's tolerable. I think, what he says, it's more or less the truth. Look, one can agree or disagree. But he doesn't beat around the bush.

MvW: When you say 'he's the only one who's tolerable', does that mean the others are not tolerable?

Bert: Well, less. Because one hears stories from those: one day it's this way, and another day it's that way. They beat around the bust, and say things they turn back on later on. It doesn't give certainty. Doubt, I think.

MvW: What I don't understand is: why they turn back.

Bert: When I'm elected and I'm put there to get the costs of health care down, and I'm part of that club, with other parties. And I see that my Cabinet can fall because I stick to this point. Then I drop this point and of course that's not good. If you promise something to your voters, you should stick to your promise. Disregarding what happens. Let the cabinet fall! At least you will be credible!

Maarten is negative about Labour leader Wouter Bos on this count:

What I see as negative about Wouter Bos is that he can't stick to his own viewpoints. He's conceded most in this coalition, I think.

MvW: But why doesn't he stick to his viewpoints, you think?

I think to get into the coalition. Hoping he will still achieve something.

MvW: Is that negative, to you?

Yes. Go and sit on the other side then, try from that side. I know they have tried that for years. And also that it hasn't helped much. But I still think, your own views, for which you stand, you shouldn't let those fall out of sight.

10

Some respondents associate stable positions with the ability to realize policy. Alex and Marco, for example, expect Rita Verdonk, former minister and VVD parliamentarian who now is an independent Member of Parliament and leader of her party *Trots op Nederland*, to be able to realize her aims better than others.

> Alex: for a larger part than the other parties. She stands firm. She really stands for her viewpoint and sticks to that.

> Marco; Rita Verdonk who has founded her own party, that's getting to be something. She follows up on what she stands for and that's quite remarkable. I must admit I don't know to what extent I agree with all her viewpoints but I have the impression: she does what she stands for.

Other respondents too associate 'instability of viewpoints' with an inability to realize aims. As Hans described it:

> I'm on the Labour side and this gives me uncertainty. They don't show what they want and also, the things you want, follow up on them to the end. Also when it can lead to a Cabinet crisis, that's something they should put up with. That's a risk you have to take. Show you have balls, to your supporters, the people.

Respondents demand consistency in goals, and results coming forth in line with these goals. These can make actors in politics followable, and accountable for their actions. The complexity of representative democracy and Dutch coalition politics, with its opaque processes and compromises, cannot live up to many respondents' expectations. Parties may have clear identities, but this clarity has little democratic significance in everyday political practice, and for respondents this implies violence to democracy.

Political leaders can bring change that would otherwise not take place. Respondents contrast leaders who have clear viewpoints with leaders who have an orientation to compromise, which they associate with weakness and loss. An orientation to leadership is in this way connected to an orientation to fixed viewpoints:

> Henk: Leaders could solve the situation to the extent that they could take the lead in some direction. And then I think it would be good if they didn't force things, but steer so that a great majority is convinced. No compromises. I'm not a compromise man. I think compromises lead to loss.

Erica explains why she sees a leader in Rita Verdonk rather than Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (of the CDA, the Christian Democratic Appeal):

> That there is really one person that stands up and doesn't hide behind the party-whatever. If I look at that Balkenende, is of the CDA and he always hides behind the CDA program I think. ..If you're the Prime Minister you represent all the groups that sit there. Then, if things get difficult, they're grilling you, you shouldn't be saying like 'but the CDA…''.

Again, such leadership is connected with action:

> Marco: In my view a leader would help in really choosing a direction. One should be able to say: this is what we're going for. The effect of really mobilizing people for something. When there is an identifiable leader, that gives more decisiveness**.**

> Krista: someone like Marijnissen is a real leader, but we don't have many of those. But we do need people like that, to pull the cart. Someone that shows to be doing

11

something…Someone who really shows: this is what I stand for. And what I'm going to take care of.

Alex and Erica contrast their ideals of leadership, comparable to those of Henk and Marco, with leadership in Dutch politics when they respond to the statement: 'what we lack in this country is true leaders':

> Alex: Kind of appeals to me. Those are the decisive people who are at the steering wheel and dare to listen to things and not just fed by the party. Sometimes someone will say something, but doesn't follow up on it because it gets too much head wind. 'It's too sensitive so we won't touch it'. Leaders should bang their fist on the table. 'Listen: this is an important topic' or 'the people think it's and important topic and we shouldn't avoid it'.

> Erica: Before the elections, it's about making converts. And when they've made enough converts, they're in their seats and then it's enough for the coming years. None of them dares to declare: I came here, I wanted this and now I'm going to push through.

For many respondents, leadership has positive connotations in the light of these supposed qualities of steadfastness and the capacity to realize goals. Good leaders are ready to put difficult topics on the agenda, stick to their viewpoints and carry them through to the point of realization, also when faced with opposition.

In recent years, the role of leadership in democracy has increasingly come to the attention of analysts. The shift from party mandates to personalized mandates – implying the development of direct relations between leaders and citizens, is an important element in this discussion. However, how leadership is interpreted and evaluated by citizens finds comparatively little attention (see e.g. Poguntke and Webb 2007; Körösényi 2005). Here, we see that the connection between clear and stable stands of leaders and the realization of goals the respondents make, indicates that the leadership respondents seek is conceived in relation to unwilling, action-impeding politician colleagues who block needed change without 'valid' reason. Respondents do not idealize leaders as incorporation of the people's will in terms of an articulated collectivity, as in populist politics (see e.g. Meny and Surel (eds.) 2002). We rather see here an indication of the limited significance of political parties and the processes of representative democracy for the experience of democracy. When it comes to the daily practice of politics, respondents organize political thought not around processes that are in place to structure and resolve significant differences between parties. What matters are positions that represent directly, and an orientation to action, rather than negotiation between representatives who have meaningfully different views on issues and need to come to democratically achieved agreement. Leaders can make themselves accountable to citizens through resolve and acting on society's problems rather than through 'politics' that in this context has little democratic significance. The findings here appear to confirm McAllister's suggestion that the desire of voters to hold governments accountable for their actions partly explains the emphasis on personal leadership in present-day democracies, especially so in 'a parliamentary system, where collective cabinet responsibility and the fortunes of government as a whole may blur accountability in the eyes of the public. Personalization can be especially problematic in a coalition arrangement where accountability may be even more difficult to assign' (McAllister 2007: 580).

The irrelevance of difference
A number of respondents tend to see issues not in terms of conflict between parties representing perspectives or interests, but in terms of generally shared goals or problems demanding a solution. In line with this, respondents define failure in the functioning of democracy in terms of a lack of experienceable orientation towards output. Respondents associate individual political parties with this type of failure, but also politics or government

more generally. Politics is then not about a battle between perspectives or interests, with some coming to realization more than others, but about output more generally: the ability to contribute to society positively. In itself, this demand of performance is a commonly understood criterion of regime legitimacy. However, we here see that this performance demand is connected to a negative evaluation of political processes intrinsic to representative democracy. Battle over priorities as carried out in Parliament, Cabinet or the media, or differences in opinion on policy direction, are deemed irrelevant in light of the performance criterion. Interpretations of performance as failing are rooted in interpretations of conflict and democratic process meant for resolving conflict, as irrelevant. If politics is about generally shared goals or problems, the significance of differences between parties is limited, which then implies that the value of political debate is limited (cf. Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). Why should there be so much discussion? When will there be action, finally? In the view of some respondents, politics fail because of too little orientation to results: parties appear to keep on disagreeing and not come to fruitful cooperation. As Maarten sees it: let's discuss it 10,000 times and then too not reach a decision. Central in such complaints is not the opposition between perspectives as such, but decisions remaining forthcoming that finally deal with a shared problem or help reach a shared goal. The point here is that discussions, as experienced, remain abstract and void of real political significance. Respondents complain about decisions not being reached, but deny the substance of disagreement a meaningful role. As Ruud says:

> You know how it is? Every party has something that I say: that one does that right, and that one that, and that one has something good also. Only thing is that it should all come together. But that will never get done, because of the differences they see between them. They'll never come together.

To attain goals, cooperation is needed, and here politics fails. It's not that there is a problem with differences between political parties, but the final goal of output is perceived to suffer with the attention paid to difference. Tanya thinks politics is too much about 'squabbling amongst each other', and refers to the current three-party coalition government:

> They're not really discussing. It's rather, you got that little point, then I want that one. Simply discuss, this is what I want, what do you want. Show, we're the three leaders[1], we discuss, but we come to agreement. That they step forwards, the three of them: look, this is what we want. And this is what's going to be done. What comes out now is that this minister disagrees with this bit of that minister, and that minister disagrees with the minister of the third party. That's how it goes. You get a really bad impression.

Politics is not very meaningful without action and output. Respondents describe politics as oriented towards process rather than output: 'discussion for the purpose of discussion':

> Sylvia: I think the politicians aren't pragmatic enough. Like: this is the problem and this is what we are going to do about it. And we're going to get to an agreement. A clear understanding of the problem, and how it's going to work to a solution. That can make things clear for people. That you say: this is what we're going to work towards. Now it's constantly: this one says this, the other one says that. This one attacks that one, and 'mister Chairman can I say this or that, and in the end there are no concrete plans…I can't give any example of something about which I can say, this problem, they made a good problem statement, a good diagnosis you can say, and a good plan, and then what the results were. Really, not at all.

> Alex: We debate a lot in Parliament. At one point it is settled again, however. To maintain the peace perhaps rather than for anything else. Like, Schiphol airport, about

which they have been having discussions for years. Should we expand, or what should we do. And that has cost so many millions and research projects, but there is no decisiveness. Get on and do something at some point.

Henk: Balkenende, comes with the story or norms and values. What disturbs me about the whole story is that it's so shallow and vague. No plain truths. Too much discussion, too little action. Just discussion. On television - that's where the common citizens get confronted with politics - if you see a debate, one contradicts the other and in the end nothing happens. They don't agree. In other words: nothing happens.

The substantial elements of discussion, the legitimacy of perspectives grounding disagreements, has little role in this argumentation. Quality of deliberation does come in, but only in the sense of poor quality showing in the absence of agreement. Focus is on the apparent absence of decisions that can lead to policy output. We already saw that differences between perspectives are often hardly relevant to respondents when it comes to daily practice in politics, at the level of individual policy issues. When it comes to deliberations, we can say these are hardly accessible to ordinary people. One can suggest that respondents can hardly be expected to focus on the quality of deliberation as norm for legitimacy. However, focusing on policy output is equally problematic. Accordingly, we also see respondents complaining not only about decisions not being taken, but also about a lack of experienceable policy results. 'I don't see anything being done', or 'I don't see any progress' are common complaints. As Marian (49), a housewife, and Inge say:

Marian: One expects to experience something quickly, from what is said in politics. One wants results right away. That's already a big problem for people. Sure, they do something for the people. But we don't see it.

Inge: Maybe they do a good job, but I never hear about it. Surely they are working on things, but there's too little result. That's it, I think.

Easton states that political outcomes will often not be experienced as such in a complex society where politics needs to take up multiple diverse and highly technical issues; a condition that matches that of our respondents. Policy execution and output are, for respondents in our study, hardly experienced. Easton claims that in such situations, ordinary citizens depend on respected intermediaries and leaders that can build bridges between politics and society (Easton in De Beus en Netelenbos 2008). Respondents' statements indicate that such intermediaries or leaders are absent. This performance-related complaint should not be confused with a mismatch between performance and expectations of performance (Miller and Listhaug 1999). It is the relation between politics and output that is the problem here – with politics experienced as lacking meaning for output.

Discussion
These citizens can to a degree align themselves with a party, but this does not mean that voting grants democracy for them. They seek to experience democracy in the practice of policymaking. However, this does not imply that they take over from parties their role of structuring and organizing political conflict, debate and decision making. Experience of democracy is sought in non-processual indications of representation: fixed positions, leadership that suggests action into a direction of choice, and an experienceable orientation to output. The elements of direct experience of democracy that respondents consistently return to are the elements that make representative democracy, otherwise opaque, orientable to them. Politics needs to be a direct experience for these citizens. They orient themselves towards that which is, to them, with their knowledge and capacities, accessible. That which is beyond knowledge and capacity falls outside of the realm in which experience of democracy can be

14

realized. The problems of the party, procedures of decision making, the considerations that come in, and the power politics involved, hardly present themselves as part of respondents' imaginaries of proper democracy. When complexities come in, they do so as barrier to the direct experience of democracy that respondents seek. Respondents do formulate complaints about lacking transparency, for example, but this experienced lack is hardly accompanied by an expressed need for more transparency. Respondents do not seek to be able to follow negotiations and decision making between politicians; do not wish for themselves to be partakers in democracy in this fashion.

So, complexity does not paralyze, nor does it urge respondents to take a deeper interest in politics and spend more energy in order to become 'better informed' citizens, able and willing to spend time engaging with complex political conditions and processes or, alternatively, leave politics to experts. As far as respondents in this study are concerned, they are well able to take stock of politics from where they are. These citizens confidently take their own knowledge and competence as standards for evaluating the experience of democracy, keeping their eye on the practices they take up as cues, ignoring the complexities they don't. It is from this position that respondents identify reference points for this experience: this is how I want to experience democracy. Respondents seek access points within the system that live up to this expectation, in disregard of the democratic arena as a place where decisions come to be in a complex process of articulation, consideration and battle, and involving multiple institutions.

It is a form of independent citizenship that maintains its own terms. With learning about these terms, we have learnt something new about they way at least part of (dissatisfied) citizenry appears to relate to democratic institutions. For years now, a discourse of loss dominates the literature on representative democracy. From conventional wisdom, rooted in this discourse, the confidence with which these citizens approach politics is surprising. If we consider these citizens we do not see the insecurity and confusion we might expect on the basis of all the suggestions of crisis. Citizens may have lost reference points, in the sense that they have lost (objectively seen) certain beacons that might help them orient; this does not leave them without cues by which to experience and evaluate democracy. We see that the complexity of politics may be a problem, but not a problem without a solution – that is, as far as the development of an orientation to political reality is concerned. Meaning that presents itself in a form directly accessible or experiencable to them is enough to experience and evaluate democracy. However, this orientation to democracy that, in its approach, keeps the complexities of political process at bay, finds itself confronted with a political reality that does not accommodate it. Through the experience of practices these complexities come back in, unavoidably. In other words, respondents cannot have democracy the way they want it.

The confidence we see is a confidence in one's own ability to comprehend and judge. This confidence does not need the expertise, time and energy demanded for direct involvement in politics and policymaking. But this confidence in ability does not imply confidence in democracy, which is what these respondents finally seek. Respondents find democracy is not geared to their images of moral order: politics does not represent directly, does not stick to points and does not work towards output that can clearly be experienced as such.

A question that needs to be addressed here is: how valid will be the conclusions drawn here? First of all: this is a small exploratory study that can not tell us much of the spread of the social imaginary described here; this would demand a much larger project. But there is another, more fundamental question: do the complaints about democracy that respondents have, concern the form of democracy they experience, or just the current regime (cf. Hurrelmann et al. 2008:8)? Recent political developments in the Netherlands at least partly inform the evaluations respondents present in this study. The labeling of Labour Leader Wouter Bos as one who 'does not stick to positions', is likely influenced by his labeling as such by other politicians as well as journalists in the recent past. We might also suggest that the call for more decisiveness is related with the recently circulating image of the Balkenende cabinet as rather lame. We can even propose that much of what is said may be partly informed

15

by an image, widely circulating among citizens, politicians, administrators, journalists and academics of a 'gap' that exists between politics and society. With that in mind, we can wonder: how tenable is the analysis in this article? Aren't the remarks respondents make highly based on incidents and tendencies in public debate in a certain period? In other words: what use is knowledge of a social imaginary if it can be different tomorrow?

We cannot exclude the possibility that with public debate changing, other images of moral order could present themselves to us as being failed, like those of crisis management or integrity. However, we can state that respondents bring in issues to illustrate problems that are more general and permanent to them, and we find respondents bringing in recent as well as older publicly debated issues to make their points. Furthermore, the complaints about process, leadership and output-orientation that are brought in, are consistently rooted in norms of directness that, in respondents' views, are failed. And finally: the problem of accountability in coalition politics that complaints often refer to is a permanent feature of Dutch politics.

But there are also other indications of wider significance of the results, and these also point to important new questions that connect the study of citizenship to that of developments in the political arena. Whereas respondents' complaints can tell us about the norms they hold about democratic functioning, they do not tell us where these norms come from. However, it is striking how close these norms ring to de-parliamentarization processes that political analysts suggest are taking place. We see a strong focus on the executive and on execution, with norms of representation, leadership towards action and an a-political emphasis on solving 'common problems' denying the democratic significance of difference, debate and compromise. It therefore appears that practices of post-parliamentary democracy may be, at least partly, more democratic to some citizens than those of parliamentary democracy.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] Tanya is referring here to the leaders of the three political parties in the Balkenende IV coalition government.