

European
Elections monitor

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The party of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte and that of populist Geert Wilders running neck and neck just one month before the general elections in the Netherlands.

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Analysis

On 15th March 12.9 million Dutch will be called to renew the 150 members of the lower house of Parliament (Tweede Kamer). These elections will precede the presidential and general elections in France and the German general election by a few weeks. A snap parliamentary election might also be organised in Italy in the course of this year. These four Member States are facing the threat of the rise of the populist right and a weakening on the left. In the Netherlands the leading left party is only ranking fifth in the polls right now.

According to the latter young people are voting less and less for the left. Ten years ago 45% of them voted for one of the three left wing parties, but last year only 16% did so. Moreover some former social-democratic voters on the left, and notably those of Moroccan or Turkish descent, seem to be prepared to support new parties such as Denk, founded in 2015 by two former Labour MPs Tunahan Kuzu and Selçuk Öztürk, who are defending minority rights.

At present the Netherlands are governed by a coalition bringing together the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the Labour Party (PvdA) led by Lodewijk Asscher. This coalition, which has been in office since 2002, recently lost its majority in parliament when MP Jacques Monasch (PvdA), who is accusing former Labour leader, Diederik Samsom of having neglected the social-democratic ideals, decided to leave the party.

The kingdom's political landscape is becoming increasingly unstable. The three main Dutch parties rally 44% of the vote according to the Peilingwiojzer. Just over twenty years ago they rallied 81.8% of the vote (1989). Voters in the Netherlands, like a majority of Europeans, are increasingly mistrustful of their political personalities and more widely of their country's institutions.

New political parties appeared in the 1960's which disrupted the political landscape and led to a new distribution of the vote. In the 1990's the economic crisis, which affected the Welfare-State quite severely as it blurred the dividing lines between the parties,

increased the fragmentation of the vote in the Netherlands even more. Although the two blocks on the left and the right still rallied an equivalent number of voters, there were more and more people who transferred from one to another or changed party within the same camp. Finally, the emergence of the populist parties in the 2000's – or rather new political personalities of whom Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered just before the general elections of 2002, was a forerunner – has further weakened Dutch voter loyalty towards their political parties.

The first consequence of this fragmentation has been the absence of any dominant party, either on the right or the left, which makes the formation of a strong, coherent government coalition extremely difficult. Until the 1990's governments comprised two parties. This figure has risen to three over the last twenty years. Political analysts believe that because of the extreme fragmentation of the political arena, the Netherlands will be governed after the election on 15th March by a wide coalition rallying four or five parties. This might comprise the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy

(VVD), Democrats 66 (D66), Christian Democratic Appel (CDA), the Labour Party (PvdA) and a “small party” or even the VVD, D66, 50+ and a “small” party.

Rem Korteweg, a researcher at the Centre of European Reform sees the CDA and D66 as the kingmakers in this upcoming general election.

In all 28 parties will be taking part in the election on 15th March. Moreover 75,000 of the 500,000 Dutch living abroad have registered to take part in the election. 48,000 of them registered last time on 12th September 2012, and 36,000 effectively voted.

The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Freedom Party (PVV) are running neck and neck in the polls. The most recent survey by Peilingwijzer¹ dated 19th February – a barometer created by political expert Tom Louwse of the political science institute at the University of Leiden, established on a weighted base of several institutions: I&O research, Ipsos, peil.nl, de stemming/Een Vandag and TNS Nipo, forecasts Mark Rutte’s VVD with 16% and Geert Wilders PVV with 17% of the vote.

Over the last few weeks the former has reduced the gap that separated it from the latter. “*The PVV was carried along by the election of Donald Trump but our poll shows that 25% of the electorate reacted negatively to the first steps taken by the American president,*” indicated the pollster Maurice de Hond. Apart from from the VVD and the PVV, 9 other parties are due to win seats on 15th March: D66 11%, the Green Left (GL) 10%, the CDA 11%, the Labour Party (PvdA) 8%, le Parti socialiste (SP) 8%, 50+ 6%, the Christian Union (CU) 4%, the Animal Party (PvdD) 3% and the Political Reform Party (SGP) 2%.

Will Geert Wilder’s Freedom Party (PVV) become the country’s leading party?

According to the polls the Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders might become the country’s leading party on 15th March. However, for the first time in the Netherlands, all of the traditional parties are refusing to take office with it. Prime Minister Mark Rutte maintains that it is impossible to govern with the PVV and recalls that the latter caused the collapse of his government

in April 2012, when it withdrew its support during the negotiations over vital reform to reduce the country’s budgetary deficit.

The head of government has qualified the PVV as a left wing party and compares it to the Socialist Party (SP), a populist movement led by Emile Roemer.

Hence to govern, the PVV would have to win the absolute majority, which no party has ever managed to do in the Netherlands. “*It is possible that Geert Wilders’ party will become the biggest party in the Netherlands but I do not think that Geert Wilders will enter government because in the Hague, no one wants to work with him,*” indicated Andre Krouwel, a political expert from the Free University of Amsterdam.

It seems clear however that Geert Wilders has no ambition to govern. As Philip van Praag, a professor of political science says Geert Wilders is “*an eternal leader of the opposition, always against the system,*” and who is only interested in provocation. He showed this quite clearly in April 2012 when he preferred isolation to cooperation with Mark Rutte’s government, which he had supported however.

And yet a first place for the PVV in the general elections on 15th March would comprise a resounding victory for the populist leader. He also maintains that it would be impossible to ignore his party’s result, otherwise the next government “*would collapse within the year,*” which in his opinion would cause revolt on the part of the population. “*You cannot ignore 2.5 million voters after a democratic election,*” declared Geert Wilders. Victory for the PVV might also encourage populism elsewhere in Europe.

The PVV has mainly positioned itself in three areas: Islam, migratory policy and the European Union. Geert Wilders wants to facilitate the organisation of a referendum (imperative) on the Netherlands exit of the Union, a project for which he would need to achieve the agreement of two thirds of the States General, ie the two houses in the Dutch parliament.

The PVV is asking for the closure of the mosques, Islamic schools and centres that are hosting refugees, the banning of the Coran and the veil in the public space and the halt to all immigration from Muslim countries. He is suggesting the introduction of a limited residence permit. The party also supports greater investment in the healthcare system and retirement at 65. Its programme is entitled “*The Netherlands for Us*”.

1. <http://peilingwijzer.tomlouwse.nl/>

On 9th December Geert Wilders was found guilty of offending a group and encouraging discrimination. *"Do you want more and fewer Moroccans in your town and in the Netherlands?"* asked the populist leader during a meeting. *"Fewer, fewer, fewer!"* answered the people attending the meeting. *"We are going to take care of it,"* Geert Wilders then said. These declarations led to 6500 complaints on the part of citizens and associations.

The judges deemed that the populist leader had isolated a group of citizens without making any distinctions and that his declarations might be deemed as an affront to the dignity of this group of people, and that it might have encouraged other people to discriminate against people of Moroccan origin. The Netherlands has a population of 380,000 Moroccans, according to data released by the Central Statistics Office. However Mr Wilders was cleared of the count of encouraging hatred. Likewise, Geert Wilders was not sentenced, whilst the Prosecution had recommended the payment of a fine of 5000 €.

It was the first time that Geert Wilders was convicted because of his declarations. He had already appeared in court because of incitement to hatred in 2011 but was acquitted, since the judges deemed that his criticism targeted Islam and not an ethnic group.

Geert Wilders did not attend his trial, which he qualified as political. He declared that it was a violation of the freedom of expression. *"It is my right and duty as a politician to speak of our country's problems,"* he stressed adding that an attempt was being made to silence him as the elections approached, but that he would never be quiet and that he was only saying what millions of citizens were thinking. *"If you find me guilty it is half of the Netherlands that you find guilty,"* he declared.

His position as a martyr of free speech and a victim of orthodox thinking might very well have strengthened his popularity: his ratings have indeed soared in the polls. *"It has been a gift from heaven to him as the general elections draw closer. If he is convicted he might position himself as a victim of the government and of the system,"* indicated André Krouwel prior to the trial.

Finally we should point out that Geert Wilders was elected man of the year 2016 in a TV programme on NPO12. He won 26% of the vote of 40,000 television viewers. This

election has been organised yearly since 2004. Geert Wilders has won four times already (in 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2016).

Which coalition to govern the Netherlands?

Outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte is highlighting his economic results. The unemployment rate totals 5.4%, and is at its lowest in over the five years. 588,000 people were looking for a job at the end of 2015, there were more than 100,000 less at the end of 2016 (482,000), which was the biggest decrease in over ten years. Consumer confidence is also at its highest in nine years and the budgetary deficit decreased sharply during the last legislature.

However, there are three major issues still to settle: the retirement system, which is suffering due to weak interest rates, the flexibilization of the labour market (the Netherlands has one of the greatest number of flexible workers in the EU and the Labour and Safety Law – which was supposed to increase employment flexibility, but has however contributed to the restriction however of labour flexibility) and the law on taxation (this has been lightened but has not been reformed to the extent that was originally promised).

Recently the Prime Minister apologised for the electoral promises he made in 2012, and that he unfortunately has not succeeded in keeping, like for example the reduction of contributions made by employees, the refusal to provide Greece with financial support and the reform of mortgage interest rates.

Mark Rutte, who is standing as the candidate of the *status quo*, hopes that his party, the VVD will succeed in pulling ahead of the PVV on 15th March and hopes to win 40 seats in parliament.

On 26th January last the head of government published an Open Letter in several daily newspapers to the Dutch population in which he spoke of *"those who refuse to adapt, who choose to criticise our customs and who reject our values."* He mentioned asocial people who still think they have a priority, who throw their waste into the street and who spit on train or tram drivers. He criticised *"those who attack homosexuals, who whistle at girls in mini-skirts and who treat the Dutch as racists,"* pointing to the increasing discomfort people of good will

feel about foreigners who threaten freedom, whilst they came to the Netherlands to find just that.

On 23rd January an interview in the *Algemeen Dagblad*, Mark Rutte asked those who did not like living in the Netherlands to leave. Last summer he even suggested that young people of Turkish origin who did not accept Dutch values “to get out”.

“The solution does not lie in putting everyone in the same bag, to insult or throw whole groups out of the country,” wrote Mark Rutte, who asked *“those who refuse to adapt and who criticise Dutch values to behave normally or to leave the country.”*

It is not sure however that this bid by the outgoing Prime Minister to address the Dutch who are ready to vote for the PVV was very effective, since voters always prefer the original to the copy. It does confirm however that Mark Rutte sees Geert Wilders as his true rival.

“This letter is a pale imitation of the populist,” declared Lodewijk Asscher, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the PvdA. *“Mark sows, Geert will reap”* tweeted the populist leader, who qualified the head of government as *“a man of open borders, of the asylum tidal wave, of mass immigration and of Islamisation, of cheating lies.”* Geert Wilders also likes to repeat that if Mark Rutte wants to govern without him he will have to find support in the centre but also on the left and that he will therefore be incapable of transforming the “Get out” that he addressed to a group of young people of Turkish origin last summer, into acts.

The Dutch Political System

The States General is a bicameral parliament. The First Chamber (*Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal*), the Senate comprises 75 members, elected every four years by indirect suffrage by the members of the assemblies of the kingdom’s 12 provincial States. The Second Chamber (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*), the Chamber of the States General, comprises 150 MPs elected every four years within 20 constituencies according to a fully proportional party list system (no electoral threshold), which fosters the representation of a greater number of parties.

Seats are distributed nationally between the lists that win at least 0.67% of the vote cast nationally. The number

of votes of each list is divided by the national quota, which is achieved by dividing the number of valid votes taken nationally by the number of seats available, ie 150. The seats that are not taken after this first division are attributed according to the d’Hondt system of the highest average.

Any party that wants to present a candidate in the general election has to win a minimum of 30 declarations of support on the part of voters in each of the 20 constituencies, ie a total of 570 signatures and if the party is not represented in the Tweede Kammer, a deposit of 11, 250€ has to be paid – and which is reimbursed if the party wins at least 75% of the national quota.

11 parties entered parliament after the last general elections of 2012:

- The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a liberal party created in 1948, led by outgoing Prime Minister, has 41 seats;
- The Labour Party (PvdA), founded in 1946, which originated in a union movement, is a member of the outgoing government. Led by Lodewijk Asscher, it has 38 MPs;
- The Freedom Party (PVV), a right-wing populist party created in 2002 by Geert Wilders, has 15 seats;
- The Socialist Party (SP), a far left party led by Emile Roemer, has 15 seats ;
- Christian Democratic Appel (CDA), a centre-right party created in 1980 after the merger of three parties: the Catholic People’s Party (KVP), the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) and the Historic Christian Union (CHU). Led by Sybrand van Haersma Buma, it won 13 MPs;
- Democrats 66 (D66) rallies the reforming liberals of the centre left. Led by Alexander Pechtold, it has 12 seats;
- The Christian Union (CU), created in 2000 after the merger of the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV), led by Gert-Jan Segers, it has five seats;

- The Green Left (GL), an ecologist party led by Jesse Klaver, founded in 1989, has 4 seats;
- The Animals Party (PvdD), founded in 2002, led by Marianne Thieme, it has 2 seats;
- The Political Reformed Party (SGP), founded in 1918, led by Kees van der Staaij, rallies the orthodox Protestant electorate (Calvinist of strict obedience). It has three seats;
- 50+, a party founded in 2009 to defend the interests of pensioners, led by Henk Krol, it has 2 seats.

Reminder of the General Election Results in the Netherlands – 12th September 2012

Turnout : 74,6%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	2 504 948	26,60	41
Labour Party (PvdA)	2 340 750	24.80	38
Freedom Party (PVV)	950 263	10.10	15
Socialist Party (SP)	909 853	9.70	15
Christian Democratic Appel (CDA)	801 620	8.50	13
Democrats 66 (D66)	757 091	8	12
Christian Union (CU)	294 586	3.10	5
Green Left (GL)	219 896	2.30	4
Political Reform Party(SGP)	196 780	2.10	3
Animals Party (PvdD)	182 162	1.90	2
50+	177 631	1.90	2
Others	88 665	0.80	0

Source : <http://www.electionresources.org/nl/house.php?election=2012>

Results

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte easily pulls ahead in the general elections in the Netherlands

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the liberal movement led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte easily drew ahead in the general elections that took place on 15th March in the Netherlands. The VVD won 21.3% of the vote and took 33 of the 150 seats available in the Second Chamber (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*), in other words 8 less than in the previous elections on 12th September 2012).

In spite of the victory by the head of government's party, the outgoing government coalition suffered defeat, notably due to the collapse of the its other member, the social democrats of the Labour Party (PvdA), led by Lodewijk Asscher, which won 5.7% of the vote and 9 seats (-29). "A dramatic loss" stressed the latter.

The slow death of social democracy is a strong trend across all of Europe.

Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) did not do as well as it might have hoped and did not succeed in making a spectacular breakthrough although its leader presented the result achieved by his party (13.1% of the vote and 20 seats, + 5) as a victory. "The Freedom Party is not a Trump style revolutionary force. Even though its result is not insignificant, people have remained on the side of sensible politicians," indicated Geerten Waling, a researcher in political history at the University of Leiden. "Geert Wilders' true victory lies in the fact that other parties modelled themselves on his discourse," analyses Stefan de Vries, the correspondent in France for the channel RTL4.

The other lesson to be learnt from this general election is the ground won by the pro-European parties: Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), a centre-right party led by Sybrand van Haersma Buma, won 12.5% of the vote and 19 seats (+ 6); Democrats 66 (D66), led by Alex-

ander Pechtold, won 12% of the vote and 19 seats (+ 7) and finally the Green Left (GL), a movement which has become the leading movement on the government left and is well positioned in terms of forming the future government. The ecologists won 8.9% of the vote and won 14 seats (+ 10).

In all thirteen parties will be represented in the next parliament, i.e. two more than in the previous legislature. "The Netherlands have a multi and extremely diversified party tradition: religious, secular, Christian, Protestant, left, right. But the thing that has changed over the last two decades is that the dominant parties have lost a great deal of influence and are now secondary movements. The political landscape is much more fragmented," analyses Eddy Habben Jansen, Director of Prodemos, a Dutch non-profit organisation providing information to citizens on democracy.

The Socialist Party (SP) led by Emile Roemer won 9.2% of the vote and also 14 seats (- 1). The Christian Union (CU), led by Gert-Jan Segers, won 3.4% of the vote and 5 seats (=) ; the Animals Party (PvdD), led by Marianne Thieme, 3.1% of the vote and 5 seats (+ 3); 50PLUS, a party created to defend the interests of the retired and led by Henk Krol, 3.1% of the vote and 4 seats (+ 2); The Political Reformed Party (SGP), led by Kees van der Staaij, 2.1% of the vote and 3 seats (=). Finally two new parties will be making their debut in the Tweede Kamer: Denk, a party founded in 2015 by two former Labour MPs Tunahan Kuzu and Selçuk Öztürk, who defend the rights of the minorities, won 2% of the vote and three MPs and the Forum

for Democracy (FvD) led by Eurosceptic Thierry Baudet which won 1.8% of the vote and 2 seats. Eight Dutch citizens in ten turned out to vote. The turnout totalled 80.4% i.e. 5.8 points more than in the previous general elections on 12th September 2012.

The Results of the General Elections of 15th March 2017 in the Netherlands

Turnout: 80.4%

Political Parties	% of the votes won	Number of seats won
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	21.30	33
Freedom Party (PVV)	13.10	20
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	12.50	19
Democrats 66 (D66)	12	19
Socialist Party (SP)	9.20	14
Green Left (GL)	8.90	14
Labour Party (PvdA)	5.70	9
Christian Union (CU)	3.40	5
Animals Party (PvdD)	3.10	5
50PLUS	3.10	4
Political Reformed Party (SGP)	2.10	3
Denk	2	3
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	1.80	2
Others	1.80	0

Source : <https://lfverkiezingen.appspot.com/nos/widget/main.html>

"Our message to the Netherlands, the conversations we have had with the electorate about how we shall maintain our goals for the next few years so that the country remains stable, safe and prosperous, this message was heard. The country gave us this result and we are particularly grateful to it. But it is also an evening for all of Europe, I have spoken with quite a few of my European counterparts. It is also an evening when the Netherlands, after the Brexit, after the American elections, brought dubious populism to a halt. Now it is especially important that over the next few weeks we come together to form a stable government so that this country can be led sensibly for the next four years. I will do everything I can," declared Mark Rutte.

Over the last few days of the electoral campaign the outgoing Prime Minister positioned himself as the defender of his country and of its values as he prevented

the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister, Mevlüt Cavusoglu, from entering the Netherlands. The latter hoped to take part in a rally in the Netherlands organised in support of his president of the Republic Recep Tayyip Erdogan just weeks before the referendum organised by the latter in Turkey (16th April next). Moreover another Turkish minister, who entered the country via Germany was taken back to the border. This undeniably played in favour of the VVD.

The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (European People's Party, EPP) congratulated Mark Rutte on his victory: "a vote for Europe, a vote against the extremists," tweeted his spokesperson, Margaritis Schinas.

In all likelihood Mark Rutte will be appointed for his third term as head of government. The support of at

General election in the Netherlands 15th March 2017

least three other political parties will be necessary for him to achieve a majority in Parliament (76 out of 150). Negotiations might therefore be long and take several weeks, even months.

The leader of the Second Chamber, Khadija Arib (PvdA), will now meet with the leaders of the different parties to appoint an "explorer" who is traditionally a representative of the biggest party, who will assess which coalition has the greatest chances of succeeding. On his/her advice the new MPs will appoint the "informers", i.e. the members of the parties in question, who together will draft a government project and put forward a "government maker" in the Second Chamber. Generally this person then becomes Prime Minister of the new government.

The Christian Democratic Appeal and the Democrats66 are natural partners for the liberals in the VVD but another party will undoubtedly be required to achieve an absolute majority in the Second Chamber which is set at 76 seats. This might be the Christian Union, the Political Reformed Party or the Green Left.

"If possible I would like to co-govern, but if that does not work, we shall support the government when necessary regarding questions that are dear to us," declared Geert Wilders, who indicated that he would be a force of *"ferocious opposition"* if he did not enter government.

We should remember that all of the Dutch parties have ruled out collaborating with him.

"We have seen, I believe, in the last part of the campaign that many parties have tried to adopt some of our positions even though they will not implement them," stressed Geert Wilders. *"I believe that our influence has become significant, maybe more important than when we were in power as a silent partner in the government coalition. But again Mr Rutte has not got rid of me and with even more people we shall put up tough opposition against the government and make every single day complicated,"* he added.

Aged 50, Mark Rutte is a history graduate. He started his professional career with Unilever where he took care of Human Resources before becoming Secretary of State for Employment and Social Security in 2002 in the government led by Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA). In 2004, he was appointed Secretary of State for Vocational Training and Higher Education. In 2006 he took the leadership of the VVD which he led to victory in the general elections on 9th June 2010. Four months later Mark Rutte became the first leader of a liberal government of the Netherlands since 1913. He was re-appointed to this post after the general elections on 12th September 2012. The government coalition that he then formed with the Labour Party was the first since 2002 to have served for the entire length of the legislature.

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