# Chapter 3
# The changing face of Dutch politics: The demise of Christian democracy and the rise of the educational cleavage

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## Dutch cleavage politics in changing times

Christian democracy, which had dominated the political scene for much of the twentieth century in the Netherlands, is gradually facing its demise. The Dutch Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA) performed poorly in the 2021 parliamentary elections. The party lost four seats, leaving them with only 15 seats in Parliament. This is far from the 54 seats the party won in 1986. The CDA's decline in electoral support progressed even further in the March 2023 provincial and Senate elections, where the party's representation in the Senate was cut in half. It now only holds five seats in the Senate, compared to the 27 it held in 1980.

Until the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch society was deeply divided along religious lines. People organized their social and political lives within separate pillars, each with its own schools, newspapers, broadcast networks, and political parties. It was rare for children to have friends from different religious backgrounds, and interfaith marriages were uncommon. Most people only socialized with others from their own pillars, and the only time they would interact with people from different pillars was during military service or at work.

This division also affected politics. Protestants typically voted for Protestant parties, while the vast majority of Catholics voted for the Catholic Party. Secular citizens tended to vote for either the social democrats or the liberal party. This system of voting along religious lines was a reflection of the societal divisions at the time.

In the twenty-first century, many of the class and religious divisions that once defined Dutch society have faded away. Two key factors have contributed to this decline in the social basis of support for Christian democratic parties over the past few decades: the

weakening of religious divisions and the emergence of a new divide based on sociocultural issues that is closely linked to education (Gomez, 2022). This new educational divide has replaced the previous secular/religious divide (Kriesi et al., 2008), creating new lines of party competition within the Dutch political landscape.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how the contours of Dutch politics are changing and how these changes reflect shifts in the underlying cleavage structure of Dutch society. Specifically, I will draw on previous research by van Kersbergen (1999, 2008) and Bovens and Wille (2017), as well as additional literature, to identify how sociodemographic developments have given rise to new political conflicts and contributed to the decline and emergence of political parties in Dutch democracy.

## A restructuration of cleavages

In their classic article, Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) defined the concept of cleavage to represent structurally embedded social groups with contrasting interests and values that inform distinctive voting preferences (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). It refers to a specific type of conflict in democratic politics that is rooted in the social structural transformations that have been triggered by large-scale processes (Bornschier, 2009: 1). Lipset and Rokkan identified a number of such large-scale 'critical junctures' in the history of European society, which eventually led to the formation of cleavages within European society. Among these are the Reformation, the emergence of nation-states, and the Industrial Revolution.

Across Western Europe, cleavage formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was based on religion and class. In the Netherlands, this religious cleavage constituted an independent dimension of political competition (van Kersbergen, 2008; Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, 2010). It reflected the conflict between religious and secular voters, with the religious more likely to vote for Christian democratic parties. At the heart of this cleavage lies the conflict between church and state, which is the contest determining how religious norms should be reflected in governmental policy.

Western party systems at the beginning of the 1960s still reflected the 'frozen' social cleavages of the 1920s (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), but the next decades were marked by important societal and politi-

cal changes. In the 1960s and 1970s, student protests and the rise of a counterculture brought cultural issues relating to authority, human sexuality, women's rights, the environment, and differing interpretations of individual freedom to the political arena (Pless, Tromp and Houtman, 2020).

The increasing modernization of Western societies has eroded traditional cleavages over the last decades. Classic sociodemographic categories, such as class and religion, are losing their relevance (Kriesi et al., 2008, Pless, Tromp and Houtman, 2020; Tromp, Pless and Houtman, 2022). Cleavage-like categories such as age, or generations (Inglehart, 1977), gender, and in particular education are becoming the basis of new political conflict lines (Kriesi, 1998, 2010; Deegan-Krause, 2007: 541). Different political scientists and sociologists emphasize the importance of education in the rise of new, cultural conflicts in Western, post-industrial societies (Kriesi et al., 2010; Bornschier, 2010; Pless, Tromp and Houtman, 2020). The study 'Diploma democracy: The rise of political meritocracy' (Bovens and Wille, 2017) shows how the contours of this new political and social divide have crystallized in Western Europe.

In this essay, I show how the demise of the religious and the rise of an educational cleavage in the Netherlands are reflected along three lines: a changing sociodemographic division, shifting differences in terms of political preferences, and the appearance of a new divide in the political landscape.

## New sociodemographic divisions in the Netherlands

A first indication of a restructuring of cleavages is whether we can observe structural changes in Dutch society. How has the shift away from religious divisions and towards education-based divides, as part of a broader process of modernization, taken place in Dutch society?

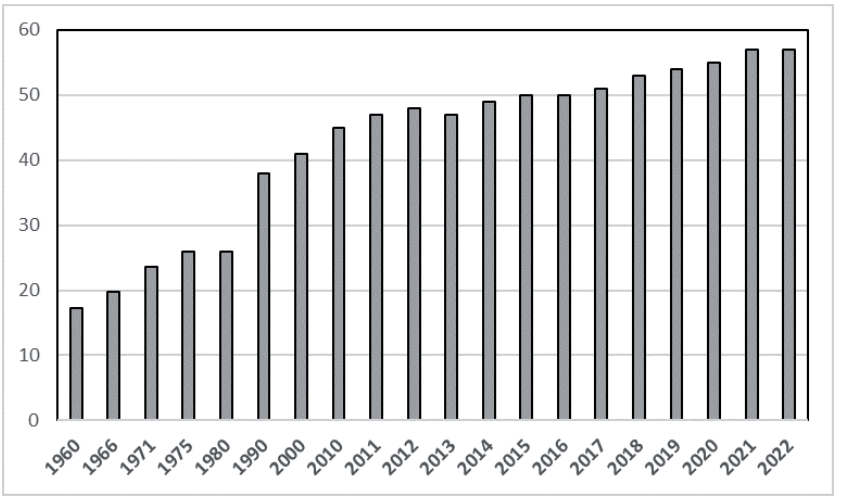
### *The secularization of Dutch society*

In recent years, the Netherlands has experienced a significant trend towards secularization. More than half of the population is now unaffiliated with a church or religious denomination, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down (see Figure 1). According to data from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and the Neth-

erlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), in 2022, 58% of Dutch people aged 15 and older did not consider themselves to belong to any religion. This is in stark contrast to the 1960s when less than 20% of the population were unaffiliated.

Of those who still identify with a religion, the number of Catholics has seen a significant decline. In 2010, 27% of the Dutch population was Roman Catholic, but by 2022, that number had dropped to just 18%. The number of Protestants has also declined, although less rapidly than the number of Catholics. These changes reflect a broader trend towards secularization and a move away from religious identity as a primary factor in Dutch society.

**Figure 1: Secularization in the Netherlands (% with no religious denomination) (1960-2022)**




Source: CBS.

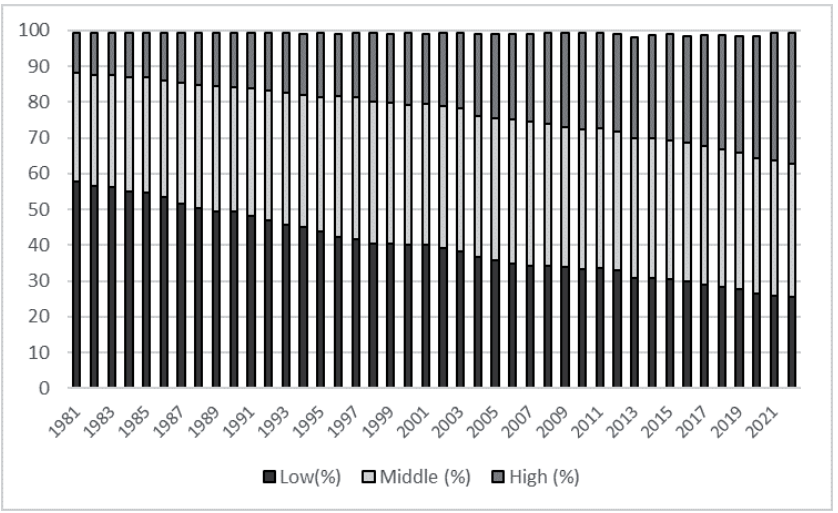
Secularization in the Netherlands has been further fueled by the expansion of education. As levels of education have risen, so too has the proportion of the population that identifies as secular or non-religious.

### *The rise of the well-educated as a new social segment*

In the past, it did not make much sense to talk about different educational groups, as the number of well-educated people was small.

However, in recent decades, the number of highly educated individuals has significantly increased. In 1960, only 2% of the population was highly educated, while in the 1980s, it was 11% (Bovens and Wille, 2017). As of 2021, the majority of 15- to 75-year-olds in the Netherlands have a secondary education, and 35% have at least a higher vocational education or university degree, as Figure 2 shows.[1] This significant expansion of the number of well-educated citizens provides the demographic basis for cleavage formation.

**Figure 2: Educational level of Dutch population 15 to 75 years (1981-2022, %)**




Source: CBS.

The emergence of new educational divides in Dutch society has led to increased stratification and segregation along educational lines. This has resulted in unequal access to housing, healthcare, job opportunities, and income, as well as disparities in life expectancies and wealth. In addition, education plays an important role in shap-

1 The growth concerns the number of individuals for whom the highest level of education achieved is an HBO or wo bachelor's degrees and the HBO and WO master's or doctorate. Individuals for whom the highest level of education is havo, vwo, and mbo2-4 are qualified as the middle educational levels; and the primary education category, the vmbo, lower havo, vwo, and mbo1 are qualified as the lower educational levels.

ing patterns of homogamy, as highly educated individuals tend to socialize mainly with others who are similarly well educated (Bovens and Wille, 2017).

Furthermore, higher levels of education are associated with lower levels of religious commitment. In 2019, 62% of academics in the Netherlands reported having no religious affiliation, compared to only 34% of individuals who had completed primary education (CBS, 2019). As education levels increase, the likelihood of being secular also increases (SCP, 2022: 71). These trends suggest that education is becoming an increasingly important factor in shaping social and political attitudes and behaviors in Dutch society.

## A shift in political values

A social divide must be based on distinct values and beliefs for it to be politically significant. In the past, Catholics, Protestants, and seculars formed such distinct groups, but secularization has led to a decline in moral traditionalism. Nowadays, education is a major source of values and beliefs, and cultural issues have taken center stage in the political debate.

### *The decline of religious conflict lines*

In the Netherlands, voters have traditionally been categorized along two dimensions: social-economic left-right and religious-secular. Christian democracy, which is based on Christian doctrines such as community spirit, stewardship, and care for loved ones, has been one of the major political forces in the country. The election manifestos of the Christian Democratic Party often emphasize the importance of Christian values. The religious model of Christian democracy also includes specific norms related to sexuality, life and procreation, family issues, and gender roles. These norms have sometimes created conflicts between moral traditionalism and liberalism. (Pless, Tromp and Houtman, 2020, Tromp, Pless and Houtman, 2022).

Since the 1960s, with the process of secularization, people started to criticize religious values, churches, and authority and placed more emphasis on individual liberty and personal authenticity. As a result, religion's social significance has declined. The protest and counterculture movement has had a lasting impact on Dutch soci-

ety and politics, as noted by scholars such as Inglehart in 1977 and Kriesi in 2010.

Surveys conducted by the SCP in 2006 showed that formal education, particularly academic degrees, has become antithetical to religious belonging. University-educated individuals placed less faith in religious principles compared to those with lower levels of education. The survey also revealed clear differences in religious beliefs between those with higher and lower levels of educational attainment. For example, 32% of those with higher educational levels believed in miracles compared to 50% of those with lower education. Similarly, there were differences in the belief that the Bible is God's word (17% among those with higher education compared to 42% among those with lower education) and the notion that Adam and Eve really existed (14% among those with higher education compared to 33% among those with lower education).

### *New cultural conflict lines*

In recent decades, a new cultural conflict dimension has emerged alongside traditional religious divides. This dimension is characterized in various ways, such as libertarian/authoritarian (Stubager, 2008, 2009, 2013), post-materialist/materialist (Inglehart, 1977), green-alternative-libertarian/traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (Marks and Hooghe, 2009), or cosmopolitan/nationalist (Bovens and Wille, 2017). The gradual rise of this new cultural divide has been fueled by waves of non-Western immigration, the process of European unification, and increasing concerns over the environment and climate change (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Many scholars attribute this political realignment to the role of education in post-industrial societies, where highly educated individuals tend to hold more libertarian views on sociocultural issues compared to their less-educated counterparts (Bovens and Wille, 2017). Highly educated citizens tend to embrace social and cultural diversity and support multiculturalism, autonomy in lifestyle, and environmentalism. On the other side of this new conflict line, we find citizens with lower levels of education who tend to reject multiculturalism and prefer a more homogeneous national culture and traditionalism, or worry about the impact of environmental measures on the costs of living.

## Shifts in the political party landscape

Cleavages manifest themselves also in the support for specific political parties or for particular political organizations. Political parties, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued, play a critical role in stabilizing and institutionalizing patterns of competition. Not only the decline of religion but also the growth of educated voters is viewed as changing the electoral ground for political parties over time. These steady changes have played an important role in redefining the landscape of Dutch politics.

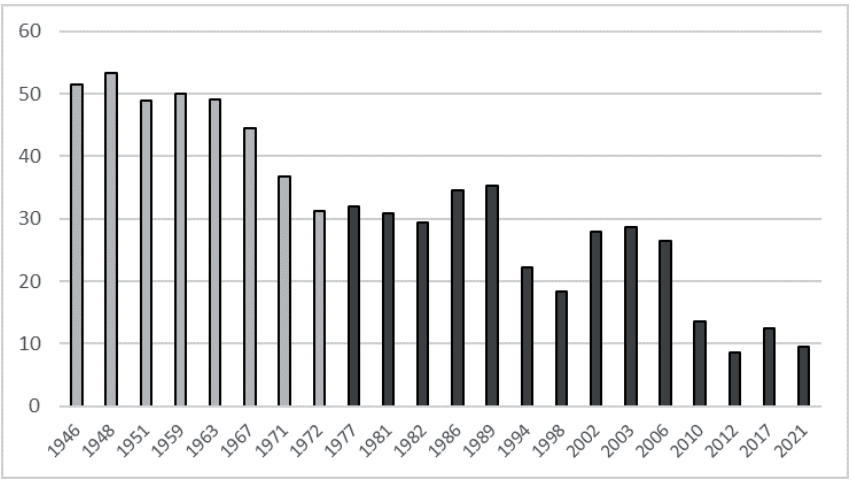
### *The demise of the Christian Democratic Party*

In the Netherlands of the past, Protestants would vote, by and large, for the various Protestant political parties, and almost all Catholics would vote for the Catholic Party. The process of depillarization in which people began to identify less with their religious groups had a detrimental impact on the support for confessional parties.

After losing seven seats in the 1967 parliamentary elections, the three confessional parties in the Netherlands (KVP, ARP, and CHU) began discussions about working together. Following a lengthy period of deliberation on fundamental principles and programmatic direction, the parties merged to form the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1980. However, the confessional parties had already been represented in the House of Representatives since 1977 via their own list. The formation of the CDA was a success, as evidenced by the electoral results in Figure 3. The CDA gained significant voter support, becoming the largest and most powerful party in the Netherlands by 1989 in terms of parliamentary seats, membership, and its pivotal role in the coalition system, according to van Kersbergen (2008).

In 1994, the CDA suffered a significant setback, losing 16.9% of the vote and 25 seats, along with its dominant position in the coalition system. The voters who abandoned Christian democracy mostly moved to the right, supporting the VVD, and to the center-right of liberalism, backing D66. Nevertheless, the CDA made a comeback in 2002 and 2003, and it remained the largest party in parliament after the elections of 2006, as noted by van Kersbergen (2008: 261).

**Figure 3: Electoral results of the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) in Dutch Parliamentary Elections, 1977-2021 (%, dark grey bars) and the total of the three confessional parties in the period 1946-1972 (%, light grey bars)**




Source: Kiesraad.

During this period, the CDA intentionally adopted a conservative economic stance. The party grappled with the challenge of balancing the promotion of its Christian ideology with its desire to remain a central player in politics. As a result, it increasingly distanced itself from its confessional roots and focused more on its centrist positioning. This led to internal disagreements over the party's core values, including the interpretation of the C in its name. Party members debated whether it represented Christian, conservative, compassion, or communitarianism (van Kersbergen, 2011).

In the 2010 elections, the CDA faced a significant defeat. The majority of its voters were aged 55 or older, posing a critical issue for the party. To appeal to younger voters, they needed new strategies. In contrast, D66 and GroenLinks have had an easier time attracting younger voters, with almost one in three of their voters under 35 years old. However, according to Te Grotenhuis et al. (2012), the impact of generational replacement on this trend was limited. More important than generational replacement was that religious, churchgoing

voters left the party, as they shifted towards secular parties such as VVD, PVV, and to a lesser extent, D66.

According to Gomez (2022), the success of Christian democratic parties in elections was largely influenced by their strategic decisions and their ability to adapt to the changing social and political landscape. Kalyvas and van Kersbergen (2010) suggested that the impact of secularization on religious parties may have been overstated, as Christian democratic parties were able to adapt to a more secular context by shedding their explicitly religious ideological beliefs and instead presenting policies that were broadly inspired by religious principles. However, this strategy proved detrimental for the CDA, as it made the party indistinguishable from other right-wing parties and failed to appeal to voters who still based their choices on economic and cultural issues, leading to a decline in support for the party (van der Meer, 2013).

### *The rise of social-liberal green versus populist right parties*

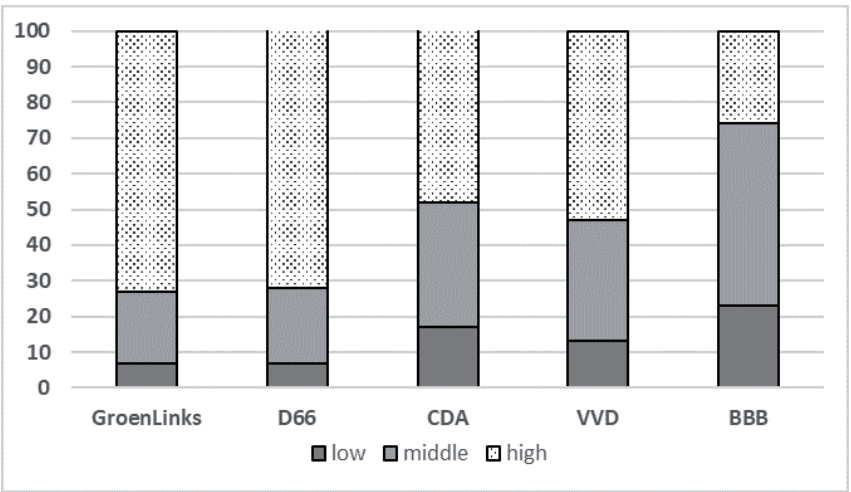
The CDA's loss of voters has benefited other political parties that are growing in popularity. CDA voters who seek a more left-wing, social, and less conservative platform are turning towards the confessional ChristenUnie, which stands out for its focus on ethical and moral issues but is generally considered more left-leaning than the CDA; or to the secular social liberal (D66) and green (GroenLinks) parties. These parties have entered the political stage in the Netherlands since the 60s, on one side of the new cultural dimension of conflict, predominantly attracting voters from the high end of the education spectrum. They have gained a lasting place in the political arena because they represent groups of voters who share a culturally progressive set of issue preferences.

On the other side of the new cultural dimension of conflict, we see the emergence of new challenger right-wing populist parties (PVV, FvD, JA21) that attract voters who hold more conservative views on issues such as immigration, law and order, national identity, and climate and environmental policies. These parties appeal to secondary and lower-educated voters who feel left behind by globalization, the EU, immigration, and firm climate acts.

The emergence of these new parties has disrupted the traditional political landscape and challenged the dominance of established

parties, including the CDA. It also displays a clear differentiation of political parties based on the educational level of their voters that has emerged in the Dutch political system. As shown in Figure 4 for five parties, the most highly educated voters are those of the green and liberal cultural parties, such as GroenLinks and D66. These parties have traditionally received a lot of support from highly educated Dutch citizens. The least educated voters are those of the PVV (not shown in Figure 4), and their education level is not significantly different from non-voters and those who vote for other protest parties.

**Figure 4: Educational level for voters of five main Dutch political parties (%) (2023)**




Source: Ipsos Survey for the NRC, 17 maart 2023.

Also, the new farmer-friendly political party BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) acting against new nitrogen laws in the Netherlands gained a significant share of support (73%) from middle- and low-educated voters in the provincial elections in 2023 (see Figure 4). BBB attracted almost a quarter of the voters who voted for the CDA in 2021, which suggests growing dissatisfaction with traditional mainstream parties, such as the VVD and CDA, among the middle and lower educational segments of the population. Ganzeboom and Arab (2019) found that the education profiles of political parties in the Netherlands have remained relatively stable over the past two decades,

with highly educated voters more likely to vote for cultural progressive parties such as GroenLinks and D66, and lower-educated voters more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties such as PVV and BBB.

Over the past two decades, there has been a clear link between sociocultural issues and political mobilization among specific educational groups in Dutch politics (Stubager, 2009, 2010; Bovens and Wille, 2017). This has led to a restructuring of political conflict lines, with the left-right dimension increasingly tied to this cultural contradiction. In particular, the cultural divide has become the central conflict dimension in Dutch politics, eclipsing other traditional themes such as the economy, immigration, the environment, and Europe (Otjes, 2021). While these themes still play a role, party positions on these issues have become increasingly clustered, with a clear division between parties that prioritize climate change, refugee admittance, and European cooperation, and those that prioritize immigration, economic growth, and less involvement with the European Union (Otjes, 2021).

## Education, secularization, and the future of the CDA in Dutch politics

All politics is demographics. The shifting demographics of a population have profound political implications. In the case of the Netherlands, the declining number of religious individuals – who traditionally formed the core constituency of Christian-democratic parties – coupled with the growing number of highly educated individuals have reshaped the country's political landscape. The process of modernization has eroded traditional religious (and class-based) divisions, giving rise to new political divides based on education.

The weakening of the once strong connection between religious identity and political affiliation has made it harder for the Christian Democratic Party to rely on traditional voter loyalties. The CDA finds itself increasingly caught between different groups of voters with diverging educational backgrounds and political preferences. This means finding a way to appeal to a more diverse and liberal voter base, while still trying to maintain its confessional values and identity. The CDA struggles to appeal to younger, highly educated voters who tend to favor socially and culturally liberal values that

are often at odds with Christian conservative positions; while at the same time trying to retain a support base of older, lower, and middle-educated voters who are more conservative and religiously oriented.

The politics of educational expansion in the era of secularization has changed the face of Dutch politics. Increased electoral volatility and a fragmented political landscape shaped new political challenger parties that seem better able to respond to the changing political and social realities and the shifting demands of CDA voters. The ability of the Christian Democratic Party to navigate these challenges will determine its future success in Dutch politics.

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