
Democracy and Civil Society in the Early Modern Period: The Rise of Three Types of Civil Societies in the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic

Maarten F. Van Dijck

This article proposes to refine the concept civil society by discerning three distinct forms of civil society in the past. This refined conceptual framework counters the criticism that civil society suffers from its growing popularity and its broad definition. The usefulness of these three forms of civil society—which are based on the later work of Jürgen Habermas—are applied in this article on the seventeenth-century Low Countries. The central question is how these forms of civil society acted as schools of democracy in the seventeenth-century Spanish Netherlands and Dutch Republic. The three types of civil society are identified that developed through time and built a cumulative tradition of civil society. These are the medieval craft guilds (liberal civil society), the early modern civic militia (republican civil society), and the modern Enlightenment sociability (deliberative civil society). Data about the associational life in two cities in the Low Countries, Mechelen and Rotterdam, show that different forms of civil societies had different functions according to the societal context. Furthermore, the data show that societies with civil societies characterized by social inclusive boards and high mutation ratios had less political impact when they lacked links with existing political institutions. This implies that civil societies did not as a rule serve as schools of democracy.

Civil Society in a Corporative World

Although the emergence of a democratic political culture has been a central issue for decades, up until this day academics disagree about the fundamental driving forces behind processes of democratization. Already in the 1960s, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas delivered one of the most substantial contributions to this discussion. In his influential study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989, first published in German in 1962), he claimed that, since the second half of the seventeenth century, Enlightenment sociability provided the necessary social background for the emergence of a civil society and a corresponding public sphere that fostered the development of a democratic political culture. Many historians were inspired by Habermas's historical perspective, but also formulated various critical responses to his theory (Arsan et al. 2012; Eckstein and Terpstra 2009; Hoffmann 2006; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Koller 2010; van Horn Melton 2001). The research at hand wants to participate in this debate by refining the theoretical framework and by looking at the historical development and democratic character of several seventeenth-century forms of civil society. The relevance of such a theoretic elaboration, even half a century past the first publication of Habermas's study, is beyond doubt because civil society has become a "somewhat slippery concept" in recent historiography (Prak 2010: 110).

A distinction between different types of civil society will be introduced to investigate the democratic character of different forms of sociability more in detail; relate these practices to the various ideological backgrounds of various types of sociability; and unravel the cumulative development of modern civil society.

The present contribution will look at three types of sociability during the early modern period: (1) craft guilds, (2) civic militia, and (3) Enlightenment sociability. These three forms of sociability will be connected to the rise of modern democracy. Current definitions of modern democracy are taken as starting point. Political theorists usually discern two fundamental dimensions of democracy: (1) actual democratic rules and (2) allocation of political rights and liberties. The latter refers to the institutional and legal background of democracy, which protects citizens and attributes them with political rights. Habermas calls this *liberal democracy*. The former concerns the procedural dimension of modern democracy. It covers the actual accountability of government and the openness toward citizens (Bollen and Paxton 2000; Munck and Verkuylen 2002). Following Habermas, it is considered feasible to divide this dimension in two different aspects: republican and deliberative democracy. The republican element emphasizes the participation of citizens in political life, while the deliberative dimension of democracy refers to the circulation of public arguments and opinions. Habermas's theory suggests that these three precursors of modern democracy were each connected to distinct forms of civil society, but Habermas did not explicitly define these forms of civil society nor did he place liberal and the republican democracy in its historical context (Habermas 1994: 1–10; 2006: 411–13).¹ The present article wants to historicize these three forms of civil society in the context of the Low Countries, and as such aims at enlarging our understanding of the genesis of modern public spheres, civil societies, and democratic practices (see figure 1). We will show that different types of civil society developed since the late medieval period and formed together a dynamic and diverse civil society.

The central question of this article is how early modern and modern forms of sociability encouraged the rise of a democratic political culture. Indeed, civil societies are often described as schools of democracy, which implies that the rise of modern democracy is the result of a grassroots movement. This central theme is divided into three subquestions: (1) which forms of early modern sociability can be distinguished, (2) did these different forms of civil society develop democratic practices, and (3) what impact had these diverse civil societies on the political system? These subquestions will be investigated by looking at the governmental practices in associations that are often considered as a good operationalization of the concept civil society. Two indicators will be central to our investigation of the democratic character of these associations: the social openness of these organizations and the mutation rate of the board. The political influence of civil society is more difficult to measure, but it is essential to discern weak from strong civil societies. This distinction is derived from Nancy Fraser who rightly argued that associations without links to power structures

1. Habermas speaks of a liberal, Lockean democracy and mentions the influence of Rousseau on republican democracy, but these are more theoretical references instead of historical.

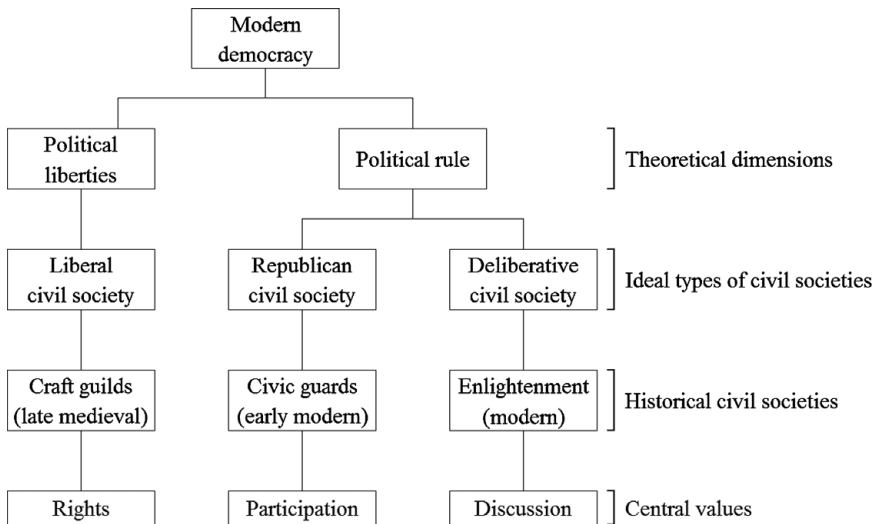


FIGURE 1. *Modern democracy and historical civil societies in the Low Countries.*

can be considered weak civil societies. Indeed, a strong public sphere can only exist if civil society is able to influence the decision-making process (Fraser 1992: 132–35). One might argue that strong civil societies can result in stronger democratic governments if these forms of sociability were not entirely controlled by the authorities. The presence of politicians with a background in civil society enables us to estimate the impact of associational life on the political system, on the condition that these people moved from a civil society organization to the urban government, and not the other way round.

Two seventeenth-century cities will be compared to evaluate the role of sociability in the Low Countries during the early modern period. Rotterdam is a good example of a rather small town in the Dutch Republic that experienced a period of exceptional economic growth after the separation from the Southern Netherlands (Lourens and Lucassen 2005). Mechelen can be considered as a typical middle-sized city in the Spanish Netherlands (Klep 1981: 354; Kocken 1973: 176). This town faced a demographic decline after the middle of the sixteenth century and was not able to recover from this major blow during the early modern period (see table 1). The division between Southern and Northern Netherlands resulted in a different political and religious context. The religious climate in Rotterdam was rather tolerant, while Mechelen became the center of restoration and Catholicism in the Southern Netherlands. The political framework was also quite different: Rotterdam became one of the major cities of the Dutch Republic, while Mechelen was part of a centralized monarchy (Carlier et al. 1991: 149–82; van der Schoor 1999: 149–79). One could expect that these different conditions also affected the role of civil society in both urban centers

TABLE 1. *Demographical evolution of Mechelen and Rotterdam, 1494–1795*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Mechelen</i>	<i>Rotterdam</i>
1494	25,000	4,000
1560	11,000	7,000
1632	21,000	30,000
1670	22,000	45,000
1732	21,000	56,000
1795	20,000	53,000

Sources: Klep 1981: 354; Kocken 1973: 176; Lourens and Lucassen 2005.

because a firm monarchical rule seems irreconcilable with the rise, or even existence, of independent civil societies.

Craft Guilds and Liberal Civil Society

Craft guilds can be considered as a late medieval and early modern form of civil society for three reasons: (1) The meetings of these associations offered plenty occasions for discussions between members. Although guild sociability decreased during the early modern period, the attendance of funerals, religious services, and other official gatherings remained compulsory for the members of most guilds in the Low Countries (Deceulaer 2001: 361; Panhuysen 2000: 37–40). Moreover, studies of early modern court records and correction books have pointed out that guild members intensively interacted informally, meeting each other in streets, workshops, and taverns (Ortmanns 2003: 80–82, 103). The many bans on excessive dancing, drinking, and masquerades likewise suggest that formal and informal guild sociability was ubiquitous (Prak 2004: 179). Political pamphlets could circulate during such formal and informal meetings, while discussions about political matters could even result in popular protest against the urban and central authorities (Van Elsacker 2000: 158–59). (2) The collective actions of guild members were not always mere responses to infringements of their own personal privileges. Recent research has shown that guilds referred in general to the common good in their political actions. This was, of course, a concept used to achieve certain interests, but the use of this term hints at values that transcended individual goals (Dumolyn and Haemers 2012: 64–86). (3) The political autonomy of the guilds is the most discussed aspect of these organizations in the context of the civil society debate. Although craft guilds had strong bonds with the urban authorities in the Spanish Netherlands and in the eastern part of the Dutch Republic, the already mentioned role of guilds in middle-class protests points at the independent opinion formation within these corporations (Boone and Prak 1995; Dekker 1992; Dumolyn and Haemers 2005; Prak 2006: 93–106). The central and urban authorities certainly

tried to control the craft guilds, but the critical—and even rebellious—attitude of the common guild members points at the limits of their influence.

The idea that craft guilds acted as a late medieval and early modern form of civil society is not new. The eminent Belgian historian Henri Pirenne already pointed at the essential political role of the medieval craft guilds in the Low Countries. He did not use the concept *civil society*, but he argued that the urban guilds fostered a democratic political culture (Pirenne 1910: 198–205). Some historians were critical about Pirenne's view, but recent studies are more positive and point at the democratic tendencies within craft guilds (Aerts 2010: 209–24; Prak 2006; Putnam 1993: 125–26; Van Uytven 1962: 373–409). The present article argues that guilds must be seen as a form of liberal civil society according to Habermas's definition. Habermas defined the essence of liberal civil society—which should not be equated with nineteenth-century liberalism—in the following way: “[I]n the liberal point of view the point of a legal order is to make it possible to determine in each case which individuals are entitled to which rights” (Habermas 1994: 3). This definition seems in line with the discourses and the practices of the late medieval and early modern guilds. Heinz Schilling, for instance, argued that rights and duties were at the heart of the political culture of the guilds (Schilling 1992: 50). These rights were not the so-called active rights of the republican system, but rather negative rights that protected and privileged guild members. Indeed, early modern guilds did not claim these rights as a form of active citizenship, but protected their members against other individuals and groups in society. It is no coincidence that guilds made large efforts to defend these rights in court (Deceulaer 1996: 171–208; Prak 1996: 255–79). The political rights connected with guild membership were usually acquired during the period of late medieval guild revolts as a mechanism to defend guild members against the corruption and the mismanagement of the urban patricians (Dumolyn and Haemers 2005: 386–87).² From this perspective, the guilds offered their members negative rights.

Although the history of the craft guilds received a great deal of attention during the last two decades, only a limited number of studies dealt with the political role of the guilds. However, some authors tried to look at the guilds as civil society organizations (Aerts 2010: 209–24; Prak 2010: 107–36). Maarten Prak, for instance, concluded that historians should distinguish three geographical regions in the Low Countries. In the Spanish Netherlands certain guilds had acquired far-reaching political rights, which ensured them of a number of seats in the urban benches of aldermen. The guilds also had political rights in the eastern part of the Dutch Republic, but here they had to share political power with other grassroots associations, such as neighborhood organizations. The situation was totally different in the western part of the Dutch Republic where the guilds were excluded from political influence (Prak 2006: 86–106). Remieg Aerts claimed from a modern perspective that the presence of strong guilds did not foster democratic developments in the Low Countries during the nineteenth century

2. Medieval revolts did not aim at changing the system, but rebels often wanted to restore existing privileges.

because the guilds acted as an early form of civil society and prevented the spread of more modern associations during the nineteenth century (Aerts 2010: 233–36).

A comparison of the guilds in Mechelen and Rotterdam reveals the great differences between different regions in the Low Countries. The late urban development of Rotterdam—in comparison with Mechelen—resulted in a delayed development of the craft guilds. Indeed, the oldest guild in Mechelen was already mentioned in 1254 while the first traces of a craft guild in Rotterdam date from 1427 (van der Schoor 1999: 53; Van Uytven et al. 1991: 53). This different chronology, which is typical for the development of the Northern and Southern Netherlands, also revealed itself in the political rights of guilds members. These political rights were the outcome of the urban revolts of the thirteenth and fourteenth century in urban centers of the Southern Netherlands (Dumolyn and Haemers 2005: 374–77). The late foundation of craft guilds in Holland was responsible for the absence of far-reaching political rights. Indeed, craft guilds founded after 1400 were unable to claim far-reaching privileges (Prak 2006: 81–83).

Some craft guilds in Mechelen acquired access to the bench of aldermen during the fourteenth century and were allowed to exercise control of the urban finances (Van Uytven et al. 1991: 59–63). These political rules are typical examples of liberal rights, which had the intention to protect citizens from corruption and repression (Dumolyn and Haemers 2005: 372–75). The craft guilds of Rotterdam never obtained similar political rights because they simply did not exist at the time of the fourteenth-century craft revolts. Paradoxically, the democratic character of the boards of the guilds was reduced in the Southern Netherlands after they acquired political rights. Indeed, a limited group of rich guild masters monopolized the guilds' seats in the benches of aldermen. Maarten Prak argued that the guilds in both Northern and Southern Netherlands were dominated by rich elites, but he also had to admit that empirical evidence remains scarce. Prak referred to eighteenth-century mutation rates about the guilds for Amsterdam, but he could not produce similar data for the Spanish Netherlands (Prak 2006: 94–106). Bibi Panhuysen and Harald Deceulaer calculated mutation rates of the deans of the tailors' guilds in Ghent (Spanish Netherlands) and Amsterdam (Dutch Republic), which are comparable, but it is dangerous to extrapolate information about one specific guild to (all guilds in) the entire city (Deceulaer 2001: 353; Panhuysen 2000: 52–58). Indeed, the mutation rate for a tailors' guild in eighteenth-century Amsterdam amounted to 7.1 years, while this was 3.5 years in Ghent, but Panhuysen also calculated that an average guild dean served 7.1 years in eighteenth-century Amsterdam. Unfortunately, similar data about the Spanish Netherlands are unavailable, except some sporadic evidence about particular guilds (Prak 2006: 101).

Data on guild boards in Mechelen and Rotterdam enable us to compare the political practices in craft guilds in the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands during the seventeenth century.³ Although information was available for 15 guilds in Mechelen and 32 guilds in Rotterdam, we collected information about 11 comparable guilds,

3. Municipal Archives Rotterdam (further MAR), nos. 1.01-2041–1.01-2046; Joosen 1960–63, 1979–84.

which were present in both cities.⁴ The sample contains the names of the deans of these guilds for a period of five years.⁵ The data show that the deans in Mechelen occupied their office twice as long as their Rotterdam colleagues. A dean in Mechelen served 2.2 years on average, while this number amounted to 1.1 in Rotterdam. An independent samples t-test shows that this difference is statistically significant and represents a strong effect.⁶ The sample for Mechelen contained guilds with access to the bench of aldermen and guilds without such political rights. A second independent samples t-test was carried out to eliminate the effects of the privileged guilds. The differences between both cities became smaller after we removed in our sample for Mechelen the guilds with representatives in the bench of aldermen. An average career lasted in Mechelen 1.9 years while the figures for Rotterdam were unaffected because no guild had access to the urban magistrate. However, the differences between both cities remain statistically significant and the effect of the city on the career length was again large.⁷ A comparison of the guilds with and without political power in Mechelen confirms that the mutation rate—this is the average number of political mandates per person—in the board was higher in guilds with legally guaranteed political power.⁸ We can conclude that the concentration of power was higher in guilds with formal access to the urban bench of aldermen. This confirms earlier ideas about the oligarchic effects of guild democracy in the Spanish Netherlands.

Mutation rates provide an indication about the democratic level of guild life, but they are not the only way to measure the nature of the political practices in civil society organizations. A comparison of the names of the guild deans and the heads of households in taxation lists offers information about the social openness of the guilds' boards in Mechelen and Rotterdam.⁹ Only a limited number of names could be identified in these fiscal sources; the guild deans in Rotterdam were especially difficult to find in the taxation lists. This is probably an indication of their lower social position in comparison to Mechelen. Table 2 shows that the guilds' boards in Mechelen were more social exclusive than in Rotterdam. Although some prudence is in order because of the low numbers, the chi-square shows that the differences between the two cities are significant. Again, the data suggest that the guilds in Rotterdam were more democratic because of their social openness. Table 3 indicates that the higher social position of the guild deans in Mechelen was due to the political influence of some guilds. The guilds without representatives in the urban bench of aldermen were less social restrictive.

The data on the mutation rates and the social openness of the craft guilds indicate that positions of power were not concentrated in the hands of a few people. This points at the (relative) democratic character of these organizations. The internal organization

4. The guilds in this sample are quite diverse: bakers, blacksmiths, brewers, bricklayers, butchers, carpenters, fish sellers, grocers, shipmasters, shoemenders, and tailors.

5. The samples for Rotterdam and Mechelen cover the period 1666–70.

6. The test gave the following results: $t(102) = 7.8$; $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.61$.

7. The t-test gave these results: $t(67) = 5.2$; $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.54$.

8. The results of the t-test are also statistically significant at the 99 percent level, but they represent medium-sized effects in this case: $t(86) = 3.4$; $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.35$.

9. City Archives Mechelen (further CAM), no. K-S-V-1-2; MAR, no. 1.01-4166.

TABLE 2. *Social position of the guilds' deans in Mechelen and Rotterdam during the second half of the seventeenth century (5-year samples)*

	<i>Mechelen (1646–50)</i>		<i>Rotterdam (1666–70)</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Quartile 1	0	0%	4	24%
Quartile 2	3	6%	2	12%
Quartile 3	23	49%	6	35%
Quartile 4	21	45%	5	29%
Total	48	100%	17	100%

Sources: CAM, no. K-S-V-1-2, MAR, nos. 1.01-2041–1.01-2046, MAR, no. 1.01-4166; Joosen 1960–63, 1979–84.

Chi-square (3) = 12.75; $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 3. *Social position of the guilds' deans in Mechelen (1646–1650)*

	<i>Representatives in Bench of Aldermen</i>		<i>No Representatives in Bench of Aldermen</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Quartile 1	0	0%	0	0%
Quartile 2	0	0%	3	10%
Quartile 3	4	22%	19	66%
Quartile 4	14	78%	7	24%
Total	18	100%	29	100%

Sources: CAM, no. K-S-V-1-2; Joosen 1960–63, 1979–84.

Chi-square (2) = 13.27; $p < 0.01$.

of civil societies can reveal processes of democratization, but it is also important to look at the ability of these organizations to defend their interests in political institutions. Historians have already showed how craft guilds tried to achieve their goals by writing petitions to the urban, provincial, and central government(s). However, the available information does not provide us with clear-cut indicators. Henk van Nierop and Maarten Prak described the tradition of petition writing as a typical feature of the political culture in the Dutch Republic, but several sources suggest that petitions were also frequently used by the craft guilds in the Spanish Netherlands (Prak 2009: 72–78; Van Nierop 1997: 284–90). The Antwerp craft guilds, for instance, submitted 1,422 petitions between 1586 and 1616. This number dropped to 1,146 petitions between 1646 and 1676, but remained impressively large (Deceulaer 1996: 190–92). Data for Mechelen make clear why the number of petitions directed to the urban authorities dropped in the Spanish Netherlands during the early modern period. The craft guilds

shifted their attention from the urban to the central government. While the guilds directed one-third of their petitions to the central government during the sixteenth century, this share rose to almost two-thirds of all petitions in the eighteenth century (Installé 1982).

Complete urban petition books are not available for Mechelen, but the guild archives prove that they tried to influence the urban government in this city. The brewers' guild, for instance, submitted at least 52 petitions to the urban and central authorities during the seventeenth century. A comparison with Zierikzee, a town of 10,000 inhabitants in the Dutch Republic, makes it easier to interpret these figures. The bakers' guild of Zierikzee submitted 18 petitions during the seventeenth century, only the shippers were more active with 32 petitions (Remmerswaal 2006: 195–97). In a larger city, such as Utrecht, the craft guilds presented 28 petitions to the urban authorities during the first half of the eighteenth century, which means that most guilds only submitted a single petition during the entire period (van der Weide 2010: 39). This is a modest figure in comparison with the 978 petitions presented by the Antwerp craft guilds to the urban authorities during the period from 1706 until 1736 (Deceulaer 1996: 190).

The petitions give an indication of the political activity of the guilds, although these numbers are difficult to interpret. Do high numbers of petitions indicate that guilds were quite influential, or do they point to the opposite situation? Therefore, the number of petitions should be complemented with other data. The moving on from board members to the bench of aldermen can reveal the real political impact of the guilds. This indicator is also in line with the idea that civil societies are schools of democracy. According to this view, civil societies stimulate democratic practices because they motivate members to participate in the board of these organizations. The mutual trust among citizens is also enlarged by the cooperation in the context of these civil societies (Putnam 2000: 19–26). This also implies that good and successful civil societies prepare citizens for political participation in the community. This can be measured by looking at the career of the deans of craft guilds. A sample with the names of all deans from 16 craft guilds show that 16 percent of all deans in Mechelen moved from the guilds to the bench of aldermen (calculation based upon Joosen 1960–63, 1979–84; Van den Eynde 1859).¹⁰ This is a modest percentage because the urban privileges stipulated that half of all aldermen had to stem from the craft guilds. However, this is a relative high figure in comparison with the share of 1 percent in Rotterdam in the years between 1666 and 1670.¹¹

Civic Militia and Republican Civil Society

The civic militia are a second form of early modern civil society that will be discussed. These organizations also had the three basic characteristics of a civil society: (1) The

10. This resulted in a list with the names of 101 deans.

11. This sample contains the names of 132 deans from 12 different craft guilds. The data are based upon MAR, nos. 1.01-2041–1.01-2046; Unger 1892.

civic guards were not just military organizations because they were also centers of urban sociability. Foreigners were surprised by their rich dinners and drinking feasts; the officers of the guards even had to promulgate certain rules to avoid drunkenness. The practice grounds of the civic guards were meeting points for burghers and the privileges of the civic guards even offered several occasions for duty-free drinking. However, the guards also assembled to discuss serious political matters (Knevel 1994: 271–311). (2) The civic guards were institutions that defended the general interests of the community. It is for this reason that humanist Hadrianus Junius described the civic guards as “the strength and nerves of the Dutch Republic” in his *Batavia* (1588). The common good was also a central concept in the ideology of the civic guards (Knevel 1994: 38, 354). (3) The relation between the urban authorities and the civic guards was often a point of discussion. Urban governments often contributed in the financial costs of the civic guards and were closely associated with the official organization of these institutions. However, the civic guards played a crucial role in urban revolts and were never intimidated by the power of the urban magistrates. They even refused to take their official oath before the urban aldermen if this would jeopardize their political neutrality. In fact, the financial and administrative relation between urban authorities and civic guards was never an impediment for the civic guard’s independence. For this reason, they compared themselves with the tribunes of the plebs in ancient Rome (Knevel 1994: 32–34, 193, 354–57; Prak 1991: 78).

Other authors also argued that the civic militia were a form of early modern civil society. Adam Ferguson, the author of the famous essay *History of Civil Society* (1767), described civic militia as important manifestations of civil society (Geuna 2002: 184). Maarten Prak more recently pointed out that the civic guards claimed that they represented the entire urban community and should be considered as civil society organizations. City-dwellers referred to the civic guards as “the citizens,” which suggests that they were identified with the urban community (Prak 2010: 117; Unger 1892: 1, lix). Prak also argued that citizens used the civic guard as an institution to form and ventilate their personal opinions and interests. The influence of the civic militia in Holland was, according to Prak, a compensation for the limited political role of the craft guilds in the western part of the Dutch Republic. In sum, the civic militias formed the early modern civil society par excellence in Holland (Prak 2009: 76–78). Some authors even argued that these civic militia propagated democratic values. However, Paul Knevel stated in his study of the early modern civic militia in Holland that this democratic tendency was rather limited. The civic guards often advocated a more open urban government and a restoration of the old rights and privileges of the citizens, but they never strove for full democratic rights (Knevel 1994: 362).

The civic militias are a good example of a republican civil society, following Habermas’s definition, because they propagated active participation in political life (Knevel 1994: 362–63). Habermas stressed the importance of this type of civil societies because republican civil societies encouraged individuals to become members of the political community (Habermas 1994: 1–9; 2006: 412). This active participation of citizens in the political life refers to the so-called concept of *vivere civile*, which is

an essential element in classical definitions of republicanism (Pocock 2009: 56–57). This idea of the *vita activa* was crucial in the work of republican thinkers, such as Machiavelli and others, and they usually included a plea for the erection of civic militia because these organizations allegedly reflected about the participation of citizens in one of the crucial tasks of the political community: the protection of the inhabitants (van Gelderen 1990: 208–9). Other prominent republican thinkers, such as the already mentioned Adam Ferguson, saw the civic militia as a school for republican virtues as well (Geuna 2002: 184).

This discourse of active participation distinguished the civic militia from craft guilds, which emphasized the different judicial status of members and outsiders (Prak 1996: 261–76). The militia did not stress this distinction and did not highlight the importance of their rights and privileges either. The civic guards in the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands primarily reminded citizens of their duty to actively protect and defend their community. People who were not able to join the civic guards had to pay a sum of money or were bound to present a legal document that ensured that they were not able to participate in the militia (Knevel 1994: 194–200; Romer 1979: 28–29). The importance of this civic duty was in the following way formulated by an unknown defender of the Mechelen civic militia: “It seems that buying off the civic militia and the civic duties not only brings along the entire destruction of the five civic guards, but it also has other dangerous consequences.”¹² Privileges were less important, with the notable exception of the right to drink duty-free beer in their meeting room (Knevel 1994: 297).

It is significant that the civic militias are not incorporated in the historiography about the Southern Netherlands. The scarce references historians have made to the civic guards usually emphasize their role as defenders of the monarchical rule. This is remarkable because the shooting guilds are considered as an expression of civic culture in the Southern Netherlands during the late medieval period (Arnade 1997: 313–17). The Antwerp shooting guilds, for instance, refused to act against the participants of the iconoclasm in 1566 (Marnef 1996: 129). They also came in conflict with the urban government during earlier revolts, such as the upheavals of 1555, and Charles V severely punished some members of the Antwerp shooting guild in the aftermath of this revolt (Kint 1996: 242–43). This tradition of resistance did not end with the Dutch Revolt. The Antwerp civic militia also refused to use violence against citizens during seventeenth-century upheavals (Houben 2004: esp. ch. 7). The evidence about Mechelen is less abundant, but the civic militia were involved in several rebellious episodes during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Installé et al. 1991: 214; Marnef et al. 1991: 131–37). It seems that the role of the civic militia in the Spanish Netherlands was comparable to the function of the civic guards in the Dutch Republic (Knevel 1994: 323–67).

The resemblances between the civic guards in the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic were the outcome of a shared historical background. In the first place, the civic militia went back to the late medieval shooting guilds. These

12. CAM, no. E-S-I-2, document 1768.

organizations gradually arose in the coastal regions of the Southern Netherlands as religious fraternities with defensive tasks. The oldest history of these organizations is not very clear, but in Flanders and Brabant they certainly existed from the thirteenth century onward. It took a century before similar corporations with defensive tasks emerged in the Northern Netherlands (Knevel 1994: 19–25). The exact relation between these civic militia and religious confraternities is not entirely clear, but the religious activities of the shooting guilds prove that they were at least influenced by the older tradition of lay confraternities (Trio 1994: 99; Van Autenboer 1993–94: 60–62). Indeed, these shooting guilds were generally named after saints or devotions, maintained an altar, actively participated in processions, and organized masses (Van Dijk 2012: 158–63; 176–79).

The night watch, another important function of the early modern civic guards, goes back to the urban neighborhood organizations of the late medieval period. These grassroots organizations were erected at an early stage of the urbanization process and organized the participation of citizens in the urban community. Although Mechelen was much older than Rotterdam, the Mechelen sources only mention these kinds of organizations since the beginning of the fifteenth century. At the end of the fourteenth century, the urban authorities still paid six people to preserve the city from all danger during night. These guards literally watched over the city because they were stationed in the towers of the parish churches.¹³ The wages of these guards disappeared in the urban accounts during the fifteenth century. It seems that the urban government became convinced that the night watch was a task of all citizens. The aldermen did not interfere with the organization of this guard, although they stipulated that households had to pay a fine to the neighbors when they failed to provide someone for the night watch. The text of the same ordinance makes clear that the practical organization of civic duties was a prerogative of the neighborhoods.¹⁴ The urban government of Rotterdam did not pay fireguards during the fourteenth century: All inhabitants had the same, shared responsibility on this matter. An agreement between urban authorities and citizens (1371) divided the urban territory in four neighborhoods, which had to organize the night watch (cf. Marnef et al. 1991: 130–73; van der Schoor 1999: 42–49).

The shooting guilds were abolished during the sixteenth century because of their involvement in the Dutch Revolt, but the authorities quickly re-established these organizations. This resulted in a reorganization of the shooting guilds according to the military model and a junction with the existing night watches. The corporative tradition of shooting guilds based on selective membership and the republican tradition of urban guards organized by the more inclusive neighborhood organizations were united in one new organization. The civic guards became a neighborhood-based organization with a military structure (Knevel 1994: 92–107). The shooting guilds were able to survive in the Spanish Netherlands. Religious associations, such as the shooting guilds, were not in line with the new religious situation in the Dutch

13. CAM, urban account 1380.

14. CAM, no. C-S-III-1, f^o 122r^o.

Republic. This was not the case in the Spanish Netherlands, where a revival of all forms of religious fraternities fit well into the political, social, and religious framework of the Catholic Reformation (Black 2004: 88–100; Van Dijck 2003: 25–52). The shooting guilds became an elite section of the civic militia and the officers of the shooting guilds were in command of the other guards who did not belong to these fraternities.¹⁵ This new role of the shooting guilds is a surprisingly neglected subject in the historiography about the Spanish Netherlands. Most authors see the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century shooting guilds as superfluous and purely trivial associations (Van Autenboer 1993–94: 645).

The organization of the shooting guilds and the civic militia bore resemblances with that of other corporations, such as craft guilds. The shooting guilds also organized an annual meeting to elect new deans by plurality of votes and to control the accounts of the past year. These elected board members were not only in charge of the shooting guilds but also directed the civic militia.¹⁶ Although the urban ordinances stipulated that the burgomasters of Mechelen formally supervised the board of the shooting guilds, a legal file from 1642 shows that it was often difficult to impose this formal supervision in practice.¹⁷ It seems that the formal control of the urban authorities was more a matter of checks and balances than a direct hierarchical relation. This does not mean that the urban aldermen were powerless because they had the right to appoint the chiefs of the shooting guilds just as the urban government in Rotterdam appointed the higher officers of the civic militia from their own ranks (Unger 1892: 1, lv). These higher officers were not in charge of the administration of the guilds, but they were involved in important decisions (Van Melckebeke 1874: 9–10).

The names of 50 deans of the Mechelen shooting guilds and the names of 54 lower officers of the Rotterdam civic militia were used to calculate the mutation rates of the boards of these organizations.¹⁸ An independent samples t-test shows that the average term of an elected board member significantly differed in both cities and represents a strong effect. The average was 1.1 in Mechelen while this amounted to 2.3 in Rotterdam.¹⁹ The low mutation rate in Mechelen points at a more democratic political culture in the Spanish Netherlands, although the mutation rate was also quite low in Rotterdam. The social profiles of the deans and officers offer further information about the democratic character of these organisations. Table 4 shows that the richest quarter of the population dominated these offices in both cities. The data point at small differences between the social background of the deans and officers

15. CAM, no. E-S-I-2, ordinances January 9, 1609, October 26, 1619, and October 1, 1625; City Archives Antwerp, Pk. No. 919, undated ordinance 1623 on the civic militia.

16. CAM, no. E-S-I-1, f° 30r°; Van Melckebeke 1874: 10.

17. CAM, Series VI, no. 64/1.

18. This sample only contains the names of elected officers because it does not make sense to include the chiefs that were appointed by the urban authorities for a period of several years. The sample for Rotterdam contains the names of the captains and lieutenants of the civic militia between 1665 and 1669. The data for Mechelen concern the period from 1634 until 1654. This is a longer period because data are only available for a limited number of years and for three shooting guilds (Saint Sebastian, Saint George, and Saint Christopher). The data were derived from the following sources: CAM, no. E-S-I-1, f° 425r°–427r°; Unger 1892; Van Melckebeke 1874: 50–55; 1879: 40–42.

19. The results of this t-test are: $t(64) = -6.3$; $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.62$.

TABLE 4. *Social position of the deans and officers of the civic militia in Mechelen (1634–1654) and Rotterdam (1660–1669)*

	<i>Mechelen</i>		<i>Rotterdam</i>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Quartile 1	1	4%	1	2%
Quartile 2	4	15%	2	4%
Quartile 3	2	7%	12	24%
Quartile 4	20	74%	35	70%
Total	27	100%	50	100%

Sources: CAM, no. E-S-I-1, f° 425r°-427r°, CAM, no. K-S-V-1-2; MAR, no. 1.01-4166; Van Melckebeke 1874: 50–55; 1879: 40–42; Unger 1892.

Chi-square (3) = 5.52; $p = 0.14$.

in both cities, but the share of the richest and the lowest quartile are similar. The chi-square proves that the differences in the second and the third quartile are not big enough to be statistically significant.²⁰

The shooting guilds, just like craft guilds, submitted petitions to the urban authorities. Quantitative data about the number of petitions are not available, but the civic militia regularly communicated with the urban government about their demands. The civic guards in the Dutch Republic were, for instance, important political pressure groups during the turbulent years at the end of the eighteenth century (Prak 1999: 71, 265). Less is known about the political role of the civic militia in the Spanish Netherlands, but several authors have pointed at petitions submitted by the shooting guilds (Kint 1996: 168–69; Verhoeven 2008: 24). Unfortunately, it is impossible to evaluate the communication between shooting guilds and urban authorities in this city because these kinds of sources are not available. However, it is possible to look at the move from board members of the shooting guilds to the bench aldermen.²¹ Our sample of deans of the Mechelen shooting guilds shows that 9 percent of these board members moved later to the bench of aldermen, the nonelected chiefs not included. This figure is higher in Rotterdam. In this city 20 percent of the lower officers moved from the civic militia to the urban magistrate (Unger 1892).

Enlightenment Sociability and Deliberative Civil Society

Enlightenment sociability is the last form of civil society that will be discussed in this contribution. These associations are generally seen as a complete break with the past

20. The social position of the deans and officers is based upon CAM, no. K-S-V-1-2; MAR, no. 1.01-4166.

21. CAM, no. E-S-I-1, f° 425r°-427r°; Van den Eynde 1859; Van Melckebeke 1874: 50–55; 1879: 40–42.

and most authors regard them as the oldest forms of civil society. It is for this reason obvious that Enlightenment sociability met all conditions of classic definitions of civil society. (1) Face-to-face relations were an essential feature of these social relations, which took place in new social venues such as salons, operas, literary associations, and coffeehouses (van Horn Melton 2001: 1–2, 12–13, 162). (2) The voluntary nature of these social relations was also an essential characteristic. Several authors have stressed that shared interests—and a commercial culture driven by consumer preferences—formed the essence of the new sociability of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (van Horn Melton 2001: 160–91, 244–47; Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 1–2). (3) The participants in this new sociability did not only share a certain political conviction or cultural taste, but they also aimed at a common good: civilization. This moral project was the defense of a particular culture—bourgeois culture—which was legitimized by an Enlightenment discourse of moral edification and progress (Finlay 2006: 27–49; Hoffmann 2006: 2–3, 16, 26–28; Mah 2000: 156–63).

Enlightenment sociability is usually seen as the starting point of deliberative democracy. This implies a civil society with an emphasis on discussions between citizens, which are able to influence the policies of political institutions (Habermas 2006: 412–13). Historians, in the wake of Habermas, usually refer to the discussions about political events in coffeehouses, salons, debating societies, and opera houses, but they also point at the discussions about art and taste in the same social venues (van Horn Melton 2001: 2–9; Wilson and Yachnin 2010: 1–2). Recent studies have challenged the unique position of this Enlightenment sociability. Several historians point at earlier forms of civil societies and public spheres during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while others look at the resemblances between corporatism and Enlightenment sociability (Garrioch 2009: 313–26; Lake and Pincus 2006: 270–92; Vermij 1999: 24–46). Indeed, one can question the novelty of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social venues. Following Habermas, most authors stress the importance of coffeehouses and the like, but other social settings also offered plenty of opportunities to discuss the matter of the day. Rhetoricians, for instance, discussed all kinds of social conditions at their meetings and in their plays (Bloemendal and van Dixhoorn 2010: 22–26; Van Bruaene 2008: 115–18). Taverns were another social context that facilitated such discussions. It is certainly no coincidence that an eighteenth-century pamphlet, published in Mechelen, did not situate the political discussions about the French Revolution in a coffeehouse, but in a traditional tavern (Anonymus 1793: 4).

A comparison of Enlightenment sociability in Mechelen and Rotterdam confirms once more that both cities were part of different regions with distinct cultural traditions. Indeed, Enlightenment sociability hardly developed in the Spanish Netherlands before the nineteenth century, while such associations already appeared in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century (Frijhoff and Spies 2000: 216–25). It is illustrative that Amsterdam had more than 30 coffeehouses around 1700 while a major city in the Southern Netherlands, such as Antwerp, only had five similar institutions (Kloek 2001: 117–20; Van Aert 2009: 35). A middle-sized town such as Mechelen only counted one coffeehouse at the end of the eighteenth

century.²² Not only were coffeehouses omnipresent in the Dutch Republic, historical research has shown that no European region had more Enlightenment associations than the Dutch Republic (Kloek 2001, 113–17). The situation was totally different in the Southern Netherlands where such organizations were extremely rare. Reading clubs were, for instance, a curiosity in the southern part of the Low Countries, while these associations were very popular in the Dutch Republic at the end of the eighteenth century. Several cities in the Southern Netherlands had a literary club during the second half of the eighteenth century, but popular reading clubs were quite exceptional and only existed in five cities (Delsaedt 2004: 91–103; Van Uytven 1992: 60). In Mechelen, the first literary society only appears in 1785, while similar organizations already existed a century earlier in Rotterdam (Installé et al. 1991: 208–9; van der Schoor 1999: 338–39). Historians counted at least 300 reading clubs in the Dutch Republic at the end of the eighteenth century (Kloek 2001: 116).

This large number of reading clubs fits in the publishing culture of the Dutch Republic. The Northern Netherlands became the leading center of the printing press in early modern Europe (Baeten and Van Zanden 2008: 220). The principal role of the Dutch publishers was not only reflected in the number of printed books, but also in the innovative and progressive ideas published in these books (Israel 2002: 118, 149, 308). The contrast between the Southern and Northern Netherlands is quite well expressed by the spread of an edition of the *Encyclopédie* published by the Société typographique de Neuchâtel. Only a few copies were sold in the Low Countries, but the reasons for this limited number of sales were diverse in the northern and the southern part. While the Dutch publishers had already printed their own version of the *Encyclopédie*, their colleagues in the Southern Netherlands were only interested in religious works according to the representative of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel. Brussels was the only exception to this pattern (Darnton 1979: 310). However, the role of the printing press should not be exaggerated. The central, provincial, and local authorities in the Dutch Republic censored books with revolutionary or unconventional political and religious thoughts. The government did not tolerate books, which could cause any kind of domestic discussions (Groenveld 1987: 80–81). A similar policy characterized the meetings of the Estates-General in The Hague. The political contents of these gatherings only reached the public by accident because the members of the assembly had to pledge an oath of secrecy. Most journals contained some details about the number of representatives and the public rituals, but no information was given about actual political debates. Political meetings were closed for the public in the Dutch Republic, just as in other states in early modern Europe (Koopmans 2005: 392–95).

A comparison between the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic can be very brief because the first forms of Enlightenment sociability gradually appeared in Mechelen during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Most new associations were only founded after 1800 (Installé et al. 1991). Jori Zijlmans showed that informal discussion clubs already existed in Rotterdam since the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Three of these associations will be discussed in the following section,

22. CAM, census of 1796.

namely the theological discussion club around David Guilbertus, the Erasmian circle around bookseller Frans van Hoogstraten, and the Quakers' company "The Lantern" organized by Benjamin Furlly. These three associations talked about more or less deviant ideas in the context of an informal circle of friends. Enlightenment thinking did not influence the meetings around David Guilbertus, but the two other organizations discussed secular subjects, such as the radical ideas of Baruch Spinoza.²³ The nature of their ideas shows that their meetings were free of political control. The size of these informal associations was rather small, each of them had 20 to 25 members who did not attend all meetings. These informal circles did not have a clubhouse, such as craft guilds and civic militia, but they met in the residence of the central figure of the association (Zijlmans 1999). It is not possible to calculate mutation rates of the members of the board because these informal organizations lacked a hierarchical structure.²⁴

The names of 64 members of these Rotterdam associations are known. Only ten of these names were found in the taxation list of 1665. This is a limited number, but these data can give an indication of the social position of these people. It is clear that these new associations recruited in the higher social strata. Half of the identified persons belonged to the richest quarter of the Rotterdam population. None of them was situated in the lowest quartile of the taxpayers.²⁵ This is hardly a surprise because most studies stress the elite character of the new seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sociability (Hoffmann 2006: 17; van Horn Melton 2001: 11–12). The Rotterdam associations also withdrew from public life and retired in the privacy of domestic houses. The ideas that circulated in these societies were certainly of importance for the rise of modern democracy, but the direct political impact of their members was rather limited. Only 3 of the 64 members moved from associational life to the bench of aldermen; one person came from the urban authorities to associational life. This means that only 5 percent of the members migrated from civil society to political power (Zijlmans 1999: 198–201), which is a small proportion compared to the craft guilds and civic guards in Rotterdam. Earlier forms of civil society were better schools for democracy compared to these Enlightenment associations.

Conclusion

Our comparison between the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands took two diverging political systems as starting point: the Dutch Republic and the monarchical Spanish Netherlands. In addition to this, we compared different forms of civil societies. The empirical results were brought together in [table 5](#). Firstly, these data tell something about the differences between the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Nether-

23. See about the crucial role of Spinoza in the radical Enlightenment: Israel 2002: 157–341.

24. All information is based upon the description of informal circles of friends by Jori Zijlmans, but some of our interpretations differ from these in her book. The names of the members of these circles can be found in Zijlmans 1999: 71, 178, 233, 252, 267.

25. This social information is derived from: MAR, no. 1.01-4166.

TABLE 5. *Civil societies in Mechelen and Rotterdam during the seventeenth century*

	<i>Mechelen</i>			<i>Rotterdam</i>		
	<i>Mutation Rate</i>	<i>Social Openness</i>	<i>Political Influence</i>	<i>Mutation Rate</i>	<i>Social Openness</i>	<i>Political Influence</i>
Craft guilds	2.2**	45	11%	1.1**	1.2	1%
Civic militia	1.0**	18.5	9%	2.3**	35	20%
Enlightenment sociability	–	–	–	–	50	4%
Total	1.8**	55	10%	1.5**	8	6%

Sources: See tables 1–4.

Note: Mutation rate = average number of mandates in board; Social openness = quartile 4/quartile 1; Political influence = percentage from civil society to urban government.

** $p < 0.01$.

lands. The figures calculated on all data in the bottom row of the table show that the Rotterdam civil society was characterized by a lower mutation rate and that the boards of these associations were more open to all social layers. However, the differences in social openness are not statistically significant. The civil society in Mechelen was a better school of democracy and delivered more people for the urban government. It is important to note that this does not imply that civil society in Mechelen was dominated by the local government because these figures only concluded the people that moved from different types of civil society to the urban bench of aldermen, and not the other way around. Only a limited number of aldermen became board members in civil society organizations. These differences between Mechelen and Rotterdam hold ground if we correct the figures for the persons that moved from the bench of aldermen to the administration of civil society organizations.²⁶ In sum, the influence of a republican form of government—closely associated with ideas about civil society—and the early presence of Enlightenment sociability in the Dutch Republic did not guarantee the rise of strong civil societies with considerable political impact.

A second comparison concerned the different types of civil society. On a theoretical level, this contribution tried to refine the notion civil society by distinguishing three forms of civil society. Late medieval craft guilds can be seen as liberal civil societies that emphasized the distinction between insiders and outsiders based on specific rights. The early modern civic militia arose out of medieval corporations, but their ideology was based upon republican values of participation and inclusion. The Enlightenment sociability is considered as a third type of civil society. This form of civil society usually dominates the discussions in the historiography and is identified as the civil society par excellence. It is remarkable that the political influence of this form of civil society was rather limited. Of course, these ideal types simplify

26. This was the case for two people in Rotterdam and four in Mechelen. This results in an 8 percent rate of board members that moved to the urban government in Mechelen and 5 percent in Mechelen.

historical reality because most organizations manifested characteristics of different types of civil societies. However, these ideal types help us to explore the different nature of civil society organizations and their diverse ideologies. It becomes clear that European civil society and its democratic culture was not only the result of the rise of Enlightenment associations, but also it was based upon the combination of different forms of civil society that had their roots in the late medieval and early modern era. It seems that modern civil societies in the Northern and Southern Low Countries were the result of a cumulative development of three types of civil societies. Contrary to Habermas, we believe that our case studies show that the development of Enlightenment deliberative civil societies does not suffice to get modern open democracies because these associations lacked social openness and crucial civic rights.

The data in [table 5](#) show that the democratic practices in civil societies were quite diverse and depended on the societal context. The absence of craft guilds with political influence was compensated by the civic militia in Holland and vice versa. It also becomes clear that civil societies were less influential when they acted as social inclusive schools of democracy. The political powerful craft guilds in Mechelen were, for instance, less democratic than the less influential civic militia in the same city. The situation was totally different in Rotterdam. In this town the craft guilds had a very limited impact on local politics, but their organization was more democratic than the political influential civic militias in the Dutch Republic. There seems to be a trade-off between the democratic practices inside civil societies and the political influence of these organizations. In the end, modern democracy could only emerge through a combination of different forms of civil society, although the concrete historical developments could differ in various regions.

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