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Theories and core principles of Dutch democracy

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Abstract

Democracies in Europe differ in what they see as being at the core of the democratic system. In some countries, citizen participation constitutes the fundamental tenet of democracy; in others, democracy is closely linked to pluralism and the protection of minorities. This paper tries to identify certain core principles of the Dutch democratic system that are reflected in the institutions and political culture that have to come to define the democratic system and are derived from the intellectual context in which the system emerged. It does so by asking two questions.

The first is: what are the core principles of Dutch democracy that are reflected in the democratic system? Five core principles are distinguished, each of which has been institutionalised in various ways.

The second question is: which ideas on democracy of key political thinkers of the 19th and early 20th century are relevant to understanding the core principles of Dutch democracy? This paper explores the normative theories on democracy of a number of political thinkers in the Netherlands. Traces of different theories appear to be present in the core principles of the Dutch democratic system.

Keywords: democracy, ideas, political science

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1   Introduction

Democratic systems are the outcome of a complex process of, sometimes contradictory, social and political pressures, political and social ideas, political events, and decisions made by politicians. Most democratic systems in Western Europe achieved their final form in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century. It may be argued that at the heart of every democratic system are a number of ideas, beliefs and values that do not fundamentally change over time. These ideas, beliefs and values may be understood as the core principles of a democratic system. Instead of focusing on the formal characteristics of democratic systems, the present paper seeks to identify certain core principles that are reflected in the institutions and political culture and that have come to define the democratic system. Secondly, an attempt is made to analyse whether and how these principles are derived from the intellectual context in which the system emerged. It does so for the Dutch case.

The questions addressed in this paper are twofold: first, what are the core principles of Dutch democracy that are reflected in the democratic system? And secondly, which ideas of key political thinkers of the 19th and early 20th century are relevant to understanding the core principles of the democratic system?

Since the characteristics of democracy in the Netherlands have been extensively discussed in earlier studies by Lijphart en Daalder, we start with a presentation of their findings (section 2). The paper then continues with the ideas on democracy of key political thinkers in Dutch politics in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (section 3). The analysis includes the main political thinkers of each of the minority groups, i.e. the Liberal Thorbecke, the Protestant thinkers Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, the Catholics Nolens and Maritain, and the Socialist Banning. All selected political thinkers played a prominent role in the expression of political ideas and ideas on democracy within their own group. Ideas on democracy can be found in the original writings of the political thinkers and in the literature that has been written about them and their ideas. In the selection and analysis of these sources the keyword is democracy, which means that the analyses focus on what key political thinkers have said about the conception of democracy.

The fourth section attempts to answer the question of which ideas of these political thinkers have shaped the core principles of Dutch democracy and how these are reflected in the democratic system. Finally, in the conclusion, the main findings are summarised. Also, some consideration is given to the question of how this analysis could be extended to other countries.

2   Lijphart en Daalder

The characteristics of the Dutch democratic system and the fundamentals behind the workings of democracy in the Netherlands have been extensively studied by Lijphart and Daalder.

The Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart has written a huge number of books and articles on politics and democratic systems. Among his most important contributions are *The politics of accommodation: Pluralism and democracy in the*

Netherlands (1968)[1], and *Democracies* (1984). His work on consensus democracy is internationally known among political scientists. As a young scholar, he was puzzled by the fact that the Netherlands was a strongly segmented society, and yet a stable democracy. Dutch society in these years was a society of tightly organised subcultures of minorities, also called pillars. Pillarization structured not only political parties, but trade unions, hospitals, schools, and leisure activities as well. Nearly every aspect of social life took place within these pillars. According to many theorists at the time, among whom Lipset (Lipset 1963, 77-78), a stable democracy could only exist if there was homogeneity or cross-cutting social cleavages at the mass level. Following extensive study of the Dutch situation, Lijphart developed a thesis that was further elaborated in his book, *The politics of accommodation* (1968). In Lijphart's view, Dutch democracy was stable because pillarization at the mass level was compensated by cooperation between the leaders of the pillars at the elite level. Thus, he concluded that social heterogeneity need not be balanced at the mass level, but can also be compensated at the elite level. He called the type of democracy in which segmentation (or pillarization) at the mass level and cooperation at the elite level are combined, a *consociational democracy*.

Table 1

Cooperation in the Netherlands at the elite level took place in a variety of forms: through informal contacts between politicians, but also in formal institutions, such as the Social and Economic Council (Sociaal Economische Raad or SER), in which the leaders of the trade unions and the employers' associations cooperated. The politics of accommodation placed high demands on the political leaders. Cooperation was feasible only because the Dutch elites agreed on seven 'rules of the game' to facilitate their cooperation: politics is business (politics not being a game, but serious business); the agreement to disagree; summit diplomacy; proportionality; depoliticization; secrecy; the government's right to govern.

Lijphart further elaborated his idea that there is more than one way to have a stable democracy in his later work, in particular in his book *Democracies, Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (later revised and extended to thirty-six countries). He distinguished two types of democracy: the majoritarian, or Westminster, model of democracy and the consensus model of democracy. Majoritarian democracy works best in homogeneous countries, whereas consensus democracy is more suitable for plural societies. The two types of democracy differ in the way they answer the question: who will do the governing and to whose interests should the government be responsive? In a majoritarian democracy, the answer is, obviously, the majority, whereas in a consensus democracy the answer is: as many people as possible. The characteristics of the majoritarian, or Westminster, model of democracy are in direct contrast to the

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[1] This book was first published in English in 1968 and was adapted and translated into Dutch in 1968 by the author himself under the title Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek. Amsterdam: J.H. De Bussy.

characteristics of the consensus model.[2] Although the eight characteristics of the consensus model resemble the characteristics of the consociational model, they are not completely the same (Lijphart 1984, xiv).

Lijphart's main contribution to democratic theory is his argument that a stable democracy can be achieved in more than one way. He used the Netherlands as an example of a heterogeneous society that is nevertheless a stable democracy. In his view, consensus government, political cooperation, and the agreement on a number of political rules to facilitate cooperation can be valuable elements in achieving a stable democracy in a pluralist society.

According to Lijphart, the beginning of consociational democracy goes back to 1917, when the elites agreed on solutions to a number of issues (the funding of Protestant and Catholic schools, universal suffrage) that had hitherto deeply divided the different minorities. Other scholars draw attention to the long tradition of elite bargaining and compromise in the Netherlands and argue that the elite cooperation is the continuation of traditional practices (Daalder 1966; Pley 2005). Daalder pointed to the similarities between the rules of the game of consociational democracy and the political practice in the early days of the Dutch Republic (the Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, established in the *Unie van Utrecht* in 1579).

Unlike Lijphart, Daalder emphasises the long tradition of opposition in the Netherlands. In his famous article *The Netherlands: opposition in a segmented society*, he summarizes this tradition as follows (Daalder 1966, 188-189). First, medieval traditions successfully resisted central authority. Political power thus remained highly dispersed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The need to adjust conflicting interests fostered a tradition of compromise and an acceptance of disagreement and diversity. Second, the nineteenth century saw the development of a reformist opposition developed in parliament, which successfully enforced ministerial responsibility after 1848. Third, the dominant liberal elite found itself confronted with opposition from orthodox Protestants and Catholics. Neither of the emancipating groups achieved a majority. And fourth, the main political parties have learned to operate within a system of political bargaining in which separate ideological traditions are carefully respected, but in which a considerable measure of cooperation is achieved.

Both Lijphart and Daalder emphasise that the way Dutch democracy developed was an answer to pluralism in society. Consensus democracy, with its emphasis on cooperation and compromise, and the acceptance of disagreement and diversity created stability and reconciled conflicting interests. In summarising the findings of Lijphart and Daalder, three core principles may be defined. The first element is consensus democracy. Lijphart sees consensus government and political cooperation as valuable elements of a stable democracy in a pluralist society. To Daalder, elite bargaining and compromise are part of the Dutch democratic tradition. The second element is pragmatism. In his theory on consociational democracy,

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[2] Empirical research by Lijphart shows that in reality, five of the eight characteristics relate to each other and can be classified as belonging to the majoritarian-consensus dimension. The other three (bicameralism, centralization of government, and the constitution) also relate to each other but do not relate to the first dimension, and must therefore be classified as belonging to a second dimension, the unitary-federal dimension.

Lijphart emphasised that in a plural society with conflicting interests between minorities, cooperation between politicians is important. According to Lijphart, it was only because the elites had agreed on a number of rules of the game that cooperation was at all possible. Lijphart identified seven rules of the game that facilitated cooperation between the political leaders. These included treating politics as business, the agreement to disagree, depoliticization, summit diplomacy and secrecy. Daalder emphasised the long tradition of these rules. The third element focuses on representative democracy. From Lijphart's and Daalder's findings it becomes clear that citizen participation is not considered an essential feature of democracy.

3   Theories of democracy

Lijphart and Daalder made clear that consensus seeking, political cooperation, and the acceptance of disagreement and diversity belong to the characteristics of Dutch democracy (see also Andeweg and Irwin 2002; Van Deth and Vis 2000). On the basis of their insights, three core principles of the Dutch democratic system have been defined: consensus democracy, pragmatism, and the focus on representative democracy. The question is whether their findings have been reflected by the ideas of key political thinkers in Dutch politics who have been crucial in the shaping of Dutch democracy in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Ideas on democracy can be found in the writings of several political thinkers in the Netherlands. In the following, a number of relevant normative theories are reviewed, in particular the ideas of the Liberal Thorbecke, the Protestant thinkers Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, the Catholic Maritain, and the Socialist Banning.

First, a few words on the historical context in which the political system emerged (De Rooy 2002; Spoormans 1988; Daalder 1966). The constitution of 1848 introduced direct elections of representatives of the Second Chamber, but no universal suffrage. The right to vote was only given to men who could afford to pay a certain amount of tax. In the second half of the 19th century, suffrage was gradually expanded and voters began to be mobilized. A number of issues led to the emancipation of the minority groups and a growing mass participation in politics: the school issue (about the funding of Protestant and Catholic schools), the issue of universal suffrage, and the 'social problem' (about the severe conditions under which the industrial workers had to work). The dominant liberal elite saw itself confronted with opposition from, first, the orthodox Protestants and Catholics and, later, from the Socialists. From the 1870s onward, political parties emerged, of which the first was the orthodox Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1879. With the growth of mass parties, the significance of the leaders of the emancipation movements increased (Te Velde 2002). The liberal Thorbecke was still a leader without a political party. By contrast, the Protestant Kuyper and the Socialists Domela Nieuwenhuis and Troelstra became the political leaders of well structured mass-party organisations. As masters of the spoken word, they were capable of addressing a crowd.

3.1 Liberals (Thorbecke)

The Liberal Johan Rudolph Thorbecke had an important influence on the development of parliamentary democracy and the structure of the decentralised unitary state. As a member of the constitutional commission, he was involved in the fundamental revision of the Constitution of 1848. At the time, Thorbecke was a member of parliament. Later he became the chairman of the cabinet in three cabinets between 1849 and 1872. The 1848 Constitution introduced direct elections of the Second Chamber and full ministerial responsibility for the acts of the members of the government, and thus reduced the political role of the King. This was a first, but important, step in the development of a parliamentary system. The 1848 Constitution also formed the basis for the foundation of the decentralised unitary state, which in essence has remained unchanged since Thorbecke.

His theory focused on the organisation of the democratic state, with an emphasis on the balance between local and central power. Thorbecke's ideas on the organisation of the state go back to the period of time after his doctorate and to his work as a professor in Gent (Belgium) and in Leiden. Between 1820 and 1824 the young doctor Thorbecke made a study tour through Germany and stayed in Giessen and Göttingen. In Germany, he fell under the influence of the ideas of the Historical Law School. Swayed by their ideas, he argued that history, society, and the state should be regarded as organisms. An organism is characterised by the fact that it is both an entity and a set of its constituent parts; entity and parts belong together; the entity cannot function without the parts and the parts cannot function without the entity. Thorbecke adopted and revised these ideas, and adapted them to the organisation of subnational and national government (Thorbecke 1824; Thorbecke 1826). In Thorbecke's view, all parts of the state should be subordinate to the state, just as the parts of the body are subordinate to the body (Thorbecke 1826, 15). At the same time, these subordinate parts should have the opportunity to develop themselves. In this self-development, they should be supported by the larger entity.

The delicate organic balance between the state and the parts of the state would stimulate a further development of the state. Like the growth of a living organism, this is a dynamic process of constant change. Contrary to the theorists of the Historical Law School who believed that the development of the state was predetermined by history or other factors that could not be changed, Thorbecke believed that a process of change could be started by an individual person.

With respect to subnational and national government, an organic balance between the state and its parts means that the relevant parts of the state should be free, but also connected and subordinate to the central entity of the state; the so-called principle of freedom in restraint. Thorbecke did not believe in a tension between these two elements. He considered both elements essential to the organic development of both the state and its constituent parts. More specifically, he felt that municipalities and provinces should have the freedom to take the initiative in matters that were in their own interest. At the same time, the autonomy of the subnational government should be subject to supervision by a higher entity. Supervision in this context refers to the possibility of intervention after decisions have been taken. For municipalities, this higher entity is the provincial government, for the provinces it is the national government.

Thorbecke's ideas on subnational government found their way into the Constitution of 1848 and into the laws on municipalities and provinces that are an elaboration of the Constitution. The 1848 Constitution laid down the rules for the democratisation and the uniformization of subnational government.

3.2 Protestants (Kuyper and Dooyeweerd)

Two eminent Protestant political leaders were Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. Groen was a political leader at the time of Thorbecke and was the founder of the anti-revolutionary school. In order to address the voters, he made use of the written word (Kuiper 2002). His follower, the clergyman Kuyper, was the founder of the Free University of Amsterdam and of the first mass political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) in 1879. He is considered to be one of the first modern party leaders who mobilized the orthodox Protestant community in the Netherlands by using modern mass party organisation techniques. The ARP organised big mass party meetings which promoted a feeling of solidarity and almost had the character of religious meetings (Ter Velde 2002, 61; Kuiper 1996).

The words 'free' and 'anti-revolutionary' in this context are to be understood as opposed to the ideas of the liberal philosophy of the French revolution. Both Groen and Kuyper rejected the idea of the sovereignty of the people. In their view, sovereignty rested in God (Kuyper 1898). The neo-calvinist ideas of Groen and Kuyper were further elaborated and given theoretical foundation by the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977).

It is important to note that, in Protestant thought, the emphasis was on the relationship between state and society, rather than on democracy (see also Wetenschappelijk Instituut voor het CDA 1990, 58-80). Nevertheless, clear opinions on democracy were also in evidence. Central to Protestant thinking was the idea of 'sovereignty in independent spheres of society' (*soevereiniteit in eigen kring*). Sovereignty in independent spheres is the expression of the sovereign will of God (Dooyeweerd 1950, 50-51; Kuyper 1898). Examples of these spheres of society, which were created by God, are the church, the family, the workplace, schools, and hospitals. There is no hierarchy and each sphere had its own specific character. The sovereignty of these spheres derived from its specific character. They fulfilled specific tasks that were not easily fulfilled by the state. The spheres of society should therefore not be submitted to the authority of the state, but be ruled by a 'higher authority' that stems from God. Kuyper believed in the organic development of society; society would grow and develop in the manner of a plant (Kuyper 1898). The government, in this view, has an ordering role. Its role is to protect the general good and to harmonise conflicting interests. This means that the tasks of the government may vary over time and depend on particular circumstances.

Rejection of the idea of sovereignty of the people also has consequences for the role of politics. Like the other spheres of society, the political sphere has its own specific character and should be submitted to 'higher rules', which, in this case, are the general principles of law. Dooyeweerd is very clear on this point (Dooyeweerd 1963, 54; Zwart 1994). In his view, the state and the *rechtsstaat* (rule of law) are not identical. The function of the state, i.e., to protect the public interest, is therefore not unlimited, but is bounded by the sovereignty of the spheres of society.

However, the Protestant idea of sovereignty in independent spheres of society does not imply a rejection of democracy. On the contrary, very early on, Groen and Kuyper supported a more comprehensive involvement of the people in political decision-making. The Protestant thinkers considered parliamentary democracy to be the best method of protecting the rights of the people. In order to protect these rights, parliament must fulfil both the task of representation and that of controlling government. Representation guarantees that the voice of different groups and spheres of society is heard in parliament. Hence, according to this viewpoint, the main role of parliament is to ensure that the government continues to serve the public good and to protect the rights and the interests of the people (or, to be more specific, the rights and interests of the different minorities).

Thus, the 'Protestant' idea of democracy is a pluralist democracy in which different spheres of society and subcultures coexist, each with a large degree of autonomy. These subcultures should be represented in parliament. Political decision-making should serve the general good and not automatically the interests of the majority.

3.3   Catholics (Schaepman, Nolens and Maritain)

Similar ideas can be found among the Catholic thinkers. However, compared to the Protestant ideas, the Catholic ideas on democracy are more explicit and theoretically grounded. Catholicism has a strong international character and, also in the Netherlands, Catholic ideas were very much influenced by Rome (papal encyclicals) and by Catholic thinkers from abroad (Wetenschappelijk Instituut voor het CDA 1990, 81-105; Raedts 1996).

Among the main Catholic thinkers are the Catholic political leaders Herman Schaepman and W.H. Nolens, and the political philosopher Jacques Maritain. The priest and member of parliament, Schaepman, had an important role in the mobilisation of the Catholic part of the Dutch nation. But he only became an icon of the emancipating Catholics after his death (Te Velde 2002, 63). Schaepman, just as Kuyper, saw democracy as something other than the sovereignty of the people. In Schaepman's view, all power stemmed from God, but was vested in the authorities through the involvement of the people. Therefore, Schaepman was an advocate of a wider suffrage, but at the same time emphasised the need to organise the sovereignty in independent spheres of society and to address the issue of social reforms first (Witlox 1960; Schaepman 1901, I, 73-75).

His support for parliamentary democracy was shared by his successor, the priest Nolens, who promoted the foundation of a Catholic party, which was finally founded in 1926. In his justification of democracy, Nolens harks back to the ideas of Thomas of Aquino, who exercised a powerful influence on Nolens' political thinking and acting. One of the leading principles was that government interference should be limited and be based on the law. The main task of every human being is self-realisation: the ambition to reach perfection and, ultimately, knowledge of God. In fulfilling this task, human beings are constantly in interaction with other human beings, with Creation, and with God. Central to Catholic thought is the focus on the individual as a person. This idea forms the basis for the ideas about the order of society. For Nolens, the task of self-realisation posed high demands on the structure of society to make this possible. The basis for the order of society was to be found in the family, schools, self-organisations and other communities. The Catholic principle

of subsidiarity, as formulated in the encyclical Rerum Novarum from 1891, resembles the Protestant idea of sovereignty in independent spheres of society. It assigns the government only an auxiliary role in structuring society. Again, the emphasis is on the self-responsibility of society. According to Nolens, for self-realisation to be possible, a large part of society must be involved in political decision-making; in making the laws that structure society.

The Catholic principles were elaborated more systematically by the French political philosopher Maritain (Maritain 1966). His perception of democracy has had a strong influence on Dutch Catholic thinking. His concept of democracy is strongly related to his ideas on the relation between state and society, with as a core belief the idea that government interference should be curbed. He worried about the growing power of the state and the threat of totalitarianism, and felt that any bounds set on government interference and democracy should include the following elements:

- The state is only one part of (political) society. Its specific task is to guarantee the welfare of all. It has been given the power to do so by the people. The right of every citizen to participate in politics (by voting) remains with the people.
- Democracy should be pluralist in nature respecting cultural and religious diversity. The state has a duty to protect the multiformity and social diversity of society. In Maritain's interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity, the family and self-organisations should be given as much autonomy as possible. The role of the state should be to serve the public interest.
- Every human being has his or her own nature, created by God, which forms the basis for his moral principles. The implication is that every human being has rights towards the community and the state. Pluralist democracy and the protection of civil rights by the state make it possible to realise fundamental human values.

In short, the 'Catholic' conception of democracy advocates a pluralist democracy in which diversity and multiformity are protected. Two principles dominate Catholic thinking: personalism (with respect to the task and rights of human beings) and subsidiarity (with respect to the role of the state).

3.4 Socialists (Banning)

For a long time, Dutch Socialists were rather critical about parliamentary democracy. The first leader, the ex-clergyman Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, was elected to parliament in 1888, but turned increasingly anarchist. In his view, a parliamentary democracy could not exist in a bourgeois society. A people that is economically under slavery could never be politically free (Domela Nieuwenhuis 1906, 97). Not all his followers would accept the anarchist move, and as an answer to this development, a new, Social Democratic party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, the SDAP) was established in 1894 which adopted an orthodox Marxist programme. Yet, its leader, Pieter Jelles Troelstra, seemingly was not opposed to methods of parliamentary democracy and, in 1913, was even willing to accept government responsibility. However, at other moments, Troelstra appeared to be a strong criticaster of parliamentary democracy (Domela Nieuwenhuis 1906, 27-33). And when in 1918, at the end of the First World War, a revolution broke out in Germany, he was convinced that the time for revolution in the Netherlands had

also come. This proved to be a historical mistake. Even within his own party, there were very few who shared his ideas. In the course of the 1920s, the SDAP increasingly distanced itself from orthodox Marxist ideas (Van Putten 1990).

From the thirties onward, the fundamental principles of the Social Democrats became more and more influenced by the religious Socialists. One of the main Socialist thinkers was the clergyman Willem Banning. His ideas formed the basis for a new party programme in 1937, in which the Social Democrats took formal leave of Marxist ideas, and in particular of the class struggle. Banning's vision on democracy shows parallels with those of the Protestant and Catholic thinkers.

Central to the ideas of Banning is the concept of personalism. Similar to the Catholic ideas on the tasks and rights of human beings, Banning advocates a personalist socialism, by which he means that every human being has a responsibility towards the others and the community. The emphasis in his theory is on the individual human being. He considers it important to show respect to the human personality and personal development. In Banning's view, every human being is independent in his thinking and acting, and thus has a personal responsibility. The idea of personalism can only become reality in a society in which everybody, from the leading figures to the people with the lowest executive tasks, has the possibility to show a personal responsibility (Banning 1935, Banning 1945). Modern socialism to him is, above all an ethical way of life (Banning 1960, 129-130).

Democracy, in the view of Banning, is the best answer to the need for personal responsibility. Moreover, democracy is the only possible answer to social and cultural tensions which are fundamental to the European culture. His ideas on democracy, and those of the other religious socialists, include a number of elements. First, democracy should be pluralist in nature as far as cultural and religious diversity are concerned. Banning and others stress the value of the freedom of movement and ideas for the different groups in society, and the acknowledgment of the positive value of religious life. These should not be subject to any secular institution (Banning 1935, 18). Political authority should represent the majority of the people and be accountable to the people and their elected representatives.

Secondly, the religious Socialists take up a strong position against a state that encloses all aspects of society. From a religious socialist point of view, which considers personalism and the value of cultural and religious diversity as the fundamentals of their vision on socialist democracy, the role of the state should be limited (Moltzer 1935). A democratic state should leave a certain autonomy to self-governing associations. It is the role of the state to promote the working of the independent spheres of society as part of the community. The state must work to promote that every individual that takes part in one of these spheres gets the opportunities to contribute to society and to his personal development.

4   Core principles and the democratic system

Which theoretical ideas of key political thinkers on the justification and basic assumptions of democracy are relevant to understanding the core principles of Dutch democracy? In section 2, three core principles were defined: consensus democracy,

pragmatism, and the focus on representative democracy. These core principles go back to some of the normative ideas on democracy as presented in the third section.

Elements of the principle of consensus democracy can be found in the theories on democracy of Catholic and Protestant thinkers. For the Protestant thinkers, the role of parliament is that of the voice of the different social, cultural and religious (minority) groups in society. The role of government is to harmonise these conflicting interests. These ideas are similar to those of the Catholic thinkers who advocate a pluralist democracy in which diversity and multiformity are protected by the state. Although the religious Socialists also defend a pluralist conception of democracy, the element of consensus seeking is less prominent in their theory.

Secondly, in all theories, the focus is on representative democracy. Citizen participation is not considered an essential feature of democracy. According to these theories, the main actors in democratic decision making are parliament (whose role it is to represent the different interests in society) and the government (whose role it is to protect the general good).

The third principle, pragmatism is not explicitly mentioned as a central idea of democracy in any of the theories on democracy. However, pragmatism is closely related to the principle of consensus democracy, and as such advocated by the Protestant, Catholic and religious Socialist thinkers as a way to deal with diversity and pluralism.

There are two other principles of Dutch democracy that have not been mentioned until now, but which have had a clear impact on the Dutch democratic system: the role of self-governing associations and decentralisation. The analysis of the normative theories makes it clear that these principles go back to the ideas of the 19th and early 20th century political thinkers.

Ideas on the role of self-governing associations are prominent among the different schools. The dominant idea is that democracy should be pluralist in nature where cultural and religious diversity in society are concerned. In particular, the ideas of the Catholic and Protestant thinkers, but also the ideas of the Socialist Banning, hold that pluralism can only be guaranteed if self-governing associations are given as much autonomy as possible. Hence, democracy, in this view, also includes the relation between the state and society and promotes the primacy of civil society over the state.

Another principle regards decentralisation and the balance between local and central power. The idea of perceiving the democratic state as an organism in which there needs to be a balance between the parts and the entity is very explicit with Thorbecke. But there are parallels with the ideas of the Protestant and Catholic thinkers on local sovereignty and the later ideas of Catholics and Socialists on a corporatist society.[3] These ideas emphasis not so much on geographical decentralisation, but rather on functional decentralisation.

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[3] The aim of what is called the 'statutory organisation of economic activity' (Publiekrechtelijke Bedrijfs Organisatie, PBO), was to develop a corporatist organisation of the economy. Decisions on social and economic issues were to be taken within companies and at the branch level, and should be coordinated by the socio-economic partners at the central level. Between Word War I and World War

The five core principles are reflected in the formal institutions of the democratic system, but also in the political culture. Although the 1970s were characterised as a period of politicisation, and a more recent tendency towards a growing loss of confidence in political institutions combined with popular indifference to conventional politics (Mair 2005; Dekker 2003), the core principles of the Dutch democratic system and the system itself have not fundamentally changed.

With regard to the element of consensus democracy, there is a strong belief that decisions should be taken after a certain degree of consensus has been reached. Negotiations and bargaining are important elements of Dutch democracy. And, although the contemporary political debate is more politicised on a number of issues than it was before, the dominant political discourse is still aimed at consensus.

The principle of consensus is also obvious in the political institutions. The main principle is that as many ideological groups as possible are involved in governing. Several elements of the consensus model of democracy, as defined by Lijphart (1984), form part of the Dutch system. For example, seats in parliament are distributed according to the principle of proportional representation. Every party receives a proportion of the total number of seats in parliament that corresponds to the percentage of votes obtained in the elections. There is no voting threshold. Other elements of the Dutch political system which are also characteristic of Lijphart's consensus model of democracy are the multiparty system and coalition governments. Partly as a result of this electoral system, a large number of political parties occupy seats in parliament. The traditional parties, representing the former pillars (Christian democrats, liberals, social democrats), are still strong. Since the end of the 1960s many new parties, from left-wing to right-wing, have entered the political arena. Because no political party ever has held a majority in parliament, the Netherlands has always been ruled by coalition governments. Furthermore, it frequently happens that opposition parties vote for proposals put forward by the government or the government parties in parliament. These cross-party relations between parliament and government also can be considered to be an element of a consensus democracy (Andeweg and Nijzink 1998, 152-178; Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2005, 57-82).

With regard to the second principle, pragmatism, there is a strong belief that the main goal of politics is to produce solutions to policy problems. Divisive policy issues may therefore be addressed by depoliticising these or, in some cases, by opting for summit diplomacy or secrecy. Although major changes have occurred in Dutch society and politics since the 1970s and there is a general tendency towards more transparency[4], pragmatism has remained a strong element in politics and to some extent, these rules still exist. The consultation of the political leaders of the coalition parties by the prime-minister before an important political decision is taken, for example, is common practice.

II, these ideas were promoted by and received support from Catholics, Protestants and Socialists. Only after World War II were several of the institutions for the PBO formed.

[4] The media play an important role in critically following the work of politicians. Also, the public accountability of the government is encouraged by a law called the 'Wet Openbaarheid Bestuur', which forces the government to make its decisions public. In addition, both the Netherlands Court of Audit (Algemene Rekenkamer) and the local courts of audit are important public watchdogs of the government, by making their findings public.

The third principle, the focus on representative democracy, becomes obvious from the discourse on the referendum and other proposals for more citizen participation. Participatory elements of democracy have always been considered of minor importance. Whereas at the local level, legislation makes it possible to hold a consultative referendum, the Netherlands has no facility for a national referendum.[5] Ideas have been developed about the introduction of a national decisive referendum. These proposals, however, have not received enough parliamentary support. Various forms of participation that might improve the quality of democracy have been discussed, including participation through constitutional reforms, the use of ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) in politics and policy-making, and interactive policy-making. However, the existing political institutions and traditional hierarchical way of policy-making have never been fundamentally criticised. Citizen participation is mainly seen as an instrument to strengthen and support the way representative democracy now functions, and not as a value in itself (Michels 2006).

With regard to the fourth principle, the role of self-governing associations, there is a widely held belief that these associations have an important role in a pluralist democracy. Self-governing associations exist in various forms and have various tasks. There are private organisations that engage in the implementation of public tasks, for example in health care and education. During the period of pillarization, every pillar had its own schools, universities, hospitals, and housing corporations. Also, interest organisations in these fields were organised within the different pillars. Nowadays, a lot of these formerly pillarized organisations still exist, though a number of them have merged. Other associations play a relevant role in the neo-corporatist structure of the socio-economic policy field.

And the fifth principle, decentralisation, finds its expression in the organisation of the decentralised unitary state, which has not fundamentally changed since Thorbecke. Also, the neo-corporatist structure of the socio-economic policy field may be perceived as an institutional translation of this principle. The Social and Economic Council (SER) is the major institution of the statutory organisation of economic activity (*Publiekrechtelijke Bedrijfs Organisatie, PBO*), which was founded in 1950. The council consists of representatives of the trade unions and the employers' associations and of independent members (usually experts in specific fields) appointed by the government. Its major role is to advise the government on socio-economic issues. Although the Social and Economic council has lost some of its power in recent years, the Council remains a central institution in policy-making. In addition, independent organisations of workers and employers were given regulatory authority to issue rules for their particular sector of the economy. However, these organisations have only been a success in the food and agricultural sector.

5   Conclusion

Although ideas on democracy are always subject to dispute and the concept of democracy may change over time, a number of core principles form the basis of the Dutch democratic system. This paper has identified five core principles that are

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[5] The national referendum in June 2005 on the European constitution was made possible by a special law.

reflected in the institutions and political culture and define the democratic system. The main core principles are consensus democracy, pragmatism, and the focus on representative democracy. These principles were also identified by Lijphart and Daalder. In addition, two principles were identified to have a clear impact on the Dutch democratic system: the role of self-governing associations, and the principle of decentralisation.

Traces of various ideas of the 19th and early 20th century political thinkers can be found in the Dutch democratic system. Thorbecke's organic perspective that the state and its parts should be in balance, has had a tangible influence on the organisation of the decentralised state. Protestant, Catholic and religious Socialist political thinkers have in common that they advocate a pluralist democracy in which diversity and pluriformity are protected. Dominant features in their ideas are the emphasis on representative democracy, the role of government to harmonise conflicting interests, and the idea of sovereignty in independent spheres. These ideas have had an obvious influence on the constitution of the Dutch democratic system, which is characterised by consensus, pragmatism, a negligible role for elements of direct democracy, thereby assigning a prominent role to self-governing associations.

The question, finally, is whether these findings are typical for the Dutch case. If this analysis were reproduced in other European countries, would it lead to other findings? To allow a comparative approach, the first step would be to define the core principles of the different political systems. In order to be able to do so, it might be useful to reformulate the core principles of democracy in terms of dimensions, contrasting consensus democracy to majoritarian democracy, pragmatism to polarization, representative democracy to participatory democracy, the primacy of civil society to the primacy of the state, and decentralisation to centralisation. These dimensions could be used to compare countries and to gain a first impression (more principles may be relevant) of the national patterns of the core principles of a democratic system. The next step would be to go back to the founding fathers of each democratic system and to identify the impact of their ideas on democracy. Such a historical analysis of political ideas will give us a better understanding of the origins of the various ideas, beliefs and values which are at the heart of the European political systems.

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List of Tables

Table 1: Lijphart's typology of democracies

| | **Mass level** | |
Elite level	**Cross-cutting cleavages**	**Segmented**
Cooperation	Depoliticized Democracy	Consociational Democracy
Competition	Centripetal Democracy	Centrifugal Democracy

Source: A. Lijphart (1979, 202)