



DEMOCRACY REVISED



**Towards a government that
delivers tangible results**

Time for tangible results

How could the Dutch democracy become more effective in achieving results? That is the underlying question of DenkWerk's latest report: *Democracy revised*. It proposes a series of reforms and tests their effect through an AI simulation.

Our Dutch democracy is under pressure. Increasingly, we see that policy fails to get off the ground or turns out differently than intended. Whether it concerns nitrogen, housing, or a future-proof healthcare system: democratic processes too often yield too little result.

This has not always been the case. The Netherlands has an impressive track record when it comes to making far-reaching decisions with long-lasting effects: the *Deltawerken*, the *Akkoord van Wassenaar* and the *Ruimte voor de Rivier-programme*. Such results are now absent. The pattern is broad and structural. Successive governments, of varying composition and character, have been confronted with this. It affects the short and the

long term, large and small issues, and both the social and the physical domain. The system does not fail randomly - it fails structurally.

A democracy that functions procedurally but fails to deliver results creates the risk that citizens lose trust in democratic representatives. The trust of Dutch citizens in the government (and in politics) has declined sharply in recent years. We have gone from best-in-class in the EU to below-average. When trust remains structurally low, citizens may disengage. This erodes the public support for democracy, making it not illogical to desire alternative governance models. Support for democracy then becomes dependent on opportunistic short-term actions. To break this dynamic, a shift is needed towards a Dutch democracy of tangible results.

Orchestration from a coherent agenda

To achieve a government that once again delivers tangible results, several challenges must be overcome. First and foremost, there is a lack of

orchestration based on a strategic agenda that addresses the totality of, and coherence between, issues. Such orchestration is needed to address issues in a timely manner and to set priorities. In the current fragmented political landscape, it is difficult to formulate such a shared vision. This is reinforced by a siloed governance structure, policy that tries to accommodate all exceptions - and is therefore unenforceable and unachievable - and policy without objectives or that fails to meet them. We do not know in which direction we want to go, which choices that requires, or whether we are on the right track. Instead of timely intervention, we defer problems, and only the most urgent issue receives attention.

A strategic unit within the Ministry of General Affairs, modelled on Singapore's Strategy Group, can help give direction to policy: drafting an agenda, making choices explicit, and setting and measuring objectives. But such orchestration can only work in a political system that promotes long-term orientation. And for that, the context and structure in which our politicians operate must change.

Attention economy

The attention economy forms an important part of that context. Citizens, media, and politicians reinforce each other's behavior in a negative spiral. Voters are encouraged towards retrospective voting behavior; media (talk shows, TV debates, and social media) towards sensation and conflict; politicians towards sharp promises and permanent profiling. This is not their fault, but the result of their mutual interaction. Conflict crowds out substance from our democratic debate.

The role of big tech in this should not be underestimated. It extends beyond facilitating public debate. Increasingly, big tech also shapes public debate, thereby acquiring power within our democracy. Breaking the attention economy requires structural improvements that enhance the quality of representation. In addition, the influence of big tech must be curtailed: through existing legislative instruments, by making the government less dependent on big tech, and by actively developing alternatives.

Reforms in our political system

The current political structure provides insufficient counterbalance to the attention economy. Adjustments that take politicians out of the permanent election mode are necessary. A parliamentary threshold of 4% increases governability and facilitates long-term legislation. An extension of the parliamentary term to six years and the introduction of a Future Committee contribute to greater long-term orientation. A motion ceiling of 2,500 per year reduces the incentive to use parliamentary instruments for political gain. Cooperation is strengthened by breaking the convention of automatically dissolving Parliament upon a cabinet crisis, making party splits more difficult, and concluding more long-term agreements.

The stability that these structural improvements aim for requires a bicameral system with consistent roles. This is currently not the case. The Senate too often functions as a political battleground. In the short term, this can be limited through adjustment: with a right of referral and simultaneous elections for the Senate and Parliament. In the longer term, abolition of the Senate should also be considered, provided this is accompanied by the introduction of constitutional review (by judges or the *Raad van State*), and a corrective referendum. This would improve the continuity and role consistency in the Dutch bicameral system.

Towards a balanced equilibrium between careful process and timely result

Orchestration based on a coherent long-term agenda, supported by a political system with a long-term orientation, makes clear which objectives are being pursued, which choices are needed, and what delay costs. This can restore the skewed balance between process and results. The debate should focus less on honoring every individual interest and combating individual process steps, and more on explicit trade-offs. Time deserves a more prominent role in this discussion. Delivering results requires choices; delay causes significant economic and societal costs that must be factored in.

Digital clone of the Dutch Parliament

We did not only want to describe the proposed changes to the Dutch political system, but also to test their workings. We did this through an AI simulation: a digital twin of the Dutch Parliament. In the digital twin we can change the context of the parliamentary debate (by changing prompts) and investigate whether a different context also leads to different outcomes. Such experiments are not possible in the real Parliament. Therefore, the proposed measures have until now been discussed but never tested.

We measured the effect of five reforms: introduction of a parliamentary threshold of 4%, extension of the parliamentary term from four to six years, non-dissolution of Parliament upon a cabinet crisis, restriction of the use of (social) media, and abolition of the Senate. We measured whether the proposed reforms improved how the debate was conducted (i.e., discussion criteria) and what the outcome of the debate was.

The results of the AI simulation (238 debates) showed that:

- Together, the tested measures led to more outcomes.
- The strongest individual effect came from the introduction of a parliamentary threshold of 4%. Debates with a threshold more frequently had an outcome, not because parties voted differently, but because it was easier to achieve a majority. The trade-off, however, was that the remaining parties debated less well.
- The extension of the parliamentary term and the non-dissolution of Parliament upon a cabinet crisis aim for the same effect: greater long-term orientation through a longer-serving Parliament. Together, these measures contribute to better debate with more outcomes. The fact that more laws are passed and more commitments are made is evidence of greater willingness to cooperate.
- The abolition of the Senate aims for greater role consistency in the bicameral system. This measure has a positive effect on outcomes: more amendments are submitted and adopted. The effect on the discussion criteria is neutral to slightly negative.
- The effect of making AI Members of Parliament aware that debate excerpts cannot be used in the media or on social media on the outcomes and discussion criteria is neutral.

The measures thus led primarily to more outcomes. The question remains how to also achieve better discussion quality? Greater long-term orientation in agenda-setting and less conflict-driven debating seem the indicated path. This requires breaking the attention economy, which encourages politicians towards unachievable promises and permanent profiling. Otherwise, politicians will remain permanently in campaign mode, or the political debate will shift even further towards big tech platforms. In short, to improve the quality of representation, in addition to structural interventions, behavioral adjustments are also necessary.

Closing remarks: Who is next?

Many of the recommendations in this report have already been discussed before. But insufficient action has followed. The measures were also too often examined in isolation. Those who isolate our recommendations miss the point. They are not designed as a menu of options, but as a coherent whole. We can no longer afford to postpone or treat adjustments to our democracy in isolation. Our Dutch democracy must regain its capacity to deliver results, otherwise it will ultimately lose its credibility.

We call upon the leaders of Dutch political parties to come together and discuss this. Only they can change the system in which politicians operate and deliver results.

It is time for tangible results.

Summary: What does DenkWerk propose?

- Orchestration of policy from a coherent, comprehensive agenda that addresses the totality of and coherence between issues. To that end, introduce a strategic unit within the Ministry of General Affairs, modelled on Singapore's Strategy Group.
- Breaking the attention economy: a negative spiral in which visibility and conflict crowd out substance. Through structural reforms of the political system (see below), reducing the grip of big tech, and a shared responsibility of citizens, media and politicians to place less emphasis on conflict and more on substantive debate.
- Reforms of the political system, including the introduction of a parliamentary threshold of 4%, extension of the parliamentary term to six years, and breaking the convention of automatically dissolving Parliament upon a cabinet crisis.
- Reform of the Senate, with consideration of abolishing the Senate in the longer term.

Authors

Barbara Baarsma, Marelle van Beerschoten, Frans Blom, Bernard ter Haar, Marion Koopman, Jeroen Nelen, Haroon Sheikh, Hans Wijers, Boudewijn Wijnands, Jaap Winter and Bas van Zandbergen

About DenkWerk

DenkWerk is an independent think tank, founded in 2018. We aim to deploy our knowledge, experience, and creativity to give direction to the broad societal issues that are close to our hearts. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a prosperous, inclusive, and forward-looking Netherlands.

Note: For sources, graphs and more detail on the analyses, kindly refer to the full version of the report (in Dutch).
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