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# Inhalt

## BEITRÄGE ZUM RAHMENTHEMA

»DEMOKRATIE PRAKTIZIEREN. ARENEN, PROZESSE UND UMBRÜCHE POLITISCHER PARTIZIPATION IN WESTEUROPA IM 19. UND 20. JAHRHUNDERT«

<i>Anja Kruke/Philipp Kufferath</i> , Einleitung: Krisendiagnosen, Meistererzählungen und Alltagspraktiken. Aktuelle Forschungen und Narrationen zur Demokratiegeschichte in Westeuropa.....	3
<i>Niels Grüne</i> , Ländliche Gesellschaft und demokratische Partizipation. Politische Translokalisierung in deutschen Regionen vom späten Ancien Régime bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts .....	21
<i>Theo Jung</i> , Auftritt durch Austritt. Debattenboykotts als parlamentarische Praxis in Großbritannien und Frankreich (1797–1823) .....	37
<i>Anne Engelst Nørgaard</i> , A Battle for Democracy. The Concept of Democracy in the Constitutional Struggle, Denmark 1848–1849 .....	69
<i>Thomas Mergel</i> , Betrug, Gewalt, Stimmenkauf. Wahlkulturen in Europa im Übergang zum politischen Massenmarkt, 1860–1914.....	85
<i>Anne Heyer</i> , Die ersten Volksparteien? Ein vergleichender Blick auf das Demokratieverständnis früherer Parteiorganisationen im Deutschen Kaiserreich, in Großbritannien und in den Niederlanden (1860–1880).....	107
<i>Paul Lukas Hähnel</i> , Mehrebenen-Parlamentarismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich. Eine quantitative und qualitative Bestandsaufnahme parlamentarischer Doppelmandate .....	125
<i>James Retallack</i> , August Bebel. A Life for Social Justice and Democratic Reform	145
<i>Nathalie Le Bouëdec</i> , Das Gericht als Arena demokratischen Handelns? Ansätze zur Beteiligung des Volkes an der Rechtsprechung in Deutschland in der frühen Weimarer Republik und den ersten Nachkriegsjahren ab 1945 .....	163
<i>Harm Kaal</i> , The Voice of the People. Communicative Practices of Popular Political Engagement in the Netherlands, 1950s–1960s .....	183
<i>Claudia Christiane Gatzka</i> , Die Blüte der Parteiendemokratie. Politisierung als Alltagspraxis in der Bundesrepublik, 1969–1980 .....	201
<i>Anna Catharina Hofmann</i> , Demokratie praktizieren in einer Diktatur? Politische Partizipation und ihre Grenzen im späten Franco-Regime (1966–1973) .....	225
<i>Liesbeth van de Grift</i> , Representing European Society. The Rise of New Representative Claims in 1970s European Politics .....	263
<i>Giulia Quaggio</i> , Social Movements and Participatory Democracy. Spanish Protests for Peace during the Last Decade of the Cold War (1981–1986) .....	279

## FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE UND SAMMELREZENSIONEN

<i>Maren Möhring</i> , Jenseits des Integrationsparadigmas? Aktuelle Konzepte und Ansätze in der Migrationsforschung.....	305
<i>Martin Rempe</i> , Ambivalenzen allerorten. Neue Forschungen zur Geschichte der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit .....	331
<i>Frank Wolff</i> , In der Teilung vereint. Neue Ansätze der deutsch-deutschen Zeitgeschichte .....	353
Summaries.....	393
Résumés .....	399
Die Autorinnen und Autoren des Bandes .....	407
Rahmenthema des nächsten Bandes des »Archiv für Sozialgeschichte« .....	412

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Harm Kaal

## The Voice of the People

### Communicative Practices of Popular Political Engagement in the Netherlands, 1950s–1960s\*

This article discusses how interaction between politicians and the people shaped Dutch political culture in the 1950s and 1960s. First, a range of communicative practices will be mapped through which politicians and the people interacted, practices to which historians have hitherto paid scant attention in their studies on post-war political history: the letters citizens sent to politicians, their notes placed in suggestion boxes, surveys that polled popular opinion and the questions people addressed to politicians live on television. I will analyse how, through these practices, both politicians and the people they represented articulated new notions of democracy and political representation. Second, based on a unique set of sources – the letters people addressed to Prime Minister Jo Cals after his forced resignation in October 1966 – I will delve deeper into the question of how citizens made sense of politics and political representation amidst this transformation of Dutch political culture.

Historians interested in studying the participation of citizens in modern parliamentary democracies have hitherto focused mainly on collective forms of political engagement. In a recent study, the history of democracy is defined as a »history of practices that were often used simultaneously in order to *organize* democracy«, which suggests that practising democracy was a collective act.<sup>1</sup> For much of their historical trajectory, parliamentary democracies have indeed been marked by a culture of popular participation through collective action and mass mobilisation. For one, the rise of parliamentary democracy as a political system in the 19th century was connected to the activities of voluntary associations that »stimulated citizens to redefine their relation to the state, forge new political identities and negotiate the boundaries of what was considered politics«. <sup>2</sup> Moreover, towards the end of the 19th century, mass political parties emerged across Europe and soon started to dominate parliamentary politics.<sup>3</sup> Political participation beyond the institutional framework of party and parliament has been mostly studied in its collective, activist forms, such as (mass) demonstrations, strikes and petitions.<sup>4</sup> In recent scholarship, the history of collective political participation is often narrated as one of decline. Political parties in particular have supposedly lost their status as trustworthy intermediaries between politics and the people and have merged with the state to such an extent that it is hard to distinguish

\* I would like to thank the participants at the *Autorenworkshop* in Berlin, November 2017, as well as the editors of the »Archiv für Sozialgeschichte« for their valuable feedback. Thanks also go to Paul Reef for his assistance in data collection.

1 *Henk te Velde/Maartje Janse*, Introduction: Perspectives on Political Organizing, in: *id.* (eds.), *Organizing Democracy. Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke 2017, pp. 1–18, here: p. 2.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Bernard Manin*, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge/New York etc. 1997.

4 *Matthias Reis* (ed.), *The Street as Stage. Protest Marches and Public Rallies since the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford/New York etc. 2007; *Lisa Keller*, *Triumph of Order. Democracy and Public Space in New York and London*, New York 2009; *Belinda Davis*, *What's Left? Popular Political Participation in Postwar Europe*, in: *AHR* 113, 2008, pp. 363–390; *Stefan Jonsson*, *Crowds and Democracy. The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism*, New York 2013.

between the two. This leaves citizens feeling abandoned and alienated from the political sphere.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I aim to move beyond this narrative of decline. In order to achieve a proper understanding of the relationship between politics and the people in post-war democracies, we need to delve deeper into practices of popular participation in and engagement with politics beyond the framework of party, protest march or picket line. In 2013, taking stock of the state of research in political history, Willibald Steinmetz and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt concluded that »governments, monarchs, parties, or parliaments [...] still get the bulk of the attention«.<sup>6</sup> My aim is to add to an emerging body of work that approaches politics »from below«, from the perspective of ordinary citizens. One might argue that »from below« does not quite capture the essence of this new scholarship, which actually focuses more on the interaction between politicians and the people: on the collision of »two very separate worlds [...] the formal political world of »representation« and the informal political world of everyday life«.<sup>7</sup> This collision took place in a range of arenas. Citizens engaged in politics in the confines of their own homes, for instance by writing letters to politicians, but often the interaction between politicians and the people was also highly mediated: from the late 1950s onwards, across Western Europe, television developed into one of the most prominent arenas for communication between citizens and the politicians who claimed to represent them. Studying this interaction enables me to identify changing conceptions of political representation on the part of both politicians and the people. In her analysis of »politics as linguistic performance«, Angelika Linke stresses that political identities are not stable and self-evident, but are instead actively constructed and acted out through language and behaviour in a range of practices and contexts. She introduces the concepts of »communicative practice« and »doing being« to express the dynamic and performative nature of identities.<sup>8</sup> Both concepts are also helpful to analyse the relationship between politicians and the people in the first post-war decades.

From the 1950s onwards, in the Netherlands as elsewhere in Western Europe, the notion of »the people« was fundamentally reconceptualised. In what Bernard Manin has characterised as the era of party democracy – roughly between the late 19th century and the 1960s – political representatives had represented the groups constituting society. In the 1950s, this idea of society being divided into distinct blocs began to lose force; the structures that had enabled politicians and citizens to make sense of the people – of themselves – in terms of distinct, homogeneous communities united around identities of class or religion were shifting.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the concept of the people became somewhat diffuse. This was a potential danger to the stability of parliamentary democracy. After all, the stability and legitimacy of a representative system depends on the ability of politicians to translate the abstract notion of the people into meaningful categories to which both politicians and the people

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- 5 For a historical analysis of the development of the relationship between party and state, see *John Keane*, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, London 2009; *Pepijn Corduwener*, Institutionalizing the Democratic Party-State: Political Parties as »Public Utilities« in Italy and West Germany, 1945–75, in: *European Review of History* 25, 2018, pp. 101–120; *Peter Mair*, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London 2013; *Colin Crouch*, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2004.
- 6 *Willibald Steinmetz/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt*, The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach, in: *Willibald Steinmetz/Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt* (eds.), *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2013, pp. 11–33, here: p. 20.
- 7 *Jon Lawrence*, *Electing our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford/New York etc. 2009.
- 8 *Angelika Linke*, Politics as Linguistic Performance: Function and Magic of Communicative Practices, in: *Willibald Steinmetz* (ed.), *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes*, Oxford 2011, pp. 53–66, here: pp. 56f.
- 9 *Manin*, *The Principles of Representative Government*.



they claim to represent can relate; categories with which voters can identify. Politicians therefore started to look for new ways to develop a connection with citizens and communicate with them. Against this background, in the 1950s and 1960s the Netherlands witnessed the emergence of a range of practices of communication between politicians and the people that together gave shape to a new political culture. Although parliament remained a prominent arena for democratic politics, other arenas emerged that brought politicians and the people together in new communicative settings, which the politicians did not necessarily control. Politicians nonetheless played an active role in this transformation by initiating new forms of interaction. Amid complaints about a growing divide between politicians and the people, they acknowledged that performing one's role as MP by contributing to debates in parliament, defending the principles of one's own party or holding speeches for an audience of party members was no longer enough.

Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that with the demise of party democracy, representatives were no longer expected to »make present« the various groups in society but to »be present«. Being present means that representatives were expected to present themselves as understanding and to some extent sharing the everyday experiences of citizens, their »trials and tribulations«. Although Rosanvallon presents this as a rather recent development, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that already from the 1950s onwards being an MP involved a range of practices through which politicians opened themselves up to public input and displayed their responsiveness to the issues and concerns on the minds of citizens, as I aim to show in this study.<sup>10</sup> In the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Western Europe, the mass media – television in particular – played a prominent role both in highlighting the »gap« between politicians and the people and in offering arenas for interaction between politicians and the people.

The concept of audience democracy, coined by Bernard Manin, only partially captures this new culture of political representation. Citizens were more than the passive consumers of information presented to them through the media, but were instead actively shaping this new political culture.<sup>11</sup> Performing one's role as »democratic subject« also changed. In the early post-war years, citizens did so by casting their ballot, placing a poster in their window, becoming a member of a political party and occasionally visiting one of its meetings. In fact, doing being a democratic citizen was maybe even more about what people *did not do*. In the post-war years of reconstruction, the repertoire of collective action, such as strikes or demonstrations, clashed with the dominant values of hard work, restraint and trust in the ability of the democratically elected representatives to redevelop the country and work towards an affluent society.<sup>12</sup> From the mid-1950s onwards, however, being a democratic citizen came to encompass a range of practices of popular engagement. Some of these were collective in nature, while others were the acts of individual citizens seeking interaction with their political representatives. Taken together, these practices expressed a growing sense of self-awareness and assertiveness among Dutch citizens.

The first part of this article discusses why and how politicians started to look for new forms of communication with the people they represented throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Research is based on the archives of political parties, particularly the minutes of the meetings of party committees that discussed communication strategies, and the discussion of

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10 *Pierre Rosanvallon*, *Democratic Legitimacy. Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity*, Princeton 2011, p. 188.

11 *Manin*, *The Principles of Representative Government*.

12 *Kees Schuyt/Ed Taverne*, 1950. Welvaart in zwart-wit. De Nederlandse wederopbouw in 12 beelden, The Hague 2004; *Harm Kaal*, *Popular Politicians: The Interaction between Politics and Popular Culture in the Netherlands, 1950s–1980s*, in: *Cultural & Social History* 15, 2018, URL: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2018.1492787>> [16.10.2018].

new forms of communication in the press. In the second part of this article, I use the controversial resignation of Prime Minister Jo Cals in October 1966 as a lens through which to explore the transformation of Dutch political culture in the 1950s and 1960s. This includes both an in-depth analysis of how citizens perceived and made sense of parliamentary politics and political leadership and an assessment of the role played by the mass media – TV in particular – in shaping these perceptions. Here, research is based on the letters citizens sent to Cals following his resignation and the manner in which his resignation and its aftermath were treated on television and in the press.

## I. PRACTICES OF POPULAR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

In the Netherlands, the political culture of the early post-war years was marked by restraint, trust in the political system and, given the recent experiences of political extremism, distrust of forms of interaction and representation that deviated from the formal institutions and procedures of democratic, parliamentary politics. Political elites did not perceive democracy as government *by* the people, but *for* the people, people who had placed their trust in their elected representatives.<sup>13</sup> The Netherlands were an example of the broader political culture of the early post-war decades in Western Europe, which Martin Conway has characterised as »neat, controlled and ever so slightly boring«. In an age of »muted temper«, governments were dominated by »middle-aged and middle-class men in suits« who ruled in »relative anonymity«. Distance marked the relationship between politicians and the people they represented. In countries like Britain and the Netherlands, both politicians and the press increasingly started to identify this as a problem in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> One of the main reasons for this was fear for the impact of the rise of an industrialised, mass society on the relationship between politicians and the people. Intellectual and political elites had begun to link this social trend with feelings of alienation, disengagement and isolation.<sup>16</sup> Against this background, the distance between politicians and the people turned from a key aspect of post-war democratic politics into a major flaw of the system. In a Dutch Catholic newspaper, the language and behaviour of politicians was, for instance, criticised for being too »academic«, which supposedly resulted in a loss of interest in politics among ordinary citizens.<sup>17</sup> In response to this, Dutch politicians started to look for new ways to connect with citizens. They first of all concluded that active, civic engagement was needed in order to create and maintain a »healthy« democracy. Attempts to promote democratic forms of participatory citizenship often had a paternalistic undertone and have been characterised as examples of guided self-development:<sup>18</sup> political and social elites were offering citizens practices through which they could enact their democratic citizenship.<sup>19</sup> Second, politicians concluded that they had to change as well, that they had to open themselves up to input »from below« and be transparent when it came to decision-making and opinion-formation within political parties or other civil society organisations.<sup>20</sup> Dis-

13 Wim de Jong, *Van wie is de burger? Omstreden democratie in Nederland 1945–1985*, Nijmegen 2014, p. 122.

14 Martin Conway, *Democracy in Postwar Western Europe: The Triumph of a Political Model*, in: *EHQ* 32, 2002, pp. 59–84, here: pp. 59f.

15 Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, pp. 154f.

16 Schuyt/Taverne, 1950. *Welvaart in zwart-wit*, pp. 383f.

17 Nederland stemt degelijk en zonder opwindig, in: *De Tijd*, 14.6.1952.

18 Kaal, *Popular Politicians*.

19 Schuyt/Taverne, 1950. *Welvaart in zwart-wit*, p. 384; *De Jong*, *Van wie is de burger?*, pp. 120f.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 144f.

playing responsiveness to the ideas and issues on the minds of ordinary people turned into a core democratic value.<sup>21</sup>

One of the practices that gave shape to a more engaged, participatory political culture was the suggestion box (*ideeënbus* in Dutch). These boxes were far from a new invention, but in the 1950s they were something of a craze in the Netherlands. Experts in the field of management and organisational sociology promoted suggestion boxes as an excellent tool to counter workplace alienation caused by functional specialisation, to bring workers and management closer together, and to stimulate the development of a critical attitude, independent thinking and a sense of commitment to the organisation among employees.<sup>22</sup> The boxes tied in with the discourse of post-war reconstruction as a joint responsibility of society at large: everybody from the shop floor to the boardroom was expected to contribute for the greater good of society. They soon also popped up in the political sphere. In the mid-1950s, they were introduced at several government agencies, and a couple of years later the national government hosted an exhibition in The Hague of the inventions and improvements which had been achieved thanks to suggestions handed in by dedicated civil servants.<sup>23</sup> In 1957, inspired by its Austrian sister party, the »Partij van de Arbeid« (PvdA) introduced a »suggestion box of democracy« (*Ideeënbus der democratie*): the Dutch social democrats distributed more than 300,000 questionnaires across the country asking people about their opinion on current social and political issues. Some 80,000 forms were filled in, mostly but not exclusively by people who sympathised with the PvdA.<sup>24</sup> The social democrats argued that the boxes were an excellent tool for boosting civic engagement and to get people thinking about key political issues.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, the questionnaire resembled an opinion survey. Querying the public about their opinion on the issues of the day formed yet another practice that expressed a new appreciation of the relationship between politicians and the people. Opinion polls based on the method developed by American polling pioneer George Gallup were introduced in much of Western Europe shortly after the Second World War. The proliferation of these opinion polls went hand in hand with a new perception of the public and a reconceptualisation of the notion of public opinion.<sup>26</sup>

At first, many politicians in the Netherlands were somewhat hesitant when it came to embracing this new, supposedly scientific method. Social democrats were worried that asking people for their opinion on complex issues that were beyond their reach could harm the system of political representation. After all, parliamentary democracy was based on people's trust in the competence of their representatives to do what was best in the interest

21 See also: *Kaal*, *Popular Politicians*.

22 *Gerard Groot*, *Ideeën van personeel vaak zeer waardevol voor bedrijven*, in: *De Tijd*, 25.9.1954; *Informatienota »ideeënbus« met resultaten met de Ideeënbus-enquete begin 1959*, ed. by Netherlands Instituut voor Efficiency, The Hague 1959; *Handleiding ideeënbus*, ed. by id., The Hague 1963.

23 *Centrale ideeënbus-commissie voor de rijksdienst geïnstalleerd*, in: *Leeuwarder Courant*, 20.10.1954; *Rijksideeënbus-tentoonstelling*, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 19.10.1957.

24 *Jaarverslag PvdA 1956–1958*, International Institute of Social History (IISH), PvdA Archive, inv. no. 2090.

25 *Verrassend resultaat*, in: *Het Parool*, 26.2.1958; *Wat kwam er uit de ideeënbus der democratie*, ed. by *Partij van de Arbeid*, Amsterdam 1958.

26 *Anja Kruke*, *Demoskopie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Meinungsforschung, Parteien und Medien 1949–1990*, Düsseldorf 2007; *Laura Beers*, *Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes towards Opinion Polling in British Politics, 1937–1964*, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 17, 2006, pp. 177–205; *Wim de Jong/Harm Kaal*, *Mapping the Demos: The Scientisation of the Political, Electoral Research and Dutch Political Parties, c. 1900–1980*, in: *CEH* 26, 2017, pp. 111–138.

of all. If polls were treated as some sort of referendum, it might threaten the position of parliament. Advocates of opinion polls, on the other hand, argued that polls served the interests of true democrats. First of all, polls confronted politicians with opinions that would otherwise have remained unnoticed and could help to counter the claims of demagogues that they represented the true will of the people. Second, the practice of an opinion poll as such implied that those conducting the poll – say the government or a political party – wanted the public to reflect on a set of issues. Polls could thus raise political awareness and engagement, encouraging people to examine these issues and form their own opinion on them.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, the advocates prevailed. In the 1960s, all major Dutch political parties started to commission opinion research in an attempt to get an answer to the great question that captivated them all: how can we reconnect with voters? As far as the two major Dutch political parties were concerned – the social democratic PvdA and the »Katholieke Volkspartij« (KVP) – election results showed that mobilizing their »own« political community, united around a shared class or religious identity, was no longer bringing in the results they expected: not every »registered« Catholic supported the Catholic party KVP and not every working-class voter cast his or her ballot for the social democrats – far from it. Anne Vondeling, leader of the PvdA between 1962 and 1966, argued that opinion research could help the party to find the reasons behind a series of disappointing election results and to again place itself in the service of the people by getting to *know* the people.<sup>28</sup> The results of opinion research convinced Vondeling of the fact that both the agenda and the language of the social democrats were failing to connect with the electorate. Research for instance indicated that many »workers« – at least in terms of the sociological categories used by the PvdA – did not identify themselves as »working class«.<sup>29</sup> Instead of deriding voters for their indifference or political ignorance, Vondeling suggested that the party should consider abandoning its language of class and focus on offering voters a clear choice between different political platforms. Simplification was key, since opinion polls indicated that voters lacked any specific knowledge of the political agendas of the various political parties.<sup>30</sup>

Polls were very effective in feeding politicians with information about majority and minority opinions on specific issues and they gave them an idea of the political ideas and preferences of the »average voter«.<sup>31</sup> They were less effective, however, when it came to bringing politicians and individual citizens closer together and to increase interaction with the public. Yet this was something politicians were looking for as well, confronted as they were with poorly attended election rallies in the 1950s. It was again Vondeling who, from the late 1950s onwards, pushed his party to send MPs out on to the streets, who introduced door-to-door canvassing by MPs in election campaigns and who stimulated politicians to ask the public for input.<sup>32</sup> The practice of hosting surgeries – a key feature of British politics with MPs returning from Westminster to their constituencies on a regular basis to meet voters and answer their questions – never established itself in the Netherlands. The electoral system of nationwide proportional representation did not correspond well with the practice of catering to the needs and interests of voters in a specific part of the country.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 121f.

28 Anne Vondeling, *Nasmaak en voorproef. Een handvol ervaringen en ideeën*, Amsterdam 1968, p. 207.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

30 *De Jong/Kaal*, *Mapping the Demos*, p. 132; *Vondeling*, *Nasmaak en voorproef*, p. 22.

31 Cf. Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American. Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*, Cambridge/London 2007.

32 *Vondeling*, *Nasmaak en voorproef*, p. 23.

Tellingly, the few MPs who did hold surgeries often did so in the more remote regions of the country from which they themselves originated.<sup>33</sup>

A practice better suited to the Dutch culture of political representation was citizens writing a letter to a political party or a particular politician. There were numerous reasons for citizens to do so. In her research on letters addressed to the prime minister of the German state of Lower Saxony between 1950 and 1974, Michaela Fenske presents a categorisation of four different types of letters: requests, opinions and comments, letters of support and admiration and finally abusive letters. In practice, of course, letters often contained combinations of these elements.<sup>34</sup> For the Dutch case, research on letters to politicians is almost non-existent.<sup>35</sup> A pilot study based on a sample drawn from the archive of the party chairman of the PvdA for the years between 1966 and 1971 shows that one out of ten letters contained personal requests.<sup>36</sup> These letters make clear that people placed their hope in the ability of politicians to correct wrongs and to offer citizens a helping hand. Often, but not always, such letters were tinged with clientelism, because citizens implicitly or explicitly invoked their party membership or support at the ballot box to back up their request for support. The PvdA particularly received requests that concerned welfare issues, such as entitlements to certain benefits or unemployment. For these *Politikferne*, to use a term applied by Michaela Fenske, these »people remote from politics« and in possession of hardly any social and economic capital, writing a letter was one of the few means by which they could make their voices heard by those in power.<sup>37</sup>

The majority of the letters sent to party chairmen Sjeng Tans and Anne Vondeling can be characterised as comments. The issues people commented on were countless, but two stand out: current political affairs – affairs that received press coverage and were discussed in parliament – and party affairs. In the period covered by the sample, the PvdA received numerous letters in response to the increasing influence of a younger generation of party members who wanted to steer the party radically to the left. This category of letters helps us to gain insight into how people perceived and defined democracy. Some citizens denounced the extra-parliamentary activities of the new left as undemocratic and maintained a narrow definition of democracy as disciplined and centred on parliament as the main locus of democratic politics, whereas others championed the new left as a revitalisation of politics and promoted a more libertarian interpretation of democracy.<sup>38</sup> The comments also reveal the impact of the mass media, television in particular, on the interaction between citizens and politicians. The attention TV paid to the personalities of politicians lowered

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33 See for other attempts to retain some of the elements of district voting *Harm Kaal*, *Politics of Place. Political Representation and the Culture of Electioneering in the Netherlands, c. 1848–1980s*, in: *European Review of History* 23, 2016, pp. 486–507.

34 *Michaela Fenske*, *Demokratie erschreiben. Bürgerbriefe und Petitionen als Medien politischer Kultur 1950–1974*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2013, p. 78.

35 In June 2018, political historian Vincent van de Griend started a research project on the letters citizens sent to Dutch Parliament in the postwar years. See URL: <<http://www.ru.nl/geschiedenis/onderzoek/pg/dossiers/the-voice-the-people/kamerpost-opvattingen-goede-politiek-burger-brieven/>> [9.5.2018].

36 *Vincent van de Griend*, *De pen van het volk. Welke rol vervulde de burgerbrief in het contact tussen de PvdA en haar kiezers tussen 1966 en 1971?*, MA Thesis, Nijmegen 2016.

37 Cf. *Rineke van Daalen*, *Klaagbrieven en gemeentelijk ingrijpen: Amsterdam 1865–1920*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 24; *Fenske*, *Demokratie erschreiben*, p. 71.

38 *Harm Kaal/Vincent van de Griend*, *Postwar Popular Politics. Integrating the Voice of the People in Postwar Political History*, in: *Harm Kaal/Daniëlle Slootjes* (eds.), *Repertoires of Representation. New Perspectives on Power from Ancient History to the Present Day* (manuscript currently in preparation); Cf. *De Jong*, *Van wie is de burger?*, pp. 190f.

the barrier for citizens to engage in a personal correspondence with them: thanks to television, voters felt they already »knew« politicians to some extent.<sup>39</sup>

Politicians valued the correspondence with citizens. The PvdA had a whole administrative system in place to process speedily and effectively the thousands of letters the party received every year, and the social democrats were proud of the fact that each received a personalised response.<sup>40</sup> Political parties indeed wanted to send out the message that they appreciated this kind of interaction with the people they represented. Vondeling saw correspondence with citizens – and the suggestion boxes as well – as an excellent way to encourage citizens to be active and to contribute to improving government and society. According to Vondeling, by writing a letter to an MP citizens »contributed to the functioning of democracy«.<sup>41</sup> In addition, these practices gave politicians the opportunity to show their responsiveness and receptiveness to the issues on the minds of ordinary citizens. Vondeling praised letters as an important »source of knowledge« that reminded him of being a »representative of the people«.<sup>42</sup>

In 1965, in his role as Finance Minister in a centre-left coalition government, Vondeling called upon the Dutch people to feed him with suggestions for spending cuts in public administration. Vondeling made his call during a televised broadcast.<sup>43</sup> Within a day, Vondeling had received some 65 responses in writing and phone calls, and reactions kept coming in – hundreds over the next few weeks. Vondeling basked in the glory of his successful campaign for popular engagement. Newspapers pictured him happily browsing through his »fan mail«.<sup>44</sup> The public response to his initiative was, however, mixed and reveals conflicting conceptions of political representation. Vondeling might have argued that he had attempted to bridge the »distance« between citizens and their representatives, but some journalists and MPs were critical of what they judged an attempt to »hollow out« the position of parliament:<sup>45</sup> it was the MPs' job, not the people's, to control and comment on the budget. Others saw in Vondeling's call for public input a lack of confidence in the capabilities of his own civil servants.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the case may be, Vondeling's broadcast was more than a mere publicity stunt. Through his ideas and activities Vondeling expressed a new, more dynamic and interactive interpretation of political representation, which was still far from self-evident for many of his fellow MPs. The latter held on to the idea that citizens had placed their trust in a political party at the ballot box, and thereafter it was up to the MPs not to betray their trust.

In the minds of politicians, all the practices discussed so far served primarily as instruments to counter political apathy. From the mid-1950s onwards, they acknowledged that democracy needed a new impulse to counter technocratic tendencies, alienation and apathy, and to bridge the gap between politics and the people. In 1964, the leading Catholic politician Jo Cals characterised this development as a »modernisation« of democracy towards an »enlivened democracy« (*beleefde democracy*), made up of informed and active

39 See also: *Fenske*, *Demokratie erschreiben*, pp. 218f.

40 *van de Griend*, *De pen van het volk*.

41 Afscheid van Vondelings brievenbus, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 9.7.1963. All quotes have been translated into English by the author.

42 Afscheid van Vondelings brievenbus, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 9.7.1963.

43 Vondeling staat open voor bezuinigingstips, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 19.10.1965.

44 Fanmail voor Vondeling, in: *De Tijd*, 21.10.1965; Minister Vondeling kreeg al 200 brieven, in: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21.10.1965; Vondeling: te veel kouwe kak bij Nederlanders, in: *Friese Koerier*, 9.11.1965.

45 Volle brievenbus bij Vondeling, in: *Friese Koerier*, 21.10.1965.

46 *Laurens ten Cate*, *Brieven*, in: *Friese Koerier*, 21.10.1965; Vondeling krijgt standjes over bezuinigingsoproep, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 15.12.1965.

citizens.<sup>47</sup> On the part of politicians this required transparency and responsiveness in order not to blunt these instruments for popular engagement, but the discourse of civic or political education also had a clear paternalistic undertone. It was the political elite itself that led the way and encouraged specific practices through which citizens could participate.

Such paternalism was quite evident in the manner in which Dutch politicians looked upon the new medium of television. In the 1950s, Cals belonged to a group of politicians who were in strong support of broadcasting the sessions of parliament. They argued that this would help to improve people's knowledge of what their representatives were actually doing on their behalf and would bridge the divide between politicians and the people by giving a face to those who represented the people in parliament. They thus primarily saw television as an instrument of political education. This appropriation of television resulted in what was, compared to other European countries, the early introduction in the Netherlands of new, ›American‹ formats of political broadcasting such as televised election debates. Politicians and journalists argued that such debates were an excellent way to »show people what politics is about«. Others appreciated that TV highlighted the »person behind the politician«, which could help foster a more personal bond between politicians and people.<sup>48</sup> Politicians, however, soon had to acknowledge that using television as a platform for political communication and interaction had its own dynamic that was beyond their control.

Television was introduced in the Netherlands in the early 1950s in the form of a public broadcasting system. The percentage of households who owned a TV set soon increased from 4% in 1957 to 80% ten years later.<sup>49</sup> Whereas political parties experienced a decline in membership numbers in the 1960s, Dutch broadcasting organisations were on the rise. In 1960, more than 30% of the adult Dutch population were members of one of the broadcasting agencies, 10% of one of the five major political parties.<sup>50</sup> In order to meet the »increasing demand for contact between politicians and the public«, viewers in the 1960s were treated to a growing number of programmes that discussed politics, even to the extent that a programme director of the public broadcasting agency NTS feared an »overdose« of politics.<sup>51</sup>

At first, television indeed primarily offered politicians a stage to have their say on the issues of the day and to display their willingness to interact with ›ordinary‹ citizens. From the early 1960s onwards, broadcasters experimented with different formats in which members of the public confronted politicians. One of those formats was »Onder Vuur«, which literally translates as »Under Fire« and first appeared on Dutch television in 1961. Each episode a member of the government faced questions from three students from the universities of Amsterdam and Leiden, whom the press described as »representatives of the younger generation«. <sup>52</sup> Judging from newspaper reviews, it did not make for exciting tele-

47 *De Jong*, Van wie is de burger?, p. 135.

48 *Harm Kaal*, De cultuur van het televisiedebat. Veranderende percepties van de relatie tussen media en politiek, 1960-heden, in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127, 2014, pp. 293–316, here: p. 301; *De Jong*, Van wie is de burger?, pp. 149 and 162; Mr. Cals bepleit hervorming parlementair systeem, in: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 10.3.1964.

49 *James Kennedy*, Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig, Amsterdam/Meppel 1995, p. 46.

50 Percentages are based on a comparison of membership numbers provided by *Huib Wijffes*, VARA. Biografie van een omroep, Amsterdam 2009, pp. 578f., and *Ruud Koole/Gerrit Voerman*, Het lidmaatschap van politieke partijen na 1945, in: *Ruud Koole/Paul Lucardie* (eds.), *Jaarboek Documentatiecentrum Politieke Partijen*, Groningen 1985, pp. 115–176, here: pp. 131f.

51 *C. Enkelaar*, Memorandum, 1.12.1966, National Archives, Archive of the NOS, inv. no. 301.

52 Vanavond, in: *De Tijd – De Maasbode*, 19.10.1961.

vision. The students showed too much deference for a stimulating debate to develop.<sup>53</sup> The first televised election debates also were rather dull. Politicians ignored the TV cameras and behaved like they were taking part in a parliamentary debate: they addressed the chairman of the debate as »Speaker« and brought along documents to substantiate their argumentation. Broadcasters quickly started to look for more appealing formats.<sup>54</sup>

One of the ways in which broadcasters tried to make political television more engaging and less predictable was by getting ordinary citizens in front of a camera. In the 1960s, street interviews with ordinary citizens, also known as »vox pops«, became a recurring element in a range of current affairs programmes. The interviews were used to represent the diversity of popular opinion and thus offered opportunities for identification to the audience watching and listening at home. Vox pops, as well as opinion polls, revealed a new appreciation of popular opinion, which apparently was now to be taken seriously rather than ignored and dismissed as uninformed. In 1967, citizens were also granted a platform in a series of televised debates, with political leaders responding to questions from the audience. Moreover, broadcasters soon appreciated the opportunities opinion polls offered to confront politicians with popular views on the key issues of the day. In a series of programmes aired in the months before the general election of 1967, politicians were asked to reflect on the results of an election poll and confronted in the studio with questions from »ordinary« and »floating« voters.<sup>55</sup> Finally, current affairs programmes covered turbulent party meetings and showed how ordinary party members called the party leadership to account.<sup>56</sup>

Against this background, Dutch politicians had to acknowledge that being transparent and responsive by engaging with citizens on radio and television required new skills and in fact a new, non-paternalistic style of political leadership. The political culture of the 1960s, shaped to a significant extent by the role television played in political communication, favoured politicians who were approachable, open to criticism and willing to show their emotions – to show the human being ›behind‹ the politician.<sup>57</sup> Newspapers reported that TV highlighted previously unnoticed features of politicians: their appearance, their clothes and *how* they said things, instead of *what* they said.<sup>58</sup> In his influential book on the principles of representative government, Bernard Manin has argued that the trust that cemented the relationship between politicians and the people became more personal in nature. Until the 1950s, political leaders had aimed above all to present themselves as members – and leaders – of a particular constituency united around a shared identity and agenda and as sincere, serious defenders of their constituency's interests. In the 1960s, trust became based on the correspondence between a politician's public persona (»the politician«) and his private identity (»the person behind the politician«): authentic politicians were those who were »representatives of themselves«.<sup>59</sup> The range of practices through

53 Regen van atombommen en principes bij VPRO, in: Leeuwarder Courant, 20.10.1961; Tamme studenten, in: Algemeen Handelsblad, 20.10.1961; Volwassen programma's van de VPRO-tv, in: Leeuwarder Courant, 8.2.1962. Two of these students became famous political journalists: Ferry Hoogendijk for Elsevier's Magazine/Weekblad and Joop van Tijn for Vrij Nederland.

54 Kaal, *De cultuur van het televisiedebat*, pp. 303f.

55 »Nipothese« (NCRV), first aired in October 1966; *H. van H.*, Het zweven der kiezers, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 18.10.1966.

56 *Harm Kaal/Fons Meijer*, Het volk in beeld. Nederlandse politici op zoek naar het volk in de jaren zestig en zeventig, in: *Anne Bos/Jan Willem Brouwer/Hans Goslinga et al.* (eds.), *Het volk spreekt. Jaarboek Parlementaire Geschiedenis*, Amsterdam 2017, pp. 65–72, here: p. 68.

57 *Henk te Velde*, *Stijlen van leiderschap. Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl*, Amsterdam 2002, pp. 10, 220 and 233; *Kaal*, *Popular Politicians*.

58 *Kaal*, *De cultuur van het televisiedebat*.

59 *Stephen Coleman*, Representation and Mediated Politics: Representing Representation in an age of Irony, in: *Kees Brants/Katrin Voltmer* (eds.), *Political Communication in Postmodern De-*



which politicians and the people interacted on television enabled them to display their authenticity and to show their receptiveness and responsiveness to the voice of the people.

## II. THE NIGHT OF CALS AND SCHMELZER

What impact did the communicative practices of popular engagement and interaction between politicians and the people have on popular perceptions of political representation? How did ordinary citizens process the events and political culture of the 1950s and 1960s in the Netherlands? Historians often have trouble answering these questions due to a lack of sources. Jo Cals has, however, left us a box filled with letters written by ordinary citizens which might help us at least frame some tentative answers. These letters of course in no way offer a representative sample of the Dutch population and its perception of political events, nor do they say anything about changes or shifts in popular attitudes towards politics, because we are dealing with a single set of sources dating from late 1966 and early 1967. Yet these letters provide us with a unique insight in how ordinary citizens experienced and reflected on one of the crucial events of post-war Dutch political history: Schmelzer's Night.

Soon after Cals had entered office as prime minister at the head of a centre-left coalition government that included the KVP, the PvdA and the orthodox-Protestant Antirevolutionary Party (»Anti-Revolutionaire Partij«, ARP), his government was confronted with lower economic growth and higher levels of inflation than expected. Moreover, the Netherlands witnessed turbulent times in the mid-1960s with the rise of provocative new social movements and demonstrations in Amsterdam against the marriage of Princess Beatrix to the German diplomat Claus von Amsberg in 1966. Throughout its term, Cals's government met with increasing opposition from confessional and liberal parties in parliament, including Cals's own party, the KVP. They asked for heavy spending cuts and questioned the financial policies of the social democratic Finance Minister Anne Vondeling. Things came to a head in dramatic fashion in the early hours of Friday, 14 October 1966. After several hours of debate about the budget, Cals asked parliament to express its confidence in his government's ability to deal with the worsening financial and economic conditions. It was after 3:30 in the morning when Norbert Schmelzer, the parliamentary leader of the KVP, responded by issuing a motion asking the government for extra spending cuts. When a parliamentary majority supported this motion, Cals resigned.<sup>60</sup> This dramatic event has entered Dutch history books as »Schmelzer's Night« (*de Nacht van Schmelzer*). Both politicians and journalists almost immediately labelled it as premeditated murder, as a stab in the back: Schmelzer had betrayed his fellow party member Cals. Although historians have modified this reading of the events and stressed that Cals ignored several warning signs, refusing to treat dissatisfaction among his party members seriously, in public memory Cals has remained the victim and Schmelzer the perpetrator.<sup>61</sup>

For several reasons, Schmelzer's Night is one of the pivotal episodes of post-war Dutch history. First of all, it contributed to the emergence of a highly polarised political climate

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mocracy. Challenging the Primacy of Politics, Basingstoke/New York 2011, pp. 39–56, here: p. 50; *Manin*, The Principles of Representative Government, p. 219; *Kaal*, Popular Politicians.

60 For an extensive analysis of these events, see *Peter van der Heiden/Alexander van Kessel* (eds.), *Rondom de Nacht van Schmelzer. De kabinetten-Marijnen, -Cals en -Zijlstra 1963–1967*, Amsterdam 2010.

61 *Paul van der Steen*, Jo Cals. Koopman in verwachtingen, 1914–1971, Amsterdam 2004, pp. 411–416; *Van der Heiden/Van Kessel*, *Rondom de Nacht van Schmelzer*, pp. 468f.; *Hans Righart*, *De eindeloze jaren zestig. Geschiedenis van een generatieconflict*, Amsterdam 1995, p. 209.

that would characterise Dutch politics into the early 1980s. The social democrats decided that they no longer wished to form a coalition government with the KVP, which they now regarded as a conservative party. Second, the events exacerbated existing feelings of dissatisfaction with the Dutch political establishment among a large group of voters. At the general elections of February 1967, this resulted in a victory for a new political party – »Democraten 66«, better known as D'66 – a party that aimed to »blow up« the existing party-political landscape. The populist Farmer's Party (»Boerenpartij«) also benefited from resentment among the electorate. The KVP and PvdA suffered heavy losses. Third, as the authors of a recent volume on the culture of journalism in the Netherlands have argued, the episode formed a junction at which several recent developments within the political-media complex came together.<sup>62</sup> One of those developments was the transition in journalism from a partisan to a public logic: journalists at Catholic newspapers and broadcasters, for instance, no longer acted as the mouthpieces of the political elite, but adopted a far more critical and investigatory approach to Catholic politicians than ever before. Another key development was the emergence of television as the main platform on which political events unfolded: the public had been able to follow the parliamentary debate in the night of 13 and 14 October live on television. Fourth and finally, the events, particularly the aftermath, revealed a shift in the emotional culture of Dutch politics and in the culture of Dutch political leadership more generally. Schmelzer's Night was a clash between two political personality types – that at least was how large parts of the media framed the events: the cool and collected, restrained and strategic mastermind Norbert Schmelzer versus the passionate, idealistic and short-tempered Jo Cals.<sup>63</sup> Schmelzer's cerebral and unemotional attitude in October 1966 contrasted with Cals' emotional response and contributed to the dominant public perception of the events as a clash between a dedicated politician people could identify with and a clinical and scheming party operator.<sup>64</sup> In the media, Schmelzer came to represent the emotional culture of restraint that had characterised Dutch politics in the early post-war years, whereas Cals was a representative of the more personal, expressive culture that emerged from the late 1950s onwards.<sup>65</sup>

How exactly Schmelzer's Night revealed a transition in the culture of journalism and the emotional culture of politics deserves some further attention. The following day, two current affairs programmes looked back on the events in dramatised fashion, depicting Cals as the victim and Schmelzer as his »hangman«.<sup>66</sup> A couple of days later, Cals, Schmelzer and the chairman of the KVP, Piet Aalberse, appeared side-by-side in current affairs programme »Vanavond in Nieuwspoor«, produced by the Catholic broadcaster KRO. Schmelzer and Aalberse might have hoped beforehand that journalists of ›their own‹ broadcasting association would draw a veil over the tensions within the Catholic party, but the barrage of questions Schmelzer and Aalberse were subjected to immediately shattered this illusion. The journalists of »Vanavond in Nieuwspoor« narrated a political issue that had centred on political differences regarding the budget in terms of a highly emotionally charged event and as a clash between two leading personalities of the Catholic party: Cals and

62 Voorwoord, in: *Jo Bardoel/Huub Wijffes* (eds.), *Journalistieke cultuur in Nederland*, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 9–11, here: p. 9.

63 Cf. *Huub Wijffes/Jo Bardoel*, *Journalistieke cultuur in Nederland. Een professie tussen traditie en toekomst*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 11–29, here: p. 29, who wrongly suggest that journalists in the 1960s ignored the »human-ethical« aspects of political events. Schmelzer's Night was actually one of the first moments in modern Dutch political history in which these aspects were played out to the full.

64 *Van der Steen*, Jo Cals, pp. 413f.

65 *Kaal*, *Popular Politicians*.

66 *Van der Steen*, Jo Cals, p. 411.

Schmelzer. TV cameras relentlessly zoomed in on their faces, allowing the public a clear view on their emotions and frustrations. With their questions, the journalists focused first and foremost on the personal and private, rather than the political and public, impact of the events. Cals eagerly went along. In response to the first question – »Excellency, how are you ... and how did your family, your wife and children react« – Cals responded: »Well, I feel a lot better than last week, but it is not how it should be« and acknowledged that the events had had a huge impact on his wife. He also mentioned that he had been »incredibly« moved by the »dozens and dozens of letters from all sections of society« he had received over the last couple of days.<sup>67</sup> The Catholic newspaper »De Tijd« characterised it the next day as a »human« interview<sup>68</sup> – at least as far as Cals was concerned: Schmelzer and Aalberse were portrayed as heartless hard-liners.

Soon not only Schmelzer's Night, but the letters to Cals, too, became a topic of debate. In statements in the press and on television, Cals repeatedly mentioned the numerous letters of support he had received.<sup>69</sup> Catholic newspaper »De Tijd« argued that the »fan mail« proved Cals's popularity and indicated that only one man was to blame for the events of October 1966: Norbert Schmelzer. »De Tijd« hyperbolically claimed that the outpouring of emotion in the wake of Cals's resignation was comparable only to the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945. Cals eagerly played to this version of events by allowing the newspaper to print quotes from the letters he had received, such as: »you fought like a lion« and »everybody hates Schmelzer's smile«. »De Tijd« also published a cartoon that had been attached to one of the letters and which pictured Cals as a skilled acrobat coming under attack from behind. The KVP leadership responded to Cals' media offensive by claiming that it had received many »mixed« reactions, but deemed it »inappropriate« to publish them.<sup>70</sup> Support for Cals was indeed far from unanimous. Popular daily »De Telegraaf«, clearly on the side of the KVP's conservative wing, repeatedly ridiculed him for boasting about the outpouring of support (»anybody who appears on television receives letters«) and, following the publications of excerpts from the letters by »De Tijd«, called him a »cry-baby«, a »bad loser« and »utterly unsuitable for the job of Prime Minister«.<sup>71</sup> Cals on his part kept basking in the warm glow of popular support. Newspaper reported that he had sent a letter of reply – »Cals sends thank-you letter to »fans«« – thanking everybody for their support and apologizing for the fact that he was not able to reply to all letters personally. He also urged supporters not to make »hasty decisions« – that is, to resign their membership of the KVP – and announced that he would take a break from politics.<sup>72</sup> A couple of weeks after stepping down as prime minister, Cals claimed to have received a thousand letters and that many citizens had urged him to start his own party. Cals considered the idea but ultimately remained loyal to the KVP.<sup>73</sup>

Exactly 332 of these letters are stored in alphabetical order in Cals's personal archive at the Catholic Documentation Centre (»Katholiek Documentatie Centrum«) in Nijme-

67 Vanavond in Nieuwspoor (KRO), 18.10.1966; Kopstukken KVP onder spervuur van vragen, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 20.10.1966.

68 Menselijk interview met minister Cals, in: *De Tijd*, 19.10.1966.

69 Vandaag en verder, in: *De Tijd*, 20.10.1966; Fanmail voor een gevallen premier, in: *De Tijd*, 20.10.1966; Interview with Cals, in: *De Volkskrant*, 18.10.1966; Cals-Aalberse, schokkend tv-relaas, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 19.10.1966.

70 Bedankjes, in: *De Waarheid*, 18.10.1966; Bij KVP 80 bedankjes, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 21.10.1966.

71 Huilebalk Cals, in: *De Telegraaf*, 20.10.1966; Onze »minister-president«, in: *De Telegraaf*, 22.10.1966; Kabinetsformatie, in: *De Telegraaf*, 24.10.1966.

72 Mr. Cals bedankt brieveschrijvers, in: *Leeuwarder Courant*, 29.10.1966; Cals stuurt bedankbriefje aan »fans«, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 28.10.1966.

73 Cals en Bogaers lichten hun besluit toe, in: *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 9.12.1966.

gen.<sup>74</sup> They provide us with a unique opportunity to analyse how citizens perceived and made sense of parliamentary politics and political leadership amid this transformation in Dutch political culture. It is hard to tell to what extent Cals or the archivists made a selection of the letters that were to be preserved in the archive. The vast majority is favourable to Cals, but the archive also contains a few letters which Cals filed as being from ›the aggrieved‹ (*bezwaarden*). The archive also shows that Cals made quite an effort to respond to his critics.<sup>75</sup> He made notes in the margins of the letters, underlined key sentences in which his actions or behaviour were questioned and subsequently drafted a response to the criticism. Most of these (typed) letters were two pages long and testify to how seriously Cals treated the correspondence. All the evidence suggests that Cals dealt with the correspondence by himself, without the help of a secretary.<sup>76</sup>

Letters are one of the few sources that give us direct access to the voice of the people and enable us to establish how ordinary citizens processed the political events of the 1960s as they were related to them in the media. The letters people send to politicians have often been treated as examples of depoliticisation: citizens, so it is argued, tend to reduce politics to the level of the person of the politician by using letters to express their admiration for and loyalty towards a politician, or to capitalise on a clientelistic relationship. The German ethnologist Harm-Peer Zimmermann, however, has stressed that citizens also use this mode of communication to create a situation in which they can bring their political opinion and ideas to the attention of politicians. By doing so, they circumvent the established channels of communication that normally distribute and filter forms of communication ›from below‹ to the echelons of power ›at the top‹. The letters *directly* confront politicians with unfiltered popular political opinion.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, in the case of Cals, the letters remind us of the personal and emotional aspects of political representation. The personal nature of the letters, with writers ›speaking from the heart‹, reveals how citizens fashioned their identity as democratic subjects and cultivated a particular connection between themselves and their political representatives at a time when television developed into the key platform for political communication.

### III. THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF POPULAR PARTICIPATION

Who were the people who took up their pens to write letters to Cals? For slightly more than half of the corpus it was possible to establish the writer's gender: two-thirds were male. Most lived in the densely populated western part of the country and in regions with a predominantly Catholic population. People from all walks of life approached Cals by mail, from crane operators to professors and from housewives to accountants. One out of six letters came from people who explicitly stated that they did not support the Catholic party but sympathised with Cals nonetheless. The archive contains only a few letters from people who were critical of Cals. Most writers combined a very formal salutation (›Your Excellency«, in Dutch: *Excellentie*) with a very personal expression of emotions and feelings of sympathy for Cals, his wife and children.

74 Katholiek Documentatie Centrum (KDC), Archief Jo Cals (605), inv. no. 133.

75 *Van der Steen*, Jo Cals, p. 418. The file contains seven of these letters and for every letter a draft of the response written by Cals. KDC, Archief Jo Cals (605), inv. no. 133.

76 Notes on the incoming letters are all in Cals' handwriting.

77 *Harm-Peer Zimmermann*, *Lebenswelt und Politik. Bürgerbriefe an Helmut Schmidt*, in: *Peter Janich* (ed.), *Humane Orientierungswissenschaft. Was leisten verschiedene Wissenschaftskulturen für das Verständnis menschlicher Lebenswelt?*, Würzburg 2008, pp. 203–226, here: pp. 208–210.

By writing a letter, citizens created a communicative relationship with Cals that allowed them to offer him advice and express opinions on the state of Dutch politics. Citizens were very aware of the fact that they were bridging the gap that normally existed between them and their representatives. They made this explicit through different rhetorical topoi. The most prominent was the »self-humbling« or »apologetic« topos. Citizens described themselves as »ordinary«: »I am an ordinary citizen who is not acquainted with our leaders of government. Yet I want to express my sympathy for your social and economic policy«. <sup>78</sup> Others motivated their intervention by claiming to speak on behalf of many more people. One finished his letter by stating: »on behalf of the Catholic people of the Netherlands, I wish you all the best«. <sup>79</sup> Another claimed that the »vast majority« of »ordinary men and women« supported Cals's cabinet. <sup>80</sup> They did not, however, need to try so hard: after all, Cals had more or less invited them to write to him with his public statements about the outburst of popular support in the first days after the Night. Indeed, many citizens mentioned Cals's comments about the epistolary support he had received as a motivation to put pen to paper and join the ranks of Cals's supporters. <sup>81</sup>

The letters make clear that the events of October 1966 encouraged people to express their views on Dutch parliamentary democracy and its future. What many of the letter writers did was to project their ideas about what most of them perceived to be a much-needed transformation of Dutch political culture onto the clash between Cals and Schmelzer. <sup>82</sup> The Night was only one, albeit crucial, episode in a series of events that contributed to a transformation of Dutch politics in the 1960s. Other key episodes included the repeated clashes between the Amsterdam police and youth movements throughout the 1960s and the protests surrounding the royal wedding. Dissatisfaction also expressed itself in the foundation of new political parties, the »Boerenpartij« in 1963 and later D'66, discussed above. To many correspondents, the dramatic and personalised nature of Schmelzer's Night symbolised the big clash in Dutch politics between the conservative political establishment and politicians like Cals and others who wanted to »modernise« the political system. Out of the letters emerges a conceptualisation of a modernised democracy as a transparent political system: citizens expected politicians to offer them »clarity« (*duidelijkheid*). The clash between Cals and Schmelzer had exposed the lack of clarity in Dutch politics: voters were not sure what to expect from the Catholic party. Cals and others were leaning to the left, while Schmelzer's wing was pushing the party to the right. <sup>83</sup> By forcing Cals and his government to resign, Schmelzer had damaged people's trust in democracy. Some argued that by treating politics as a »game« Schmelzer was undermining democracy; <sup>84</sup> declining trust in the established political parties pushed voters to the populist fringes. <sup>85</sup> An-

78 F.K. to Cals, 14.10.1966. Other examples: P.H.J.B. to Cals, 3.12.1966; K.P. to Cals, n.d.; H.H. to Cals, 15.10.1966; G.W.J. to Cals, 22.10.1966; A.K.O. to Cals, 16.10.1966; J.v.d.L. to Cals, 17.10.1966; H.W.O. to Cals 14.10.1966; G.T./E.T.v.O. to Cals, n.d.; A.V. to Cals, 23.10.1966; T.V.H. to Cals, 19.10.1966; A.C.V. to Cals, 19.10.1966.

79 F.J.H.v.G. to Cals, 19.10.1966.

80 A.V. to Cals, 23.10.1966.

81 J.B. to Cals, 20.10.1966; A.B.J.B. to Cals, 27.10.1966; K.L. to Cals, 14.10.1966; H.J.v.O. to Cals, 17.10.1966; Anon. to Cals, 18.10.1966; K.R. to Cals, 28.11.1966; W.S. to Cals, 18.10.1966; L.M.S. to Cals, 21.10.1966.

82 J.P.v.G. to Cals, 18.10.1966; H.v.B. to Cals, 18.12.1966; T.v.B. to Cals, 17.10.1966; see also T.H.N.v.B. to Cals, 21.10.1966; H.v.B. to Cals, 18.12.1966; W.J.J.v.K. to Cals, 14.10.1966; H.J.R. to Cals, n.d.; J.G.d.V. to Cals, 19.10.1966; J.Z. to Cals, 18.10.1966.

83 Anon. to Cals, 18.10.1966; R.J.H.E. to Cals, 14.10.1966; F.B. to Cals, n.d.; J.d.B. to Cals, n.d.; G.L.D.M. to Cals, n.d.; H.J.R. to Cals, n.d.

84 K.S.d.F.B. to Cals, 20.10.1966; Anon. to Cals, 19.10.1966.

85 H.J.R. to Cals, n.d.; J.Z. to Cals, 18.10.1966.

other writer placed all his hope in Cals creating a »new party structure and system of political representation« that would bring »clarity« to Dutch politics.<sup>86</sup>

Citizens who wrote to Cals were thus also practising democracy. They did so not merely to vent their emotions and express their admiration, but also to express their views on the state and future of Dutch democracy and to display their political agency, defining their own role and position as democratic subjects in this particular political context. Many writers indicated that they intended to cancel their membership of the Catholic party (some had already done so immediately after Schmelzer's Night) and that they would not support the KVP at the next election.<sup>87</sup> They followed up on this by urging Cals to walk out with them and establish a progressive Catholic party of his own, arguing that this would contribute to the much-needed clarity in Dutch politics: »I implore you to not give up [...] do not abandon us«, one citizen wrote.<sup>88</sup> Some also used the opportunity to make suggestions for the introduction of new democratic instruments, like a referendum or the direct election of the prime minister, which would »certainly« hand Cals the victory over Schmelzer.<sup>89</sup>

In his analysis of the letters Helmut Schmidt received after his forced resignation as chancellor of Germany in October 1982, Harm-Peer Zimmermann has argued that citizens process political events through »theatralisation«, that is, by narrating them as tragedy or drama. He stresses that this should be seen not as trivialising politics but as an effective coping strategy: personalisation and emotionalisation provide orientation and thus enable political participation.<sup>90</sup> The letters addressed to Cals corroborate Zimmermann's thesis. Some citizens explicitly use the term »tragedy« or »intrigue« to describe the events, others use words like »treason« and »a stab in the back« (*dolksteek, in de rug aangevallen*).<sup>91</sup> One citizen even compares Schmelzer's actions with Brutus' attack on Caesar, another describes Schmelzer's betrayal of Cals as a »kiss of Judas«. <sup>92</sup> According to Zimmermann, an important stage in the popular dramatisation of politics occurs when citizens apply the frame of good versus bad to make sense of events they have witnessed. In the letters people portray Schmelzer as »nasty« (*naar*), »mean« (*gemeen*), a »hypocrite« (*huichelaar*) and a »coward« (*lafhartig*). Cals, in contrast, is described as »energetic« (*energiek*), »sympathetic« (*sympathiek*), »sincere« (*oprecht*), »honest« (*eerlijk*) and as »someone with guts« and »courage« (*durf* and *moed*).<sup>93</sup> In general, the letters show how people turned issues of policy into a »human« affair. In fact, many letter writers argued that Schmelzer was at fault for ignoring the personal and emotional implications of doing politics.

86 H.v.B. to Cals, 18.12.1966.

87 Leave the party, no voter for KVP: C.B. to Cals, 19.10.1966; H.v.B. to Cals, 18.12.1966; A.F. to Cals, 15/21.10.1966; V.W.v.G. to Cals, 15.10.1966; J.J.K. to Cals, 16.10.1966.

88 G.E. to Cals, 14.10.1966; G.F.I. to Cals, n.d.; F.v.G. to Cals, 19.10.1966; S.B.G. to Cals, 14.10.1966; Ch.H. to Cals, 18.10.1966; W.H. to Cals, 14.10.1966; L.A.K. to Cals, 22.10.1966; K.L. to Cals, 14.10.1966. Quote: W.J.S. to Cals, 2.11.1966.

89 A.B.L. to Cals, 28.10.1966; H.W.S. to Cals, 21.10.1966; J.d.B. to Cals, n.d.; L.A.K. to Cals, 22.10.1966; J.H. to Cals, 18.10.1966.

90 Zimmermann, *Lebenswelt und Politik*, pp. 212f. and 224.

91 L.J.B. to Cals, 17.10.1966; F.B. to Cals, 15.10.1966; I.D.D. to Cals, 19.10.1966; stab in the back etc.: W.P. to Cals, 15.10.1966; A.K.O. to Cals, 16.10.1966; T.M. to Cals, 16.10.1966; J.C.J.M.S. to Cals, 19.10.1966; W.F.W.S. to Cals, 19.10.1966.

92 H./Mw. B.H.J. to Cals, 15.10.1966; M.L.v.H. to Cals, 16.10.1966.

93 Letters discussing Schmelzer: Anon. to Cals, 19.10.1966; A.A. to Cals, 16.10.1966; W.W. to Cals, 14.10.1966; Letters discussing Cals: F.B. to Cals, 15.10.1966; G.N.H.B. to Cals, 15.10.1966; F.D. to Cals, 18.10.1966; J.D. to Cals, 19.10.1966; F.J.D. to Cals, 18.10.1966; G.G.E.B. to Cals, 14.10.1966; F.J.H.v.G. to Cals, 19.10.1966; J.C.d.H. to Cals, 19.10.1966; A.P.V.H. to Cals, 18.10.1966; W.H. to Cals, 14.10.1966; R.K. to Cals, 14.10.1966; R.K. to Cals, n.d.; H./Mw. J.M.J.v.L. to Cals, 18.10.1966.

Zimmermann, however, does not reflect on the connection between the ›tragedy frame‹ and the way in which political events are mediated: as a matter of fact the media – both television and the press – handed this frame to citizens by zooming in on the personal aspects of the government crisis and particularly on the tragic fate of noble Jo Cals and malicious Norbert Schmelzer. The »Affektschema der klassischen Dramaturgie« that is evident in the letters people sent to Cals also dominated the media coverage of the events.<sup>94</sup> Cals himself also played into this by publicly discussing how the events had affected his wife and children and in turn received numerous letters after the interview in which citizens expressed their sympathy for his family. Some even addressed their letters to Cals' wife directly or to »Mr and Mrs Cals«.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, several correspondents refer to the suspense they had experienced while following the debate live on television and want to reassure Cals of their support and empathy with him, the victim:<sup>96</sup> »We, too, have anxiously followed the night and now feel the need to express our complete confidence in you«.<sup>97</sup> Besides that, many writers also reflect on the interview with Cals, Schmelzer and Aalberse in »Vanavond in Nieuwspoor«. In fact, the number of letters Cals received peaked in the days following his TV interview. The personal, dramatic and emotional frame through which the political events of October 1966 were mediated thus clearly resonated in the letters.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From the late 1960s onwards, new social movements, often but not exclusively consisting of a younger generation of citizens, took issue with the existing repertoire of democratic practices and the »restricted and disciplined view on democratic participation« that went with it.<sup>98</sup> They made use of more confrontational democratic practices such as demonstrations and demanded more freedom to take to the streets unhampered by public order regulations. Simultaneously, as the political historian Wim de Jong argues, new perceptions of the crisis of democracy emerged both among the political elite and the social movements. Unlike the immediate post-war years, when fingers were pointed at ignorant and indifferent citizens, now blame was put on the elites themselves and the system they were part of for not opening up enough to input ›from below‹.<sup>99</sup> Historians have often read the subsequent transformation of Western European political culture as a clash between the political establishment and protest groups. Within this historiography, social movements and their

94 *Zimmermann*, *Lebenswelt und Politik*, p. 223.

95 References to Cals' family: X.W. to Cals, 18.10.1966; W.W. to Cals, 18.10.1966; Anon. to Cals, 25.11.1966; L.J.B. to Cals, 17.10.1966; H.K.M.D. to Cals, n.d.; F.D. to Cals, 18.10.1966; K.P. to Cals, n.d.; R.K. to Cals, 14.10.1966; School class (elementary school St. Michaelschool Groningen) to Cals, 23.10.1966; H.D.J.P. to Cals, 20.10.1966; C.V.D.W. to Cals, 15.10.1966; P.J.F.T. to Cals, 27.10.1966; L./A.P. to Cals, 20.10.1966; Letter to Ms Cals: A.Th.S.C. to Cals, 14.10.1966; to Mr and Mrs: S.O. to Cals, 18.19.1966; A.P. to Cals, 18.10.1966; J.G.d.V. to Cals, 19.10.1966; J.M. to Cals, 24.10.1966.

96 School class (elementary school St. Michaelschool Groningen) to Cals, 23.10.1966; H./Mw. B.H.J. to Cals, 15.10.1966; R.C.K. to Cals, n.d.; P.R. to Cals, 12.12.1966; V.M.d.R.R. to Cals, 19.10.1966.

97 (»Na dat ook wij de hele nacht met spanning alles gevolgd hadden, is het ons een behoefte U mede te delen dat wij altijd het volste vertrouwen hebben gehad in U«, H.C.J. to Cals, n.d.).

98 *De Jong*, *Van wie is de burger?*, p. 190.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

repertoire of collective action emerge as the main catalysts of change, promoting anti-authoritarian and libertarian interpretations of democracy.<sup>100</sup>

The culture of civic engagement of the late 1960s, however, tied in with the democratic practices that were initiated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as I have tried to show here. By focusing on the interaction between politicians and the people beyond the arenas of party politics and collective action, I have aimed to provide a richer picture of the transformation of Dutch political culture throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Confrontation was only one aspect of this transformation. Citizens expressed their political engagement and interacted with the sphere of politics through a broad range of communicative practices. ›The people‹ appeared in different guises: as a representative sample in opinion polls, as the interrogators of politicians in TV debates and commentators on political affairs in news and current affairs programmes, and as involved and engaged citizens who posted letters in suggestion boxes and to their representatives. The arenas of interaction between the formal world of politics and the everyday ›life-world‹ of ›ordinary‹ citizens were initiated by politicians, who feared that political disengagement undermined democracy. Already in the mid-1950s they started to look for ways to stimulate communication between themselves and the people they represented by handing the people meaningful ways to feed the political system with their ideas and concerns. The mass media, too, facilitated and initiated new forms of interaction between politicians and the people as part of their shift from a partisan to a public logic. Citizens, thus, were increasingly presented with (re)presentations of the voice of the people in the highly mediatised political culture of the 1960s, which – as the letters Cals received have shown – encouraged individual citizens to reflect on their relationship towards politics and their political representatives.

Most of the democratic practices that emerged out of these efforts continued to play a role in the 1970s and beyond. Opinion polls and the agencies that conducted them flourished: polls were at the heart of the mediatisation of politics in these decades, and political parties invested large sums of money in polls in gauging public opinion on party platforms and political leadership.<sup>101</sup> Suggestion boxes did not disappear but were eclipsed by institutionalised and more comprehensive forms of employee participation. Personal letters to politicians remained an important form of political communication, but thanks to the activities of social movements petitioning also re-emerged as an important democratic practice.<sup>102</sup> Television continued to act as an important platform for communication – and confrontation – between politicians and the people in different formats.<sup>103</sup> Through these practices both politicians and the people articulated new conceptualisations of democracy and political representation that centred on transparency and responsiveness. Politicians were expected to open themselves up to popular interventions and to display their responsiveness and receptiveness to the voice of the people. This voice encompassed far more than the shouts of demonstrators: it resounded in a range of communicative practices through which new ways of being a politician and a democratic citizen were performed.

100 *Gerd-Rainer Horn*, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, Oxford/New York etc. 2007; see also *Piet de Rooy*, *Ons stipje op de waereldkaart. De politieke cultuur van Nederland in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, Amsterdam 2014, who argues that historians have overrated the impact of conflict; *De Jong*, *Van wie is de burger?*, p. 167.

101 *De Jong/Kaal*, *Mapping the Demos*.

102 Petitions had been an important instrument of social and political associations in the 19th century to express the concerns of (disenfranchised) citizens. For the Dutch case, see for instance *Maartje Janse*, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840–1880*, Amsterdam 2007.

103 *Kaal*, *Popular Politicians*.