

Lokaal en landelijk in Limburg : veranderingen in de Limburgse lokale politiek

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Summary

A striking feature of local politics in the Dutch province of Limburg is the traditionally strong position of independent political groups. Until the 1970s, municipal elections in most municipalities were not contested by national parties. In the last two decades a remarkable process of nationalisation took place, leading to important changes in the structure and culture of local politics in Limburg. This monograph offers an exploration of local political systems dominated by independent or local lists, as well as the backgrounds and effects of this nationalisation process.

The analysis of political changes in Limburg municipalities cannot be isolated from an analysis of some other developments in the Limburg society at large. Chapter 2 therefore deals with the historic, social-economic and cultural context of local politics in this province. The peripheral position of Limburg within the Netherlands, in terms of both geography and culture, provides a natural background for different features of electoral behaviour at national and provincial elections. From 1946 to 1963 the Catholic People's Party (KVP) obtained about 80 percent of the vote in Limburg. This is explained by the existence of a catholic mono-culture in the southern part of the Netherlands, coupled with the pillarisation ('verzuiling') of Dutch society. Processes of secularisation and depolarisation became manifest in the 1960s. In the short period between 1963 and 1972 votes for the Catholic People's Party dropped to circa 40 percent. The Social-Democrat Labour Party (PvdA) established itself as the second largest party in Limburg, assembling approximately a third of the electorate in the eighties.

The third chapter focuses on the results of post-war municipal elections. The virtual absence of the KVP on the municipal level is explained by the fear of dissidentism and the lack of competition between the KVP and other national parties in this part of the country, as well as the hostile attitude of local political elites. The other national parties failed to gain enough membership and support to contest local elections. At the wake of the changes mentioned in electoral behaviour, however, their chances of success were growing in the seventies, resulting in a rapid expansion of their local branches and lists presented at municipal elections. This expansion in turn provoked a reaction of the Christian-Democrat Appeal (CDA), the successor-party of the KVP, formed at the end of the seventies. Making use of the possibilities offered by the enlargement of scale, due to municipal restructuring in 1982 and 1989, this party succeeded in setting up local branches in almost every municipality. Many former independents (individuals and groups) crossed over to the Christian-Democrats. The PvdA followed suit, whereas the other parties lagged far behind the Christian-Democrats and Social-Democrats, in their number of local branches.

This process of penetration of national parties in the local arena radically changed the structure of most local political systems. National party-lists gained a majority of seats in two-thirds of the municipal councils. The CDA evolved as the strongest party group in almost 70 percent of the councils in Limburg. The independent groups retained only about 40 percent of the seats between 1990 and 1994, although in some municipalities they regained some of their lost territory. A massive regrouping of local lists took place in the eighties. As a result the traditional fragmentation of these lists diminished.

In chapter 4 we concentrate on these local lists or independent groups. Drawing on the results of a survey of independent leaders in fifteen municipalities, the profile, the organisation and the functioning of the concerning groups is compared with local branches of national parties. The survey gives an indication of the situation in the period between 1986 and 1990. In addition, the results of several longitudinal case-studies are used to reconstruct developments in greater detail.

Local lists are classified according to the social cleavages which they are linked to as territorial (representing villages or neighbourhoods), social-economic (representing professions or classes), cultural (representing voluntary associations) or personal lists. In the seventies a fifth category entered the local arena, comprising lists aiming at a renewal of the political structure and culture, and opposing the political establishment often focusing on specific policy issues. The social-economic and cultural cleavages seem to have lost political relevance in the post-war period. Classification of most of the lists under investigation, however, remained highly ambiguous.

Local branches of national parties and independent groups differ greatly in their organisation. The former are structured in conformity with national regulations, prescribing (among others) the possibility of membership and a separation of the council group and the board of the party-branch. Local lists in general are loosely organised groups, which come close to the type of political organisation Duverger dubbed caucuses. In coherence with these findings, the order of candidates on most local lists is decided on in an informal way, whereas within local branches of national parties this same decision is strictly guided by procedural regulations. Another marked difference exists between the two types of groups on a second basic function of political parties, the articulation of policy objectives.

Many local lists did not present a party manifesto and if they did, they amounted to one or two pages only. Lists of national parties provided on the contrary rather elaborate manifestos. In face of the increasing competition between national and local lists and the restructuring of the latter, a process of professionalisation of local lists is taking place, which tends to reduce the differences, highlighted in this chapter.

The consequences of the differing organisational outlook of national and local lists on the links between citizens and politicians are elaborated in chapter 5. It is concluded that the links between the electorate and local politicians are characterised by rather strong personal and often clientelistic orientations. Clientelism is deeply rooted in the Limburg political culture; it has proved to be an effective way of securing votes and of accommodating the demands and pressures of citizens vis-a-vis the local political

system. The introduction of national political parties on the local level even enhances more effective clientelistic activities based on intra-party links between local, regional and European level.

In chapter 6 we take a closer look at the characteristics of local political leaders and at the processes of candidate recruitment and selection. Using the findings of the survey mentioned earlier, two (ideal-)types of political leaders are distinguished. The first type of leaders is attached to the local lists and the CDA-lists. Leaders of these political parties are in their fifties, they are 'real locals' and they show a high level of activity in the community life. These activities played an important role during their recruitment as local politicians.

Leaders of the second type belong to lists of the other national parties. These leaders are comparatively young, well educated and less active in voluntary associations. In their case the level of party-activism constituted the most important factor leading to their own recruitment as candidates. Women are very rare among political leaders of all parties.

The differences between leaders of local lists and CDA-lists on the one hand and other national lists on the other hand, are expected to decrease as a result of the strengthening of the role of political parties (i.e. local branches of national parties or professionalised independent groups) as recruitment agencies.

Chapter 7 deals with local coalition formation in the province of Limburg. The executive of Dutch municipalities consists of an appointed burgomaster and two or more aldermen, who are elected by the municipal council. In most Dutch municipalities a tradition of accommodation has been established by applying the unwritten rule that aldermen are chosen proportionately ('afspiegeling'). As a consequence they are usually elected by large majorities.

This has not been the case in most Limburg municipalities during the period where national lists were not involved in the process of coalition formation. Consensus has been the exception rather than the rule. Most executives were supported by a small and in many cases unstable majority of council-members.

The nationalisation of local politics in Limburg changed this traditional pattern of coalition behaviour. By and large, coalitions formed in the period between 1982 and 1990, gained more support in the respective councils than in the previous period. Moreover, about two-thirds of the political leaders included in our survey showed a positive attitude towards the formation of 'grand coalitions' instead of coalitions supported by a small majority of council-members. Exceptions to the 'afspiegeling'-rule were mostly due to a certain antagonism between the Christian-Democrats and the largest independent group represented in the council. In many other instances, however, this cleavage between the largest national and local lists did not emerge during the process of coalition formation. As a result, 'grand coalitions' between local and national lists were quite frequent during the last decade.

Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the findings of the previous chapters.