

The Dutch elections and 'populism'

Fleur de Beaufort and Patrick van Schie interpret the results of the Dutch elections, and consider the growth in the support for the alternative 'populist' parties

The background to the elections in the Netherlands

In March 2021 the scheduled elections were held for the Second Chamber, which is the more important of the two chambers comprising the Dutch parliament. As many as 37 parties sought a seat in the new Second Chamber. The elections were remarkable for various reasons and the run-up to them proceeded more messily than ever before.

On the left, where three political parties – the Partij van de Arbeid [Labour Party] (PvdA), GroenLinks [Green-Left Party], and the Socialistische Partij [Socialist Party] have been talking in vain about combining their forces for many years now, they again beat about the bush as is customary in relation to the contentious issue of ‘greater cooperation’. On the right, conflicts ensued in the weeks preceding the elections, which resulted in splits and the birth of new competitors.

In the meantime, the existing government coalition of four centre-right and centre-left parties (the third cabinet of Prime Minister Mark Rutte) fell on 15 January in the wake of a social allowance affair which saw the Tax and Customs Administration office wrongly accuse and prosecute the recipients of childcare allowances as frauds over a lengthy period of time.

The fall of the Rutte III government was accompanied by the demise of the odd key political player and the social democrats were urgently compelled to seek a new leading candidate (because their current one had been responsible in his capacity as a minister in the previous government), while others explicitly secured the ongoing support of their rank and file, and remained.

Even the Christian democrats changed their leading candidate during the contest due to circumstances. At the outset the media sought to elicit statements from the leading candidates as to their potential coalition partners – and apparently more interestingly – their exclusion of specific parties.

In particular, this had already been the fate of the explicit right-wing flank on more than one occasion, while extreme left-wing viewpoints invariably went unchallenged.

At a more practical level, the elections also proceeded differently from what was customary. As a result of the coronavirus crisis, it had been decided to stagger the elections over three days to ensure that the polling stations would not be excessively busy.

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In addition, those voters who were older than 70 years of age had the option of casting a postal vote. Nevertheless, many failed to observe the procedure properly, with the result that even then their vote was declared invalid.

It was reported that some 65,000 votes (of the total of 10,462,677 ballots cast) were not counted for the purposes of the final outcome. In spite of what were extraordinary circumstances, the turnout of 78.7% could be termed 'average' by Dutch standards.

The results interpreted

What is of course more interesting is to examine a number of striking aspects of the election results. First of all, 17 parties managed to obtain a sufficient number of votes to secure a seat in the Second Chamber, which comprises a total of 150 seats.

This meant that a post-war record was achieved in terms of the number of parties represented. This large number is partly due to the fact that the Netherlands has one of the purest systems of proportional representation in the world with merely one seat in the Lower House (representing 0.67% of the votes cast) serving as an electoral threshold¹. As such, it is relatively simple for a new party to gain access to the Second Chamber.

Partly as a result of this, the trend toward so-called single-issue parties gaining access to parliament is persisting. In 2006 the Netherlands was the first European country in which a political party focusing on animal welfare managed to secure a seat in parliament (Partij voor de Dieren).

Since then parties which specifically focus on the elderly (50PLUS)², rural interests (BoerBurgerBeweging), the promotion of a federal Europe (VOLT), and anti-discrimination (BIJ1) have come to be represented in the Second Chamber. In a number of cases newcomers are actually breakaways from existing parties, such as JA21, whose

founders turned their backs on their existing party, Forum voor Democratie [Forum for Democracy], following internal division.

The 'traditional' major currents of social and Christian democracy have been exhibiting a decline in their number of seats for years now, a trend which is also occurring at the international level³. Between 1956 and 1998 the social democrats (PvdA) usually won in excess of 40 seats, with peaks of more than 50 and the odd decline to 37 seats.

In the last two elections they have failed to win more than nine seats. In the case of the Christian democrats (the CDA [Christian Democratic Party]), which always achieved an absolute majority between 1922 and 1967, the decline initially began somewhat earlier with a provisional trough of 29 seats in 1998.

A brief revival featuring scores in excess of 40 seats was followed by a drop to a low point of 13 seats in 2012, and the party failed to advance further than 15 seats in 2021. A survey of voters has also revealed that these traditional parties have to contend with supporters who are ageing the most⁴.

What is also remarkable is that the left has also failed to emerge as the largest presence in any single Dutch municipality. Even the last left-wing bastions, such as north-east Groningen (in the extreme north-east of the Netherlands) changed their colour to dark blue (VVD) [People's Party for Freedom and Democracy] or light green (D66 [Democrats 66] in 2021.

The Christian democrats, which were still in the majority in most municipalities in 2002, managed to retain their relative majority in several rural municipalities, especially in north-east Friesland and the Twente region (in the north and east of the country respectively), although they were forced to acknowledge the VVD as their superior in

other municipalities. The original social and Christian democrat predominance in the large cities and the north and the Catholic south respectively has dissipated in its entirety.

This is because the parties designated liberal (the VVD and D66) together obtained more than 58 seats, although the question remains as to whether this may really be celebrated as a genuine victory of liberalism. The victory of the right-wing liberal VVD is predominantly due to the persistent popularity of Prime Minister Mark Rutte as a crisis manager.

As such, the party largely centred its campaign on the person of Rutte in the absence of any explicit liberal message. In addition, Rutte headed a government which has pursued a policy that was hardly liberal in that it imposed strict restrictions on liberty during the coronavirus pandemic.

Moreover, the fall of the government in January this year seems to have failed to yield any grounds for a reduction of Rutte's popularity. While it is true that D66 is usually viewed as liberal in international terms, and profiles itself using the vague adjective, 'progressive', it has adopted few liberal positions.

For instance, this party took the initiative to introduce legislation on organ donation which conflicts with the constitutional right to the inviolability of the individual's own body, and it opts for more state intervention with persistent frequency.

In addition, during the last elections most voters turned their backs on the traditional left in favour of D66 as a 'left-wing alternative'. This too occasions doubt about the concept of a 'liberal victory'.

More to the left the traditional left-wing parties together failed to advance further than 26 seats. If one adds the minor, left-wing, single-issue parties of PvdD, VOLT and BIJ1, the left has failed to advance further than 36 seats.

As such, the left wing in the Dutch parliament is smaller than ever, not even managing a quarter of all of the seats. This outcome is even more striking in view of the allegedly 'neo-liberal' yoke that is frequently cited and under which the country is said to be suffering.

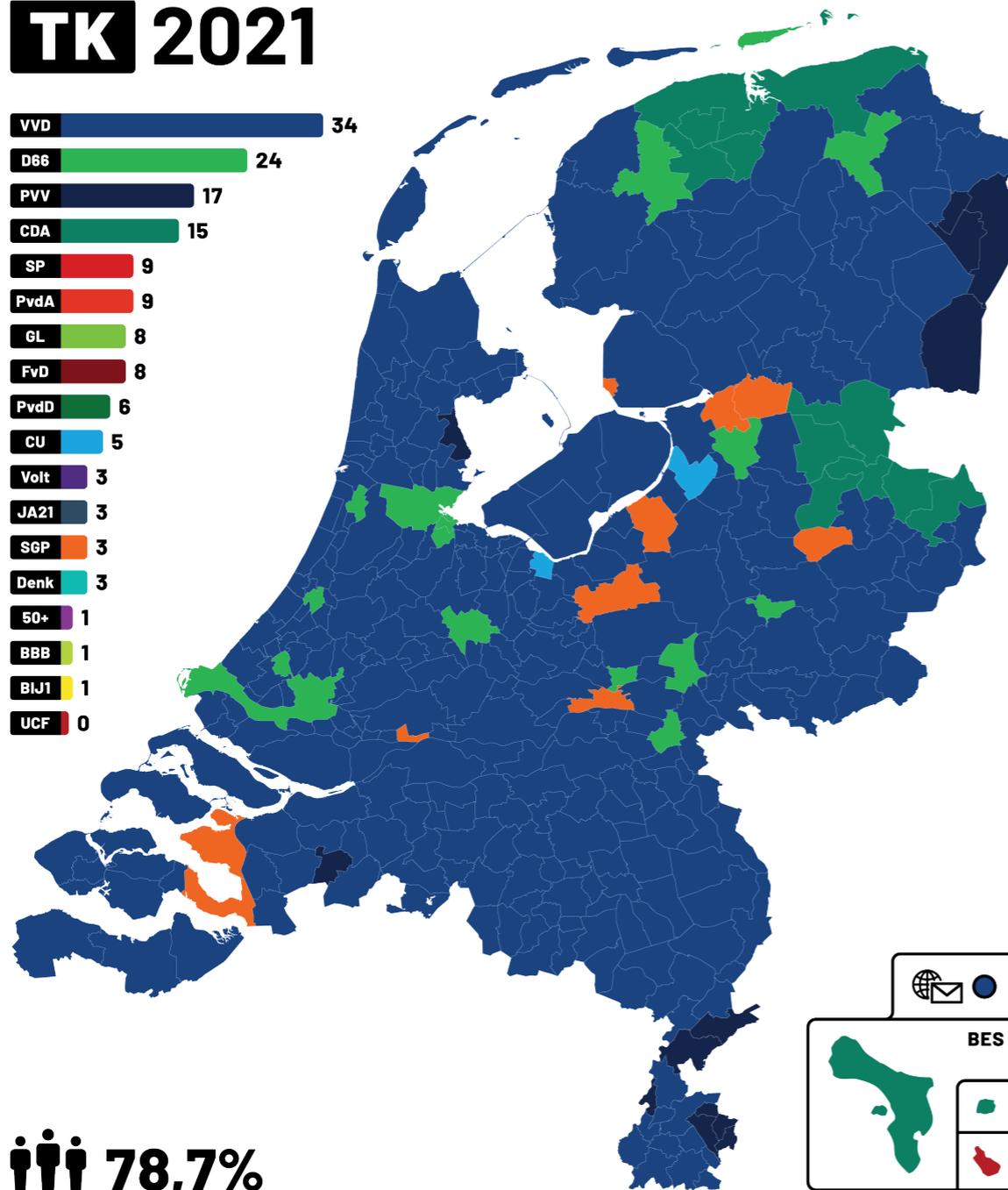
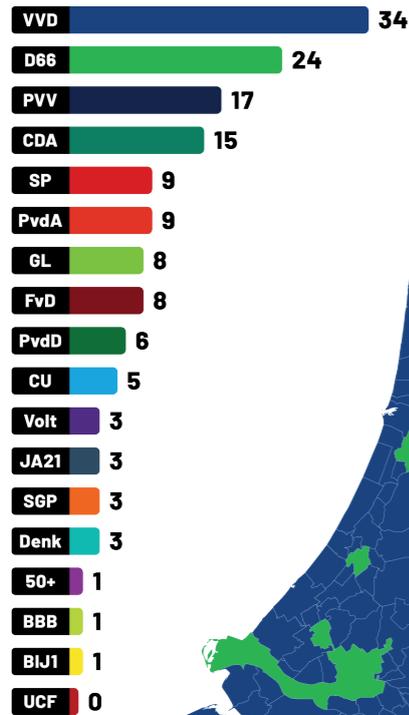
It is precisely on the right that a collection of parties is growing – the Partij voor de Vrijheid [Freedom Party] (PVV), Forum voor Democratie (FvD)⁵, JA21, Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij [Reformed Political Party] (SGP) – which is good for 31 seats and, as such, is larger than the traditional left.

Most of these parties are tagged as 'populist', a description which is then eagerly applied in the foreign media. However, this is misleading in many respects.

'Populism' on the explicit right?

In order to ascertain whether there is any question of 'populism' amongst these parties, one first needs to determine what it entails. This is not the place to proceed with a discussion of the matter, although the aspects which are attributed to it and are frequently cited are (a) playing up to dissatisfied voters, (b) presenting matters as though such dissatisfied voters comprise the real people whom the 'elite' no longer serves but cheats, (c) a strong leader (or this is how the party leader is at any rate presented) who would do everything differently if they were to seize power, and (d) an appeal to and/or ties with a body of thought sourced from a 'brown' or 'black' past.

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 **78,7%**

The first three aspects are mainly sourced from the relevant academic literature⁶, while the fourth aspect is frequently cited in left-wing circles in order to align them with a questionable tendency. In this respect we would merely like to note that the first two aspects almost always apply in the case of new political movements or parties.

All of the established parties or their predecessors once started out from dissatisfaction (whether justified or not) with matters which the dominant political regime neglected or mismanaged in the eyes of the newcomers.

In this sense the social and Christian democrats, the parties which are now on the wane, were the 'populists' of their time more than a century ago, even though they developed an ideology based on their dissatisfaction.

If we examine the above-mentioned parties on the right in the Netherlands in the light of these criteria, one must immediately treat the SGP as an exception. Established in 1918, the SGP is now the oldest political

party in the Netherlands. While it is true that the three traditional tendencies of liberalism, and Christian and social democracy are older, the parties that currently espouse them are younger.

The SGP is a typically Dutch party: extremely orthodox Calvinistic, anti-papal for many decades, and formerly more inclined to testify as preachers from the pulpit than as politicians operating in the political arena. Its support base is one of the most stable in the Netherlands, consistently amounting to more than 2% of the voters.

It also espouses a highly distinctive ideology sourced from a strict, Calvinistic interpretation of the bible coupled with a distrust of state intervention in the socio-economic field. In parliament the SGP has started to operate 'more politically', albeit constructively.

The party is probably the only one that has never been represented in a government but which does not in itself serve as opposition and is disposed to accommodating governments, albeit critically.

Still always representing more than 10% of the electorate, Geert Wilders' PVV is the largest party on the explicit right and the one which is always categorised as 'populistic and right-wing' in the foreign media. This party has been quite simply set up around a single leader.

More importantly, voters cannot become a member of the party, as Wilders is its sole member⁷. More so than in any other party, Wilders also personally helps to select all of his fellow parliamentary members. This desire for control has its origins in the fear of the conflicts with which new parties are almost always afflicted.

Wilders is relatively flexible in relation to various issues and his party appears to listen to a potential support base comprising socially and economically disadvantaged or neglected voters. Yet Wilders is uncompromising when it comes to his primary concern.

He views Islam as an ideology that is hostile to Dutch values and would therefore like to reduce the number of highly religious Muslims. It is this essential aspect of his beliefs which causes many of his opponents to brand him as discriminatory or even 'racist'.

The question as to whether this description is justified is closely associated with one's own assessment of Islam and the presence of large groups of Muslims in Western European countries. Wilders is vehement and explicit, something which Muslims sometimes perceive to be provocative and insulting.

His links to extreme right-wing parties and his admiration for 'strong leaders', such as Orban and Putin, cause one to consider the fourth of the above-mentioned criteria.

However, Wilders definitely distinguishes himself from traditionally extreme right-wing parties in two respects. Firstly, he is not anti-Semitic and is even explicitly pro-Israel. Secondly, his argument contends that Islam constitutes a threat to traditional Dutch freedom, in respect of which he explicitly refers to the rights of women and homosexuals. Traditionally, the extreme right, has little sympathy for these two groups.

For approximately five years there has been a newcomer on the right-wing flank, namely, Forum voor Democratie (FvD) and its leader, Thierry Baudet. Its original agenda was twofold. The other parties were characterised as 'cartel democracy' and the remedy was supposed to be more direct democracy.

This component of its agenda is very similar to what D66, a party that is viewed as an eminent example of anti-populist sentiment, brought with it when it entered the Dutch political arena 55 years ago. The second component of its agenda lies in FvD's view that European integration has gone too far, with the result that the nation state has come to be under threat.

In this case too direct democracy is the remedy that is offered. The voters must be able to express their views on EU matters through referendums, including the question as to whether the Netherlands should remain a member of the EU.

A third issue which FvD has used to profile itself emerged at a later stage: opposition to climate targets and, closely associated with this, to sensitive matters, such as the erection of increasingly more wind turbines in the countryside and policy to reduce those farming activities which are deemed to be polluting.

Whatever conclusions one wishes to draw in this respect, they are legitimate positions and in them the party is expressing concerns which are clearly shared within the Dutch electorate.

The fact that there was a breeding ground for a party which expressed such concerns is also an indication that the 'established parties' devoted insufficient attention to them in the eyes of part of the electorate at any rate and that the Netherlands' open system of democracy – featuring pure proportional representation – offers scope for the representation of voters who are 'not heard'.

However, FvD is frequently portrayed unfavourably in the news because of three factors and the party has already had to contend with a major breakaway on three occasions in its brief history. The person of its leader, Thierry Baudet, is the first factor.

He does not tolerate opposition, which nevertheless occurs more often in politics, and he does not have the wherewithal to secure the loyalty of fellow party members who do not admire him uncritically. The situation is more difficult, because Baudet is somewhat capricious.

Related to this – the second factor – is that racist statements regularly occur within the party and Baudet does not distance himself from them. More to the point, on more than one occasion he has also made statements which suggest a belief in a superior white race, provided that its conduct is deemed to be 'masculine'.

A third factor lies in his undisguised admiration for Putin and his tendency to deny or condone aggressive Russian behaviour. The most distressing within the Dutch context is that Baudet constantly raises doubts as to whether Flight MH-17, an aircraft with mainly Dutch passengers which was shot down above eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014 was indeed brought down by pro-Russian rebels.

Baudet is sympathetic to Russian propaganda which ascribes this crime to Ukraine. According to leaked internal electronic messages, this position is (also?) linked to Russian funding of FvD. For a party that claims to support the national interests, it is remarkable that it is so casual in its dealings with the interests of the survivors of the almost 200 deceased Dutch citizens who were on board Flight MH-17.

Aversion to the first two of the above-mentioned factors led to a breakaway from FvD to establish JA21 several months before the Lower House elections in March 2021. This party claims that it wishes to highlight FvD's original agenda without making any wild statements and to do so in a way in which it hopes to exert influence on its policy.

This newcomer relies on a 'conservative, liberal' body of thought. It explicitly claims that it wishes to provide a home for those voters who are of the opinion that the liberal right-wing VVD and the Christian democratic CDA are inclined too much to the left.

It awaits to be seen to what extent this party, many of whose members were also a member of FvD until recently, is able to live up to this claim. Nevertheless, within a brief period of time it has managed to convince enough voters, most of whom have come from the VVD and CDA rather than FvD and the PVV, to enter the Lower House with three seats.

According to some polls, it already commanded double the number of seats two months after the elections. It says a great deal that other parties have not precluded this party at the outset. As such and in so far as it is already possible to say this now, JA21 is a potentially non-populist outlet for dissatisfied voters on the right. Time will tell whether this party will be able to live up to this.

Towards a new government

Three months after the elections a new government is still a far-off prospect. This is not unusual in the Netherlands. The formation of a new government can take a long time, because increasingly more parties are required for this purpose.

Since the Second World War the formation of a new government has taken more than three months on average. The formation of the Rutte III government took a record number of 225 days.

What is unusual is that the first two months elapsed before the formation involved any substantive matters and – up until now – without there being any clarity as to which parties would constitute part of the new coalition.

An unfortunate leaked statement made by Prime Minister Rutte occasioned extensive debates in the Lower House, where parties that are rival to the VVD sought to settle scores with Rutte, who won the elections.

Nevertheless, there is a good chance that a Rutte IV government will emerge, because it is impossible to form a stable government without the VVD, while polls reveal that new elections, which some losers in March may be seeking, will again result in Rutte's VVD trumping its competitors by a large margin.

Voters are beginning to tire of politicians who have been preoccupied with holding each other to account instead of addressing the major issues facing the country, as in the case of other Western nations. ■

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Endnotes

- 1. By way of comparison, most of the European countries which have a system of proportional representation have an electoral threshold varying from 2% (Denmark) to 5% (Germany, Belgium, Poland, most others).*
- 2. It is no longer formally represented in the Lower House, albeit still locally and in the Senate, after the departure of its leading candidate, Liane den Haan, on 6 May 2021 following a conflict.*
- 3. As it happens, the membership of all of the political parties amounted to more than 780,000 members when taken together, whereas that figure had shrunk to 310,000 in 2021. The minor (new) movements are performing relatively better than the traditional parties.*
- 4. 'TK2021 naar demografische en andere kenmerken' [The 2021 Lower House based on demographic and other*

characteristics], which was consulted at <https://maurice.nl/peilingen/2021/04/11/tk2021-naar-demografische-en-andere-kenmerken/>

5. On 13 May 2021 FvD again had to contend with a breakaway, as a result of which three of the five seats will continue as the Haga Group and the FvD leader, Thierry Baudet saw his party shrink to five seats in the Lower House.

6. See numerous publications, eg. Cas Mudde and Rovira Kalwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2017) and Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (Philadelphia, 2016).

7. In formal terms there are two 'members: the individual, Geert Wilders, and also a foundation whose executive board consists of ... Wilders.