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CHAPTER 17

PUBLIC OPINION DYNAMICS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

This chapter deals with public opinion.[1] The term 'public opinion' has a long history and can be used in different ways. In this chapter we largely follow the definition of Speier (1950, p. 376), who defines it as 'opinions on matters of concern to the nation freely and publicly expressed by men outside the government who claim a right that their opinions should influence or determine the actions, personnel, or structure of their government'. Apart from the reference to 'men', we employ Speier's definition of public opinion, which has two consequences. First, in this chapter, public opinion is restricted to citizens' opinions on *political* issues, which are problems that, according to some actors, require actions on the part of local, regional, national, or transnational governments (Van der Brug, 2017). Secondly, we believe that citizens' public opinions should, in one way or another, influence the actions and decisions of governing bodies. In a representative democracy like the Netherlands, opinions of citizens are represented in the public domain by political parties that are democratically elected. So, public opinion is only politically relevant if opinions of voters are represented by the parties that citizens vote for. This, in turn, is optimized if their issue positions are structured by the same overarching ideological dimension (see also Thomassen, 1994, p. 254; Van der Brug et al., 2020).[2] Moreover, ideologies help to make future actions of parties on new issues

[1] Author order is alphabetical to reflect equal contributions of the authors.

[2] To understand why this is important, we should try to imagine a political system without such a structure. The Dutch parliament is normally elected for a four-year term. In those four years, parliament will be voting on thousands of bills, motions, amendments, etc., and most voters will not really care about most of these. But let us assume that there are two issues each year on which a voter has a strong opinion and on which the voter wants to be represented. This would be eight decisions in the four-year period. Even if positions on these eight issues took the simple binary form (for or against), there would

predictable. Much of the discussion in this chapter on public opinion therefore focuses on the question how political opinions are structured in relation to ideology.

The main governmental parties in the Netherlands have presented themselves to the public in terms of distinct ideologies, particularly Christian democracy, social democracy, and liberalism (see Otjes & De Lange, *this volume*). Yet, since the depillarization that occurred from the 1960s onwards, many of the differences between the parties can be understood well by their positions on a left–right dimension. In the 1970s and 1980s, left–right was usually seen as a dimension that structured conflicts on social and economic policy issues. However, various authors have argued that several conflicts in Dutch politics are not related to this understanding of left–right (e.g. Middendorp, 1992; Van Deth & De Graaf, 1991; Van Deth & Geurts, 1989). Positions on issues such as euthanasia and abortion may be unrelated to positions on socio-economic policies. So, if the left–right dimension structures attitudes on socio-economic issues, the correlations with these 'ethical issues' may be weak or non-existent. More recently, the issues of European unification and immigration have become more politicized, and attitudes towards these issues are also not obviously related to attitudes towards socio-economic policies. As a result, one could argue that left and right are outdated concepts and irrelevant to contemporary politics in the Netherlands. Yet, scholars have long observed how left–right functions as a 'super issue' that is able to assimilate new conflicts (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976, p. 244). This chapter presents longitudinal evidence suggesting that this is indeed the case in public opinion in the Netherlands.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. We first discuss the main debates in the literature on how public opinion is structured and how this structure relates to the structure of the Dutch party system. Which political issues have been central to electoral politics in different periods of time and how do these relate to the left–right positions of voters? We then turn to provide descriptive analyses of how left–right structures public opinion on political issues in the Netherlands. We conclude by sketching some avenues for future research.

Developments in Public Opinion over Time

Citizens' policy preferences became a more important factor in Dutch politics after depillarization from the 1960s onwards. Before then, the pillarized Dutch society was a prime example of what Lipset and Rokkan (1967) called 'frozen cleavages'. Many citizens

theoretically be 256 combinations of preferences on these eight issues, which is more than the number of seats in parliament. So, even if we could predict which issues will be on the political agenda, most voters will not see their combinations of preferences represented in a world without any structure (see also Van der Brug et al., 2020).

identified strongly with a specific social group distinguished by religious and class cleavages, and these group identifications strongly motivated electoral behaviour as well as choices in other domains, such as which newspapers to read, which clubs to join, and so on (see Irwin & Van Holsteyn, *this volume*). Since the 1960s, many Dutch voters—and especially younger generations—have become more volatile in their party choice (e.g., Andeweg, 1982; Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983), and electoral decisions have been increasingly guided by their opinions on political issues.

Two models have been proposed to explain how political opinions of voters influence party choice. According to the 'issue publics' model, voters would simply focus on one single issue that they care most about and vote for the party that represents them the best on that issue. This model was developed in the context of the United States by Krosnick (1990), but as far as we know it was never very influential in electoral research in the Netherlands, nor in other multiparty systems in western Europe. Conceivably this is because internally coherent and disciplined western European parties motivate voters more strongly to vote on the basis of ideological preferences than the internally more divided parties in the United States. In the Netherlands, researchers have focused mostly on ideology as a cognitive shortcut to simplify electoral decisions. The main debate has been about which ideological dimension(s) structure(s) public opinion and/or party choice (see Van der Meer & Van der Brug, *this volume*).

The question which—and how many—dimensions are relevant to describe public opinion depends on the exact phenomenon that scholars are trying to explain. Research on party choice in the Netherlands has focused mainly on the effects of voters' positions on a left–right dimension. While public opinion may be structured by several underlying ideological dimensions, this does not imply that all of these attitudes play an equally important role in structuring citizens' party choice. Some combinations of issue positions are not offered by any parties, and when trying to take into account several dimensions the choice simply becomes too complex for most citizens. As famously argued by Sartori (1976, p. 338): 'When the citizen speaks, he may have many things to say. But when he is coerced into casting a … vote, he may well have to … vote for the party … perceived as closest on the left-right spectrum.' Whether this means that people will also be well represented by the party they vote for, will then depend upon the supply side of the electoral 'market'. If the party system is structured largely by the left–right dimension, voters who vote for the closest party on the left–right dimension will be well represented on those issues that are strongly correlated with left–right. Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) showed that the party choice of voters could be explained very well by ideological distances on the left–right dimension. Later studies have generally confirmed that left–right distance is the strongest predictor of party choice in the Netherlands (e.g. Van der Eijk et al., 1999, 2006; Van Wijnen, 2000).

Yet, while the left–right dimension serves as a cognitive shortcut guiding voting behaviour, there is broad consensus that Dutch public opinion is structured by multiple issue dimensions. Several scholars have argued that 'the Dutch ideological space' since the 1970s has mainly been structured by two ideological dimensions, a socio-economic dimension and a politico-cultural libertarianism–authoritarianism dimension

(Middendorp, 1992). The socio-economic dimension structures opinions on social welfare arrangements, income redistribution, and the size of the public sector. The libertarianism–authoritarianism dimension structures issues such as law and order and individual freedoms (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, and emancipation). In much of the work from that period, the socio-economic dimension is labelled 'left–right'. However, Middendorp (1992) demonstrated that the two ideological dimensions were both correlated equally strongly with left–right self-placement. Thus, he argued that 'the conclusion is inevitable that left-right self-identification lacks unambiguous content validity' (Middendorp, 1992, p. 257). Similar conclusions regarding public opinion in the Netherlands have been drawn by other scholars, such as Van Deth and Geurts (1989) and Van Deth and De Graaf (1991), who were more interested in the increasing importance of postmaterial values, a concept developed by Inglehart (1977).

In the international literature, prominent research by Kitschelt (1996) and later by Kriesi et al. (2008) similarly described public opinion as two dimensional with a socio-economic and a sociocultural dimension. However, analysing six western European countries (including the Netherlands), they found that the substantive meaning of particularly the sociocultural dimension had changed over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, this dimension structured mainly issues related to religious values (e.g. abortion and euthanasia) and individual freedoms—similar to the libertarian–authoritarian dimension described above. Yet, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, issues such as immigration and European unification have become more central to the second (sociocultural) dimension (Kriesi et al., 2008).

According to Kriesi et al. (2008), the transformation of the sociocultural dimension was mainly driven by the emergence of a structural conflict of interest between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization. According to them, the 'losers' are citizens who, as a result of globalization of national economies, see their jobs disappear to low-wage countries in Asia, while at the same time they face increasing competition from workers from eastern European countries. Kriesi et al. (2008) expect these 'losers of globalization' to be against further European unification, in favour of protectionist measures, and against the arrival of immigrants. On the other hand, the 'winners of globalization' benefit because globalization increases their own career opportunities and because they prosper from the cheap labour that immigrant workers provide. While some scholars see this structural conflict of interest as a new political cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008), this claim has been criticized for several reasons (see Harteveld & Van der Pas, *this volume*). In the Netherlands, some researchers observe only the 'tentative contours' of a cleavage (De Ridder & Dekker, 2014, p. 155). In any case, a new cleavage would entail that party positions and voter positions are structured by the same ideological dimensions. Party positions continue to be strongly structured by left–right (see Otjes & De Lange, *this volume*; see also Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009), while this is much less the case for the opinions of voters.

In sum, until recently, research has identified three ideological dimensions that are relevant to understanding the structure of public opinion in the Netherlands. The first is a socio-economic dimension, the second is a libertarian–authoritarian dimension

(structuring issues such as euthanasia, abortion, law and order, and security) and the third is a sociocultural dimension (structuring issues like immigration, European Union (EU) integration, and globalization). There appears to be consensus that attitudes on socio-economic issues are structured by a different ideological dimension than attitudes on sociocultural issues, as these dimensions are largely uncorrelated at the level of voters (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that attitudes towards more traditional libertarian–authoritarian issues such as gender equality, abortion, and euthanasia are no longer correlated to sociocultural issues (De Vries, 2018), especially among younger cohorts (Lancaster, 2022), possibly because Dutch radical-right parties such as the Freedom Party (PVV) have combined an anti-Islam stance with a defence of Dutch tolerant values.

The coherence and political salience of these issue dimensions may vary over time, influenced by political parties as well as societal developments. As for the socio-economic dimension, studies in the Netherlands show that egalitarianism does not necessarily correlate to support for the welfare state among voters (Achterberg et al., 2011; Derks, 2006), which may be due to the Europeanization of economic issues (Otjes, 2018) or to the influence of right-wing populism, which combines a wish for a more equal society with a rejection of the (in their eyes costly and too inclusive) welfare system (Derks, 2006). The libertarian–authoritarian dimension has become less salient in Dutch politics since the 1990s, which might be because some of these issues have gained wider acceptance in Dutch society (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Jaspers et al., 2007). Finally, the sociocultural dimension has become increasingly politicized in the Netherlands, especially with regard to issues related to immigration (e.g., Berkhout et al., 2015; Green Pedersen & Otjes, 2019). This started in particular with the electoral success of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, in the slipstream of '9/11'. Even though Pim Fortuyn was assassinated and his party disappeared (see Otjes & De Lange, *this volume*), the issue remained highly salient on the political agenda—especially due to the PVV, founded by a former member of parliament for the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Geert Wilders—and continued to form the core of the sociocultural dimension.

Attitudes towards European integration deserve special attention, as they may relate to both socio-economic and sociocultural attitudes. Starting out as an economically liberal project of market integration, the EU was initially perceived by Dutch citizens as primarily challenging welfare state provisions and undermining the power of trade unions. So, Euroscepticism could be found mostly among citizens and parties of the (radical) left (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2015). However, several scholars see the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 as a game changer: 'Maastricht marked a transformation of the EU from an intergovernmental project to a multi-level polity, with its own currency, citizenship rights and with supranational authority over an increasing number of policy areas' (Hakhverdian et al., 2013, p. 529; see also Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007; Fuchs, 2011; Marks, 2004). Each consequent step in the process of European unification was increasingly opposed by citizens and parties of the (radical) right, who perceived it as a threat to the sovereignty of the nation state. Thus, Eurosceptic attitudes became correlated to

new sociocultural issues related to immigration and nationalist sentiments (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011). Otjes and Katsanidou (2017) show that this was particularly the case in northern European countries (including the Netherlands) after the financial crisis and subsequent bailouts, while in southern Europe Euroscepticism was strongly connected to the socio-economic dimension among citizens.

The above discussion shows that dimensions of public opinion change over time, in meaning and salience, due to both societal developments and political mobilization. This, in turn, is reflected in how these specific issues correlate to left–right positions. Generally, if issues are actively politicized by political actors with a clear left- or right-wing position, they become associated to left–right ideology. Thus, while 'left–right' terminology is traditionally associated with the socio-economic dimension, the terms 'left' and 'right' may actually have a different meaning in different historical contexts. Among voters, self-identification with the label 'left' or 'right' may correlate to non-economic issues as well. Studies in the Netherlands have shown that left–right self-placement among voters over time has become increasingly correlated to sociocultural issue positions, and less to socio-economic issues (De Vries et al., 2013), and that left–right relates differently to economic or cultural issues for different people, depending upon the salience they attach to particular issues (Weber & Saris, 2011). This explains why the left–right dimension can retain its structuring force in a changing ideological space; as a 'super issue' it flexibly absorbs new issues as they arise, with an important role for political parties that may redefine its meaning by mobilizing new issues.

Some more recent issues do not clearly belong to the three (socio-economic, libertarian–authoritarian, sociocultural) issue dimensions, yet we would expect them to relate to left–right placement among voters, mirroring patterns of politicization at the party level. Concern with climate change and support for stricter environmental policies is more prominent on the political left, and climate change beliefs correlate to left–right placement among voters (Fisher et al., 2022). During the Covid-19 pandemic, issues were politicized in relation to the government's vaccination policies, as well as several partially related conspiracy theories. Some far-right parties embraced anti-vaccination sentiments, while others did not (Kessenich & Van der Brug, 2022). Moreover, there has been a recent politicization of the future of the heavily industrialized agricultural sector in the Netherlands. The high nitrogen emissions of this export-oriented sector place a heavy burden on the environment and there were court rulings that forced the sector to reduce them. While measures to restructure this sector seem unavoidable, this has provoked the rise of a new farmers' party, the Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB) (Otjes & Voerman, 2020). The party has surged in the polls and its core issue is the denial of structural problems in the agricultural sector. As far as we know, the relationship between these newer issues and left–right placement has not yet been studied systematically, but we would expect anti-vaccination sentiments as well as opposition to nitrogen policies to be stronger among right-wing citizens. Finally, both the far-right parties and the BBB canalize a more general dissatisfaction with the government. An open question is to what extent such dissatisfaction is related to the left–right dimension (see Van Ham & Thomassen, *this volume*).

How Does Left–Right Structure Public Opinion?

In this section we take a look at citizens' positions on policy issues, and how these positions are related to left–right placement in the Netherlands. First, we map how public opinion has developed over time (1989–2021) for a set of four policy issues reflecting the three main dimensions of Dutch public opinion (i.e. socio-economic, sociocultural, and libertarian–authoritarian). In a second step, we analyse how citizens' attitudes on these issues correlate to their left–right positions across the same time span. Thirdly, we focus on data from 2021 to assess the correlation of left–right with a broader set of political issues, including a couple of newly politicized topics.

The Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey (DPES) collects survey data among a random sample of Dutch citizens around each parliamentary election. We use multiple waves of the DPES (1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2017, and 2021), which repeatedly asks respondents for their positions on a set of key policy issues. For the socio-economic dimension, we use the item on *income redistribution*, which asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale labelled from 1, 'differences in income should be increased', to 7, 'differences in income should be decreased'. For the sociocultural dimension, we employ two items. The first is on *cultural assimilation* of immigrants to Dutch culture, which uses a scale from 1, 'preservation of own culture for foreigners', to 7, 'foreigners should fully adapt'. The second is an item on *European integration*, ranging from 1, 'European unification should go even further', to 7, 'European unification has already gone too far'.[3] Finally, we include the issue of *euthanasia* to represent the libertarian–authoritarian dimension of the political space, with a scale from 1, 'euthanasia should be forbidden', to 7, 'euthanasia should be possible'. To facilitate comparison, the items on income redistribution and euthanasia were reverse-coded so that higher scores signify more right-wing attitudes (i.e. support for higher income differences and opposition to euthanasia).

Figure 17.1 shows how public opinion on these four issues has developed over time. Attitudes on income redistribution have remained rather stable, with average responses hovering around 3, indicating a left-leaning public opinion on this topic. Attitudes towards the assimilation of immigrants are also relatively stable, and—with an average of about 5—are tilted more towards the 'right-wing' end of the scale. Euroscepticism increased somewhat from the 2000s onwards, though the trend seems downwards more recently. More change is visible for the issue of euthanasia, which became widely accepted by the Dutch population from 2006 onwards, following, with some delay, the legalization of euthanasia in 2001. All in all, we see a public opinion which leans towards

[3] Given its current association to the cultural dimension, we include European integration as a sociocultural issue here.

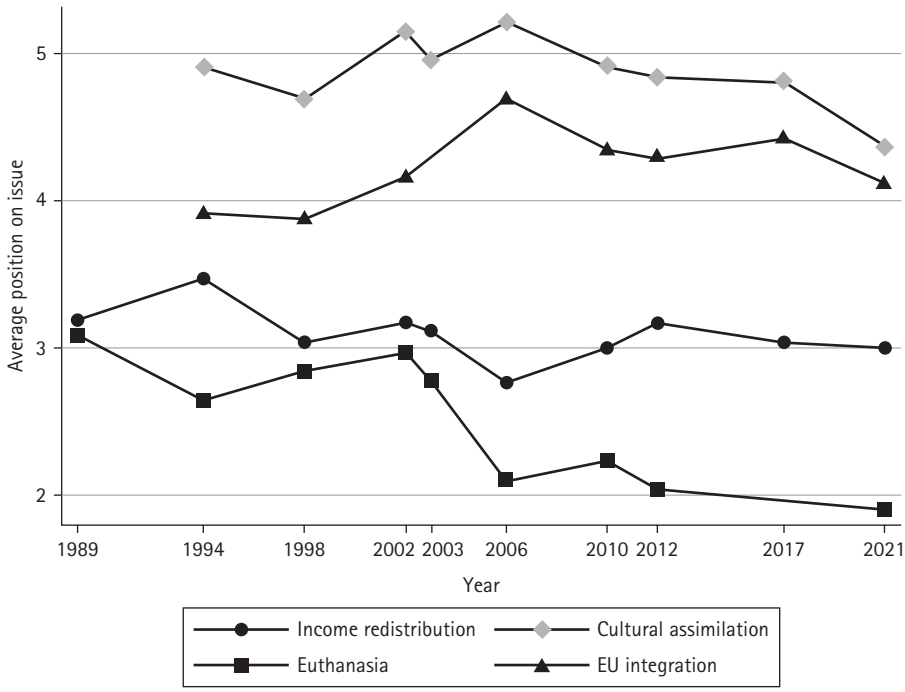

FIGURE 17.1 Average positions on four key policy issues, 1989–2021

Source: authors.

the left on socio-economic issues, towards the right on sociocultural issues, and which is rather stable except for the issue of euthanasia. The fact that opinions are rather stable, however, does not mean that their association to left–right will be stable as well.

Figure 17.2 presents the correlations between left–right self-placement of citizens and their positions on the four respective policy issues in each survey wave (note that not all issues were included in each wave). As expected, the figure shows that attitudes towards income redistribution correlate positively with left–right placement: citizens who view themselves as right wing are more inclined to support larger income differences than citizens on the left. This correlation is moderate to strong across the whole period and increases in 2017 and 2021. In 1989, the libertarian–authoritarian issue of euthanasia is almost as strongly correlated to left–right placement as the issue of income differences. Right-wing citizens are clearly more often opposed to euthanasia than citizens on the left. However, this correlation declines in strength in subsequent waves.

Across the full observed period, the issue of cultural assimilation correlates strongly to left–right self-placement, such that right-wing citizens are more inclined to feel that immigrants should assimilate to Dutch culture. The correlation increased in 2017 and 2021, but was already quite strong in 1994, when the question was first asked. The issue of European integration shows considerable change in its association to left–right. In 1994, citizens' positions towards European integration are unrelated to their left–right

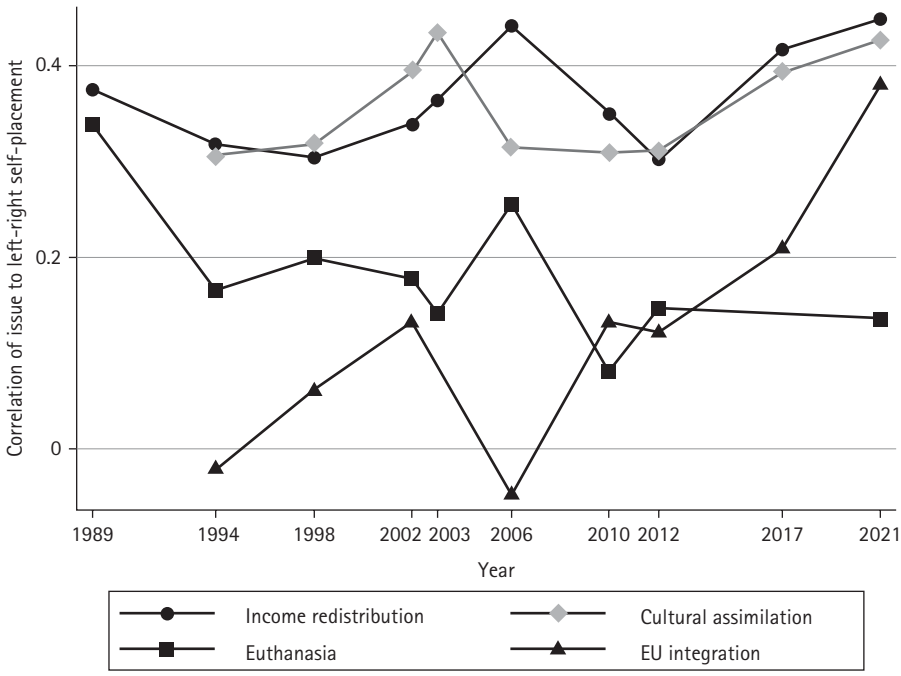

FIGURE 17.2 Correlation between policy issues and left–right self-placement, 1989–2021

Source: authors.

positions. In 2021, opposition to integration has become a right-wing position. As discussed above, EU opposition was traditionally found more on the left. In response to the deepening of EU integration, right-wing parties and citizens became more Eurosceptic, resulting in most EU opposition being found at the left and right extremes of the spectrum (the 'horseshoe') in the 2000s (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2015). The recent developments displayed in Figure 17.2 suggest that the shift of Euroscepticism from the left to the right has continued since.

So, left–right not only structures socio-economic attitudes, but also clearly has an equally important sociocultural connotation among citizens. This is in line with the idea that left–right self-placement not only reflects traditional socio-economic issues, but can assume multiple meanings (Middendorp, 1992). The findings suggest that left–right used to structure attitudes on the libertarian–authoritarian dimension, but that it has now become much more related to newer sociocultural issues (immigration and the EU).

In Figure 17.3 we focus solely on data collected by the DPES in 2021. Inspecting a broader set of issues, the picture that emerges in 2021 is somewhat different compared to the developments over time. The first five issues relate to the socio-economic dimension, measuring attitudes towards redistribution (an item from Figures 17.1 and 17.2), cutting taxes, abolishing the mortgage deduction (benefiting homeowners), lowering the retirement age, and regulating the housing market. All items are coded so that

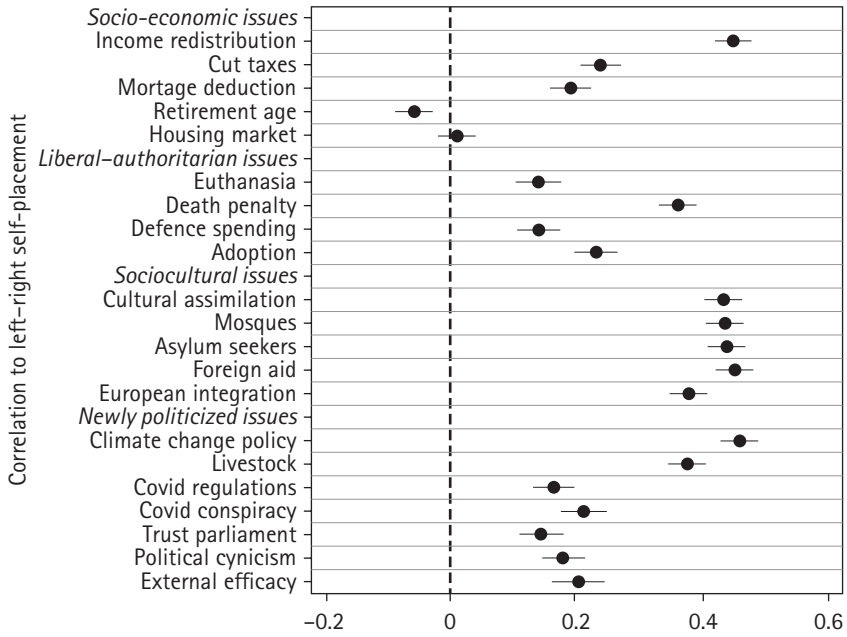

FIGURE 17.3 Correlations between policy issues and left–right self-placement, 2021

Source: authors.

higher scores represent economically right-wing positions (even though this is somewhat arbitrary in the case of the retirement age).[4] As becomes clear from Figure 17.3, in contrast to general attitudes towards income redistribution, the issues of cutting taxes and mortgage deduction correlate only weakly with the left–right dimension, whereas attitudes to the retirement age and housing market are uncorrelated to left–right (the item on retirement age is even correlated inversely to left–right, with right-wing citizens somewhat more supportive of lowering the retirement age to 65). In contrast to general attitudes towards redistribution, these specific economic issues are not as strongly structured by the left–right dimension. These findings raise questions about the coherence of the socio-economic dimension in line with studies discussed above (Achterberg et al., 2011; Otjes, 2018).

A second category of issues is traditional libertarian-authoritarian issues, related to religious and ethical considerations as well as individual freedom. Attitudes towards euthanasia and towards adoption by same-sex couples are weakly correlated to left–right in 2021, as is support for increasing defence spending. Support for introducing the death penalty in the Netherlands is more strongly associated to left–right. In 2021, law and order issues thus fit more into the left–right structure than ethical issues.

[4] We assumed that left-wing voters would prefer early retirement (but this is not the case).

For issues related to the sociocultural dimension, we find much more consistent correlations to left–right. The five issues displayed in Figure 17.3 relate to the cultural assimilation of immigrants (an item from Figures 17.1 and 17.2), the building of new mosques, the intake of asylum seekers, reducing money for foreign aid, and European integration (an item from Figures 17.1 and 17.2). These issues are all quite strongly correlated (> 0.4) to left–right placement. This is the case not only for the issues related to immigration and international solidarity, but also for opposition to European integration, which behaves in line with other sociocultural attitudes.

Finally, some newly politicized issues show considerable correlation to left–right. Attitudes towards climate change policies (and whether these 'should go further' or 'have gone too far') are strongly related to left–right placement, reflecting the fact that environmentalism is associated with the left at the party level. A similar association is found for attitudes towards decreasing livestock. This shows that the recent discussion on nitrogen emissions and reducing agricultural activity in the Netherlands has led to a politicization of this issue along left–right lines. Another highly politicized issue at the time of the survey—Covid policy—has also become associated with the left–right dimension, with right-wing citizens prioritizing the economy over Covid-outbreak management. Yet, this relationship is much weaker than the one pertaining to climate change policies. Covid conspiracy beliefs, here measured by the statement that the coronavirus was fabricated in a lab, are also more common on the right, reflecting the promotion of such ideas by radical-right actors. Such beliefs might be part of a broader anti-system sentiment that is currently found mostly on the right of the Dutch political spectrum. Indeed, distrust in parliament, political cynicism ('Politicians do not care about what people think'), and external political efficacy (measured by a three-item index) are all higher among right-wing citizens, though correlations are modest.

Avenues for Future Research

The left–right dimension remains the overarching structuring dimension in Dutch public opinion. Left–right integrates attitudes on new issues that arise, thus accommodating the increasing salience of sociocultural issues. Attitudes related to immigration, open borders, and European integration have become consistent correlates of left–right placement in the Netherlands. As these new issues become more strongly integrated in the left–right dimension, ethical issues (e.g. euthanasia) central to the libertarian–authoritarian dimension have gradually become less correlated with left–right. Socio-economic issues, which reflect the 'traditional' meaning of left–right as an egalitarian vs. laissez-faire dimension, appear to have become less central to citizens' left–right placement, with the exception of attitudes towards income redistribution. This may reflect the lower salience of these issues in recent elections, but it is also suggestive of a general tendency of left–right to be interpreted more in cultural terms (see De Vries et al., 2013).

But what are the mechanisms behind this changing meaning of left–right, and how is this associated to demographic processes? Research has shown that younger generations of voters tend to associate left–right much more with sociocultural issues (Rekker, 2016), and that such issues also tend to have more impact on the voting behaviour of younger voter cohorts (Van der Brug & Rekker, 2021). More work is needed to understand why this is the case, by looking at the role of rising educational levels, secularization, and the changing composition of the population.

Future research may also address the consequences of these developments. According to some authors, we are witnessing the rise of a cosmopolitan–communitarian dimension which might overshadow the left–right dimension and redefine the political space (e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Koopmans & Zurn, 2019). This new dimension is similar to the sociocultural dimension as discussed in this chapter, and its end points may also be labelled 'left' (cosmopolitan) and 'right' (communitarian). Rather than replacing the left–right dimension, the rise of such a sociocultural dimension leads to a redefinition of its meaning. The question remains, however, what consequences this will have for the socio-economic dimension. Will socio-economic issues become less relevant, or will these issues be reinterpreted in cultural terms (as is the case with 'welfare chauvinism' and international solidarity)? If the latter is true, does this mean that the socio-economic and sociocultural dimensions will become more related? Such a development could functionally alter the structure of public opinion by moving to a space with one dominant dimension.

Relatedly, research may focus on how voters combine views on socio-economic and sociocultural issues, and the implications this has for their self-identification as left wing or right wing. Scholars have observed a large group of voters combining economically left-wing with culturally right-wing attitudes. These voters are in the 'blind corner' of representation (Thomassen, 2012), as long as there are no parties that clearly represent this combination of positions (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Several western European far-right parties have moved to a more centrist position on socio-economic issues and welfare chauvinism is an expression thereof. Yet, none of these parties is outspokenly left leaning on these socio-economic issues, certainly not in the Netherlands. The PVV's movement to the left appears to be more an example of 'issue blurring' (Rovny, 2013). This raises the question how these voters interpret the labels 'left' and 'right', and how they resolve the cross-pressure posed by their specific combination of issue positions. A seeming paradox exists if voters increasingly find themselves in this quadrant (i.e. combine economically left-wing and culturally right-wing attitudes), while at the same time left–right does not lose any of its structuring power in political contestation.

A further avenue to pursue is the politicization of 'anti-system' attitudes, which—though these are not policy attitudes—have become associated with the right of the political spectrum. Indeed, this chapter's findings suggest that people's appraisal of their political institutions and representatives have become related to left–right positions. The simple descriptive analyses presented in this chapter need elaboration, as different forms of politicization seem possible. On the one hand, given that radical

issue entrepreneurs combine their substantive issue positions with anti-politics rhetoric, we may expect a non-linear relationship with higher anti-system sentiments at the left and right extremes. On the other hand, recent research suggests that political distrust is particularly present among citizens combining economically left-wing and culturally right-wing attitudes, as a consequence of their underrepresentation noted above (Hakhverdian & Schakel, 2022). Further research into the politicization of political trust could shed light on these developments, including potentially by distinguishing levels of trust among voters for different (types of) parties (see Van Ham & Thomassen, *this volume*).

This chapter underlines that left–right continues to be relevant in Dutch public opinion. In a country with a party system with more than ten parties, it is probably indispensable that voters and parties can simplify the structure of party competition, otherwise most voters would be lost when trying to make sense of the differences between the parties on offer. Left–right behaves as a 'super issue' connecting to a wide array of political issues and flexibly accommodating newly arising issues, and its substantive meaning will differ across time and place. The question remains, however, how well left–right facilitates representation in light of its ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, left–right may mean different things to different voters, depending on the importance voters attach to different issues. And as such, if a voter for instance prioritizes sociocultural issues, (s)he can still 'rationally' vote for a party which is 'right wing' in this respect. On the other hand, voters wishing to express both socio-economic and sociocultural issue preferences are not always well represented by left–right. To the extent that political parties align along a single left–right dimension, this poses a challenge to the representation of voters' issue positions, as well as to their translation into coherent coalitions and policies.

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