

Winning from second? The political weight of second-tier cities

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Governmental investments are far from equally distributed (Jones, 1997; Omstedt, 2016; Meijers, 2022). In recent decades, larger metropolitan regions in particular have benefited from their privileged status as perceived national trump cards in the global economy (Crouch and LeGalès, 2012; Cardoso and Meijers, 2016), at the expense of increasingly neglected cities and regions (Brenner, 2004; Dijkstra, 2013; Parkinson et al., 2015). The consequence of persistent spatial bias in government spending towards larger metropolitan regions is that inhabitants of peripheral regions feel neglected; they take ‘revenge through the ballot box’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). A highly vibrant scholarly debate with great contemporary relevance has emerged in recent years trying to understand how voting patterns, regional decline and political prioritization are interwoven (‘the geography of discontent’), and this paper aims to make a strong empirical contribution to understanding these patterns in the Netherlands, thereby specifically focusing on the position of second-tier cities in this debate.

The narrative of regions being ignored, neglected and not considered worthy of investment or even looked down upon by a political elite residing in, and hardly ever leaving the large primary cities has been successfully exploited by old and new populist political parties. The Netherlands is no exception. In the most recent national elections, the right-wing populist party PVV led by Geert Wilders became the largest with about a quarter of all seats in parliament. Several other political parties also successfully exploited the narrative of regional neglect, calling for more attention for predominantly rural regions. However, whether populist parties actually pay more attention to peripheral rural regions that feel marginalized remains to be seen.

While voting patterns have been used to proxy ‘left-behindness’, this paper exploits a novel database in which the attention given to all Dutch places and regions in Dutch parliament is accounted for in an objective way. By analysing over 10,000 questions posed by Members of Parliament in parliamentary debates between the 2017 and 2021 elections, an exact measure of left-behindness is obtained. A link will be established with voting patterns: are ‘neglected’ regions more inclined to vote for populist parties? Also, the question is whether political parties pay more attention to the regions where they got relatively more votes, and whether paying a lot of attention to certain places and regions pays off in terms of obtaining relatively more votes in the next election.

But primary interest is in analysing the spatial orientation of Dutch political parties and their Members of Parliament in detail. It allows to precisely answer the question which places and regions are overlooked indeed and which ones get relatively more attention. It is explored whether perceptions match with reality here. And, there is also the question of ‘constituency’ or ‘home’ orientation of members of parliament, even though in the Dutch proportional election system members of parliament are supposed to represent the entire country. But regional

favoritism is a very human trait (Hodler & Raschky, 2014; Psycharis, Rodríguez-Pose & Tselios, 2021).

Of course, special attention will be given to second-tier cities, and we compare them to the primary, or 'first' Dutch cities. In the polycentric Dutch urban system, there is no single 'first' or 'primary' city, it makes more sense to compare smaller and medium-sized cities to the four largest cities in the Randstad region (the primary region), namely Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. We introduce different methods to compare the observed frequency of being mentioned in parliament to a calculated expected level, in order to judge whether second-tier cities get more or less attention than first-tier cities, while also comparing Randstad to the rest of the country. In doing so, we consider not just how large a potential gap in attention is between second- and first-tier cities, but also whether there is a gap in how well represented these cities are. Research has shown that over the past decades, the number of members of parliament 'per capita' for the Randstad is about two to three times higher than the number of members of parliament per capita that comes from regions outside the Randstad. The analysis before of home orientations of members of parliament will shed light on how problematic this is, if at all. This is also important input to debates on how the electoral system in the Netherlands could be adjusted to diminish feelings of neglect that regions may have.

Interestingly, in response to the fear of being neglected, local and regional actors try in many ways and with varying success to gain political weight and attention, e.g. through better political representation, by building alliances, forming city-regions, etc. (e.g. Schlozman et al, 2012). In our analyses, we are able to distinguish whether cities and regions that are more pro-active in developing such strategies to gain political weight and attention do indeed get more attention in parliament. Rather than comparing first and second-tier cities, we will compare among second-tier cities only.

As is called for in the call for papers for this special session, the interest is not just in seeing second-tier cities as a distinct category, but also in understanding heterogeneity across second-tier cities. Again, we seek to identify patterns, and potentially develop a typology of second-tier cities based on their political representation, level of attention or neglect and their efforts, and success, in terms of better positioning themselves politically.

The paper and presentation will close with a thorough reflection on proxying 'left-behindness' through the frequency of being mentioned in parliamentary debates, and list pros and cons of such an approach, leading to recommendations for further research.

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