

Independent Local Political Parties in the Netherlands

MARCEL BOOGERS* & GERRIT VOERMAN**

*Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, Tilburg University, The Netherlands,

**Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT *In the last 15 years, the Netherlands has witnessed the enormous growth of independent local parties and of their electoral support. In order to assess the success of independent locals in the Netherlands, this paper explores how independent local parties distinguish themselves ideologically, organisationally, and operationally. It presents the results of two online surveys of 1,800 independent and other local parties in the Netherlands. Compared to local party branches, independent local parties are more successful in performing the organisational, programmatic and nomination function of political parties. They are spearheading the change to a modern cadre party with politicians and a small number of active volunteers taking care of the party's rootedness in society. Furthermore, they enrich local politics with new political dividing lines, smoothing the entry of new demands, themes, and issues onto the political agenda. Finally, they are proving to be more resourceful in recruiting citizens to stand as candidates for municipal councillorship.*

KEY WORDS: Local politics, elections, political parties, the Netherlands

Introduction

Local political parties are usually regarded as parts of larger party organisations prevalent within all levels of representative institutions. Nonetheless, many European countries are familiar with independent local parties that have no formal links with supralocal parties. As the existence of these parties has often been seen as a political anomaly, we know little about the ways in which independent local parties organise and operate (Geser, 1999).

Dutch local councils are elected every four years. For all Dutch elections applies a system of proportional representation with an election

Correspondence Address: Marcel Boogers, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands.
E-mail: m.boogers@uvt.nl

threshold that equals the number of voters/number of seats in local council (depending on the population). Because of this electoral system, local politics is very open to political changes and to new parties (e.g. independent local parties) that are expressions of these winds of change. In the last 15 years, the Netherlands has witnessed the enormous growth of independent local parties and of their electoral support (from 13 per cent in 1990 to nearly 24 per cent in 2006). After the last two elections of 2002 and 2006, independent local parties were jointly best represented in Dutch municipal councils.

In order to assess the success of independent locals in the Netherlands, this article explores how independent local parties distinguish themselves ideologically, organisationally, and operationally. It presents the results of two online surveys of 1.800 independent and other local parties in the Netherlands.

This paper starts with a short description of the different functions of political parties at a local level. After that, changes in the presence of independent local parties will be described and explained. Subsequently, independent local parties will be compared with local party branches. The paper ends with an overview of this comparison, which lays out the strengths and weaknesses of both party types.

Political Parties at the Local Level

Political parties are generally regarded as an important intermediary between society and public administration. First of all, they organise groups in society and involve them in debates on social issues. Secondly, parties translate the wishes they register in society into a political program and rally support for these issues in election campaigns. In order to have the party's views and ideas implemented in policies, they pursue representation in government. Hence, and thirdly, parties recruit and select candidates to serve on representative bodies and fill other political positions in government; moreover, they organise campaigns to support their candidates in elections and advise and assist politicians once they have been elected. This sums up the three main functions assigned to political parties in the literature: the organisational function, the programmatic function, and the nomination function (Webb, 2002).

The way in which parties perform these functions has changed considerably over the past few decades, which has also brought about a reshuffle in their relative importance. The drop in political party membership, as well as the diminished significance of ideological party programs, has decreased the importance of the organisational and programmatic functions, while also increasing the importance of the nomination function. This development has been described in great detail for political parties at the national level (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), but as of yet, little is known about the way parties perform these different functions at the local level.

Organisational function: Over the past 20 years, membership of the major political parties has, on the whole, shown a steep decline. In 1980, parties represented in Parliament had a joint membership file of approximately 430,000, which dropped to about 308,000 by early 2009. This amounted to a 28 per cent decrease (DNPP, 2007). Such a drop may cause immediate problems for parties at the local level, since sustaining a local party organisation requires a minimum number of active members.

Programmatic function: A political program embodies the party's positions on major issues and developments in society, and derives its coherence from an ideological outlook on how society should be organised. For a variety of reasons, political parties distinguish themselves less often through their programs. At the local level, this programmatic party function is even weaker. The sharp political cleavages exploited by parties to profile themselves in national politics are less relevant in local politics: for instance, nationwide debates on the distribution of incomes bypass local politics altogether, since local councils have no competence in this field. Conversely, many local controversies do not easily fit within ideological divisions between national parties. This means that party programs shape the positions of parties at local levels only to a limited degree, which makes it hard for them to create a distinctive profile for themselves in local political debates.

Nomination function: The nomination function, as indicated above, has grown to be most important for political parties. From a membership organisation, the political party has evolved into an executive organisation that recruits, selects, and supports politicians. Only a few studies show if and how this development has taken place at the local level. In any case, there are reasons to expect local politics to have special requirements for the performance of this nomination function. In selecting candidates, parties at the local level must restrict themselves to municipal residents. Therefore, a drop in membership at this level causes many more nomination problems than at the national level.

Party Branches and Independent Parties

Political parties operating at the local level can play two different roles. First, they act as local political parties pursuing representation in the local council. In this sense, they do not differ much from national parties, which do the same at a national level. Secondly, local political organisations may act as local branches of national political parties. In most cases, parties at the local level combine both functions: they not only operate as political players in the local arena, but also as local representatives of their national mother parties. However, there are parties that confine themselves to either one of these roles. Besides national party branches that for tactical or practical reasons back out of local politics, these are mainly independent local political parties with no formal ties to any national political party

(Geser, 1999: 3). According to this classification, two different types of local political parties can be distinguished:

1. Party branches: local party branches of national party organisations.
2. Independent parties: independent local parties with no formal ties to any national party.¹

Independent Parties

As independent parties have no ties with national parties, they play a distinct role in local politics. They are more clearly focused on local issues than party branches, and their political positions cannot be easily reduced to national political cleavages. For these reasons, independent parties are commonly regarded as an extraordinary phenomenon in local politics. As they used to have a strong representation in certain parts of the country, especially in the Catholic south of the Netherlands, they were long considered a feature of regional political folklore that would disappear with the modernisation of local government. Their declining participation in elections and diminishing voter support after the 1970s gave every reason to support this assumption (Kuiper, 1994).

However, since the 1990 local elections, independent parties have shown a remarkable upswing, especially in parts of the country where they used to be weakly represented (Janssen & Korsten, 2003; Zouridis & Tops, 1994). This development was regarded with anxiety by the existing local elites. Independent local parties were not taken seriously as competent players: they would lack the required professionalism, take a clientelist approach to group interests, and make a populist appeal to gut feelings of social discontent. These stereotypes were only reinforced when independent local parties gained landslide victories in the wake of the populist Fortuyn revolt in 2002. Again, the presence of independent parties was considered a temporary phenomenon that would be flushed out as voter discontent ebbed away (Boogers & Weterings, 2002). The March 2006 local election results countered this expectation: although independent parties lost many voters, jointly they still took up the largest share of seats in municipal councils.

Why Independent?

According to the literature, local political parties may have different motives for taking an independent position *vis-à-vis* national political parties.

Focus on local issues: The first intrinsic reason for local parties to operate separately from national political parties is this allows them to focus more distinctly on local issues. In this view, national party positions obscure local issues because party branches fit their national party's ideology and points of view onto local issues. Conversely, independent local parties are more likely to take up issues that are not very relevant from a party-ideological

Table 1. Percentage of votes for independent parties per province, 1974–2006

	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
Groningen	5.1	5.0	6.5	5.7	5.9	6.0	6.5	14.3	14.1
Friesland	10.5	9.2	9.9	9.2	12.7	20.4	20.0	24.4	13.7
Drenthe	8.5	8.9	9.3	9.1	12.0	17.4	*	23.1	19.7
Overijssel	10.6	6.5	6.6	6.1	9.4	14.8	13.4	18.9	19.8
Flevoland	6.3	4.7	2.8	5.2	5.7	7.7	11.8	27.2	21.2
Gelderland	16.7	13.0	11.2	10.4	12.1	14.5	16.8	22.7	23.0
Utrecht	5.3	3.2	3.1	3.7	4.9	6.9	14.8	21.4	19.7
Noord-Holland	6.4	4.9	6.4	6.8	7.9	11.8	13.9	22.2	18.3
Zuid-Holland	4.7	3.3	4.6	4.5	4.6	8.1	11.7	23.6	22.8
Zeeland	15.8	13.2	11.4	9.0	10.7	10.4	16.6	16.6	21.3
Noord-Brabant	51.3	37.0	31.7	28.1	30.0	33.6	35.8	42.0	37.2
Limburg	71.8	61.9	41.0	36.1	34.2	34.7	36.7	38.2	33.5
Netherlands	18.9	14.8	13.0	12.0	13.3	17.8	17.7	26.3	23.7

Sources: 1974–90: Van Tilburg (1993: 34); 1994–2002: Janssen & Korsten (2003: 99); 2006: own inventory.

point of view. Therefore, independent local parties are said to be more responsive than party branches to local issues that matter to common people (Janssen & Korsten, 2004). Their independence from a national political party also holds out the possibility for independent parties to devote themselves to a single cause. A case in point here are the temporary one-issue parties springing up in Switzerland and dealing with controversies in local politics (Ladner, 1999). Dutch examples would include the legion of ‘village parties’, which promote the interests of one or several villages that are part of a municipality.

Meaninglessness of national politics: A second reason for playing a non-partisan role is that party-political oppositions are quite irrelevant in local politics. In this view, local politics is a matter of pragmatism and common sense, and political nitpicking is out of place. There are quite a few international examples of local parties that distance themselves from national parties for this very reason, such as the *Freie Wählergemeinschaften* in Germany (Schneider, 1999) and *Lokale lister* in Norway (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005). In the Netherlands, independent local parties that call themselves ‘public interest’ or ‘municipal interest’ parties are good examples of parties profiling themselves with a apolitical message.

Dissatisfaction with politics: A less defined ground for operating as a independent local political party is related to an overall dissatisfaction with politics, without making much distinction between national and local politics. This discontent is mainly targeted at mainstream national political parties, which are accused of neglecting the problems and interests of ordinary citizens. In this view, independent parties are a sign of protest against politics in general, and an attempt to change politics by giving citizens a greater say in decisions that affect them. Examples of independent local parties that profile themselves with this motive are the ‘*leefbaar*’ (liveable) parties, and other new local political parties that achieved landslide

successes in the 2002 local council elections, which took place in the wake of the political discontent mobilised by Pim Fortuyn (Boogers & Weterings, 2002).

Independence of national political trends: The final ground for taking a non-partisan position is that this allows local parties to be independent of national political trends. Presenting themselves as independent parties, they avoid being held to account for the policies of national politicians. This is why national parties in Canada support independent local parties ('civic parties'), rather than participate in local elections under their own name (Filion, 1999). In Dutch political party circles – especially those of the Labour Party (PvdA) and the Green Party (GroenLinks) – some do occasionally argue in favour of allowing national party branches to take part in local council elections by another name. However, this is only allowed in exceptional cases. In practice, these are usually partnerships of national parties (usually progressive or Christian parties), whose local constituency is too small to allow them to take part in local council elections on their own.

Data and Methods

In order to get more information about political parties at a local level, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (Home Affairs) commissioned Tilburg University and the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties to investigate the nomination capacity of these parties, and to explore the ideological, organisational, and operational characteristics of independent local parties. Two online surveys were conducted: one among the administrators of all 2,260 local party branches of all national parties, of the 21 local branches of the provincial Frisian party (Fryske Nasjonale Party), and of all 884 independent local parties (winter 2005/2006, N=1,800: 1450 party branches, 350 independent local parties), and one among the administrators of all 884 independent local parties (spring 2006, N=250). All local branches were contacted via the national party headquarters. Most independent local parties could be reached by their national association.² Those independents that were not associated were contacted directly after an inventory was made of all independent parties represented in local councils. Parties that could not be reached by e-mail received a questionnaire by post. The overall response rate of the first survey was 59 per cent; the second survey had a response rate of 30 per cent. The data of the first survey show an under-representation of the Christian Democrat (CDA) branches (45 per cent response) and of independent local parties (44 per cent response) and a over-representation of the branches of the Socialist Party (SP) (96 per cent response), of the Labour (PvdA) (75 per cent response) and the Liberal (VVD) branches (72 per cent response). The data of both surveys are representative for region and municipality size. The results of these surveys allow us to

compare how independent local parties and party branches fulfil the organisational, programmatic and nomination functions of political parties.

Organisation and Mobilisation

The way in which parties organise and mobilise citizens' political involvement shows how they are rooted in society. Important aspects here are membership volume and contact intensity between members and the party. In addition, the character of a party's organisation also depends on the party's external relations with local inhabitants and groups in society.

Membership

Political parties have been facing declining membership for quite some time now. As in most other Western countries, the percentage of voters in the Netherlands who are members of a political party shows a downward trend (Mair & Van Biezen, 2001). This trend is also evident in membership developments at the local level, even though some party branches are witnessing increasing membership numbers. Answering the question 'how have membership figures developed during the last years; have they increased, decreased or have they remained unchanged?', branches of the Christian Democrats (CDA), Liberals (VVD), and, to a lesser degree, the Liberal Democrats (D66), report dropping membership figures. However, branches of the Socialist Party (SP), Green Party (GroenLinks), Reformed Church Party (SGP), and Labour Party (PvdA) more often face increases in membership. Compared to party branches, independent parties are much more successful at retaining and recruiting new members than party branches.

According to branch administrators, party branches have an average of about 100 members. Approximately 25 of them are active, which involves distributing folders, attending party meetings, serving on the branch committee, or supporting the council faction. The actual number of members is likely to be much lower: national membership figures registered annually by the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties (DNPP) are twice as low as the membership figures reported by the joint national party branches themselves. However, even if membership figures have not been over-estimated, parties in smaller municipalities still have very few

Table 2. Membership developments in local party branches and independent parties

	Decreased	Stable	Increased	Total
Party branches	31.7	43.3	25.0	100.0
Local parties	10.6	45.3	44.1	100.0
Total	28.0	43.6	28.4	100.0

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 1.824 (Voerman & Boogers, 2006: 2).

active members. In the smallest municipalities, with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, party branches themselves say they have about 70 members, approximately 15 of whom are active. This is close to the minimum number of active members needed to run a local party organisation. This is especially true for D66 and GroenLinks, who on average, have fewer than 10 active members in these small municipalities. As the reported membership numbers seem not very reliable, Table 3 shows the relative differences between party branches and independent parties in municipalities of different size. Local political parties on average, have more active members in small municipalities than national party branches, whereas they have fewer active members in the big cities.

Contacts with Members

As indicated above, only a minority of party members make active contributions to internal debates, campaigning activities, the party executive committee, or to the support of municipal councillors. It would seem self-evident to assume that active member involvement is more pronounced in smaller local parties: their members are more likely to feel they can make a distinctive contribution to the party's activities, than members of bigger parties. Moreover, stronger social networks in small parties provide a greater incentive for participation (Reussing, 1989). As expected, bigger local parties maintain less intensive member contact at the local level: the bigger the party, the lower the percentage of active members. Active membership varies considerably among local parties. Overall, independent

Table 3. Differences in number of members and active members per party and per municipal size: index scores (general average = 100)

	Municipal size	Index average number of members	Index average number of active members
Independent parties	<20,000 inhabitants	40.1	74.8
	20–49,999 inhabitants	57.5	89.3
	50–99,999 inhabitants	54.1	90.1
	≥100,000 inhabitants	98.6	95.0
Party branches	Local parties' average	55.2	85.5
	<20,000 inhabitants	58.9	71.1
	20–49,999 inhabitants	88.0	93.8
	50–99,999 inhabitants	145.3	122.3
	≥100,000 inhabitants	323.6	229.8
Total	Party branches' average	78.6	103.3
	<20,000 inhabitants	71.2	71.5
	20–49,999 inhabitants	104.0	93.0
	50–99,999 inhabitants	164.1	116.9
	≥100,000 inhabitants	369.0	210.7
	General average	100.0	100.0

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 1.824 (Voerman & Boogers, 2006: 5).

Table 4. Percentages of active members by party size. Local political parties and national party branches

	Party size	Percentage active members
Local political party	< 50 members	54.9%
	50–99 members	31.8%
	100–149 members	21.1%
	≥150 members	16.6%
	Local parties' average	41.7%
National party branch	< 50 members	38.8%
	50–99 members	24.5%
	100–149 members	21.8%
	≥150 members	15.5%
	Party branches' average	26.0%
Total	< 50 members	43.0%
	50–99 members	25.8%
	100–149 members	21.7%
	≥150 members	15.6%
	General average	28.7%

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 1.824 (Boogers, Lucardie & Voerman, 2006: 27).

parties maintain closer ties with their members than party branches (see Table 4). A possible explanation for this difference is that independent local parties only have locally interested members, whereas members of national party branches have a stronger focus on national politics and therefore more easily drop out on local political issues.

Relations with the Local Community

Political parties mostly depend on their membership organisation for maintaining relations with the local community. Through active membership, parties keep in touch with current issues in the municipality and mobilise social support for party positions on these issues. As membership figures of most party branches are going down, and fewer people are inclined to be active members, parties need to start looking for other ways of organising their relations with the local community. They often do so by directly contacting groups in society. For instance, many party branches experiment with working groups on specific policy issues that not only attract party members, but also party sympathizers (Boogers, Tops & Vries, 2005). Parties also increasingly tend to make councillors and council candidates responsible for liaising with individual citizens, societies, and organizations. This is how political parties are developing into a modern cadre party, with politicians framing their own grassroots support (Koole, 1995; Katz & Mair, 1995; Gunther & Linz, 2002). Independent local parties are the clearest exponents of this development. As previously stated, these are smaller parties with a relatively active membership. Their relations with the local community are not based on a large membership organisation, but rather on the efforts of politicians and other active members. By visits to neighbourhoods, site

visits and get-togethers with residents, regular meetings with social organisations, and casual personal contacts, they maintain close ties with the local community. They also profile themselves more pronouncedly than national party branches with politicians who are rooted in local society (Boogers, Lucardie & Voerman, 2006).

Programme and Profile

The programmatic function of parties is twofold: to translate citizens' wishes and ideas into a coherent political program; and to make clear what can be expected from the party in terms of political positions and policy proposals. These two are, ideally, a seamless match. If the party program is not based on local opinions about local issues, it will be hard for the party to offer the voters any clear option in elections and retain a distinct profile afterwards. On the other hand, local voters would feel disappointed if the party does not act according to the expectations that were set in its program on municipal policy. In order to match both components of the programmatic function, it is important for the party program to identify and accentuate local conflicts, and then to take a position. Wishes and ideas articulated in the program are only politically relevant if they embody conflict or controversy in the municipality. By taking a stand on such oppositions, the program gains a clear focus and the party a distinct profile. Ideological views on local society confer coherence on the political choices in the program, and thus reinforce the party's profile.

Party Branches

The programmatic profile of a party branch is largely based on the national party's manifesto. Even if branches of the same party respond to local circumstances in different ways, voters will mainly recognise a party branch by the national mother party's programmatic profile that is embedded in national themes. This makes it hard for local party branches to take a distinct position in matters of local controversy: it is almost impossible to frame local conflicts of interest between neighbourhoods, or divergence of views on city centre innovation into political dividing lines between social democrats, liberals, and Christian democrats. This means that although the ideological profile of party branches is clear enough, the electorate hardly knows how this translates into party positions on well-defined local issues.

Independent Parties

Independent parties are a diverse group of organisations that have only their non-alliance to a national political party in common. This makes it hard to pinpoint them ideologically. Survey data on the aims and basic principles³ of independent parties give a more in-depth picture of their programmatic

Table 5. Programmatic typology of independent parties

Type	Percentage
Localist parties	50.0
Protest parties	27.4
Interest parties	22.6
Total	100.0

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 251 (Boogers, Lucardie & Voerman, 2006: 21).

profile. This data indicates that local political parties can be distinguished into three types of profiles:⁴

Localist parties: These independent local parties distinguish themselves by their general focus on the quality of the local administration and democracy. They have a generally apolitical character: the main issue in their programs is the preservation of the municipality's unique character. Half of all local political parties fall into this category. They are commonly independent local parties with a long history.

Protest parties: This type of independent local party is driven by opposition to a municipal plan, or by a general dissatisfaction with municipal administration. Well over a quarter of local independents fall into this category.

Interest parties: The last type is made up of independent parties that devote themselves to the interests of specific groups of residents. Almost a quarter of all local parties fall into this category. Like localist parties, interest parties have been around for some time.

Local Political Cleavages

National parties can be classified more easily than independent local parties. Voter surveys show that virtually all Dutch voters manage to position national parties on a left-right scale, and do so relatively consistently and stable basis (Van den Brug, 1996). This gives the national parties a distinctive ideological profile. However, for their local branches, there is a downside. As national party profiles are largely based on national themes, party positions on local issues tend to be fuzzy. Independent local parties find themselves in a reverse situation. Their ideological position on the classic left-right spectrum is vague, but they take clear and distinctive positions on local issues. In doing so, independent parties introduce three new political cleavages to the left-right division. Parties with a localist profile emphasise the contrast between municipal interests on one side, and regional, provincial, or national interests, on the other. They stress that independent local party councillors are in a better position to promote local interests than representatives of party branches, who are assumed to be more responsive to pressures from fellow party members at higher administrative levels.

The second new political dividing line is between establishment and anti-establishment. This dividing line is particularly politicised by protest

parties that intend to expose the poor responsiveness of party branches in office.

Thirdly, interest parties stress geographical and demographic cleavages between neighbourhoods, communities, villages, or between young people and senior citizens. Their claim is that party branches are not able to act on behalf of the interests of neighbourhoods or demographic groups.

As independent local parties have a distinct profile, they appear to have a positive influence on the accessibility and responsiveness of local politics. Because they bring new, purely local political divisions into local politics, independent local parties manage to put issues on to the political agenda that escape the attention of party branches, or end up smothered in internal party debate.

Nomination

With the reduced significance of the mobilisation and ideological functions of parties, nomination has now become the most important function of political parties. By pre-selecting candidates with common political ideals, and with required competencies, parties simplify the selection process in elections. This saves voters from having to compare the qualities and ideas of hundreds of individual candidates (Jones & Hudson, 1998). However, this impels parties to recruit sufficient people who are willing and able to take up town councillorship, which is increasingly hard to do. Particularly, in the smaller municipalities, parties are having great difficulty finding motivated and talented candidate councillors or active members who can support councilors. For this reason, the Liberal Democrats (D66) withdrew from the 2006 local elections in Waalwijk, Dongen, and Marum, among other smaller municipalities. According to the survey data, one in seven party branches seriously considered non-participation in local elections; even more than half the D66 branches did so. Party branches in particular had great difficulty in finding eligible council candidates: virtually half of all party branches reported great difficulty in finding sufficient eligible candidates. The D66 (54.9 per cent), VVD (50.9 per cent), and PvdA (47.9 per cent) party branches had the greatest nomination problems in the 2006 local elections; the SP (42.0 per cent) and ChristenUnie (40.0 per cent) branches had the least. In general, local political parties had less difficulty recruiting council candidates; only 38.2 per cent reported they had great, or some difficulty in finding candidates for local elections.

Recruitment of Non-Party Members

Considering the major problems some national party branches experienced in finding eligible candidates, it was expected that they must have looked beyond their party organizations to try and recruit non-party members.

Table 6. Percentage of party branches and independent parties that had some or great difficulty recruiting eligible candidates

Party	Percentage
Party branches	47.9
Local parties	38.2
Total	46.1

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 1.824 (Voerman & Boogers, 2006: 5).

Table 7. Percentage of party branches or local parties that recruited among non-party members

Party	Percentage
Party branches	29.1
Local parties	54.4
Total	33.6

Source: Dataset TSPB/DNPP; N = 1.824 (Voerman & Boogers, 2006: 11).

Indeed, this was the case in the build-up to the 2006 municipal elections. The GroenLinks (46.6 per cent) and CDA branches (41.0 per cent) did so most often, while the SGP (3.3 per cent) and SP (5.6 per cent) branches mostly refrained from this approach. A total of approximately one-third of party branches put up one or more non-party member candidates. In particular, national party branches and independent local parties that had to make a considerable effort to find sufficient municipal councillors often looked for candidates among non-party members. Thus, circumstances seem to have blurred the distinction between members and non-members.

The national PvdA, CDA, and VVD party headquarters encouraged their local branches to recruit non-members as council candidates, partly because it was impossible to find sufficient candidates in any other way, and partly to stimulate a much-needed rejuvenation of their council factions. For that matter, all such non-members had to join their parties to be able to stand as candidates.⁵ Independent parties showed an even higher degree of flexibility than national party branches. Well over half recruited people were not registered as members.

Nomination Capability

The quality implications of political parties' weak nomination capability for local democracy appear to be ambiguous. On the one hand, the quality of council candidates may be compromised, with all the consequences for the role and position of the municipal council. On the other, national party branches are following the example of independent local parties in recruiting non-members who, for instance, have 'won their spurs' in local society. This widening of the scope of recruitment might eventually reinforce the council's representative function, which would ultimately benefit the responsiveness and legitimacy of local politics.

Conclusion

In evaluating the way in which political parties fulfil their functions in local politics, we find that their intermediary function is under considerable pressure. Party branches are experiencing increasing difficulty organising and mobilising citizens' political commitment. More than a quarter of all parties are facing decreasing membership figures at the local level, while the number of members is already low. In smaller municipalities many party branches – especially those of CDA, VVD, and D66 – are approaching critical limits: their active membership is barely sufficient to keep the party branch alive, which is causing difficulties in recruiting candidates for local elections. During the last council elections, nearly half of all national party branches had difficulties finding people prepared to stand as candidates. In well over one-third of these cases, parties turned to non-party members. Although recruiting talent outside party ranks might have a revitalising effect, the current state of affairs is a worry for a substantial number of political parties. Obviously, this has consequences for national party organisations, as local branches are a party's grassroots.

Independent local parties seem to be doing better. With a small number of relatively active members they are able to develop and maintain the party's rootedness in society. Secondly, they enrich local politics with new political dividing lines between local and supra-local interests, between establishment and anti-establishment and between local geographic and demographic interests, smoothing the entry of new demands, themes, and issues on to the political agenda. Finally, they are proving to be more resourceful in recruiting citizens to stand as candidates for municipal councillorship. Because of their ideological and organisational characteristics, they are in a better position to organise citizens' political involvement; not on a permanent, but an *ad hoc* basis, and not based on party-political ties, but rather on their interests and expertise (Dekker, De Hart & Van den Berg, 2004). These qualities give local political parties a head start in developing a new intermediary role between politics and society.

Notes

- 1 As with all classifications, there are some borderline cases. Some independent local parties have successfully rallied for provincial elections with independent provincial voter associations.
- 2 The national association of independent parties is not an overarching national political party, but a national service organisation that acts for (and sometimes on behalf of) the associated independent local parties.
- 3 Answers to the survey questions: 1) To what extent are the next objectives important for your party?: a) taking care of good government in your municipality, b) reducing the gap between citizens and administration, c) defending the interests of the municipality in the province and national government, d) preservation of the municipality's character, e) stand up for the weak in our society, f) resistance against a [municipality] plan, g) stand up for the interests of a certain district, suburb or village, h) stand up for the interests of a certain group of people in

the municipality (very important, important, hardly important, not important); 2) Which reasons for establishing your party still apply: a) dissatisfaction about the municipal policy in general, b) mobilize political attention for a certain subject or problem, c) dissatisfaction about the way local democracy works, d) standing up for the interests of a certain district, suburb or village, e) standing up for the interests of a group of people, f) political belief/conviction, that other political parties didn't consider important enough, g) conflict within a party that already exists, h) interest in participating in local policy, i) a collective philosophy of life, j) the care for preservation of the specific character of the municipality. Answer categories for both sets of questions: very important, important, hardly important, not important. A principal component analysis of these items led to four different factors: advocacy (Cronbachs alpha = 0.80), protest (C's alpha = 0.63), localism (C's alpha = 0.59), idealism (C's alpha = 0.51).

- 4 This classification was made by a two-step cluster analysis of the factor scores advocacy, protest, localism and idealism.
- 5 Group interview with officials from national party headquarters (PvdA, CDA, VVD, SP, GroenLinks, ChristenUnie, SGP), June 2006.

References

- Aars, J. & Ringkjøb, H.-E. (2005) Party politicisation reversed? Non-partisan alternatives in Norwegian local politics, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 28(2), pp.161–181.
- Boogers, M. & Weterings, R. (2002) Het gebeurde in Rotterdam, Hilversum en Drimmelen, *Beleid en Maatschappij*, 17(3), pp.169–171.
- Boogers, M., Lucardie, P. & Voerman, G. (2006) *Lokale politieke groeperingen: belangenbehartiging, protest en lokalisme* (Tilburg & Groningen: TSPB & DNPP).
- Boogers, M., Tops, P.W. & Vries, A. (2005) *Effecten van dualisering voor burgers: beweging naar buiten?* (The Hague: VNG Uitgeverij).
- Brug, W.van der (1996) *Where's the Party? Voters' Perceptions of Party Positions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press).
- Dalton, R.J. & Wattenberg, M.P. (Eds) (2002) *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Dekker, P., de Hart, J. & van den Berg, E. (2004) Democratie en civil society, in: P. Schnabel (Ed.) *In het zicht van de toekomst: Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport 2004*, pp.181–220 (Den Haag: Sdu).
- DNPP (2009) Party membership overview. Available at <http://www.dnpp.nl> (accessed 3 February 2009).
- Filion, P. (1999) Civic parties in Canada: their diversity and evolution, in: M. Saiz & H. Geser (Eds) *Local Parties in Political and Organizational Perspective*, pp.77–100 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- Geser, H. (1999) The local party as an object of interdisciplinary comparative study, in: M. Saiz & H. Geser (Eds) *Local Parties in Political and Organizational Perspective*, pp.3–36 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- Gunther, R. & Linz, J.J. (Eds) (2002) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Janssen, J. & Korsten, A.F.A. (2003) De wederopstanding van lokale lijsten, *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 57(2), pp.90–111.
- Jones, P. & Hudson, J. (1998) The role of political parties: an analysis based on transaction costs, *Public Choice*, 94(1), pp.175–189.
- Katz, R.S. & Mair, P. (1995) Changing models of party organization and party democracy: the emergence of the cartel party, *Party Politics*, 1(1), pp.5–28.
- Koole, R. (1996) Cadre, catch-all or cartel? A comment on the notion of the cadre party, *Party Politics*, 2(4), pp.507–523.
- Kuiper, W. (1994) *Lokaal en landelijk in Limburg: veranderingen in de Limburgse lokale politiek* (Maastricht: Universitaire Pers Maastricht).

- Ladner, A. (1999) Local parties in Switzerland: an active pillar of the Swiss political system, in: M. Saiz & H. Geser (Eds) *Local Parties in Political and Organizational Perspective*, pp.213–241 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- Mair, P. & van Biezen, I. (2001) Party membership in twenty European democracies, *Party Politics*, 7(1), pp.5–21.
- Reussing, R. (1989) Participatie binnen politieke partijen op lokaal niveau, in: R. Koole (Ed.) *Jaarboek 1988 van het Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen*, pp.131–152 (Groningen: DNPP).
- Schneider, H. (1999) Local parties in the German countryside, in: M. Saiz & H. Geser (Eds) *Local parties in political and organizational perspective*, pp.123–150 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- Tilburg, M.F.J. van (1993) *Lokaal of nationaal? Het lokale karakter van de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen in Nederlandse gemeenten (1974–90)* (The Hague: VNG-uitgeverij).
- Voerman, G. & Boogers, M. (2006) *Rekrutering door politieke partijen bij gemeenteraadsverkiezingen: problemen en perspectieven* (Tilburg & Groningen: TSPB & DNPP).
- Webb, P. (2002) Introduction, in: P. Webb, D. Farrell & I. Holliday (Eds) *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, pp.1–15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Zouridis, S. & Tops, P.W. (1994) 'Wij zijn een partij voor normaal denken . . .' Stadspartijen en hun betekenis voor de lokale democratie, in: G. Voerman & P. Lucardie (Eds) *Jaarboek 1993 Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen*, pp.75–92 (Groningen: DNPP).