

‘Between party and parliament: The roles of parliamentary party group leaders in partitocratic Belgium’

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The study of legislative behaviour has recently taken flight, whereas role theory seems to have taken a back seat. Seminal works of Eulau and Wahlke and Searing are still discussed today, but perhaps their primary focus on describing parliamentary roles rather than explaining role variation affects the attractiveness of role theory to contemporary researchers. Benjamin de Vet’s *Between Party and Parliament* offers at least two promising contributions to this area of research. First, he extends the use of role theory from members of parliament in general to parliamentary party group (PPG) leaders specifically. His in-depth analysis of their roles, using data from 68 in-depth interviews, demonstrates a rich understanding of how PPG leaders themselves and their party colleagues conceive of PPG leaders’ roles. Second, de Vet does not only develop a descriptive typology of these roles, but also applies qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to analyse potential explanations of role variance.

De Vet’s main research question is how PPG leaders conceive of their roles in parliament and what factors explain role variance. He explores the role con-

ceptions of Flemish PPG leaders at the federal and state levels in Belgium. That country case was purposefully selected, because in Belgium PPG leaders are usually not the most powerful party actors. Instead, the party chair(wo)men, i.e. the leaders of the extra-parliamentary party, are regarded as the party leaders. This puts the PPG leaders both in the federal Parliament as well as in the Flemish Parliament in between two fires: the (extra-parliamentary) party led by the party chair(wo)men, on the one hand, and the members of the parliamentary party on the other.

Not surprisingly, this peculiar position in between the extra-parliamentary party and the parliamentary party group is one of the two dimensions in de Vet’s typology of PPG leader roles: bottom-up liaisons (who defend their PPG interests with the party leadership) versus top-down liaisons (who ensure the wishes of the party leadership are carried out by members of the PPG). The other dimension in this typology is the internal or external focus of the PPG leader: whether they act as internal ‘managers’/coaches or are the external spear-

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head of their party group. This results in four main role types: (a) *party soldiers*, top-down liaisons with an internal focus, the most commonly observed role, (b) *crisis managers*, top-down liaisons with an external focus, usually appointed after an electoral defeat, (c) *parliamentarists*, bottom-up liaisons with an internal focus, (d) and *instrumentalists*, bottom-up liaisons with an external focus. The last type is further divided into *prodigies*, usually young new leaders who are very externally oriented, and *status protectors*, seasoned politicians who use PPG leadership to continue their political influence. As this typology is inferred from the answers to open interview questions, one can, of course, discuss at length whether this typology is adequate, but de Vet clearly outlines his procedure and choices and therefore makes a compelling argument in favour of his typology.

Developing a typology of leaders' roles is a relevant contribution by itself, but explaining who holds what role type is at least as interesting. Using multi-value qualitative comparative analysis (mv-QCA), de Vet identifies the correlates of role type. Importantly, he finds that both institutional factors, such as party size and government participation, and personal factors, such as prior experience and career ambition, play a role. Party soldiers always belong to government parties, commonly belong to large parties and are experienced. Crisis managers are appointed by central party elites, belonging to opposition parties that lost the last elections. Status protectors are experienced, while prodigies are inexperienced. Not all of these explanations are equally convincing. For example, no less than three causal

pathways are identified as sufficient conditions for fulfilling the role of a parliamentarist, while there are only three parliamentarists in the data set. The application of mv-QCA in the field of legislative studies is novel, but an explicit discussion of the limitations of such an approach would have been a welcome addition to the doctoral dissertation. Still, while mv-QCA does not 'solve' the problem of a limited number of observations, it does present a way to carefully examine causal pathways in cases in which there is a naturally limited number of observations.

The doctoral dissertation uses a rich variety of data sources and methods. Apart from the in-depth interviews, qualitative content analysis and mv-QCA already mentioned, the dissertation includes a chapter in which the socio-demographic and career characteristics of all PPG leaders in the Belgian House of Representatives, Senate and Flemish Parliament are explored using a large-N quantitative analysis. It documents, unsurprisingly, that PPG leaders are predominantly male, middle-aged and highly educated. It also shows that PPG leaders' time in office has decreased in the past few decades, in line with a general trend among MPs. Potentially, these higher levels of turnover could impact on the roles PPG leaders play, as they are now less experienced than in the past.

In yet another empirical chapter, the author demonstrates the limitations of using existing cross-national elite survey data on political elites to identify PPG roles. The available questions regarding role conceptions do not pertain specifically to PPG leaders, but MPs in general; and PPG leaders do not seem to hold equivalent posi-

Tom Louwerse

tions on these general role conceptions. While de Vet argues that this demonstrates the necessity to use in-depth interviews to describe PPG leaders' roles, one might also argue that it mainly shows that existing surveys do not contain suitable questions to measure and compare PPG leaders' roles. In fact, based on in-depth analyses like the ones presented in this dissertation, we are now in a much better position to get a better understanding of PPG leaders' role perceptions, by operationalising de Vet's two dimensions for use in large-N surveys of political elites.

This brings us to perhaps the most relevant limitation of de Vet's book: its limited scope, most of all in terms of geography. The topic of PPG leaders' roles is quite specific, to begin with, and, additionally, the analyses are limited to the context of Flemish party group leaders. While this choice is understandable from a practical point of view, it does beg the question of what this study teaches us beyond the specific case examined. De Vet is rightly cautious about the potential for generalisation. After all, he defends the choice for in-depth interviews to map PPG leaders' roles in terms of the advantages of an actor-centred approach and the ability to take into account contextual factors in describing these roles. De Vet still argues, however, that the two dimensions he identified "are rather likely to recur in other countries" (p. 246). While that can be understood for the internal or external focus of PPG leaders, it is not overly clear that the bottom-up versus top-down liaison roles would be equally important in other countries. In most countries, the PPG leader is normally also the party leader (and in

some countries also the party chair(wo)man). These PPG leaders are the most powerful actors in their party, and therefore the 'liaison' dimension does not seem to apply in the same way as it does for Flemish PPG leaders. Of course, this is an empirical question, and de Vet presents a strong defence of the relevance of an actor-centred, in-depth approach to studying PPG leader's roles, even if it is a time-consuming endeavour.

Between Party and Parliament is therefore relevant to researchers of Belgian politics and scholars of comparative politics alike. It carefully discusses the concept of political roles and demonstrates the strengths of in-depth interviews to document these roles as well as a structured way of analysing the determinants of role variation. It challenges those working with large-N quantitative data to take into account what actors themselves say about their roles and shows scholars working in more 'qualitative' ways how to move beyond description and to analyse explanations in a structured way. De Vet's approach invites researchers in other countries to study the roles of parliamentary party group leaders in a similar fashion and, hopefully, use these insights to develop more appropriate measures of PPG leaders' roles that can be used in cross-country comparative research.