

Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands: An Analysis of the Dutch Public's Policy Beliefs and Partisan Loyalties, 1986–98

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During the 1980s and the 1990s, the elites of the two largest Dutch parties converged dramatically in debates on income redistribution, nuclear power and the overall Left–Right dimension, paving the way for the Dutch party system's polarization on immigration and cultural issues. Did the Dutch mass public depolarize along with party elites, and, if so, was this mass-level depolarization confined to affluent, educated, politically engaged citizens? Analysis of Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents' policy beliefs and partisan loyalties in 1986–98 shows that the mass public depolarized during this period, and that this extended equally throughout the electorate. These conclusions mirror previous findings on Britain, but differ from those on the United States, and have important implications for political representation and for parties' election strategies.

American and British politics scholars increasingly emphasize the dramatic changes in the tenor of elite policy debates in their countries. In the United States these changes entail growing elite-level polarization, as the policy gap between Republicans and Democrats in Congress has widened sharply over the past three decades on both social welfare issues and on cultural issues.¹ In Britain, by contrast, the Labour and Conservative party elites have depolarized dramatically on economic and social welfare policy during the post-Thatcher era, as Tony Blair's 'New Labour' party moderated its stances on taxes, income redistribution and nationalization of industry, while the Conservatives – at least prior to the economic downturn in 2008 – have increased their support for public services.²

The phenomenon of US elites' policy polarization, and of British elites' depolarization, has inspired extensive research on whether the mass publics in these countries have polarized (in the United States) and depolarized (in Britain) in response to party elites, and, if so, whether specific subgroups have reacted disproportionately to these elite-level

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¹ See, e.g., Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006).

² See Jane Green and Sara B. Hobolt, 'Owning the Issue Agenda: Party Strategies and Vote Choices in British Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 27 (2008), 460–76.

policy shifts.³ These questions are important because they bear on how strongly party elites influence public opinion, whether the public holds elites accountable for their policies, and whether, more generally, the public approves of policy moderation by political elites.⁴ The studies cited above report consistent evidence that, taken as a whole, the mass publics in both countries have followed the leads of political elites, i.e., that the American mass public has polarized over the past three decades while the British public has depolarized during the post-Thatcher era.⁵ By contrast, these studies reach conflicting conclusions with respect to subconstituency-based polarization: namely, studies on the United States conclude that subgroups of affluent, educated and politically engaged citizens have polarized more than other subgroups in the electorate, while studies on Britain conclude that mass depolarization extends roughly equally across different subgroups.⁶

Although the research summarized above illuminates mass–elite policy linkages in Britain and the United States, it is unclear whether we should expect these patterns to extend to other Western democracies. In particular, both Britain and the United States employ plurality voting systems and feature two dominant, mainstream, political parties,⁷ while most Western democracies employ some form of proportional representation and feature both mainstream parties and smaller ‘niche’ parties that present more radical policies and/or that emphasize alternative policy dimensions.⁸ In addition, the United States and

³ See Marc J. Hetherington, ‘Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization’, *American Political Science Review*, 95 (2001), 619–31; Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America*, 2nd edn (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005); Alan Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, ‘Is Polarization a Myth?’ *Journal of Politics*, 70 (2008), 542–55; Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd, *High-Intensity Participation: The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Jane Green, ‘When Parties and Voters Agree: Valence Issues and Party Competition’, *Political Studies*, 55 (2007), 629–55; Geoffrey C. Layman, Thomas M. Carsey and Juliana Horowitz, ‘Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes and Consequences’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9 (2006), 83–110.

⁴ See Lawrence Ezrow and Georgios Xezonakis, ‘Citizen Satisfaction with Democracy and Parties’ Policy Offerings: A Cross-National Analysis of Twelve European Party Systems, 1976–2003’, *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming).

⁵ As we discuss below the evidence from both countries suggests that these trends may be more pronounced with respect to *partisan sorting*, i.e., changes in the mean policy positions of rival parties’ supporters, than with respect to *policy-based polarization*, i.e., changes in the extremity of citizens’ policy views.

⁶ On the American electorate, see Ryan L. Claassen and Benjamin Highton, ‘Policy Polarization among Party Elites and the Significance of Political Awareness in the Mass Public’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 62 (2009), 538–51; Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, ‘Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 114 (2008), 408–46. On the British electorate, see Robert Andersen, James Tilley and Anthony Heath, ‘Political Knowledge and Enlightened Preferences: Party Choice through the Electoral Cycle’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005), 285–302; James Adams, Jane Green and Caitlin Milazzo, ‘Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?’ (presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, 2008).

⁷ While the Liberal Democrats constitute a significant ‘third party’ in Britain, prior to the May 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democratic coalition every post-war British government has been a single-party government.

⁸ See, e.g., Bonnie Meguid, ‘Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success’, *American Political Science Review*, 99 (2005), 347–60; James Adams, Michael Clark, Lawrence Ezrow and Garrett Glasgow, ‘Are Niche Parties Fundamentally Different from Mainstream Parties? The Causes and the Electoral Consequences of Western European Parties’ Policy Shifts, 1976–1998’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 50 (2006), 513–29.

Britain arguably differ from other Western democracies in terms of the number and types of social cleavages and the degree of governmental stability.⁹ Prompted by these considerations, we analyse mass responses to elite policy shifts in a political context that differs sharply from those of Britain and the United States: namely, the Netherlands during the 1980s and the 1990s. Unlike the United States and Britain, the Netherlands employs a highly proportional system to elect its members of parliament and also features multiple parties including the large, mainstream Christian Democrats (CDA) and Labour (PvdA), along with several smaller but influential parties.¹⁰ Furthermore, between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s the CDA and PvdA party elites depolarized dramatically on social welfare policy along with support for nuclear power – developments that, as we discuss below, plausibly created an opening for the subsequent polarization of the party system on immigration and cultural issues, debates over which have dominated Dutch politics since 2000.¹¹ We asked whether during this 1986–98 time period the Dutch public depolarized along with the elites from the two largest parties; whether the different Dutch subconstituencies, defined in terms of education, income, political knowledge and interest, depolarized to roughly the same degree; and whether our findings on the Netherlands illuminate mass–elite policy linkages in Britain and the United States.

The answer we provide to each question posed above is ‘Yes’. We report longitudinal analyses of Dutch Parliamentary Election Study survey data over the period 1986–98 on citizens’ partisan loyalties along with their policy preferences, which suggest that the public depolarized significantly in terms of three distinct criteria: the dispersion of citizens’ policy preferences; their degrees of attitude constraint; and the differences between the policy preferences of CDA supporters versus the policy preferences of PvdA partisans. Furthermore, we conclude that these mass-level patterns extended equally across the subconstituencies of the most affluent and the least affluent; the more educated and the less educated; and the politically knowledgeable along with the less informed. We label this phenomenon *electorate-wide depolarization*, a pattern that contrasts with the unequal or *subconstituency based polarization* in the United States, which has occurred primarily among affluent and educated subgroups. By contrast our findings on the Netherlands parallel the conclusions that Adams, Green and Milazzo report on the British public.¹²

We propose a simple explanation for the electorate-wide depolarization that has occurred in the Netherlands and Britain in response to parties’ policy shifts, as opposed to the subconstituency-based polarization observed in the United States, which is that the Dutch and British parliamentary delegations – in common with the delegations in most

⁹ On the types of social cleavages, see Rudy B. Andeweg and Galen A. Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). On the degree of governmental stability, see Arco I. Timmermans, *High Politics in the Low Countries: An Empirical Study of Coalition Agreements in Belgium and the Netherlands* (Aldershot, Surrey: Ashgate, 2003).

¹⁰ These include the Liberal VVD and the Social Liberal D66. In our analyses we focus on the CDA and PvdA because these are the two largest Dutch parties, and they are the pivotal players in coalition government negotiations (see Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*).

¹¹ See Kees Van Kersbergen and Andre Krouwel, ‘A Double-Edged Sword! The Dutch Center-Right and the ‘Foreigners Issue’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (2008), 398–414; Annemarije Oosterwaal and Rene Totenvlied, ‘Politics Divided from Society? Three Explanations for Trends in Societal and Political Polarisation in the Netherlands’, *West European Politics*, 33 (2010), 258–79.

¹² Adams, Green and Milazzo, ‘Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?’

Western democracies outside the United States – are highly unified and thereby convey clear policy cues to citizens, compared with the weaker policy cues delivered by the more ideologically diverse, decentralized American parties.¹³ The challenges of perceiving and reacting to West European party elites' clear policy cues plausibly place fewer cognitive demands on citizens than do the more ambiguous and diffuse policy messages that American party elites convey to the public. For, while citizens' education and political knowledge plausibly mediate their abilities to assess and react to 'difficult' or confusing political scenarios, citizens' political capacities may be less relevant to their interpretations of 'easy' scenarios, where the relevant political signals are clear-cut. Put differently, West European party elites convey clear policy cues that should register even with citizens who possess limited information about politics and modest educational backgrounds. Therefore, we believe that our findings of electorate-wide depolarization in the multiparty, PR-based Dutch political system, in combination with earlier, parallel findings on the two-party, plurality-based British system, support the following proposition:

PROPOSITION: West European citizens' reactions to party policy shifts will extend roughly equally across different subconstituencies in the electorate.

We believe that our findings are significant for three reasons. First, the aggregate-level patterns that we identify are intrinsically important for understanding public opinion and mass–elite policy linkages in the Netherlands. To our knowledge ours is the first study that analyses how the Dutch electorate reacted to the dramatic policy depolarization between the CDA and PvdA party elites, which was arguably the key development in Dutch politics during the 1980s and the 1990s. Furthermore, as we discuss below, this CDA-PvdA depolarization created the conditions that facilitated the subsequent elite polarization on immigration and cultural issues, which is the dominant feature of contemporary Dutch politics.

Second, our findings have an important implication for parties' election strategies, which is that, in forecasting the electoral effects of policy shifts, Dutch party elites – and, we believe, the party elites in other West European democracies – should project that citizens from all walks of life may display reactions of equal magnitude to those of educated, affluent, politically aware citizens. Thus, in situations where educated and affluent citizens' policy preferences diverge from those of less-educated, lower-income citizens, political elites cannot cater to the policy beliefs of socioeconomically advantaged subgroups without sacrificing support from less-advantaged groups.

Third, and related to the previous two issues, our findings suggest that West European party elites have electoral incentives to provide more equal representation of different subconstituencies than do American politicians. American politics scholars conclude that elected officials respond disproportionately to the policy preferences of affluent, educated and politically involved citizens.¹⁴ This pattern of *unequal representation* plausibly stems in

¹³ In this regard, there is extensive research documenting that citizens in European democracies – all of which feature significantly greater degrees of party-line voting in parliament than does the US Congress – hold quite accurate perceptions of parties' policy positions. See, e.g., Roy Pierce, *Choosing the Chief: Presidential Elections in France and the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 73–4; Randolph T. Stevenson and Greg Vonnahme, 'Executive Selection and the Informed Electorate: How the Rules and Norms Governing Cabinet Formation Impact Citizens' Knowledge of Politics' (presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2009).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation; and Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Martin Gilens,

part from American politicians' perceptions that the members of these privileged subgroups respond disproportionately to the policy behaviour of elites, i.e., American elites are motivated to cater on policy grounds to the subgroups that are most likely to perceive and reward these policy appeals. By contrast, the electorate-wide reactions to party elites' policy shifts that we document in the Netherlands – and which previous research has documented in Britain – may motivate party elites to provide more nearly *equal representation* of different subgroups' collective preferences.¹⁵ To the extent this is the case, the electorate-wide depolarization that we observe in the Netherlands appears normatively desirable.

MASS REACTIONS TO ELITE POLICY SHIFTS: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE NETHERLANDS

American and British politics scholars have begun to explore whether elite policy polarization (in the United States) and depolarization (in Britain) have been mirrored in the mass publics in these countries. Several studies on the United States argue that mass-level polarization should develop disproportionately among educated and politically informed citizens, because these individuals are most likely to perceive the growing policy polarization between Republican and Democratic elites, and would therefore exhibit the strongest reactions to elite polarization.¹⁶ Thus, Hetherington demonstrates that educated and affluent Americans have perceived elite polarization to a greater extent than have other citizens, while Baldassarri and Gelman find that over the past thirty years the degree of partisan sorting in the American electorate, i.e., the correlation between citizens' policy beliefs and their party identification, has increased disproportionately among affluent and politically engaged citizens.¹⁷

Research on Britain, by contrast, does not identify subconstituency-based differences in citizens' reactions to Labour–Conservative elite policy depolarization during the post-Thatcher era. Thus Andersen *et al.* find that while policy-based voting is most pronounced among British citizens who accurately perceive the parties' positions, perceptual accuracy is not closely tied to citizens' general political knowledge.¹⁸ Adams, Green and Milazzo analyse over-time changes in the policy preferences and party support among different British subconstituencies during the post-Thatcher period, and find that

(*F*note continued)

'Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69 (2005), 778–96; John Griffin and Brian Newman, 'Are Voters Better Represented?' *Journal of Politics*, 67 (2005), 1206–27.

¹⁵ Of course, party policy appeals to affluent and educated voters may confer ancillary benefits, in that members of these groups may disproportionately reward the party with financial contributions and/or with participation in other campaign activities. See, e.g., Henry Brady, Kay Schlozman and Sidney Verba, 'Redistribution, Polarization, and Medians: Bringing Data to Downsian Puzzles' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, 2009); James Adams and Lawrence Ezrow, 'Who do European Parties Represent? How Western European Parties Represent the Policy Preferences of Opinion Leaders', *Journal of Politics*, 71 (2009), 206–23. Our point is that we should expect that electorates that display more equal responsiveness across subgroups will receive more equal representation from party elites.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Hetherington, 'Resurgent Mass Partisanship'; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, *Culture War?*; Layman, Carsey and Horowitz, 'Party Polarization in American Politics'; Claassen and Highton, 'Policy Polarization among Party Elites'.

¹⁷ Hetherington, 'Resurgent Mass Partisanship'; Baldassarri and Gelman, 'Partisans without Constraint'.

¹⁸ Robert Andersen, Anthony Heath and Richard Sinnott, 'Political Knowledge and Electoral Choice', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*, 12 (2002), 11–27.

all of the subgroups they examined – the affluent and the poor; the more highly educated and the less-educated; the more and the less politically knowledgeable – depolarized to roughly the same extent.¹⁹ Adams, Green and Milazzo attribute this electorate-wide depolarization to the clear policy cues that the unified British parliamentary parties communicated to the public, cues that were received even by citizens with low levels of education and political interest.

Given that West European parties' parliamentary delegations are typically highly unified, the Adams-Green-Milazzo argument suggests that we might expect electorate-wide reactions whenever European party elites significantly shift their policies. However, there are reasons to question whether these authors' findings on Britain during the post-Thatcher era extend to other West European electorates. First, post-Thatcher Labour-Conservative policy depolarization is arguably the most striking instance of elite depolarization in Western Europe over the past twenty years, and is thus not typical of elite-level policy shifts in other party systems. Second, the large, mainstream, Labour and Conservative parties constitute the left-most and right-most 'poles' of the British party system,²⁰ so that these parties arguably have the leeway to converge on policy without sacrificing electoral support to more radical rival parties – a luxury that mainstream parties lack in many multiparty democracies. Third, and related, Britain typically features single-party government while most West European democracies – including the Netherlands – feature coalition governments. This distinction is important because Stevenson and his co-authors report remarkable findings that coalition governments create different incentives and opportunities for citizens to infer parties' policy positions, compared with single-party governments.²¹ These considerations cast doubt on whether we can use British citizens' reactions to party elites' depolarization post Thatcher to project how citizens in other West European democracies may react to party policy shifts. Below we explore the extent to which Dutch citizens depolarized during the 1980s and the 1990s in response to elite-level policy depolarization between the two largest parties, the CDA and the PvdA, and whether the mass-level trends we identify extend across different subgroups in the electorate.

An Overview of the Dutch Elites' Policy Depolarization during the 1980s and the 1990s

The Dutch political system has been classified by Lijphart as a *consociational* democracy that features considerable power-sharing across different parties including those in opposition.²² The features of Dutch politics that promote power-sharing include: a large

¹⁹ Adams, Green, and Milazzo, 'Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?'

²⁰ We note that by 2001 the Liberal Democrats were arguably to the left of Labour on some social welfare and economic policy issues (see Andersen, Tilley and Heath, 'Political Knowledge and Enlightened Preferences'). However, in the 2001 and 2005 British Election Studies, survey respondents' mean placements of Labour were to the left of the Liberal Democrats, i.e., the British electorate continued to perceive Labour and the Conservatives as the two 'poles' of the party system.

²¹ Stevenson and Vonnahme, 'Executive Selection and the Informed Electorate'; David Fortunato and Randolph T. Stevenson, 'Perceptions of Partisan Ideologies: The Effect of Coalition Participation' (presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2010).

²² See Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Governmental Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).

number of political parties (described below) combined with a highly proportional voting system;²³ decentralization of certain policy making to advisory bodies; and a tendency towards oversized coalitions and political accommodation.²⁴ These power-sharing features of Dutch politics contrast with majoritarian British politics, which feature a plurality-based electoral system, single-party government (with rare exceptions, such as the current Conservative–Liberal Democrat governing coalition) and few provisions for policy-making influence from opposition parties. Furthermore, while British parties have competed primarily on economic and social welfare policy during the post-war era, Dutch parties compete on several salient dimensions including economic and social welfare policy; a secular–religious dimension; and, over the past decade, immigration and cultural issues.²⁵

During the 1980s and the 1990s the Dutch party system featured four major governing parties including the economically right-wing Liberal party (the VVD), the centrist Democrats '66 (the D66), and two large, dominant parties, the centre-left Labour party (the PvdA) and the centre-right Christian Democratic Appeal (the CDA).²⁶ Following the Second World War, the major Dutch parties represented the 'pillars' of Dutch social-political cleavages, and, as predicted by Lipset and Rokkan, citizens' party support was tied to their social class and religion.²⁷ However, electoral volatility jumped in the 1980s and 1990s as voting patterns relating to socioeconomic cleavages declined, to be replaced with higher levels of issue-based voting.²⁸

The 1980s featured sharp fluctuations in the electoral fortunes of the Dutch parties, which coincided with major shifts in the policy positions of the two largest parties, the PvdA and the CDA. While the leftist PvdA and the more right-wing CDA diverged on economic and cultural issues in the early 1980s, they depolarized sharply later in the decade and on into the 1990s. During this period, the CDA, formed in 1980 from a merger of the three largest religious parties in the system, moderated its economic and

²³ Over the period 1971–96 the effective number of parliamentary parties in the Netherlands averaged about 4.7, the highest number for any West European democracy except Switzerland. In addition, the Netherlands scores as the most proportional West European electoral system, according to Gallagher's index of disproportionality (see Michael Gallagher, 'Proportionality, Disproportionality, and Electoral Systems', *Electoral Studies*, 10 (1991), 35–51). On both points, see Appendix A in Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.

²⁴ See Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*.

²⁵ See Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*; Huib Pellikaan, Tom van der Meer and Sarah de Lange, 'The Road from a Depolarized to a Centrifugal Democracy', *Acta Politica*, 38 (2003), 23–48; Huib Pellikaan, Sarah de Lange and Tom van der Meer, 'Fortuyn's Legacy: Party System Change in The Netherlands', *Comparative European Politics*, 5 (2007), 282–302; Oosterwaal and Totenvlied, 'Politics Divided from Society?'

²⁶ In recent elections there has been increased support for the ideological extremes, represented on the left by the GreenLeft party, which emphasizes environmental protection along with support for social welfare programmes and income redistribution, and on the right by the List Pim Fortuyn Party for Freedom which has advocated strong nationalist and anti-immigrant policies, see, e.g., Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*; Peter Mair, 'Electoral Volatility and the Dutch Party System: A Comparative Perspective', *Acta Politica*, 43 (2008), 235–53. However, the growth of these parties – which we discuss below – occurred largely after the period of this study.

²⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, Voter Alignments: An Introduction', in Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), pp. 1–64; Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, p. 491.

²⁸ See Mair, 'Electoral Volatility and the Dutch Party System'.

social welfare policies in an attempt to seize the middle ground between the left-leaning PvdA and the right-leaning Liberal party (the VVD), while maintaining conservative positions on religious issues.²⁹ However, the growing secularization in Dutch society was problematic for the CDA, and the issue of euthanasia captures this religious–secular dimension. Euthanasia, which had long been controversial in the Netherlands, re-emerged following the introduction of a 1986 bill that would have de-criminalized physicians engaging in the practice, a policy the CDA vehemently opposed. The issue exacerbated tensions between the CDA and its coalition partner, the VVD, during the Lubbers government of 1982 to 1986, and eventually prompted the exclusion of the CDA from the 1994 governing coalition.³⁰ Thus, while the CDA moderated its positions on economic and social welfare policy during the latter half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, it maintained its conservative stance on the moral issues that had traditionally defined it.³¹

During the 1980s the PvdA shifted its policy emphasis away from its long-term advocacy for social welfare programmes and income redistribution and towards an emphasis on ‘new left’ issues, including environmental protection, which appealed to the ‘postmaterial’ voters, outside the party’s traditional support constituency.³² This environmental emphasis was marked by the PvdA’s strong opposition to nuclear power during the early and mid-1980s. The conflict over nuclear power between the PvdA and the CDA (which advocated continued use of nuclear energy) precipitated the dissolution of the Van Agt government of 1981–82.³³ The PvdA subsequently softened its opposition to nuclear power, thereby bridging its policy differences with the CDA.³⁴ This increasing policy moderation of PvdA elites during the 1980s and 1990s was driven by electoral and coalition-based considerations.³⁵ While this strategy proved successful in the short term, the policy depolarization of the two dominant Dutch parties along the main dimensions of political competition created an opening for political entrepreneurs to gain traction by mobilizing voters on new policy issues.³⁶ By 2002, Dutch politics witnessed an ‘earthquake election’ in which Pim Fortuyn successfully introduced a new dimension of polarization on the basis of issues relating to immigration and to the integration of foreigners into Dutch society.

²⁹ See Arco I. Timmermans, *High Politics in the Low Countries: An Empirical Study of Coalition Agreements in Belgium and the Netherlands* (Aldershot, Surrey: Ashgate, 2003).

³⁰ Timmermans, *High Politics in the Low Countries*.

³¹ Although the CDA did not vocally mobilize on this issue like the small Christian right, see, e.g., Pellikaan, van der Meer and de Lange, ‘The Road from a Depolarized to a Centrifugal Democracy’.

³² Thomas R. Rochon, *The Netherlands: Negotiating Sovereignty in an Interdependent World* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999).

³³ Timmermans, *High Politics in the Low Countries*.

³⁴ Rochon, *The Netherlands*.

³⁵ In the words of the party leader, Prime Minister Wim Kok, the PvdA needed to ‘shake off its ideological feathers’ to attract moderate voters (quoted in Andeweg and Irwin, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*). In addition, the party’s moderation on economic and social welfare issues was driven by coalition-based considerations: namely, that the PvdA’s policy moderation would make it an acceptable partner in a ‘purple’ coalition with the centre-right VVD. In the event, the PvdA’s moderating policy shifts accomplished both objectives in that the party increased its support among moderate voters and also engineered the ‘impossible’ Purple Coalition with the PvdA in 1994 and 1998. On these points, see Rochon, *The Netherlands*.

³⁶ See Pellikaan, van der Meer and de Lange, ‘The Road from a Depolarized to a Centrifugal Democracy’; Sara Hobolt and Catherine de Vries, ‘Issue Entrepreneurship and the Dynamics of Multiparty Competition’ (presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2010).

DID THE DUTCH PUBLIC PERCEIVE AND REACT TO ELITE DEPOLARIZATION?

The policy depolarization between the CDA and the PvdA during the 1980s and the 1990s raises the questions of whether the Dutch public perceived this elite-level depolarization and, if so, whether they depolarized along with the political elites? Here we address these questions with respect to the public as a whole, while the next section addresses subconstituency-based reactions. To assess whether the public perceived elite depolarization, we analysed Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey (DPES) respondents' placements of the CDA and the PvdA on the four policy scales that were included in the 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998 surveys and which relate to the parties' positions on income inequality, nuclear power, euthanasia and Left–Right ideology.³⁷ We focus on the 1986–98 period because the pre-1986 DPES surveys featured different wording for some of the policy scale questions, while the post-1998 Dutch elections – as noted above – have revolved around a new set of policy debates relating to immigration and cultural assimilation, which differ dramatically from the salient policy debates of the 1986–98 period.

In the original version of the surveys, the Left–Right scale ran from 1 to 10 while the three policy scales ran from 1 to 7; however, we recalibrated respondents' party placements on the policy scales to run from 1 to 10 so that these placements could be compared meaningfully with Left–Right party placements. For each scale, higher numbers denote a more right-wing position.³⁸ Table 1 reports, for each scale in each election year, the DPES respondents' mean placements of the CDA and the PvdA, along with the difference between respondents' mean party placements (the 'CDA-PvdA gap'), which provides an index of the policy-based party differences that Dutch respondents perceived. These computations reveal that respondents perceived dramatic party convergence between 1986 and 1998 on the Left–Right dimension, as well as on income inequality policy and on nuclear power. On the Left–Right scale, for instance, respondents placed the CDA at 7.61 (on average) and the PvdA at 2.67 (on average) in 1986, so that they perceived a Left–Right gap between these parties of nearly five units on this 1–10 scale. However, respondents' perceptions of both parties moderated consistently across the 1989, 1994 and 1998 surveys, so that by 1998 DPES respondents placed the CDA at 6.23 and the PvdA at 4.25 (on average); that is, the perceived Left–Right gap between the parties had shrunk to less than two units on the 1–10 scale by 1998, a decline in perceived elite divergence of nearly 60 per cent compared with 1986. The computations in Table 1 reveal that DPES respondents perceived similarly dramatic party policy depolarization on income inequality and nuclear power, but perceived only modest depolarization on the euthanasia issue. These mass-based perceptions accord well with expert accounts of Dutch elites' policy convergence during this period, which (as discussed above) emphasize that the PvdA and the CDA depolarized on social welfare and environmental issues but maintained sharp differences on euthanasia.

³⁷ Of course, there were additional salient issues on the Dutch political agenda at various points during the 1980s and 1990s, such as the placement of cruise missiles on Dutch soil during the 1980s, but unfortunately the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies from this period only consistently included the four scales listed above.

³⁸ We have reversed the policy scales so that higher numbers denote a more conservative position, so that they are consistent with the Left–Right scale. The Appendix to be found on the Cambridge Journals Online website presents the texts of the policy scale questions.

TABLE 1 *Dutch Survey Respondents' Mean Placements of the CDA and the PVDA, 1986–98*

		1986	1989	1994	1998	Change 1986–98
Left–Right	CDA	7.61	7.03	6.45	6.23	–1.38
	PvdA	2.67	3.11	3.72	4.25	+1.58
	CDA–PvdA gap	4.94	3.92	2.73	1.98	–3.06
Income differences	CDA	6.24	6.22	6.10	5.11	–1.13
	PvdA	2.49	2.65	3.36	3.27	+0.78
	CDA–PvdA gap	3.75	3.57	2.75	1.86	–1.91
Nuclear power	CDA	6.42	6.25	6.27	4.84	–1.58
	PvdA	2.02	3.57	3.94	3.88	+1.86
	CDA–PvdA gap	4.40	2.69	2.33	0.96	–3.44
Euthanasia	CDA	7.57	7.81	7.20	7.57	0.00
	PvdA	3.37	3.58	4.00	4.06	+0.69
	CDA–PvdA gap	4.20	4.23	3.20	3.51	–0.69
Average across four scales	CDA–PvdA gap	4.35	3.60	2.75	2.07	–2.28

Notes: The numbers reported in the table are the mean positions that Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents ascribed to the CDA and the PVDA along the Left–Right scale and the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid party placement on the scale (see Appendix on Cambridge University Press website for the wording of the issue scale questions). All four scales run from 1 to 10, with higher numbers denoting a more right-wing response. (We note that in the original surveys the Left–Right scale ran from 1 to 10 while the three issue scales ran from 1 to 7; we have recalibrated the issue scales to run from 1 to 10, so that they are comparable to the Left–Right scale.) The rows labelled ‘CDA–PVDA gap’ report the difference between respondents’ mean placement of the CDA and their mean placement of the PVDA.

Policy-Based Depolarization Trends in the Mass Public

We now consider the question of whether the Dutch public, as a whole, depolarized along with the political elites of the CDA and the PvdA? We initially address this issue by analysing two *policy-based* features of mass depolarization, which relate to citizens’ policy preferences without regard to their party loyalties. The first is the change in the diversity of citizens’ policy preferences. According to this *policy dispersion* criterion, an over-time decrease in the dispersion of Dutch respondents’ self-placements on the policy scales would be evidence of policy-based depolarization; that is, this would indicate that the electorate had converged on policy along with party elites. Adams, Green and Milazzo document that the British public depolarized along with party elites on social welfare policy during the post-Thatcher era,³⁹ while scholars are divided about whether the American public has polarized significantly on policy over the past thirty years, a time period when Democratic and Republican party elites have diverged dramatically.⁴⁰

Table 2, which reports the standard deviations of DPES respondents’ self-placements on the scales relating to income inequality, nuclear power, euthanasia and Left–Right

³⁹ Adams, Green and Milazzo, ‘Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?’

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting*.

TABLE 2 *Standard Deviations of Dutch Survey Respondents' Self-Placements on the Policy Scales, 1986–98*

	1986	1989	1994	1998	Change 1986–98
Left–Right	2.42	2.37	2.08	1.99	–0.43
Income differences	2.55	2.72	2.72	2.36	–0.20
Nuclear power	2.75	2.97	2.90	2.51	–0.24
Euthanasia	3.05	2.97	2.78	2.76	–0.29
Average across 4 scales	2.69	2.76	2.62	2.40	–0.29

Notes: The numbers reported in the table are the standard deviations of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents' self-placements along the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid self-placement on the scale. All four scales are from 1 to 10, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses (see Appendix on the Cambridge University Press Journals website for the wording of the issue scale questions). We note that in the original surveys the Left–Right scale ran from 1 to 10 while the three issue scales ran from 1 to 7; we have recalibrated these issue scales to run from 1 to 10 so that they are comparable to the Left–Right scale. The right-hand-side column gives the change in the standard deviation of respondents' self-placements in 1998 compared to 1986.

ideology, presents evidence that the Dutch public depolarized between 1986 and 1998 according to the policy-dispersion criterion. The table reports these standard deviations on each policy scale for each election year, while the column on the right-hand side reports the change in the standard deviations between 1986 and 1998. These computations reveal that the dispersion of DPES respondents' self-placements declined noticeably on each scale. On the Left–Right scale this standard deviation declined from 2.42 in 1986 to 1.99 in 1998, while there were significant declines in the dispersion of respondents' self-placements on the three policy scales as well. The dispersion of DPES respondents' self-placements, averaged across the four scales, decreased from 2.69 in 1986 to 2.40 in 1998 (see the bottom row of the table).

A second policy-based perspective on mass depolarization pertains to the connections between citizens' positions across different issues, i.e., to what Converse labelled attitude constraint and which we label *policy constraint*.⁴¹ Baldassarri and Gelman analyse attitude constraint in the American public by computing the correlations between survey respondents' self-placements across different policy scales.⁴² According to this perspective, if these correlations decrease over time this constitutes evidence of decreased policy constraint – and hence of depolarization – in the mass public.

Table 3 reports the correlations between DPES respondents' positions across pairs of issues, where these positions are measured via respondents' self-placements on the scales relating to income inequality, nuclear power, euthanasia and Left–Right ideology. The table gives the correlation for each possible issue pair (six pairs in all) for 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998, while the column on the right-hand side reports the change in the correlation for each issue pair between 1986 and 1998. To the extent that these correlations diminished over time will imply that citizens' tendencies to align their positions across different policy/ideological dimensions decreased over the 1986–98 period, i.e., that the Dutch public depolarized according to the policy constraint criterion. The computations reported in

⁴¹ Philip E. Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

⁴² Baldassarri and Gelman, 'Partisans without Constraint', pp. 418–19.

TABLE 3 *Correlations between Dutch Survey Respondents' Self-Placements on Pairs of Issues, 1986–98*

	1986	1989	1994	1998	Change, 1986–98
Left–Right/Income differential	0.43	0.38	0.36	0.35	–0.08
Left–Right/Nuclear power	0.39	0.28	0.33	0.23	–0.16
Left–Right/Euthanasia	0.33	0.34	0.18	0.21	–0.12
Income differential/Nuclear power	0.16	0.09	0.07	0.16	0.00
Income differential/Euthanasia	0.43	0.38	0.36	0.35	–0.08
Euthanasia/Nuclear power	0.33	0.34	0.18	0.21	–0.12
Average across all issue pairs	0.35	0.30	0.25	0.25	–0.09

Notes: This table reports the correlations between Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents' self-placements on the pairs of policy scales listed in the column on the left-hand side, with correlations computed for all respondents who gave valid self-placements on both scales (the question wording for each policy scale is presented in the Appendix on the Cambridge University Press Journals website). The column on the right-hand side reports the change between the correlations for the issue-pair in 1998 compared to 1986.

Table 3 support this hypothesis. The correlations between DPES respondents' self-placements on pairs of issues decreased significantly between 1986 and 1998 for five of the six issue pairs, while on the sixth issue pair (income inequality and nuclear power) there was no change over time. The average correlation across the six issue pairs, which is reported in the bottom row of the table, decreased from 0.35 in 1986 to 0.25 in 1998, which denotes a significant decline in policy constraint in the mass public across this period.

Partisan-Based Depolarization Trends in the Dutch Public

Much of the American and British literature on mass polarization emphasizes the relationship between citizens' partisanship and their policy beliefs. According to this *partisan sorting* perspective, the widening gap between the ideologies of the Democratic and Republican parties-in-Congress has prompted a corresponding divergence between the policy preferences of the parties-in-the-electorate; that is, the difference between the mean policy preferences of Democratic partisans and those of Republican partisans has increased over time.⁴³ Similarly, Adams, Green and Milazzo find that the mean social welfare policy preferences of British Labour and Conservative party supporters have converged during the post-Thatcher era, in tandem with elite depolarization.⁴⁴ These findings imply that, in the

⁴³ See, e.g., Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); Marc Hetherington, 'Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39 (2009), 413–48; Matthew S. Levendusky, 'The Microfoundations of Mass Polarization', *Political Analysis*, 17 (2009), 162–76. We note that this partisan sorting may occur either because citizens shift their partisan loyalties to match their policy attitudes and/or because citizens update their policy attitudes to fit their party identification, see, e.g., Thomas M. Carsey and Geoffrey C. Layman, 'Changing Sides or Changing Minds? Party Identification and Policy Preferences in the U.S. Electorate', *American Journal of Political Science*, 50 (2006), 464–77; Caitlin Milazzo, James Adams and Jane Green, 'Are Voter Decision Rules Endogenous to Parties' Policy Strategies? A Model with Applications to Elite Depolarization in Post-Thatcher Britain', *Journal of Politics* (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ James Adams, Jane Green and Caitlin Milazzo, 'Has the British Public Depolarized along with Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion', *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming).

TABLE 4 *Changes in Dutch Survey Respondents' Mean Self-Placements on the Policy Scales, 1986–98*

		1986	1989	1994	1998	Change, 1986–98
Left–Right	All	5.51	5.43	5.41	5.36	–0.15
	CDA partisans	7.19	6.93	6.45	6.06	–1.13
	PvdA partisans	3.60	3.56	3.96	4.31	0.72
	CDA–PvdA gap	3.59	3.36	2.49	1.75	–1.85
Income diff.	All	4.26	4.29	4.71	4.06	–0.20
	CDA partisans	5.15	4.71	5.11	4.33	–0.81
	PvdA partisans	2.95	2.97	3.54	3.43	0.48
	CDA–PvdA gap	2.20	1.74	1.58	0.91	–1.30
Nuclear power	All	3.34	3.60	3.74	3.44	0.10
	CDA partisans	4.26	4.22	4.48	3.64	–0.62
	PvdA partisans	2.08	2.81	3.15	3.17	1.10
	CDA–PvdA gap	2.18	1.41	1.33	0.47	–1.71
Euthanasia	All	4.60	4.12	3.46	3.76	–0.84
	CDA partisans	6.16	5.53	4.94	5.35	–0.82
	PvdA partisans	3.68	3.11	3.05	3.22	–0.46
	CDA–PvdA gap	2.49	2.42	1.90	2.13	–0.36
Average across all 4 scales		2.62	2.23	1.82	1.31	–1.31

Notes: The numbers reported above are the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents' mean self-placements on the policy scales in the 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998 surveys. Mean self-placements are given for all respondents ('All'); for all respondents who reported that they identified with the CDA ('CDA partisans'); and for all respondents who reported that they identified with the PvdA ('PvdA partisans'). The figures given in the rows labelled 'CDA–PvdA gap' report the differences between the mean self-placements of CDA and PvdA partisans on the policy scale. All four scales are from 1 to 10, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses. (We note that in the original surveys the Left–Right scale ran from 1 to 10, while the three issue scales ran from 1 to 7; we have recalibrated these issue scales to run from 1 to 10, so that they are comparable to the Left–Right scale.) The texts of the policy scale questions are reported in the Appendix available on the Cambridge University Press website.

Netherlands, the policy preferences of the CDA and the PvdA partisans should have converged across the 1986–98 period, as these parties' elites depolarized on policy.

Table 4 reports analyses that pertain to the hypothesis outlined above, with respect to Dutch citizens' partisan sorting on the issues of income inequality, nuclear power, euthanasia and Left–Right ideology. For each policy scale in each election year, the table reports the mean self-placement computed over all respondents; the mean self-placement computed over respondents who reported that they identified with the CDA; and the mean self-placement computed across all PvdA identifiers.⁴⁵ We also report the policy

⁴⁵ Party identification categories were computed by using the party to which an individual said they were an adherent, along with the reply to a follow-up question for respondents who stated that they were not adherents of any party, which asked whether there was a party to which the respondent was primarily attracted. (The texts of both questions are reported in the Appendix available at Cambridge University Press Journals Online.) Respondents who named a party in response to either question were classified as partisans of that party. We note that we recomputed the means reported in Table 4 using a stricter

distance between the mean self-placements of CDA and PvdA identifiers (the ‘CDA–PvdA partisan gap’ variable), which provides an index of the mass-level partisan differences on the policy scale. To the extent that the Dutch public depolarized according to the partisan sorting criterion between 1986 and 1998, we expect the CDA–PvdA partisan gap to diminish over time. The computations reported in Table 4 support this expectation: the mean distance between CDA and PvdA partisans decreased on each policy scale between 1986 and 1998, and on three of the four scales this partisan convergence was dramatic. On Left–Right ideology, for instance, the mean self-placement of CDA partisans was 7.19 in 1986 while the mean self-placement of PvdA partisans was 3.60, so that the partisan gap was about 3.6 units on the 1–10 scale; by 1998 this partisan gap had shrunk to 1.85 units, with CDA supporters self-placing at 6.16 (on average) and PvdA supporters at 4.31 (on average); that is, the distance between the mean Left–Right positions of the CDA’s supporters versus those of the PvdA’s supporters declined by nearly 50 per cent between 1986 and 1998. The partisan convergence between the CDA and the PvdA parties-in-the-electorate was equally dramatic on income inequality and on nuclear power: on both policy scales the CDA–PvdA partisan gap declined by more than 60 per cent between 1986 and 1998.⁴⁶

In sum, we find consistent evidence that the Dutch public depolarized in terms of its policy beliefs and its partisan loyalties between 1986 and 1998. Specifically, we document significant declines in mass *policy dispersion* as measured by the standard deviations of DPES respondents’ self-placements across the policy and ideological scales, and in mass *policy constraint* as reflected in the correlations between respondents’ self-placements across different policy scales. We also document a sharp decline in *partisan sorting*, in that the CDA and PvdA partisans’ policy and Left–Right preferences converged sharply between 1986 and 1998. These partisan-based results suggest that mass–elite policy linkages between the two largest Dutch parties and their supporters changed fundamentally between 1986 and 1998: the 1986 party system featured left-wing and right-wing parties-in-parliament supported by left-wing and right-wing parties-in-the-electorate, but the 1998 party system featured centre-left and centre-right parties-in-parliament supported by centre-left and centre-right parties-in-the-electorate. We conclude that during the 1986–98 period when the Dutch public perceived dramatic elite depolarization between the PvdA and the CDA, the public itself depolarized sharply in terms of its policy beliefs and its partisan loyalties.

Finally, we briefly address the question of how much the mass-level depolarization that we document in the Netherlands between 1986 and 1998 reflects the Dutch public’s response to elite-level policy shifts, as opposed to a reciprocal process whereby party elites reacted to depolarization in the mass public. While it is beyond the scope of this article to

(Footnote continued)

definition of partisanship, which omitted the follow-up question, and these computations supported substantive conclusions that were identical to those we report below.

⁴⁶ We performed additional computations that bear on partisan sorting in the Dutch electorate by computing the correlations between DPES respondents’ self-placements on the policy scales and their *net CDA–PvdA propensity to vote*, defined as the difference between the respondent’s reported propensity to vote for the CDA and her reported propensity to vote for the PvdA. (This measure was based on the respondent’s answers to the following question: ‘Would you indicate for each party how probable it is that you will ever vote for that party?’) We found that the correlations between DPES respondents’ self-placements on the policy scales and their propensities to vote for the CDA versus the PvdA diminished sharply between 1986 and 1998. These computations thereby support the same substantive conclusion as the analyses reported in Table 4.

parse out this issue fully, there is extensive previous research documenting that citizens in Western democracies update both their party attachments and their policy beliefs in response to their perceptions of parties' policy positions.⁴⁷ Given our finding that Dutch citizens clearly perceived the policy depolarization of the CDA and the PvdA during the 1980s and 1990s (see Table 1 above), this suggests that the mass-level policy-based and partisan-based depolarization that we document in the Dutch public between 1986 and 1998 was at least partly a consequence as opposed to a cause of elite-level depolarization. We leave for future research the question of whether the Dutch public's depolarization reciprocally moved the political elites of the CDA and the PvdA to moderate their policies during this period.⁴⁸

SUBCONSTITUENCY-BASED DEPOLARIZATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

We next address the question of whether the mass-level depolarization patterns that we document in the Netherlands extend equally across different subconstituencies in the electorate. Figures 1A–1E, which display the mean perceptions of party Left–Right positions for subgroups defined in terms of political knowledge, political interest, education and income, suggest that the members of all of these subgroups perceived similar degrees of ideological depolarization (on average) between the CDA and the PvdA party elites between 1986 and 1998.⁴⁹ The analyses subdivided by political knowledge (Figure 1A) display the difference between respondents' mean Left–Right placements of

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Marco Steenbergen, Erica E. Edwards and Catherine de Vries, 'Who Is Cueing Whom? Mass-Elite Linkages and the Future of European Integration', *European Union Politics*, 8 (2007), 13–35; Carsey and Layman, 'Changing Sides or Changing Minds?'; Jack Nagel and Christopher Wlezien, 'Centre-party Strength and Major-party Divergence in Britain, 1945–2005', *British Journal of Political Science*, 40 (2010), 279–304; Benjamin Highton and Cindy Kam, 'The Long-Term Dynamics of Partisanship and Issue Orientations', *Journal of Politics*, 73 (2011), 202–15; Logan Dancey and Paul Goren, 'Party Identification, Issue Attitudes, and the Dynamics of Political Debate', *American Journal of Political Science*, 54 (2010), 686–99. This research suggests that the extent to which citizens react to parties' policy positions by updating their own policy beliefs (policy cueing), as opposed to updating their party attachments (party switching), varies with individual-level characteristics such as political knowledge and engagement, along with system-level characteristics such as the degree of party polarization on the focal policy dimension along with the intensity of media coverage on this dimension. For our purposes the important point is that to our knowledge all extant studies of this issue conclude that citizens do indeed react to their perceptions of party policy positions by updating their own policy beliefs and/or their party attachments.

⁴⁸ For comparative studies of whether parties adjust their policy positions in response to public opinion, see, e.g., Lawrence Ezrow, 'The Variance Matters: How Party Systems Represent the Preferences of Voters', *Journal of Politics*, 69 (2007), 182–92; James Adams, Michael Clark, Lawrence Ezrow and Garrett Glasgow, 'Understanding Change and Stability in Party Ideologies: Do Parties Respond to Public Opinion or to Past Election Results?' *British Journal of Political Science*, 34 (2004), 589–610. For more specific studies on the Dutch case, see for example Kees Aarts and Jacques Thomassen, 'Dutch Voters and the Changing Party Space 1989–2006', *Acta Politica*, 43 (2008), 203–34; Oosterwaal and Totenvlied, 'Politics Divided from Society?'

⁴⁹ Our focus on these subgroups is in line with previous research that analyses how mass–elite policy linkages are mediated by citizens' levels of political knowledge, education and income (see, e.g., Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*; Gilens, 'Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness'; Adams and Ezrow, 'Who do European Parties Represent?'). We note that there is (modest) overlap between these individual-level characteristics in that the correlation between these measures ranges from 0.2 (between income and political interest) to 0.4 (between knowledge and political interest). From our perspective, the key question is not whether Dutch citizens' political knowledge correlates with other characteristics such as education, income and political interest, but whether citizens with high levels of political knowledge, education and income have similar perceptions of (and reactions to) elites' policy shifts as do citizens with

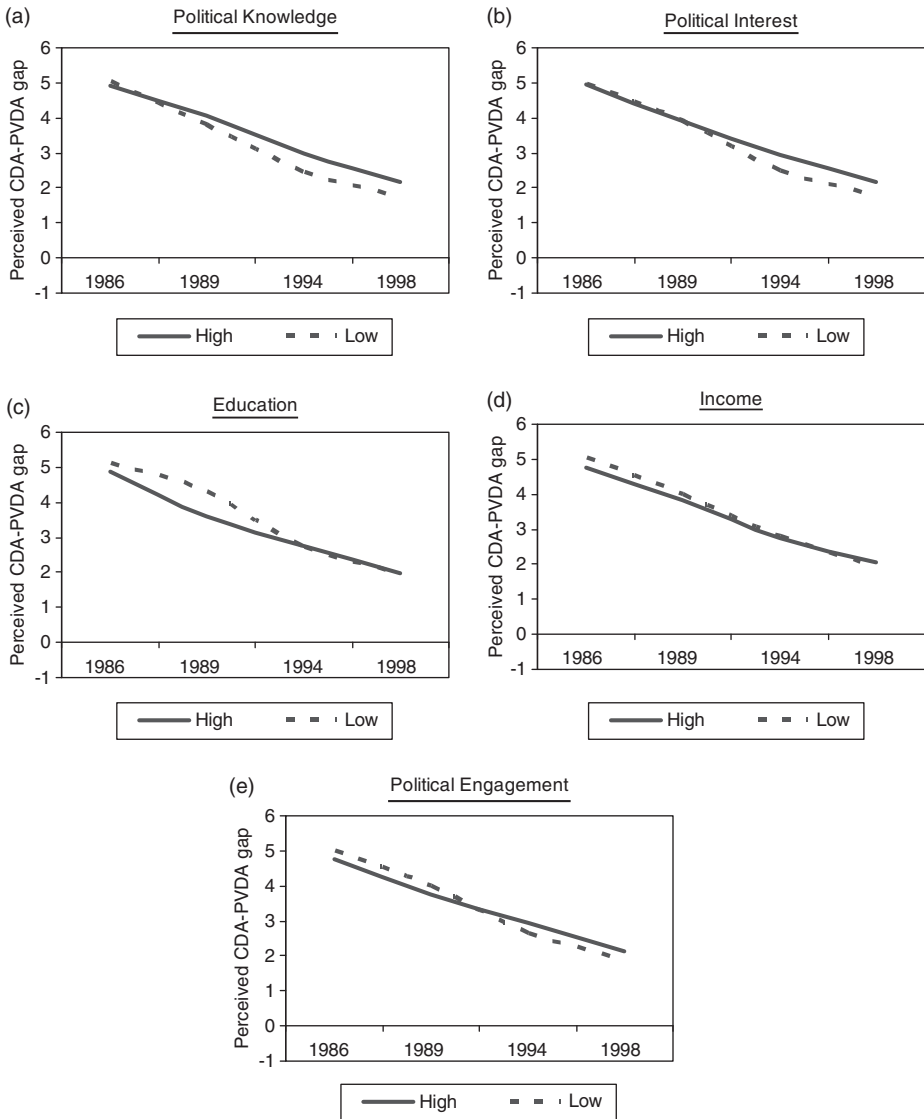


Fig. 1. Respondents' perceptions of differences between the Left–Right positions of the CDA and the PvdA, stratified by subconstituency, 1986–98

Notes: The figures display the differences between the mean Left–Right position that Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents ascribed to the CDA versus the mean position they ascribed to the PvdA on the 1–10 Left–Right scale, across the years 1986–98, and stratified by the respondents' level of political knowledge, political interest, education, income and political engagement. The definitions of these different subconstituencies (high and low political knowledge, political interest, etc.) are given in the text.

(Fnote continued)

lower levels of knowledge, education, income and political interest. The analyses we present below suggest that this is indeed the case.

the CDA and their mean placements of the PvdA (the 'CDA–PvdA gap'), for respondents who scored above-average on a general political knowledge quiz (the solid line) and for those who scored below-average on this quiz (the dotted line).⁵⁰ We see that both the knowledgeable and the less-knowledgeable respondents perceived comparable degrees of elite Left–Right depolarization between 1986 and 1998: for the knowledgeable group, the mean perceived gap between the CDA and the PvdA declined from about 4.9 units on the 1–10 Left–Right scale in 1986 to about 2.5 units in 1998, while for the less knowledgeable group the perceived CDA–PvdA gap declined from about 5.0 units in 1986 to 2.1 units in 1998. Thus, both subgroups perceived comparable degrees of ideological depolarization between party elites across this time period, and in fact less-knowledgeable respondents actually perceived slightly more elite depolarization than did the high-knowledge group.⁵¹

Figure 1B displays trends in DPES respondents' party placements among respondents who displayed high levels of interest in politics versus those who displayed less interest, calculated using the DPES political interest index.⁵² These subconstituency patterns based on political interest are nearly identical to the patterns based on political knowledge that were displayed in Figure 1A above: namely, both the high-interest and the lower-interest subconstituencies perceived nearly identical degrees of Left–Right depolarization between the CDA and the PvdA party elites, across the 1986–98 time period.

Figures 1C and 1D extend these analyses to DPES respondents subdivided by education (Figure 1C) and by income (Figure 1D), i.e., according to whether they ranked in the top or the bottom half of the survey sample in these categories. Education was calculated as the respondent's highest completed education level, which ranged from elementary-only education to university-level education. Income was measured as average household income, ranging in guilders from less than NLG 1,700 to NLG 73,000 or more per year. We observe that over the period 1986–98, each subgroup of respondents – the highly-educated and the less educated, and the more and less affluent – perceived dramatic ideological depolarization between the CDA and the PvdA, and furthermore these perceptions were quite similar across different subconstituencies.

Finally, one might expect that while no single citizen characteristic – i.e., political knowledge, political interest, education, or income – is sufficient to identify a stratum of voters who disproportionately perceived elite depolarization, citizens who possessed combinations of these attributes might be especially likely to perceive elite policy shifts. Figure 1E displays data

⁵⁰ The political knowledge quiz in the DPES consisted of twelve questions. Respondents were presented with pictures of four senior political party members and asked to identify their name, party identification, and function within that party. In 1998, for example, individuals were shown pictures of Jaques Wallage, leader of the PvdA faction in parliament; Thom der Graaf, leader of the D66 faction in parliament; Annemarie Jorritsma, a member of the VVD and minister for transport; and Piet Bukman, member of the CDA and chairman of the Second Chamber. Respondents were coded 'high' on political knowledge if they provided more correct answers than the average respondent in the survey, and 'low' otherwise.

⁵¹ For simplicity, Figure 1 presents subconstituency-based perceptions on the Left–Right scale only; however, the patterns on the policy scales relating to income inequality, nuclear power and euthanasia support identical substantive conclusions.

⁵² The DPES uses an index of political interest developed from four questions, including: how frequently the respondent reads about national news ('nearly always' to 'does not read paper'); how often the respondent discusses national news ('joins conversation' to 'does not listen/not interested'), how often the respondent reads about foreign news ('nearly always' to 'does not read paper'), and the respondent's reported interest in politics ('very interested' to 'not interested'). Respondents were classified as high interest if they scored above the mean on this political interest index, and were classified as low interest if they scored below the mean.

on DPES respondents' perceptions of the parties, for two groups of voters. The first is a *high-engagement* group consisting of DPES respondents who possessed at least three of the following four attributes: they scored above average on the political knowledge quiz; they scored above average on the political interest index; they were above average in educational attainment; they received above-average incomes. The second group consists of *low-engagement* respondents who were below the mean on at least three of these attributes. The patterns displayed in Figure 1E are similar to those for the previous figures: over the period 1986–98, the high-engagement and low-engagement subgroups displayed similar perceptions of the elite-level Left–Right depolarization between the CDA and the PvdA.

Our finding that perceptions of elite policy depolarization cut across Dutch subconstituencies defined in terms of education, income, political knowledge and political interest parallels the findings that Adams, Green and Milazzo report with respect to British subconstituencies' perceptions of elite policy depolarization during the post-Thatcher era.⁵³ By contrast, Hetherington concludes that American subgroups of educated, affluent and politically interested voters have perceived substantially greater increases in the policy polarization of Democratic and Republican party elites over the past thirty years, compared with the perceptions of less affluent and educated citizens.⁵⁴ These patterns support the hypothesis that the unified parliamentary delegations in Western Europe provide clear policy cues that register roughly equally with citizens with different sociodemographic characteristics and levels of political interest, while the more diffuse policy cues provided by the decentralized American political parties register primarily with the subconstituencies of affluent, educated and politically sophisticated citizens.

Subconstituency Depolarization in the Netherlands: A Policy-Based Perspective

While the analyses presented above suggest that Dutch citizens' perceptions of party elites' ideological depolarization between 1986 and 1998 extended to the socioeconomically advantaged and the politically engaged along with the disadvantaged and the less engaged, this does not guarantee that these different subconstituencies reacted similarly to the party convergence they perceived. Suppose, for instance, that politically engaged citizens evaluate parties primarily based on their policy positions, while less-engaged citizens prioritize factors such as national economic conditions and party leaders' personal images.⁵⁵ In this case, we might expect politically engaged citizens – but not the less engaged – to adjust their partisan loyalties in response to elite-level policy depolarization. Similarly, politically knowledgeable, socioeconomically advantaged citizens may differ from other citizens in their openness to elite *policy persuasion*, i.e., in their willingness to shift their policy positions in response to their preferred party's policy shifts.

We begin by analysing whether there were subconstituency-based differences in Dutch citizens' *policy-based* patterns of mass depolarization. Figure 2, which reports changes in the standard deviations of DPES respondents' self-placements on the Left–Right scale

⁵³ Adams, Green and Milazzo, 'Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?'

⁵⁴ Hetherington, 'Resurgent Mass Partisanship'.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Andersen, Heath, and Sinnott, 'Political Knowledge and Electoral Choice'; Michael Clark, 'Valence and Electoral Outcomes in Western Europe 1976–1998', *Electoral Studies*, 28 (2009), 111–22; Ronnie Abney, James Adams, Michael Clark, Malcolm Easton, Lawrence Ezrow, Anja Neundorf and Spyros Kosmidis, 'When Does Valence Matter? On Heightened Valence Effects for Governing Parties during Election Campaigns', *Party Politics* (forthcoming).

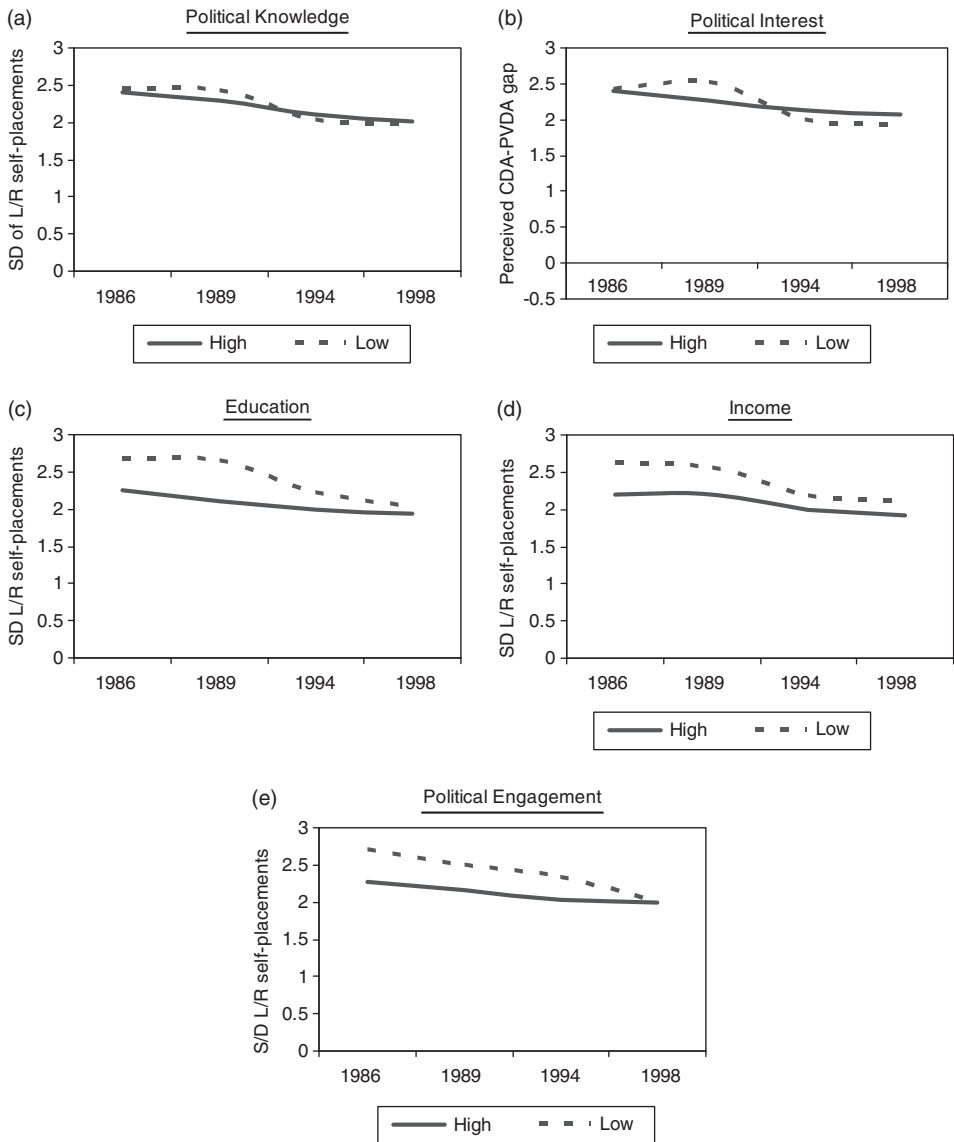


Fig. 2. The standard deviations of respondents' Left-Right self-placements, stratified by subconstituency, 1986-98
 Notes: The figures display the standard deviations of the self-placements of Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents on the 1-10 Left-Right scale, across the years 1986-98 and stratified by the respondent's level of political knowledge, political interest, education, income and level of political engagement. The definitions of these different subconstituencies (high and low political knowledge, political interest, etc.) are given in the text.

between 1986 and 1998, presents evidence on changes in the degree of policy dispersion across different subconstituencies.⁵⁶ The results displayed in Figure 2A show that the

⁵⁶ The patterns on the policy scales relating to income inequality, nuclear power and euthanasia support the same substantive conclusions as the patterns we report here on Left-Right ideology.

degree of policy dispersion among respondents with above-average political knowledge (i.e., those who scored above average on the political knowledge quiz) and those with below-average political knowledge declined nearly equally across this period: for both subgroups, the standard deviation of respondents' Left–Right self-placements declined from roughly 2.4 units in 1986 to 2.0 units in 1998, on the 1–10 Left–Right scale. We observe similar patterns when we compare the subconstituency of respondents who scored above average on the political interest index to the subgroup of lower-interest respondents (Figure 2B). The computations for the remaining subgroups that are subdivided according to their levels of education, income and political engagement (Figures 2C–2E) reveal slightly different patterns: in each case, the socioeconomically disadvantaged subconstituency (i.e., the less educated, the less affluent, and the least politically engaged) was more ideologically dispersed than its socioeconomically advantaged counterpart in the cross-sectional comparisons, and these disadvantaged subconstituencies displayed larger declines in their ideological dispersion across the 1986–98 period. For instance, the standard deviation of less educated DPES respondents' self-placements on the 1–10 Left–Right scale declined from roughly 2.7 units in 1986 to 2.0 units in 1998, a 0.7 decline, while the standard deviation of better-educated respondents' self-placements dropped from roughly 2.2 units in 1986 to 1.9 units in 1998, a 0.3 decline (see Figure 2C). The patterns are similar when DES respondents are subdivided by income (Figure 2D) and political engagement (Figure 2E).⁵⁷ These results suggest that every subgroup that we examined depolarized between 1986 and 1998 according to the policy dispersion criterion, and that to the extent that we identify subconstituency-based differences it was the less-educated and less-affluent subgroups who displayed stronger reactions to the elite-level policy depolarization of the CDA and the PvdA; that is, these subgroups depolarized to a greater extent than did other subconstituencies in the electorate.

Next, we analysed subconstituency-based depolarization differences judged according to the *policy constraint* criterion. Recall that our measure of policy constraint, borrowed from Baldassari and Gelman, relates to the correlations between DPES respondents' positions across pairs of issues, where these positions are measured via respondents' self-placements on the three policy scales and the Left–Right scale.⁵⁸ Figures 3A–3E report these correlations for 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998, averaged across the six possible issue pairs.⁵⁹ The patterns displayed in these figures suggest that all of the subconstituencies that we analysed depolarized, in that the correlations between group members' positions on different issues diminished between 1986 and 1998. Note, furthermore, that the magnitudes of these decreases in policy constraint are similar across all of these subgroups. For instance, among DPES respondents who scored above average on the political interest index the mean correlation between their positions across pairs of issues decreased from 0.37 in 1986 to 0.26 in 1998, a 0.11 decline, while for low-interest respondents this mean correlation decreased from 0.29 in 1986 to 0.18 in 1998, an identical 0.11 decline (see Figure 3B). We observe similar patterns in comparisons of the politically knowledgeable versus the less knowledgeable (Figure 3A),

⁵⁷ As discussed above, the high-engagement subgroup consists of DPES respondents who possessed at least three of the following attributes: they scored above average on the political knowledge quiz; they scored above average on the political interest index; they were above average in education; they were above average in income. The low-engagement group consists of respondents who were below the mean on at least three of these attributes.

⁵⁸ Baldassari and Gelman, 'Partisans without Constraint'.

⁵⁹ As discussed above, the six issue pairs are: Left–Right/income inequality; Left–Right/euthanasia; Left–Right/nuclear power; income inequality/euthanasia; income inequality/nuclear power; euthanasia/nuclear power.

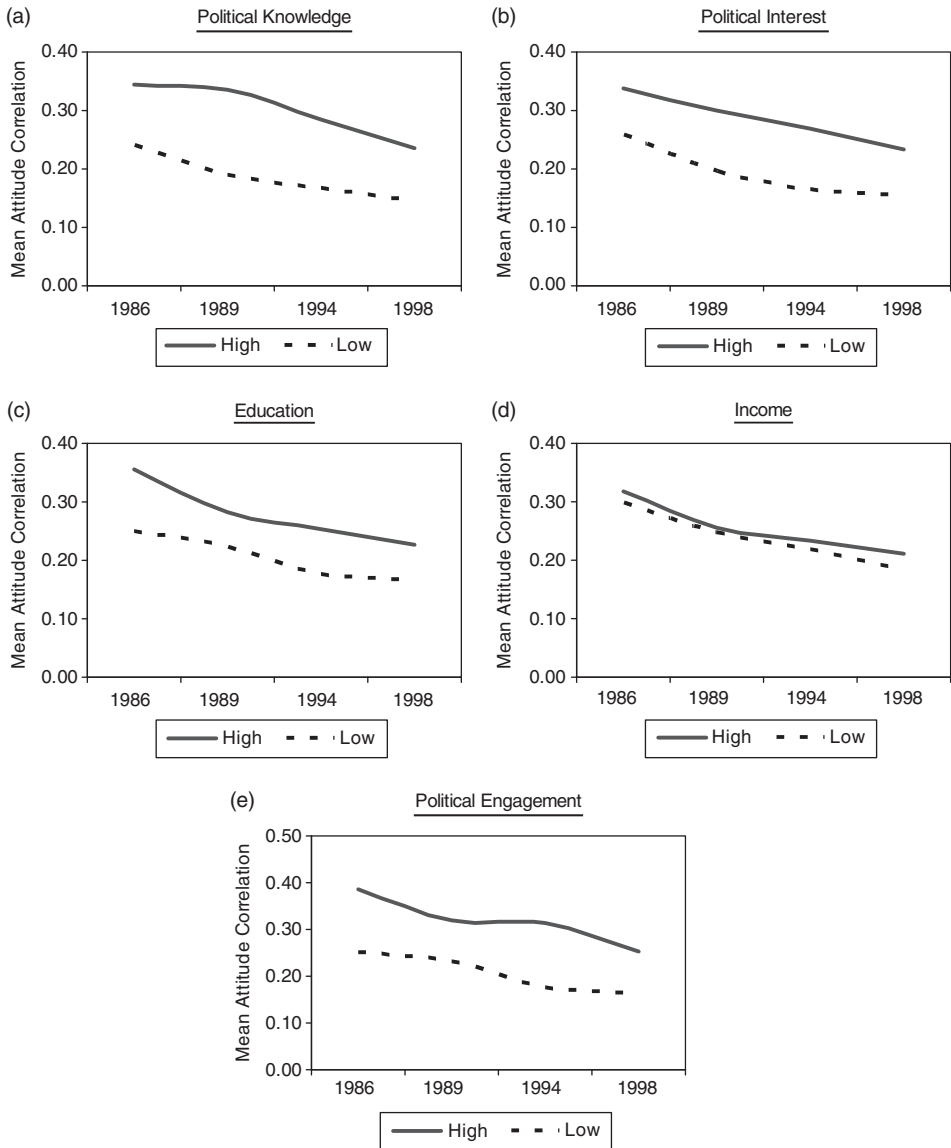


Fig. 3. Correlations between Dutch survey respondents' self-placements on pairs of issues, stratified by subconstituency, 1986–98

Notes: The figures display the mean correlations between Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents' self-placements on pairs of policy scales (the vertical axis in the figures), averaged across the following six issue pairs: Left–Right/income inequality; Left–Right/euthanasia; Left–Right/nuclear power; income inequality/euthanasia; income inequality/nuclear power; euthanasia/nuclear power. These mean correlations are reported across the years 1986–98, and stratified by the respondents' level of political knowledge, political interest, education, income and political engagement. The definitions of these different subconstituencies (high and low political knowledge, political interest, etc.) are given in the text, and the wordings of the policy scale questions are presented in the Appendix on the Cambridge University Press Journals website.

the highly educated versus the less educated (Figure 3C), and the politically engaged versus the less engaged (Figure 3E): namely, in each cross-sectional comparison the more knowledgeable/educated/engaged subconstituency displays modestly higher levels of policy constraint, but in over-time comparisons all subgroups depolarized to roughly the same extent. These patterns on the Netherlands parallel the results that Adams, Green and Milazzo report with respect to Britain during the post-Thatcher period,⁶⁰ namely that more educated and knowledgeable subgroups displayed greater degrees of policy-based polarization than less-educated and knowledgeable subgroups in cross-sectional comparisons, but that all of these subconstituencies displayed comparable over-time changes in their levels of policy polarization.

Subconstituency Depolarization: A Partisan-Based Perspective

Next, we evaluated subconstituency-based differences in Dutch citizens' patterns of mass depolarization, judged according to the *partisan sorting* criterion. Figure 4 reports computations of the differences between the mean self-placements of CDA partisans versus the mean self-placements of PvdA partisans on the 1–10 Left–Right scale (the 'CDA–PvdA partisan gap'), computed across time for different subconstituencies defined in terms of political knowledge and interest, education, income and political engagement.⁶¹ The patterns displayed in these figures suggest that all of these subconstituencies depolarized sharply according to the partisan sorting criterion. Specifically, for each subgroup the mean Left–Right positions of CDA and PvdA supporters converged between 1986 and 1998; that is, the magnitude of the CDA–PvdA partisan gap declined across this period. Furthermore, the degree of partisan-based polarization was similar across all subgroups. Note that to the extent that there were modest differences across subconstituencies, it was the less educated and less politically interested subgroups that actually depolarized to a greater degree than their more educated and interested counterparts (see Figures 4B and 4C). Hence, we find no evidence that more affluent, educated and knowledgeable respondents depolarized disproportionately between 1986 and 1998, according to the partisan sorting criterion.

Overall, we conclude that all of the different Dutch subgroups that we examined – the more and the less politically knowledgeable and politically interested, and the more and the less educated, affluent and politically engaged – depolarized between 1986 and 1998, according to the policy dispersion criterion, the policy constraint criterion and the partisan sorting criterion. Furthermore, we find no evidence that the subconstituencies of more knowledgeable, interested, educated and affluent citizens responded disproportionately to the depolarization between the CDA and PvdA party elites that occurred during the 1980s and the 1990s: across 1986–98, all of these subconstituencies displayed roughly similar over-time changes in the dispersion of their ideological positions, in the correlations between their positions across pairs of issues, and in the differences in the mean positions of CDA partisans versus those of PvdA partisans. Although we detected modest differences in the depolarization patterns across different subconstituencies – in particular, that more knowledgeable/educated/engaged subgroups displayed greater levels of policy constraint in cross-sectional comparisons, while less-knowledgeable/educated/affluent subgroups displayed greater changes in their degrees of

⁶⁰ Adams, Green and Milazzo, 'Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?'

⁶¹ We note that the partisan self-placement patterns on the three policy scales support identical substantive conclusions as the patterns we report here on Left–Right ideology.

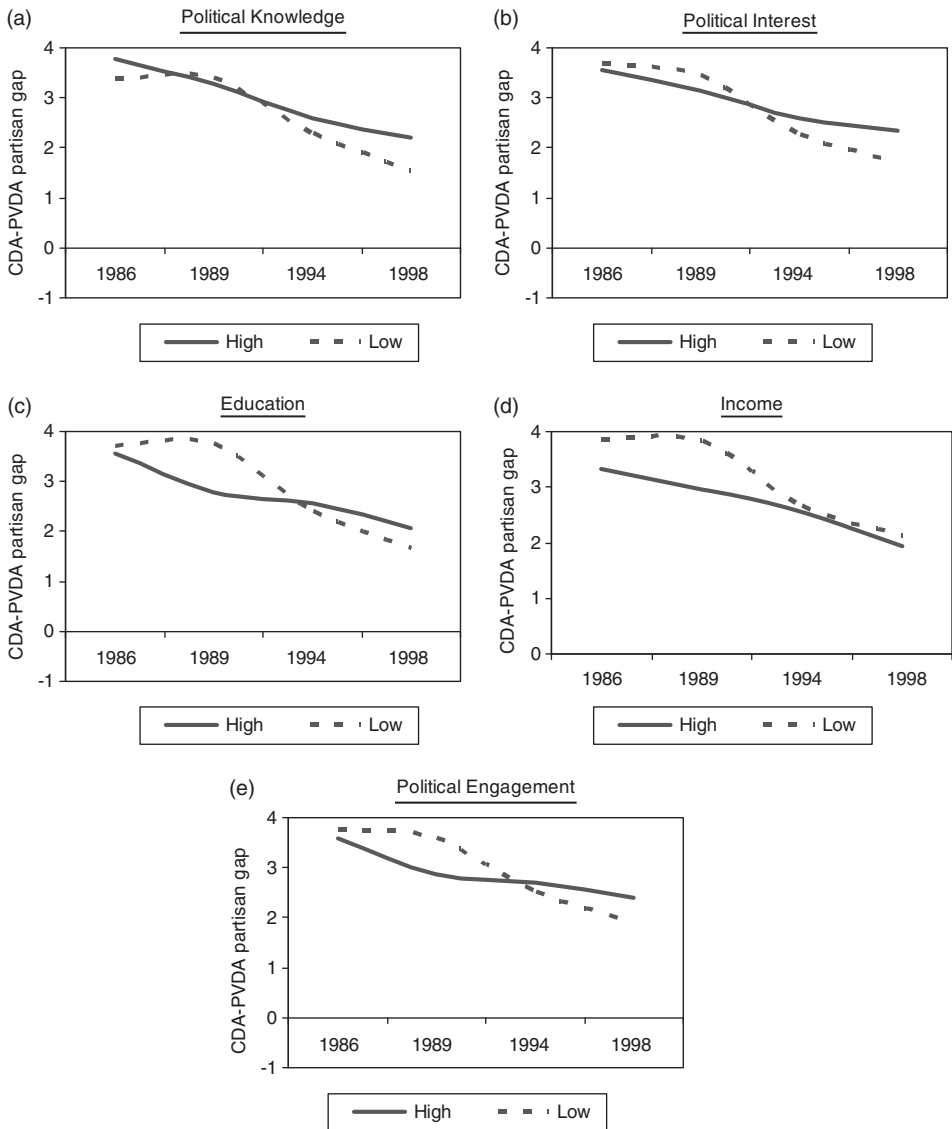


Fig. 4. Gaps between mean Left–Right self-placements of CDA and PvdA partisans, for different subconstituencies, 1986–98

Notes: The figures display the differences between the mean self-placements of Dutch Parliamentary Election Study respondents who identified themselves as CDA partisans versus the mean self-placements of PvdA partisans, on the 1–10 Left–Right scale. The definitions of the different subconstituencies (high and low political knowledge, political interest, etc.) are given in the text.

partisan sorting in over-time comparisons – these differences are trivial compared with the striking similarities across the different subgroups we analysed. Simply put, we find that all of these subconstituencies perceived the elite-level policy depolarization between the CDA and the PvdA that occurred across the 1980s and the 1990s; that these subconstituencies all depolarized across this period according to both policy-based and partisan-based criteria; and that these subgroups all depolarized to roughly the same extent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings on the Netherlands during the 1980s and the 1990s enhance our understanding of mass depolarization trends in western democracies, and also illuminate political developments in the Netherlands over the past decade. With respect to the first point, our findings on the Dutch public parallel those that Adams, Green and Milazzo report on the British public during the post-Thatcher period: namely, that during periods of dramatic elite policy depolarization the mass publics in both countries also depolarized in terms of their policy beliefs and their party attachments, and that these depolarization patterns extended across all the major subgroups in the electorate.⁶² Furthermore, these patterns of electorate-wide depolarization in the Netherlands and Britain contrast with subconstituency-based polarization patterns in the United States, which have occurred disproportionately among the subconstituencies of affluent, educated and politically engaged citizens.⁶³ As we stated in the introduction, we believe the most plausible explanation for these cross-national differences is that the unified parliamentary delegations in Western Europe provide clear policy cues to voters, while the decentralized American political parties provide diffuse policy cues that are difficult for politically unsophisticated citizens to interpret. In this regard, it is significant that the Netherlands and Britain display similar subconstituency-based depolarization patterns, given that these two democracies differ with respect to the number of salient political cleavages, the number of significant political parties and their tendencies to feature single-party as opposed to coalition governments. What unites these two democracies – and what separates them from the United States – is that Britain and the Netherlands – in common with other West European democracies – feature unified parliamentary delegations. Our findings suggest that this feature of West European democracies has a crucial implication for mass–elite policy linkages: namely, that when party elites shift their policy positions, citizens from all walks of life will perceive and react to these policy shifts to roughly the same degree. These electorate-wide reactions that we observe in Western Europe appear normatively desirable, since they give political elites incentives to attach equal weight to all citizens' policy preferences. By contrast, the subconstituency-based reactions that we observe in the United States plausibly motivate political elites to provide unequal representation, i.e., to tailor their policies towards the preferences of the affluent and educated citizens who respond disproportionately to elite policy behaviour.⁶⁴

Our findings on the Dutch public's reactions to elite policy depolarization in the 1980s and 1990s also shed light on the subsequent elite polarization on immigration and cultural issues, which has occurred over the past ten years. The convergence of the two dominant parties on the main dimension of political competition in Dutch politics, namely the Left–Right dimension, opened up the possibility for political entrepreneurs to gain traction by mobilizing new policy issues, such as immigration, in order to reap electoral gains. In addition, our finding that the Dutch public followed political elites by converging on Left–Right ideology plausibly illuminates why political entrepreneurs did not seek to 'enter' the Dutch party system by mobilizing extremist voters on traditional

⁶² Adams, Green and Milazzo, 'Which Voting Subconstituencies Have Reacted to Elite Depolarization in Britain?'

⁶³ See, e.g., Hetherington, 'Resurgent Mass Partisanship'; Baldassarri and Gelman, 'Partisans without Constraint'.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*; Gilens, 'Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness'.

Left–Right issues: namely, the supply of voters who held extreme viewpoints on these types of issues declined sharply across the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the public and mainstream party depolarization on the traditional Left–Right dimension created additional incentives for political entrepreneurs to mobilize new policy issues. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, political entrepreneurs did exactly that by highlighting the immigration issue. By 2002, Dutch politics witnessed an ‘earthquake election’ in which Pim Fortuyn successfully introduced a new dimension of polarization on the basis of issues relating to immigration and to the integration of foreigners into Dutch society. We believe that our analyses of mass and elite depolarization on traditional Left–Right issues (along with euthanasia) during the 1980s and the 1990s thereby illuminate the subsequent polarization of Dutch elites and the mass public on immigration and cultural issues.