

# Caretaker Conventions in Crisis Times: Dutch Government-Opposition Dynamics After the Fall of the Government

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## Abstract

How does the caretaker status of a government affect party political dynamics in parliament during a crisis? Generally, caretaker governments are not mandated to introduce important policy changes. Yet major crises can demand decisive political action. This article aims to understand the consequences of the caretaker status of the Rutte III government in the Netherlands (after its resignation in January 2021) for government-opposition dynamics during the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. We first analyse party voting behaviour in parliament and then draw on a qualitative text analysis of nine critical parliamentary debates. Surprisingly, we find that differences between mandated and caretaker status have little effect on parliamentary dynamics. Opposition parties *with* coalition potential are supportive of the government and take on a cooperative tone; opposition parties *without* coalition potential are not supportive and take on a combative tone and oppose in harsher terms, yet even they barely mention caretaker status. As such, this case provides unique insights into the functioning of caretaker conventions during crises which offer opportunities for new theorising in the undertheorised field of caretaker cabinets and parliaments.

## Keywords

caretaker governments; Covid-19; opposition; political parties

## 1. Introduction

On 15 January 2021, Dutch prime-minister (PM) Mark Rutte announced that his government would resign, following a critical investigation into a childcare benefit scandal that saw thousands of families wrongly

accused of fraud. Rutte III would then continue as a caretaker government (*démissionnaire* in Dutch). It is not uncommon for Dutch cabinet governments to resign before the end of their mandate (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005), but the fall of Rutte III happened at a crucial moment during the Covid-19 pandemic: the country was in lockdown and even stricter measures were being considered. According to the PM, this would not lead to problems: “no matter whether the government is fully-fledged or has a caretaker status, in any case, this country needs a cabinet that is duly-mandated on Covid-related issues. Perhaps not formally, but at least mentally” (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Still, this case leads to two interwoven questions: How does this caretaker status affect the political dynamics between government and opposition parties? And, how do caretaker conventions fare in times of crisis?

Commonly, caretaker governments are biding their time until election day or during prolonged coalition formation talks after elections (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a; McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014). They are placeholders ensuring a functioning executive and are not expected to enact major policy changes (Laver & Schepsle, 1994). Yet a crisis exposes the ambiguities and frictions of caretaker governments. Although caretakers have to act with urgency and impact in response to the immediate threat of a crisis, they do not have the full mandate and thus the perceived legitimacy to do so (see Brans et al., 2016): “The transaction costs of policy response adoption are higher to caretaker governments as they lack the necessary mandate to govern by popular consent” (Toshkov et al., 2022, p. 1017). As the parliamentary “chains of delegation” are interrupted, this leads to important concerns about the crisis responses of caretaker governments regarding their (democratic) accountability and legitimacy (Amorim Neto & Strøm, 2006; Strøm, 2000).

Meanwhile, a crisis during a caretaker period marks a “political opportunity structure” for altering parliamentary behaviour (cf. Vande Walle et al., 2021), ranging from collaborative to critical attitudes of opposition parties towards the government (Louwerse et al., 2021; Vande Walle et al., 2021). Crises during caretaker periods could strengthen a deviation from “normal” parliamentary behaviour, as norms and legitimacy are less settled under the combination of these conditions.

Caretakers are becoming more relevant in Western democracies due to growing political fragmentation and increasingly lengthy cabinet formations (cf. Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). According to Otjes and Louwerse (2013, p. 10): “In one out of seven days [since 1945], the Netherlands was governed by a caretaker cabinet.” The Dutch case remains relatively underexplored in the caretaker literature, which is rather slim and focused on Belgium. The caretaker period of Rutte III presents an exceptional case, as the cabinet maintained its caretaker status for more than 300 days. Because this long caretaker period took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, it offers a unique opportunity to study a caretaker government and its opposition in extraordinary crisis times.

This study aims to enhance our understanding of the implications of caretaker conventions during times of crisis. After explaining the theoretical framework and methods used, we present findings from a quantitative analysis of parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic disease control. We continue with a qualitative text analysis of nine parliamentary debates on crucial votes related to pandemic disease control, capturing the parliamentary narrative during Rutte III, first as a duly-mandated government and then as a caretaker government. We will end with a conclusion and a discussion of our main findings. By doing so, we seek to derive lessons from the Dutch caretaker experience during a significant crisis, contributing to the evaluation of the robustness of Dutch caretaker conventions and caretaker conventions in general.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Caretaker Conventions

The literature points out three characteristics of caretaker governments. The first is simple yet unusual for democratic government: a caretaker government cannot be fired or resign (Laver & Schepsle, 1994; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Parliament cannot get rid of a government that is already gone, which weakens its accountability and legitimacy.

As a consequence, the second characteristic is that a caretaker can only “exert a ‘bridging role’ between duly mandated governments” (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014, p. 661). Its whole point is to ensure the continuity of the executive and the public administration until a new duly-mandated government takes office. In many countries, caretaker periods only consist of a short period, but caretakers could potentially be in office for quite a long time when government formation is complex, most often in countries with proportional representation (Boston et al., 1998; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014).

A third characteristic concerns the “restricted remit” of caretaker governments. They are generally expected to only serve the “policy status quo” (Laver & Schepsle, 1994, p. 292) and not to undertake new initiatives. Significant decisions should be postponed until a new government takes over (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b). In most countries, this is reflected in written or unwritten “caretaker conventions” that specify what a caretaker government is allowed to do and, also, what it should not do (Boston et al., 1998; Schleiter & Belu, 2015).

However, in some circumstances, it is executive inaction rather than executive action that would upend the status quo. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, for example, Belgium did not have a “normal” federal government, yet the act of governing continued. The country assumed the presidency of the Council of the EU, got a budget approved, and even nationalised banks and sent military troops abroad (Devos & Sinardet, 2012). These events stretched the remit of caretakers yet were widely accepted. They were supported by a parliamentary majority and executive action was considered essential during the economic crisis (Devos & Sinardet, 2012). Also, in the Netherlands, the Balkenende I government provided political support to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 while it was in office as a caretaker cabinet (Oktay, 2018).

According to the caretaker conventions, these are the political actions available to caretaker governments within their limited remit: “caretaker government’s responsibilities are composed of the continuation of daily administrative management, custody of ongoing concerns, and handling of urgent matters and international commitments (including NATO and the European Union [EU])” (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012, p. 174). Dandoy and Terrière (2021b) add three potential political actions to a caretaker’s remit: (a) urgent matters that need attending to avoid damage to the state or its citizens, (b) legal initiatives that are decided by parliament and implemented by the caretaker government, and (c) new initiatives by the caretaker government itself. The latter action is controversial yet common as new cabinet formation drags on.

### 2.2. Caretaker Governments and Parliamentary Behaviour

Meanwhile, the absence of a duly-mandated government not only affects the executive branch of government; caretaker periods also have important consequences for parliamentary behaviour. The evidence

on what the effects are is mixed. Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) observed that individual MPs' initiatives increased, a modest deviation from the norm. More recent work also found that "partitocracy still dominates federal politics" in Belgium (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021b, p. 134). We also see that a government's caretaker status reduces the divide with opposition parties in parliament (Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014), as its role as a placeholder diminishes legitimacy for all the reasons mentioned above.

Regardless of caretaker conventions, a crisis also affects parliamentary behaviour significantly. The urgency and scale of a crisis increase executive power, which raises the question: Do opposition parties mainly oppose holding the government accountable or do they support the government to emphasise national unity and enhance the legitimacy of far-reaching containment measures among the population (Louwerse et al., 2021)? Louwerse et al. (2021) observed positive sentiment from the opposition towards the government in four countries during the first six months of the crisis, indicating an elite rallying-around-the-flag effect, especially among larger opposition parties with governing experience. Similarly, in Belgium, the minority government received support from mainstream opposition parties with governing experience, while smaller opposition parties without such experience were more likely to oppose (Vande Walle et al., 2021).

### 3. Case Study Methodology

We conduct a single case study of the politics of Covid-19 pandemic management of the Dutch Rutte III government before and during its caretaker status. The resignation of the Rutte III government in January 2021 offers a critical opportunity to observe the political government-opposition dynamics during a large-scale crisis. Single case studies are well-suited for theory-building purposes, as they can provide empirical evidence to explore relatively unexplored phenomena or under-researched areas, and as such, contribute to the development of new hypotheses (see Eckstein, 2000; Toshkov, 2016). This is particularly valuable for caretaker literature, as this case highlights the role the opposition plays in parliament.

The Rutte III government was installed on 26 October 2017, after the March 2017 elections. The government was led by PM Mark Rutte of the conservative-liberal VVD. VVD obtained 33 of the 150 seats during the 2017 elections for the Dutch Lower House and formed a majority government together with Christian-democrat CDA (19 seats), progressive liberal D66 (19 seats), and small Christian-democrat CU (5 seats).

On 15 January 2021 Rutte III became a caretaker government: it resigned after a critical parliamentary inquiry into the childcare benefits scandal ("Toeslagenaffaire" in Dutch). This was two months before already scheduled elections, at which the four parties that formed Rutte III were able to secure their parliamentary majority in the Lower House with 78 out of 150 seats (see Table 1). Because of a lengthy formation process, it took until 10 January 2022 to install a new government: Rutte IV contained the same four parties as the previous government. Rutte III thus became the longest-governing caretaker in the history of Dutch politics.

We select our case for three reasons. First, the imposition of caretaker status on the Rutte III government amidst the Covid-19 pandemic allows for a within-country comparison of how such a status affects government-opposition dynamics during a crisis. Second, the caretaker period of the Rutte III government lasted for more than 300 days, offering an opportunity to explore the actual functioning of caretaker conventions for a longer period. Third, by focusing on this Dutch case, we offer insights from a contrasting

**Table 1.** Political parties in the Dutch Lower House of Representatives, before and after the parliamentary elections of 17 March 2021.

Political parties	Ideological position in the party system	Seats won in the 2017 election	Seats won in the 2021 election
Coalition parties			
VVD	Conservative-liberal	33	34
D66	Social-liberal	19	24
CDA	Christian-democrat	19	15
CU	Christian-democrat	5	5
Opposition parties with coalition-potential			
GL	Green	14	8
PvdA	Social-democrat	9	9
Opposition parties without coalition-potential			
PVV	Radical-right populist	20	17
SP	Socialist	14	9
PvdD	Animal rights	5	6
50 Plus	Pensioners' interests	4	1
SGP	Orthodox-protestant	3	3
Denk	Multiculturalist	3	3
FVD	Radical-right populist	2	8
JA21	Radical-right populist	–	3
Volt	Pro-European integration	–	3
BBB	Farmers interests	–	1
Bij1	Anti-racism	–	1

case to the relatively small but growing body of literature on caretakers currently dominated by the Belgian case (cf. Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b).

To capture the government-opposition dynamics, we separate the opposition parties with coalition potential (Sartori, 1976) and those without. Two parties have coalition potential: PvdA and GL. The former was in government at least once in all decades since the Second World War (except the current decade); the latter had been part of serious coalition negotiations forming Rutte III. We do not consider the radical-right PVV to have coalition potential during the time of our study, even though the party had supported the minority government Rutte II for a year and a half between 2010 and 2012. Mark Rutte, who would remain PM from 2010 until 2024, had excluded every possibility of repeating this scenario. We do not identify any parties in our analysis to have blackmail potential (Sartori, 1976), even though Rutte III did not have a majority in the Dutch Senate ("First Chamber"): the government coalition had many parties to choose from to form case-by-case majorities.

For the quantitative part of our analyses, we use the most recent version of Louwse et al.'s (2017) dataset of Dutch parliamentary behaviour to trace voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues. We use the information on all types of votes (motions, legislation, etc.) related to pandemic disease control (*infectieziektenbestrijding* in Dutch). We focus on a two-year period between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022. As such, our quantitative

analysis covers all parliamentary votes on pandemic disease control since the start of the outbreak in Western Europe until a new and duly-mandated government (Rutte IV) was sworn in on 10 January 2022. In total, we have quantitative data for the voting behaviour of all Dutch political parties in a total of  $N = 1019$  parliamentary votes on pandemic-related issues between 2020 and 2022.

To unravel government-opposition dynamics in Dutch parliament during the Covid-19 pandemic, we select nine high-profile parliamentary debates on disease control policies in the Lower House between March 2020 and December 2021. They were selected because of the far-reaching measures being implemented, some unprecedented during peacetime. We capture Rutte III in three phases: duly-mandated, caretaker before, and then after the March 2021 election (see Table 2). We use all publicly available minutes from the debates. We differentiate between the contributions of coalition parties, opposition parties with, and those without coalition potential. A coding scheme is in the Supplementary File.

## 4. Results

To establish a pattern of support or opposition to governmental policies, we first analyse voting behaviour in the Dutch Lower House. To trace parliamentary dynamics, we then turn to a qualitative analysis of nine crucial votes that represent unprecedented containment measures against the coronavirus (e.g., mask mandates and lockdowns). These results are organised according to three phases (see Table 2).

### 4.1. Patterns of Voting Behaviour in Parliament

Tables 3–5 visualise patterns in parliamentary voting behaviour of Dutch political parties on pandemic-related issues for three different phases during the Covid-19 pandemic: Rutte III with a mandate (Table 3), as a caretaker government before (Table 4), and after the elections (Table 5). In addition, Figure 1 summarises the voting behaviour of opposition parties in comparison to coalition parties for all three different periods of the Rutte III coalition government.

**Table 2.** Selection of high-profile Covid-19 parliamentary in the Dutch Lower House of Representatives (March 2020–December 2021).

Date	Topic
Rutte III is duly-mandated	
12 March 2020	First containment measures
26 March 2020	Intelligent lockdown
14 October 2020	Partial lockdown
4 November 2020	Continuation and stricter lockdown
15 December 2020	Lockdown
Rutte III as caretaker before elections	
21 January 2021	Evening curfew
Rutte III as caretaker after elections	
16 September 2021	Pass entry system
16 November 2021	Stricter pass entry system
21 December 2021	Sudden and full lockdown

Before the fall of the Rutte III government, on 15 January 2021, our data revealed unity within the government and considerable support from the opposition during the early stages of the pandemic. Table 3 shows congruence (92.4 percent) in the voting behaviour of the four coalition parties (VVD, CDA, D66, and CU). This is no surprise. Overall, Dutch government parties vote congruently and Rutte III (before the fall) is no exception. Using the same data we do, Otjes and Louwerse (2021, p. 61) find no meaningful difference in coalition-opposition voting after the start of the coronavirus crisis. During these first months of the pandemic, opposition parties tended to support the government on pandemic-related policies. When there was congruence among coalition members, PvdA, for example, voted in line with the coalition parties in 74.1 percent of votes, whereas the other opposition party with coalition potential (GL) did so in 73.5 percent of cases. Even the opposition without coalition potential had quite some congruence with Rutte III, including parties such as orthodox-Protestant SGP (73.7 percent) and socialist SP (71 percent). These findings indicate a rallying-around-the-flag effect at the political elite level during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (cf. Louwerse et al., 2021). We further observe that both radical-right populists PVV and FVD were less likely to vote in line with the governing parties, which we also expected as they are opposition parties without

**Table 3.** Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 1 January 2020 and 7 January 2021 ( $N = 509$ ).

		Government				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Government	VVD		97.7	93.5	96.3	69.9	69.0	49.9	66.8	62.4	71.9	62.9	46.5
	CDA			94.3	97.9	70.7	69.8	49.9	68.4	64.0	72.3	64.5	45.9
	D66				95.7	73.2	73.0	51.7	70.2	67.0	72.1	67.0	45.4
	CU					72.5	71.6	52.1	69.8	65.4	73.7	65.9	46.6
Opposition	PvdA*						94.7	68.9	92.9	87.8	77.6	86.7	57.2
	GL*							68.3	91.9	90.0	77.4	87.2	56.6
	PVV								72.5	72.5	70.9	75.2	80.8
	SP									90.9	76.8	85.1	60.5
	PvdD										75.2	86.2	59.6
	SGP											77.6	63.9
	Denk												63.4
	FVD												

Notes: \* Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.

coalition potential. When there was congruence between the governing parties, PVV cast a similar vote in 51.3 percent of cases and FVD only did for 46.3 percent of votes.

Table 4 shows similarities and differences between political parties in their parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between the fall of the Rutte III government (15 January 2021) and the parliamentary elections (17 March 2021). Still, there is a high degree of congruence in the voting behaviour of the governing parties (in 88.9 percent of the votes). This is only a small decrease compared to before the fall of Rutte III. Opposition parties, such as PvdA, GL (both with coalition potential), and SP (without coalition potential), were still supportive of the government in a majority of the parliamentary votes. Both GL and SP voted with the coalition in 70.2 percent of cases when there was congruence among governing parties, while PvdA only voted 68.3 percent. Again, these percentages are only slightly lower than before the fall of Rutte III. Notably, the SGP's support for the coalition dropped sharply from 73.7 percent to 51 percent. Both Denk and PvdD were also less inclined to vote in line with the caretaker coalition—yet, this may be related to the fact that the pandemic had become more politicised after the first few months of the crisis (Boin et al., 2021). Compared

**Table 4.** Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 20 January 2021 and 10 March 2021 (N = 117).

		Government				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Government	VVD		98.3	94.8	92.3	64.1	65.8	41.0	65.0	53.9	47.8	35.9	40.2
	CDA			94.8	92.3	64.1	65.8	39.3	65.0	53.9	47.8	35.9	40.2
	D66				92.3	69.2	70.9	42.7	70.1	59.0	51.3	41.0	41.9
	CU					66.6	68.3	45.3	69.2	61.5	53.8	43.6	46.2
Opposition	PvdA*						94.9	61.5	90.6	82.9	71.8	65.0	52.2
	GL*							58.1	92.3	82.9	68.4	61.5	50.5
	PVV								60.7	65.0	72.7	81.1	76.9
	SP									83.8	69.3	62.4	49.6
	PvdD										77.0	75.2	62.4
	SGP											81.2	73.5
	Denk												83.8
	FVD												

Notes: \* Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.



to these parties, radical-right PVV and FVD show even less alignment with the coalition, voting similarly in 42.3 percent and 41.3 percent of votes, respectively, and remain the two opposition parties (both without coalition potential) that deviate the most from the governing parties in their voting behaviour on pandemic disease control.

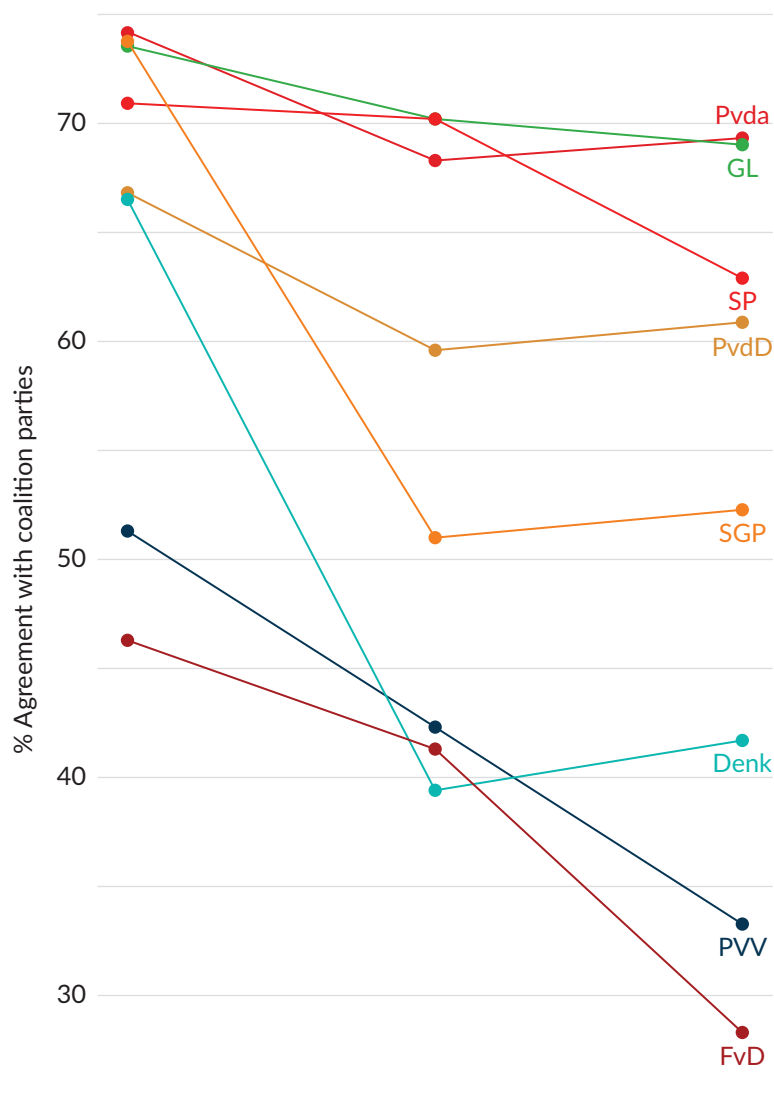
After the elections, we still see a high level of agreement between the four coalition parties, although congruence is slightly lower (Table 5). Junior partner CU, in particular, seems to deviate more, although the party still voted congruently in a vast majority of the votes. We do not observe large differences in government-opposition dynamics during the caretaker period of the Rutte III government before and after the elections. Of all opposition parties, we see that those with coalition potential, PvdA (69.3 percent) and GL (69 percent), are again most likely to vote in line with the government, with almost similar scores compared to before the elections. We observe that both radical-right populist parties PVV and FVD are again least likely to vote in line with the governing parties, and their level of agreement has further decreased after the elections of March 2021 (34.3 percent and 28.3 percent, respectively).

**Table 5.** Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 24 March 2021 and 21 December 2021 (N = 393).

		Coalition				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Coalition	VVD		95.6	93.2	87.5	63.4	62.1	35.6	56.0	53.9	49.9	38.2	30.5
	CDA			93.4	87.3	64.7	62.9	34.9	57.2	54.7	49.1	39.0	30.3
	D66				89.8	68.7	67.4	35.9	62.4	59.3	49.7	43.6	28.7
	CU					68.2	69.5	40.0	64.3	63.4	55.8	47.5	33.8
Opposition	PvdA*						91.1	52.9	84.5	80.4	63.1	61.1	36.6
	GL*							53.7	86.8	82.2	63.8	62.9	38.4
	PVV								60.4	62.4	73.5	82.2	78.1
	SP									89.3	68.4	69.9	45.0
	PvdD										71.5	72.0	49.6
	SGP											76.6	63.4
	Denk												69.5
	FVD												

Notes: \* Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.

Generally, the emerging pattern aligns with findings from crisis management literature, suggesting an initial rally-around-the-flag effect in the early phase of the crisis that gradually diminishes over time (Boin et al., 2021). We observe different trends in the parliamentary voting behaviour of opposition parties after the fall of the Rutte III government. Both PvdA and GL—two opposition parties with coalition potential—show high levels of agreement with the governing parties. However, the initially high support from the small orthodox-Protestant party SGP and the small multiculturalist party Denk plummets after the fall of Rutte III. Radical-right opposition parties PVV and FvD had already deviated most from the governing parties at the start of the pandemic, but seem to turn increasingly sceptical after the fall of the Rutte III government. To determine whether this trend is due to crisis fluctuations (Louwerse et al., 2021) or the legitimacy issues of a caretaker government, we now turn to our qualitative analysis of the debates.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of agreement with coalition parties during different periods of the Rutte III cabinet. Notes: The graph shows the percentage of agreement of various political parties with the coalition parties (if consensus among coalition members) during different periods of the Rutte III government; the three time points represent, respectively, Rutte III as a duly-mandated government, the caretaker period before the elections, and the caretaker period after the elections; the total number of votes is  $N = 893$ .

## 4.2. Qualitative Analysis of Parliamentary Debates

### 4.2.1. Phase 1: Rutte III as a Duly-Mandate Government

The qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debates confirms the pattern established by the quantitative analysis: at the beginning of the pandemic, we observe a rallying effect. Parliament discussed the first containment measures against the spread of the coronavirus (12 March 2020) and a second batch of stricter measures (26 March 2020) called an “intelligent lockdown.” During this intelligent lockdown, schools were closed, as were pubs and restaurants, and people were advised to stay at home.

The four government parties came out stating “we’re all in this together” and noted there was no alternative to the proposed measures. There was some disagreement within the coalition, with D66 and CDA questioning the initial decision (recalled two weeks later) to leave schools open. In terms of tone, the coalition parties explicitly welcomed parliamentary debate, despite presenting these measures as being without alternative, arguably inviting a rallying-around-the-flag effect.

Gert-Jan Segers (CU, 12/03/2020) stated: “Meanwhile, the cabinet acts. It listens to experts and handles to the best of its abilities and knowledge. Although no-one can pretend to know everything, it is good to have this debate, because we know more together.”

The opposition parties with coalition potential supported the government policy. Both social democrat PvdA and GL urged the government to take drastic steps if necessary: the latter assured the government of parliamentary backing; the former said better safe than sorry. They explicitly gave the government a mandate for far-reaching policy measures to contain the coronavirus. Lodewijk Asscher (PvdA, 12/03/2020) stated:

I appreciate those in government trying to control the crisis. The fact that I ask critical questions in the name of my party should be seen in the light of the attempt to do as well as possible considering the circumstances.

The main opposition party without coalition potential, radical-right populist PVV, disagreed with the severity of the measures, suggesting a more invasive full lockdown. In both debates, the tone of the PVV was more combative. They called the measures long overdue and called on government parties to act instead of talk in parliament. PVV addressed governing Christian-democrat CDA: “You, not me, are the parliamentary leader of a government party. You should not be asking questions. You should arrange it.” (Geert Wilders, PVV, 12/03/2020). As evidenced by Segers (the CU MP) above, the governmental parties refuted this line of questioning and heavily underlined the added benefit of parliamentary debates.

Still, all parties also used uniting rhetoric, like the opposition party without coalition potential Denk, whose position was:

Whether you have a migration background or not, whether you vote PVV or Denk, whether you are Muslim, Jewish, or Christian or atheist: we are all people and susceptible to this infectious disease, which we have to fight together. (Tunahan Kuzu, Denk, 12/03/2020)

In these early stages of the pandemic, there is a duly-mandated government and a cooperative opposition. We observe a rallying-around-the-flag pattern, although some opposition parties want more severe measures at this stage (this will change) and their tone is sometimes combative.

Moving on to the debates of late 2020 (see Table 2 for a list), we see that this stage of the pandemic was characterised by a steady rise in infections and accompanying stricter measures. In October 2020, the cabinet announced a “partial lockdown,” with more mask mandates and a limit on the number of people that could meet indoors. The November debate followed a press conference of PM Rutte announcing more severe measures because healthcare systems were “at a breaking point.” In December 2020, Rutte announced a full lockdown in a rare press conference from his office. Schools, kindergartens, and non-essential shops were closed.

After the first stage of the crisis, the rallying effect had died down and parliamentary dynamics were closer to normal, including blame games and ideological positioning. Government parties disagreed about minor issues (school closures) but supported the coalition line in the end. Opposition parties with coalition potential were more critical but also constructive (i.e., social-democrat PvdA presented a full and detailed plan to combat inequality). Opposition parties without coalition potential blamed the government and hit their usual notes (PVV blamed Moroccan immigrants for not following the rules and suggested that the previous Rutte II government had had a bookkeeping mentality in healthcare, leading to hospitals not being up to the Covid-19 challenge now).

More opposition parties (PVV, FVD, Denk, PvdD, and SP) mentioned the disastrous economic consequences of the full lockdown and managed to highlight the issues they have ownership over. For instance, the animal-rights party PvdD questioned why slaughterhouses and Schiphol are still allowed to be open and warned that “we know that the climate crisis will be even more disruptive” (Esther Ouwehand, PvdD, 15/12/2020). In response, junior governing partner CU accused PvdD of using this crisis to beat their own drum on reducing meat consumption.

Radical-right FVD took a remarkable turn compared to the start of the pandemic. They labelled the lockdown and not the virus as the problem and suggested that the government was boycotting access to pharmaceuticals: “potential drugs such as Ivermectin, which this government is boycotting” (Wybren van Haga, FVD, 15/12/2020). FVD explicitly asked anyone who was against these measures to vote for them at the next election.

However, when it came to the democratic process, we saw that radical right PVV still “supports” even those rules the party leader calls “bull” (e.g., 1.5 meters distance between people when outside), because: “We live in a democracy, don’t we? We all make the rules. And all of us should follow them, whether you vote for PVV or for PvdA.” (Geert Wilders, PVV, 14/10/2020).

As at least six months had passed since the Covid-19 crisis began, we saw that the opposition parties with coalition potential were cooperative (PvdA) and those without (PVV and FVD) challenging both in content and in tone. It seems that in their own way, all opposition parties were preparing for the March 2021 election.

#### 4.2.2. Phase 2: Rutte III as a Caretaker Immediately After the Fall

On 20 January 2021, just five days after the government's resignation due to the benefit fraud scandal, PM Rutte announced an evening curfew at a press conference. Despite being a caretaker government since 15 January 2021, Rutte emphasised the urgency of managing the new "British" variant of the coronavirus. He stated: "When it comes to Corona, you always have a mandate," which was later also explicitly supported by the opposition party with coalition potential GL. Following the caretaker convention, we expect a government to act in crisis circumstances to protect the policy status quo, but we also expect the opposition parties to mention this status especially when an unprecedented policy is introduced.

During the parliamentary debate, all government parties supported the introduction of a curfew, only D66 and CU mentioned they wanted the curfew to start later than proposed. Opposition parties with coalition potential (GL and PvdA) were in favour, but also the opposition party without coalition potential SP supported the curfew. Other parties voted against it for different reasons: PVV instead proposed voluntary vaccinations only for vulnerable people; PvdD disagreed with the policy because of behavioural science and human nature; SGP argued that the curfew was too crude and counterproductive for societal support; FVD defended that death is part of life and that the policy was therefore unnecessary; and Denk thought it was counterproductive because more clusters would emerge as a result.

Radical-right opposition party PVV attacked both the content of the measure and the decision-making process leading up to it. Its leader was the only one to specifically refer to the government's caretaker status in his opposition to this specific measure: "Of course a caretaker cabinet must be able to take measures against corona, but we think it is inappropriate to take a measure as extreme as this one" (Geert Wilders, PVV, 21/01/2021). Although it is possible that Wilders used the government's caretaker's status as a strategy to express his disagreement, it is remarkable that he referred to it repeatedly throughout the debate, when even opposition parties who used forceful language to protest did not. The opposition parties with coalition potential supported the measure, although social-democratic PvdA condemned the bartering process among government parties over what time exactly the evening curfew should start. GL emphasised the importance of collaboration: "We think we should work together with this caretaker cabinet and the complete Lower House to gain control over this virus" (Jesse Klaver, GL, 21/01/2021). As such, it seems that, immediately after the fall of the government and at the introduction of a far-reaching containment measure, the crisis logic trumps the caretaker logic for all but one opposition party.

#### 4.2.3. Phase 3: Rutte III as a Caretaker With a New Parliament

The Phase 3 debates took place after the March 2021 elections but before the new cabinet (Rutte IV) was formed (see Table 2). The pandemic had also entered a new stage, with a high vaccination rate yet new political questions about how to deal with the unvaccinated within society. Particularly, the introduction of a pass entry system for citizens who were recovered, vaccinated and/or negatively tested (a 3G system), and a system only for citizens who were recovered or vaccinated (a 2G system) became a politically sensitive topic.

The pass entry system caused a schism in the governing coalition: VVD, D66 and CDA were in favour of the policy while junior partner CU was against it, because they believed the pass entry system would lead to distrust against "particular groups" in society. The opposition parties with coalition potential were divided,

with PvdA in favour (while critically questioning implementation) but GL against it. GL considered the entry pass as “a moral dilemma,” because “people have the right to be unvaccinated. At the same time, we also find it a real dilemma that vaccinated people suffer from people who deliberately choose to not get vaccinated” (Lisa Westerveld, GL, 16/09/2021). Both parties with coalition potential kept their tone cooperative.

Opposition parties without coalition potential, in contrast, used a combative tone to reject the pass-entry system. Socialist SP criticised it as prone to fraud and mismanagement; radical-right PVV, orthodox-Protestant SGP, but also multiculturalist Denk considered the entry system as vaccination pressure. PVV not only disagreed with the measure they also called it “abuse of power” due to the cabinet’s lack of mandate, saying the country had become “a banana republic” (Geert Wilders, PVV, 16/09/2021).

The lockdown of 19 December 2021, caused by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, felt far-reaching because it included end-of-year festivities. The measure came as a shock to many. The content of the parliamentary debate was unremarkable in the sense that most parties agreed with the necessity of the lockdown while simultaneously bemoaning its timing and its effect on business. Apart from FVD, which defended that “We don’t believe in vaccination” and “This is just the next flu season” (Freek Jansen, FVD, 21/12/2021), all parties acknowledged that further restrictions were necessary. The difference of opinion between the government parties and the opposition was not about the necessity of the measure taken, but about whom to blame.

Radical-right populist PVV blamed the long-governing VVD and its structural lack of investment in healthcare that would now bring financial devastation to non-food retailers.

Other opposition parties blamed the government for not considering the policy suggestions from “the left side of parliament” (Maarten Hijink, SP, 21/12/2021). Multiculturalist Denk called out the fact that this PM had a caretaker status but saw only the PM’s low approval rating as problematic: “The caretaker (and, sadly, also future) PM has a major trust problem” (Tunahan Kuzu, Denk, 21/12/2021).

Opposition parties with coalition potential (PvdA and GL) criticised the lack of long-term vision from the government. Remarkably, they disapproved of the not-yet installed new cabinet not considering the Covid crisis in their coalition negotiations yet did not mention its caretaker status as an obstacle. The governing parties also criticised the opposition parties for not having written down any long-term plans in their opposition plan (D66 about GL and PvdA). Simultaneously, they called on the opposition to work together. Corona is too important to make it into a coalition vs. opposition thing (VVD and D66) and for measures such as “2G” support of other parties is also needed. Moreover, D66 argued, in the new governing culture not everything is nailed down in the coalition agreement. Except for some minor remarks from Denk and PVV, we do not see that the caretaker status of the government is discussed during these parliamentary debates in the fall of 2021.

#### 4.2.4. Conclusion of the Qualitative Analysis

The thick description we gave of nine crucial debates (see Table 2) confirms the pattern we established by looking at the parliamentary voting behaviour of parties. In the first phase, when Rutte III was still duly-mandated, the first debates showed a rallying effect, with all parties agreeing on the necessity of the

measures. As the pandemic continues, this changes. Opposition parties without coalition potential take a different tone and all parties manage to show their ideological colours in the debate (e.g., PvdD's focus on the zoonotic origin of Covid-19). Because this happens before Rutte III falls, we can say this is because of crisis logic and the rallying effect tapering off, not because of caretaker logic. In phase 2, immediately after Rutte III fell, we see that only radical-right PVV mentions this status to vehemently protest a newly introduced evening curfew. Although we cannot say with certainty that this is a point of principle for the party instead of a strategy, it is remarkable that the PVV leader comes back to it again and again. Phase 3, as Rutte III became a caretaker with a parliamentary majority, repeats the pattern of phase 2 (only PVV objects to disease control measures while referring to the government's caretaker status).

## 5. Conclusions

This article presents a case where a parliamentary democracy's legitimacy and accountability processes were challenged by two (partially) concurrent challenges. First, an unprecedented crisis, and second, a caretaker government in charge after the duly-mandated Rutte III fell over the Dutch tax service unfairly accusing mainly non-Dutch citizens of fraud.

The concurrence and longevity of these challenges put pressure, in particular, on the opposition to ensure a functioning democracy from parliament. Because growing political fragmentation across party systems in Europe will make longer periods with caretaker governments more likely, we studied this case to add a focus on parliamentary relations between government and opposition to the caretaker literature. In particular, we studied party voting behaviour in parliament and offered a thick description of nine crucial debates to highlight the role of opposition parties with and without coalition potential. The timeframe is from 12 March 2020 to 10 January 2022, which saw the emergence and persistence of the Covid-19 crisis and Rutte III as a caretaker for over 300 days.

Caretaker conventions mainly target the executive level. The "policy status quo" has to be preserved, but urgent matters are within the remit of a caretaker government to address. Our analysis shows that the Rutte III government introduced far-reaching measures to deal with the Covid-19 virus even after obtaining its caretaker status in January 2021. For example, the government introduced an evening curfew only a couple of days after its resignation, illustrating the PM's remarks from 12 January 2021, suggesting his government remained duly-mandated on Covid-19-related issues. PM Rutte's interpretation of caretaker conventions was supported by a large majority of parliament, including all governing parties. The four coalition parties were able to guarantee a parliamentary majority after the elections in March 2021, ensuring prolonged support for the caretaker government in parliament. This is reflected in our quantitative findings, showing congruence in the government parties' parliamentary voting behaviour on disease control measures. Our thick description of parliamentary debates confirms this. Opposition parties with coalition potential, such as GL and PvdA, also supported PM Rutte in his view that the caretaker government had a full mandate to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Both parties often voted in support of government policy and further adopted a cooperative rhetorical stance towards the caretaker government. Only PVV, the largest party in opposition without coalition potential, was critical of the caretaker government using its full powers to deal with the pandemic. Interestingly, these criticisms were not heavily discussed in parliamentary debates and seem at least partially strategically motivated. The caretaker status of the Rutte III government was not a prominent issue in contributions from other opposition parties without coalition potential in parliamentary debates.

Our findings extend the caretaker literature by showing that critical political events, such as crises, provide caretakers with the opportunity to extend their mandate and introduce new policies (see also Dandoy & Terrière, 2021b). We further contribute to the literature by showing that these findings do not only apply to the often-studied Belgian case but also to the Netherlands. We show that the role of the opposition is crucial when crisis and caretaker are combined in extending legitimacy to far-reaching containment measures and in holding the government accountable in exceptional times. We also demonstrate that, in this case, the opposition parties with coalition potential supported the government more than those without and that parties continued to highlight issues they had ownership over (e.g., the PvdD focusing on the pandemic origin and radical-right PVV and its focus on immigrant communities).

Our findings also matter for the crisis management literature. Shortly after the initial Covid-19 outbreak, scholars debated how policy and political settings shaped the pandemic response (see e.g., Boin et al., 2021; Maor & Howlett, 2020). We show that the caretaker status of a government might be an important factor, but perhaps not as expected. Although caretaker governments were found to act slower in the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Toshkov et al., 2022), we show that the caretaker status of the Rutte III government between January 2021 and January 2022 was not a big obstacle for the government's crisis management.

Meanwhile, an important question is to what extent our findings are specific to the Rutte III caretaker government. For example, it may be relevant that the coalition parties of Rutte III were able to secure their parliamentary majority after the March 2021 elections. As the caretaker literature suggests, the loss of a parliamentary majority during elections might be a reason why caretaker governments function differently before and after elections (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b). Separating the effects of the crisis from those of caretaker status also remains a challenge. There was broad consensus among governing and opposition parties that the Covid-19 pandemic presented a severe and urgent threat, providing room for manoeuvre for the caretaker government. We expect that different types of crises can leave a different imprint on the functioning of caretaker governments. Particularly, when crisis definitions are more politicised and more contested, caretaker governments might be more likely to face multiple challenges to their mandate. Another question would be how caretaker conventions function for “creeping” crises with a time horizon of multiple years or (even) decades, such as climate change. In addition, as prolonged caretaker periods are more common in Dutch politics than in most other countries (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013), country context may matter. For countries with less caretaker experience, it could be less clear how a caretaker government should use its powers in an effective yet legitimate way.

Finally, our findings come with normative questions about caretaker conventions and the role of the opposition. Although opposition parties cannot fire a government that has already lost its mandate, they have a role: they support the problem-solving capacity of caretaker governments during crises, while simultaneously questioning new policy critically and being aware of their constituencies (see also Louwerse et al., 2021). In times of crisis, the legitimacy of governments, including caretaker ones, not only hinges on their ability to effectively manage crises but also on their adherence to democratic norms and procedures. And the opposition has its role to play in both concerns. Although citizens may prioritise swift and decisive action over democratic procedures in times of crisis (Christensen et al., 2016), we should be aware that this output legitimacy (cf. Schmidt, 2013), based on results rather than democratic principles, can undermine the foundational values of liberal democracy. This dilemma is important for *all* governments in times of crisis but maybe even more relevant to caretaker governments.



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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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