

Article

Is the (Mass) Party Really Over? The Case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy

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Submitted: 15 May 2021 | Accepted: 11 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

Abstract

Over the past decades, the Netherlands has witnessed the rise of several influential populist radical right parties, including the Pim Fortuyn List (Lijst Pim Fortuyn), Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) and, more recently, the Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie [FvD]). By analyzing the party's organizational structures, this article seeks to determine whether the FvD may be considered a new "mass party" and to what extent ordinary members can exert influence over the party's internal procedures. The party's efforts to establish a large membership base suggest that the FvD set out to build a relatively complex mass organization. Through targeted advertising campaigns, the party made strategic use of social media platforms to rally support. Thus, while the means may have changed with the advent of the internet, the FvD invested in creating some organizational features that are commonly associated with the "mass party" model. At the same time, however, the party did not really seek to foster a community of loyal partisan activists among its membership base but instead treated its members as donors. The party is clearly characterized by centralized leadership in the sense that the party's spearhead, Thierry Baudet, maintains full control over key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, and internal procedures. At first sight, the party appears to have departed from Wilders's leader-centered party model. However, a closer look at the party apparatus demonstrates that the FvD is, in fact, very hierarchical, suggesting that the party's internal democracy is much weaker than the party's name might suggest.

Keywords

Forum for Democracy; mass parties; party organization; populist radical right; the Netherlands

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

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1. Introduction

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Netherlands has witnessed the rise of several influential populist radical right parties (PRRPs), including the Pim Fortuyn List (Lijst Pim Fortuyn [LPF]); Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV]); and more recently, the Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie [FvD]), led by far-right political newcomer, Thierry Baudet. The electoral rise of the FvD was remarkable by any measure. Founded as a Eurosceptic think tank in 2015, the FvD entered parliament for the first time after garnering 1.8% of the vote in the 2017 general election, thereby winning two of the 150 seats in the Dutch House of Representatives.

In March 2019, the FvD became the largest party in the Dutch Senate after winning nearly 15% of the vote in the Dutch provincial elections. In January 2020, the FvD announced that it had become "the biggest party in the Netherlands by membership" (FvD, 2020a), thereby surpassing traditional "mass parties," including the social-democratic Labor Party (Partij van de Arbeid [PvdA]), the Christian-democratic Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl [CDA]), and the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie [VVD]).

The FvD's "success story" was momentarily offset in November 2020, when renewed allegations surfaced over right-wing extremist tendencies within the party's youth wing Youth Organization Forum for Democracy

(Jongerenorganisatie Forum voor Democratie [Jfvd]). In the run-up to the 2021 general election, these accusations resulted in mounting public pressure on the party leadership to distance itself from these extremist messages. When Baudet refused to give in to demands to take more drastic measures (e.g., by dissolving the youth wing), underlying tension between the more moderate and radical factions within the party erupted into an open dispute, which resulted in an exodus of prominent party members. Despite the party's episodic decline in the opinion polls, the FvD became the largest "net winner" in the 2021 general election; by garnering 5% of the vote, the party managed to quadruple its parliamentary seats from two to eight. However, in May 2021—just eight weeks after the said election—three FvD representatives split off and set up a new party called Interest of the Netherlands (Belang van Nederland), thereby reducing the FvD's number of seats in the Dutch House of Representatives from eight to five.

The advent of the FvD initiated a new phase in the history of right-wing populism in the Netherlands, characterized by competition within the PRRP family. Indeed, since May 2021, the country has had four PRRPs with parliamentary representation: the PVV; the FvD; and two FvD breakaway-parties, i.e., the Right Answer 2021 (Juiste Antwoord 2021), led by Joost Eerdmans, and Interest of the Netherlands, run by Wybren van Haga. Despite obvious ideological similarities, there are noteworthy differences between these parties—not least in terms of party organization. This contribution particularly focuses on the FvD's party apparatus. While Wilders's PVV is known for its extremely leader-centered party model that does not accept any members other than Wilders himself (see Vossen, 2013), the FvD set out to build a more complex mass organization. Given the costs associated with maintaining large organizations (de Lange & Art, 2011), it is worth asking why the FvD has committed itself to such an endeavor. Moreover, while we have witnessed the decline of traditional "mass parties," as evidenced by falling membership numbers and shrinking electoral support (Mair, 2013), we have also seen the rise of populist parties that criticize their mainstream competitors for being out of touch with voters (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; van Kessel, 2015). This begs the question of whether PRRPs "represent the nail in the coffin for the age of party politics or whether they may be able to revitalize the latter" (de Jonge, 2021, p. 196). Specifically, can the FvD be considered a new mass party, thereby challenging claims about the alleged disappearance of such parties (e.g., Young, 2013)?

To answer this question, it is necessary to delineate the key features of the mass party organizational model. Drawing on the academic literature (e.g., Duverger, 1951; Katz & Mair, 1995), three core characteristics can be discerned, as detailed in the introduction of this thematic issue (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021). First, mass parties strive to recruit a large, activist membership through which they seek to reach out to the wider public, for

instance, by campaigning and canvassing. Second, unlike cartel parties, mass parties are firmly rooted on the ground and provide a variety of activities for their members (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). Third, mass parties promote social integration among their members and seek to establish "collective identities through ideology" (Panebianco, 1988, p. 268), notably by fostering closed political communities of partisan activists (Albertazzi, 2016). However, this is not to say that intra-party democracy is necessarily well-developed within mass parties (see Panebianco, 1988).

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it examines whether and to what extent the FvD can be considered a new mass party. Second, it analyzes the extent to which power has remained centralized in terms of key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, and internal procedures. The article is empirical in nature. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative case study analysis. Given the novelty of the FvD, scholarly accounts of the party remain relatively scarce. As a result, empirical support is drawn from a range of primary and secondary sources, including official party documentation (i.e., programmes, manifestos, statutes, web content, and social media posts) as well as journalistic accounts (i.e., newspaper articles, media interviews, chronicles, and books). Where appropriate, direct and indirect quotations and references to works originally in Dutch have been translated into English by the author.

In a nutshell, the findings indicate that although the FvD showed considerable effort to develop a rather complex, mass party-type organization, the party eventually turned into a textbook case of a "personal party" (McDonnell, 2013) that came to be strongly associated with and dependent on its founder-leader, Baudet. The argument proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the party's history, ideology, and electoral evolution. The third section analyzes the FvD's initial efforts to build a mass-party organization. The fourth section shows that the party organization is, in fact, deeply hierarchical, thereby indicating that the party's internal democracy is much weaker than the party's name might suggest. The conclusion reflects on the wider implications of the findings by discussing PRRP organization and placing the evolution of the FvD in the context of the history of the Dutch far-right.

2. The Rise, Fall, and Revival of the Forum for Democracy

The FvD was registered as a political party in September 2016 to improve the general state of democracy in the Netherlands by "breaking through the party cartel" and giving Dutch voters a greater say in the decision-making process through binding referendums, popular initiatives, directly elected mayors, and e-democracy (FvD, 2016, p. 1). Accordingly, the FvD's 2017 party manifesto focused primarily on democratic reform as well as Dutch

sovereignty and independence from the European Union (FvD, 2017).

Ideologically, the FvD can broadly be classified as a PRRP, characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Otjes, 2020). However, it is useful to differentiate between the comparatively “moderate” official party manifesto and the more radical and, at times, extremist messages voiced by the party leader, Baudet. In 2015, for instance, Baudet expressed his wish for a “predominantly white Europe” (Oudenampsen, 2020, p. 208). In 2017, he warned about the alleged “homoeopathic dilution of the Dutch population” with people from other cultures, thereby popularizing the extreme-right Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Couperus & Tortola, 2019, p. 113).

As mentioned earlier, the electoral rise of the FvD was truly spectacular. The party first entered parliament in the 2017 general election with just under 2% of the vote but gained substantially more votes in the 2019 regional and European elections, in which it won nearly 15% and 11%, respectively. While the FvD’s objectives and programme initially seemed fairly consistent, tensions soon emerged between the moderate and radical factions within the party. In February 2018, the Executive Board first expelled internal party critics (Aalberts, 2020, p. 115). In July 2019, co-founder and FvD Senator Henk Otten was ousted over allegations of fraud after having publicly accused Baudet of “pulling the party too far to the right” (as cited in de Koning & de Witt Wijnen, 2019). Following Otten’s departure, support for the party plummeted in the opinion polls from approximately 14% in July 2019 to about 8% in September 2019 (Louwerse, 2020). The downward spiral continued in 2020 when the FvD lost some of its credibility as a “more reasonable” alternative to the PVV when Baudet (who had initially pushed for stricter lockdown measures) became a vocal ally of anti-lockdown protests and voiced support for Covid-19 conspiracy theories (Korteweg & Mebius, 2020).

In November 2020, the Amsterdam-based newspaper *Het Parool* published an article containing evidence of anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist messages being spread on the JFvD’s internal message boards, including Instagram and WhatsApp (Botje & Cohen, 2020). This was not the first time that the party’s youth branch had been accused of harboring right-wing extremist sympathies: In April 2020, the Dutch monthly magazine *HP/De Tijd* already reported that JFvD members were sharing “expressions that correspond to authoritarian, fascist and/or National Socialist ideas, including anti-Semitism, homophobia and racist imperialism” (van Dijk, 2020). In an attempt to ward off mounting pressure and to distance himself from these renewed allegations of extremism, Baudet renounced his position as lead candidate (*lijsttrekker*) for the 2021 general election but subsequently backtracked on his decision to resign. After seizing control of the FvD’s official social media channels, Baudet announced that he would be organizing a

“binding referendum,” asking members to decide on his fate as party leader. In response to this move, several prominent party representatives, including elected officials and election candidates, renounced their membership. On 4 December 2020, the FvD announced that only 9,000 members had voted against Baudet, while 76% of the approximately 37,000 participating members supported his reign, thereby ending the leadership struggle (FvD, 2020b).

In the run-up to the 2021 general election, FvD launched a Trump-like campaign by touring through Dutch towns in a “freedom caravan,” with which it claimed to “set the Netherlands free” from what it perceived to be oppressive lockdown measures, thereby mobilizing anti-lockdown supporters from across the political spectrum. This strategy proved fairly effective; according to a post-electoral survey conducted by Ipsos, 73% of FvD voters stated that the Covid-19 measures played an important role in determining their vote (“Welke rol speelde,” 2021). While the party managed to make a comeback in the 2021 general election by winning 5% of the vote, it was unable to return to its glory days of 2019.

Having traced the party’s origins and electoral trajectory, the following section examines the FvD’s party organization in the run-up to the 2021 general election. By studying the party’s organizational structures, recruitment strategies, and use of social media, and by reflecting on the party’s motivations for cultivating a large membership, it ultimately seeks to determine whether and to what extent the FvD can be considered a new mass party.

3. Efforts to Build a Mass Party

3.1. Party Organization

According to the party statutes, the FvD is formally composed of two party organs: the General Assembly (*Algemene Vergadering*), which is accessible to all members, and the Executive Board (*Partijbestuur*), consisting of a minimum of three people (FvD, 2016). When the party was set up in 2016, the Executive Board was composed of Baudet, who assumed the role of party chairman; Otten, who served as treasurer; and Rob Rooker, who became the party secretary. According to Chris Aalberts, who chronicled the FvD’s rise from its inception, Rooker’s role remained limited to maintaining the party website (Aalberts, 2020, p. 105), while Baudet served as “poster boy,” and Otten became the “organizational motor” behind the party (Aalberts, 2020, p. 50). It was under Otten’s impetus that the FvD set out to build a functioning party apparatus.

Having been a member of various political parties in the past, Otten was not interested in building a traditional party with conferences, regional branches, and membership councils; instead, he preferred an agile “lean and mean” organization built around a small team and operated according to “business principles”

(Aalberts, 2020, p. 103). Indeed, in its early days, the FvD resembled a company rather than a political party. According to Aalberts (2020, p. 104), the FvD was set up like a start-up: “as small, efficient and agile as possible.” As such, the party’s initial goal was to develop a marketing plan and create a sustainable budget.

After entering parliament in 2017, the FvD set up three auxiliary organizations: a youth wing (JFvD), a think tank (Renaissance Institute), and a foundation (Forum for Democracy International). Between 2018 and 2019, the party was also represented at the municipal, provincial, and European levels. At the same time, the party started to recruit a large membership. In January 2018, the party had already attracted nearly 23,000 members, and by 2020 that number had nearly doubled to almost 44,000 members (Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen [DNPP], 2021a), as it overtook traditional mass parties and became the largest party by membership in the Netherlands (see Figure 1). In 2021, the party reported that total membership numbers had increased to 45,322. It is worth mentioning, however, that the accuracy of this figure is questionable. As mentioned earlier, nearly 9,000 members had voted against Baudet in an internal referendum on his party leadership in December 2020, and it is likely that some of these members subsequently left the party (DNPP, 2021b).

After winning the provincial elections in March 2019, the FvD transitioned from its “start-up” period to a “scale-up” phase, during which it sought to build on its initial electoral breakthrough by growing into a stable organization (Aalberts, 2020, p. 213). However, tensions in the party leadership started to mount, particularly between Baudet and Otten. In the battle over the ideological and organizational course of the party, Baudet emerged victorious. Three weeks after winning

the 2019 provincial elections, the party’s Executive Board was expanded with trustees of Baudet (Aalberts, 2020, p. 165). One of them, Paul Frentrop, was charged with the organizational development of the party, thereby effectively side-lining Otten, who renounced his board functions several days later and was formally expelled in July 2019. During the internal turmoil in 2020, the party witnessed a series of internal reshuffles and personnel changes. In the run-up to the 2021 general election, a new five-member Executive Board was installed with Baudet as party Chairman (FvD, 2021).

Given the party’s drive to recruit a large membership, it may be tempting to conclude that the FvD assumed a key feature of the traditional mass-party model. However, as shown below, most of these members never assumed an activist role; in fact, they primarily served as donors rather than actual party members. More generally, in terms of party organization, it seems fair to state that the FvD is managed through a relatively simple structure and by a small group of people.

3.2. Recruitment Strategies

The party’s rapid growth can largely be attributed to its recruitment strategies, which formed part of Otten’s “business plan.” In an interview with *de Volkskrant* in 2018, Otten famously described the FvD as a “media company with a political branch” (as cited in Hendrickx & Mebius, 2018). As such, the FvD sought to maintain a strong media presence, which, in turn, can largely be attributed to the party’s flamboyant leader, Baudet, who repeatedly managed to draw considerable attention through scandalous social media posts and controversial comments and actions (see de Jonge, 2021, p. 191). In 2018, for instance, he made the national

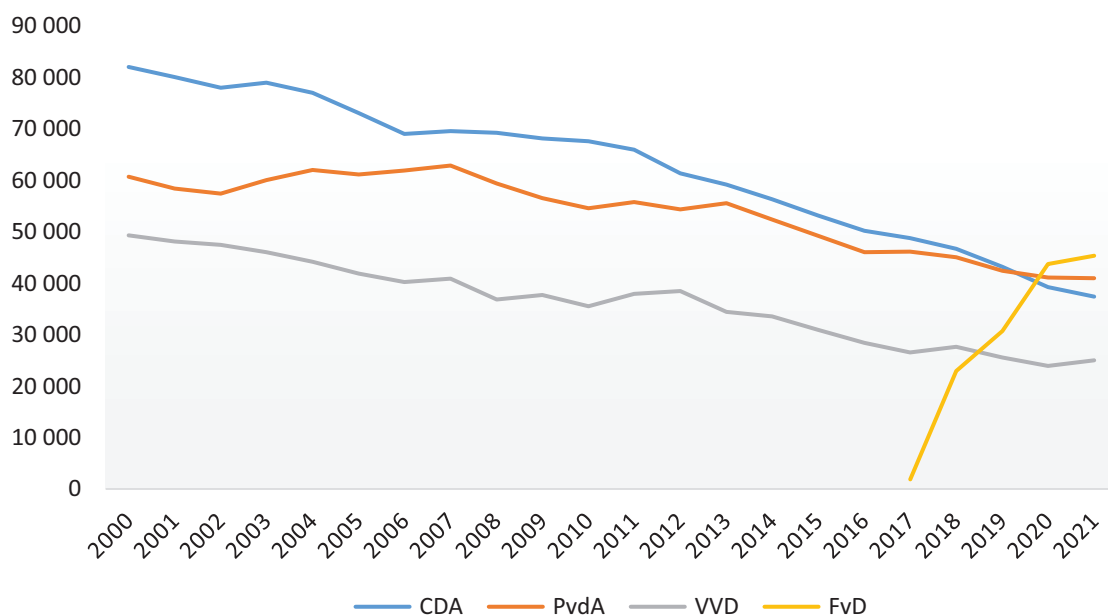


Figure 1. Party membership in the Netherlands between 2000–2021. Source: DNPP (2021a).

news after sharing a picture on Instagram in which he posed naked at the edge of a swimming pool (“Vakantiefoto van naakte,” 2018). Having crossed the threshold of parliamentary representation, Baudet continued to make headlines with his “unconventional” behavior, for instance, by giving his maiden speech in Latin, or participating in a parliamentary debate while wearing a dysfunctional military vest to illustrate the alleged lack of funding for the armed forces. In the aftermath of the 2019 provincial elections, his victory speech was dubbed “the most remarkable victory speech in Dutch political history” (Tempelman, 2019). Through scandals and ambivalent messages, Baudet also managed to attract considerable media attention in the run-up to the 2021 election (see Aaldering & van der Pas, 2021). This media strategy partly helps explain the meteoric rise of the FvD, as it allowed the party to make a name for itself and attract a wider audience.

Apart from its vast media presence, the FvD also has a strong track record in organizing physical events in every corner of the country to recruit new supporters. In its pre-partisan days, when the FvD was still a think tank, it regularly hosted discussion evenings with lectures and drinks (the so-called *borrellezingen*) in the basement of a canal house in Amsterdam. From 2017 onwards, the FvD sought to reach a wider audience. To this end, the FvD rented out fancy conference locations such as the RAI Amsterdam Convention Centre or large theatre buildings for so-called “members’ days,” campaign evenings, and party conferences. For these show-like events, the FvD hired hostesses through hospitality agencies to surround the all-male party leadership and give the event “the right look” (Aalberts, 2020, p. 16). These large-scale events were primarily geared at self-promotion as well as attracting new members and funding. According to Aalberts (2020, p. 98), the FvD party conferences were mostly about “product presentation” as opposed to members’ participation. Indeed, it appears that during this early phase, the party was not particularly interested in recruiting partisan activists because the Executive Board (notably Otten) felt that they might pose a potential risk to the strict party hierarchy. In fact, when it came to canvassing, Otten preferred working with freelancers instead of volunteers because they could be hired and fired as needed (Aalberts, 2020, p. 106).

The recruitment of loyal partisan activists was largely left in the hands of the Renaissance Institute. From its inception, the FvD’s in-house think tank took charge of organizing lectures as well as summer and winter schools for young, ambitious, and ideologically like-minded followers. During these academic retreats, a selective group of young FvD supporters are invited to “delve into Western tradition, philosophy, political theory and practice” (Renaissance Instituut, 2020). It is here that we can observe some effort to create a closed, political community of activists and foster some form of collective identity through ideology. Besides lectures and discussions, participants also engage in sports, singing, workshops,

and lavish dinner parties. On the one hand, these educational activities form part of the party’s wider metapolitical struggle to influence politics through culture and ideas. On the other hand, they can be seen as a means for the party to recruit qualified personnel and train loyal activists.

Given the rapid growth of the party, the FvD was soon confronted with staffing shortages. To this end, the Executive Board launched a nationwide “speed-dating” operation. Using social media, Baudet called on members interested in becoming activists to sign up to their regional chapter (Baudet, 2018). The idea behind the speed-dating activities was to recruit and screen potential candidates to fill the regional lists. Candidates were also asked to take a personality test. The aim was to set up diverse teams to avoid internal turmoil—a strategy that initially appeared to bear fruit (Aalberts, 2020, p. 152).

In the scale-up phase, FvD events became more frequent and widespread throughout the country. The party announced that it would provide regular “members drinks” (*ledenborrels*) in all provinces, as well as regular discussion evenings, meetings, and courses (Aalberts, 2020, pp. 213–214). Following Otten’s departure, the party also increasingly started to rely on the help of volunteers. For instance, the FvD website started to invite visitors to become active, notably by distributing flyers, posters, and party newspapers, and by assisting on market stalls or amplifying online content.

Overall, it can be stated that from its inception, the FvD relied on the media to gain national visibility and recruit a large membership base. However, in its early phases (particularly under Otten), the party was very reluctant to accept partisan activists into its ranks for fear that they might challenge the party hierarchy. Therefore, the recruitment of loyal activists and qualified personnel was outsourced to the partisan think tank, which offered a contained and controlled environment for the careful cultivation of loyal activists. When faced with staffing shortages, however, the party began to rely more on the support of activist members. Thus, particularly after Otten’s departure, the FvD started to bear more resemblance to a traditional “mass party,” characterized by a large, activist membership, rootedness on the ground, and the cultivation of a shared identity through ideology.

3.3. Use of Social Media

To mobilize members and activists, the party also heavily relied on social media. In 2017, the FvD spent 77% (904,569 euros) of its budget on campaigning and membership recruitment (FvD, 2018). A substantial portion of that money (240,468 euros) was invested in advertisement on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, for which the party spent about three times as much as any other political party (Beune & Davidson, 2020). In 2019, the FvD launched one of the largest social media campaigns in the history of Dutch

politics (Snelderwaard & van den Berg, 2020). By micro-targeting potential supporters, the party managed to build a large membership base from scratch. Moreover, in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, the FvD announced its plans to build its own television studio, and in January 2020, Baudet started presenting a weekly “news show” on YouTube entitled *FvD Journaal*, which regularly attracts more than 60,000 viewers. On the one hand, this initiative reflects the party’s deep mistrust of traditional media outlets, which it seeks to bypass through social media. On the other hand, it can be seen as a way of recruiting new members to generate income. As shown below, there was a clear financial incentive behind growing a large membership base.

3.4. Reasons for Cultivating a Large Membership

When drawing up the party statutes, Otten sought inspiration from other parties, notably the center-right CDA and VVD. He also added his own input based on his experience with the LPF. After the murder of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, Otten briefly joined the LPF, which succumbed to infighting soon after having crossed the threshold of parliamentary representation. The implosion of the LPF was partly due to the lack of a functioning party apparatus (de Lange & Art, 2011). When setting up the FvD, Otten sought to avoid the weak organizational features of the LPF, notably by designing a simple and hierarchical party structure in which the party leadership would keep tight control over the organization to avoid internal dissension.

At the same time, however, Otten drew lessons from the structural limitations of the PVV. To avoid some of the organizational weaknesses of the LPF, Wilders deliberately designed a political party that would not accept any members other than Wilders himself (de Lange & Art, 2011). While this allowed Wilders to maintain a certain degree of cohesion and unity in his party, it prevented him from tapping into substantive amounts of funding. Dutch party financing law stipulates that political parties only qualify for subsidies if they have at least 1,000 members who have voting rights and pay a contribution fee of at least 12 euros per year (Overheid, 2013). Therefore, the PVV cannot apply for state subsidies or receive any funding through membership contributions. Otten purposely sought to overcome these financial shortcomings by expanding the FvD membership base.

Prospective FvD members are offered a choice of three payment options (i.e., 25, 50, or 100 euros), which they can choose to pay on a monthly or yearly basis. In 2017, FvD members paid an average of 30 euros for a membership card, so with approximately 20,000 members the party managed to raise over half a million euros through membership fees (den Hartog, 2019). In 2020, FvD members paid approximately 31 euros on average, resulting in 1,335,173 euros of income (l’Ami & Wijnen, 2020). Membership contributions are subsequently matched with state subsidies. The amount of

state subsidies varies every year, but in 2017, the FvD received a subsidy of 7 euros per member (den Hartog, 2019), resulting in an additional income of approximately 140,000 euros. The FvD received further subsidies for holding seats in parliament and for setting up a think tank and youth wing—although it is worth noting here that the party had to pay back some of these subsidies because of its faulty administration (see l’Ami et al., 2020).

While it is difficult to gauge the exact reasons behind the FvD’s organization model, it seems fairly obvious that Otten’s decision to adopt certain elements of a mass party-type organization (notably a large membership base) was primarily driven by financial considerations. In an interview with *Het Parool* in 2019, Otten spoke openly about his financial strategy for the FvD and the party’s ambition to recruit a large membership base:

As far as members are concerned, it’s a zero-sum game....It’s one pot, one pizza. And your pizza slice gets bigger with a larger membership. Plus, the amount that we receive is at the expense of established political parties. So for the FvD, the knife cuts both ways. The cartel parties receive less money and the FvD more. A very healthy dynamic for us. (as cited in den Hartog, 2019)

In other words, by attracting members and acquiring state subsidies, the FvD sought to strengthen its own (financial) position whilst at the same time working towards its main goal to “breakthrough the party cartel.” By doing so, the FvD adopted some features of the mass-party model, notably the drive to recruit a large membership (albeit a largely non-activist one), the provision of a variety of activities for these members (e.g., drinks and debates), and the creation of a closed, activist community through its proxy organizations (i.e., the Renaissance Institute). This enabled the FvD to grow from a newcomer to an influential political movement in less than four years. Following Otten’s departure, the organizational development of the party was effectively put on hold and power was centralized in the hands of Baudet.

Having discerned the key features of the FvD’s party apparatus, the following section analyzes whether and to what extent FvD members can exert influence over key decision-making areas.

4. Centralization of Power and (Lack of) Internal Democracy

The FvD is managed through a relatively simple structure, with power concentrated in the hands of the party leadership. In its early days, the FvD was entirely run by the self-proclaimed “cockpit,” composed of co-founders Baudet and Otten, alongside Otten’s right-hand man Jeroen de Vries and Theo Hiddema, a popular lawyer and media personality who long represented the FvD in parliament. It was this core group that leased a

Jaguar to drive to every corner of the country to campaign. Apparently, all key decisions were taken in the car (Aalberts, 2020, pp. 15, 104). A closer look at the party statutes confirms that all power resides with the Executive Board. For instance, the board is authorized to direct all activities within the party, including drawing up the agenda, preparing and implementing the decisions taken during the general assembly, and changing the party statutes (FvD, 2016, p. 7). Crucially, the Executive Board is also in charge of nominating and appointing its own members, including the party chairman, treasurer, and secretary (FvD, 2016, p. 8).

Furthermore, the Executive Board decides over party policies at the European, national, regional, and local levels. In other words, European, regional, and local subdivisions are kept on a very short leash and they are not recognized as independent party organs. This became evident in the run-up to the communal elections in 2018, when the FvD decided against setting up local branches; instead, the party announced its plans to forge alliances with existing local parties. The idea behind the alliance model was to set up “franchises,” notably by lending the FvD’s “brand” to local party structures, hence giving it a presence at the sub-national level. Accordingly, the party set up loose ties with Livable Rotterdam (Leefbaar Rotterdam) which had won the municipal elections in 2002 under the leadership of Pim Fortuyn. Apart from some joint campaigning, however, the association between the FvD and Livable Rotterdam was never formalized, and the “alliance model” subsided soon after the 2018 election (Aalberts, 2020, p. 128).

In the run-up to the 2019 provincial elections, the FvD eventually found sufficient candidates to participate in all twelve provinces; yet, unlike most other parties, the FvD ran a national campaign. In other words, the Executive Board remained fully in charge of selecting and appointing loyal FvD candidates, and subsequently instructed them not to participate in debates, talk to the press, campaign, or make any political statements whatsoever (Aalberts, 2020, p. 148). Incidentally, the party’s youth wing also adheres to the strict party hierarchy; instead of criticizing or challenging the FvD’s course, the JFvD seems to have adopted a support role, notably by helping the party organize events and campaign online.

Based on these observations, it seems fair to state that all decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of party elites. As such, party members do not have a say over key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, or internal procedures. As mentioned in the previous section, the FvD is officially composed of two organs: the General Assembly and the Executive Board. Given the party’s focus on direct democracy, it is not surprising that the party statutes officially state that the General Assembly is “the highest organ of the party” (FvD, 2016, p. 5). Accordingly, members can formally decide on the party’s political line during the general assembly. In practice, however, the influence of FvD members remains limited.

As Aalberts (2020, p. 90) has observed, members generally assume the role of donors in the sense that they provide the party with financial support without necessarily being willing or able to affect the decision-making process. In fact, it is very difficult for FvD members to exert influence over the agenda. Members can send in suggestions four weeks before the general assembly, but there are no transparent procedures in place to make such suggestions; ultimately, the board decides which items will be discussed. Moreover, members cannot appoint or nominate board members or candidates for local, national, or European elections; they can only vote for candidates that the Executive Board has nominated. Similarly, members can only suspend or expel board members by a two-thirds majority, and only if at least two thirds of all members are present to take part in the vote (FvD, 2016, p. 7). With current membership numbers, some 30,000 members would need to be present at the general assembly to take any sort of action against the board. For the members to exert more influence, the party statutes would have to be altered. However, this would be very difficult to achieve given the limitations listed above. To propose an amendment, the suggested alterations would need to be put on the agenda for the general assembly, and a two-thirds majority would subsequently be needed to formalize the amendment.

Thus, contrary to what the party’s name might suggest, the FvD does not facilitate any internal democracy whatsoever. In fact, Baudet rules by decree. This became even more obvious in November 2020, when Baudet effectively made use of the rigid party hierarchy to stifle internal criticism. After fellow board members had renounced Baudet’s party membership, the latter hijacked the party’s social media channels to announce that he would be organizing a “binding referendum” on his fate as party leader—an instrument that is not enshrined in the party statutes. The referendum was completely untransparent but ultimately settled the leadership question, thereby cementing Baudet’s autocratic powers within the FvD. Organizationally as well as ideologically, the FvD eventually became what Baudet wanted it to be. Considering these observations, we can conclude that the FvD’s party organization is deeply hierarchical and completely undemocratic.

5. Conclusion

This article set out to determine whether the FvD has assumed any features of the traditional mass party, and to what extent ordinary members have been able to exert influence on the party’s internal procedures. The findings indicate that, at least initially, the FvD strategically assumed some organizational features typically associated with the mass party. Specifically, the FvD sought to attract a large membership base. Through targeted advertising campaigns, the party made deliberate use of social media platforms including Facebook

and Twitter to rally support and communicate with their voter base. At the same time, however, the party did not really seek to establish a large community of loyal partisan activists among its membership base. In other words, most individuals who joined the FvD served as donors rather than active participants in a movement. Thus, although the party has maintained a relatively large organization, it was never particularly well-rooted on the ground. While the party did make some attempts to foster a collective identity, notably by hosting events and courses through its auxiliary organizations, it only appeared to target a highly selective group of like-minded supporters. By doing so, the party apparently sought to consciously restrict members' influence over party strategy, candidate selection, and formulation of policy, thereby effectively maximizing Baudet's freedom to maneuver. Furthermore, the findings highlight that the FvD is managed through a simple structure and by a very small group of people. In fact, over the course of 2020, Baudet's power within the party became absolute. Contrary to what the party's name might suggest, the FvD never facilitated any internal democracy; instead, it became both centrally and vertically controlled by Baudet. In conclusion, the analysis presented above suggests that, in contrast to the traditional mass party, the FvD was never interested in actively engaging and socializing party members in long-term political associations (let alone enabling members to make their voices heard). Thus, if the FvD is a harbinger of the modern mass party, then the future of party politics looks rather bleak.

While the meteoric rise of the FvD was extraordinary, the internal dissension that befell the party in the run-up to the 2021 general election (and again shortly after that) was far from unique. New parties often run the risk of losing momentum after crossing the threshold of parliamentary representation, and there are countless examples of flash-in-the-pan PRRPs succumbing to infighting after their initial electoral breakthrough. The LPF in the Netherlands is a case in point. As de Lange and Art (2011, p. 1245) have observed, to achieve electoral persistence:

Radical right parties need to have more than just an appealing programme and a charismatic leader. They need to develop a party organization that is properly structured, and that is populated with competent people who support the goals of the party.

It is questionable whether the FvD has fully achieved this.

From a comparative point of view, the FvD stands out in the sense that it was conceived as a classical PRRP that combined organizational elements of the personal party (with Baudet acting as a quasi-authoritarian leader) with a fairly strong level of institutionalization (courtesy of Otten) from the start. Specifically, the party appears to have merged organizational elements from both of its predecessors, notably the LPF and the PVV. To avert the internal dissension that caused the demise of the LPF, the FvD opted for a hierarchical party model with

limited to no internal democracy. Indeed, in this respect, the FvD bears much resemblance to Wilders's "personal party" where power is entirely centralized in the hands of the founder-leader (see McDonnell, 2013). At the same time, however, the FvD drew lessons from the structural and financial limitations of the PVV, notably by creating a large membership base, which enabled the party to tap into considerable funding opportunities. At least in the short run, the combination of strong, centralized leadership with a solid institutional foundation and a large donor membership base serving as a "cash cow" has proven to be a fairly sustainable organizational model. To date, the party has been able to withstand setbacks and adapt to new political circumstances. As such, it managed to cut its losses and make a comeback just in time for the 2021 general election. However, whether the FvD can survive beyond the political lifespan of the founder-leader and whether the FvD's organizational model can stand the test of time remains to be seen.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Niklas Abel for his excellent research assistance. I am also grateful to Daniele Albertazzi, Stijn van Kessel, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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