

# The Dutch elections: fragmentation and a normalised EU debate

Adriaan Schout

## International perceptions of the Dutch elections

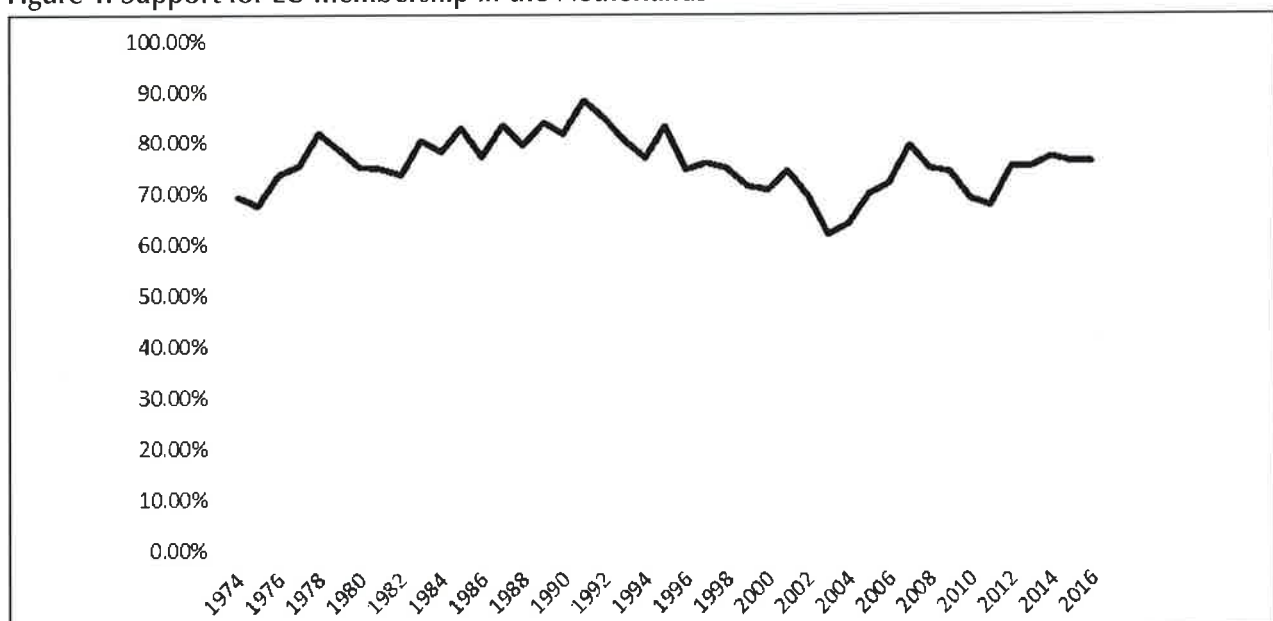
The first striking element of the upcoming Dutch elections on 15 March is the extent to which the Netherlands is represented in the international media as an EU-critical country: many international media outlets focus on the allegedly strong position of the populist radical-right leader, Geert Wilders, and his Freedom Party (PVV)<sup>1</sup>, and even speculate about a possible Brexit.<sup>2</sup> The underlying expectation seems to be that after Donald Trump's victory, the path is now cleared for politicians such as Wilders and Marine Le Pen in France to take centre stage. Yet the picture of the Netherlands as a highly EU-critical country needs some qualification.

Firstly, the Netherlands is traditionally one of the member states with the highest levels of support for the European Union (generally above 70%, see Figure 1). Also, the country's conservative governments have consistently opted in the EU's core policies, from Schengen, to the euro, the third rescue package for Greece, and many more. As an open-trading nation, and being bound to German markets and industrial sectors, Dutch governments have been strongly oriented towards economic integration.

Secondly, Geert Wilders draws attention to his anti-EU messages because he appears to be more outspoken than his opponents, as well as clearer (his party's electoral programme consists of one page with 11 statements that are short on politically-correct language). According to Wierd Duk, a journalist from *Algemeen Dagblad*, this image of "telling it as it is" tends to appeal to a part of the electorate. However, it does not mean that his potential voters also support his views. For example, Wilders wants to leave the EU notwithstanding the indication that 75% of his electorate are in favour of remaining in the internal market.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, as in the elections of 2012, his party dropped in the polls as the election date draws closer. At the start of 2017, Wilders had almost 25% of the votes<sup>4</sup> but this figure plunged to 15% by early March (still a gain compared to the current 10% of the seats that the PVV holds in the Parliament). Thus, there seems to be a difference between flirting with the Freedom Party and actually voting for it. Yet, since Wilders is very popular among young voters, his election result will partly depend on the extent to which this group of first-time voters turn out to vote on election day (young voters often have a low turnout).

Figure 1: Support for EU membership in the Netherlands



Source: Dekker (2013); Eurobarometer.

Yet, the generally strong support for the EU in the Netherlands should not be confused with enthusiasm for European integration: support does not mean affection. Dutch voters score the lowest when it comes to "feeling affiliation" with other Europeans (5% compared to 29% in Germany). Moreover, test panels show that attitudes towards the EU can easily shift under the influence of, in particular, negative opinions.<sup>5</sup> This makes support for the EU rather volatile. Apart from periods of intense EU crises, such as during the Greek crisis, interest in the EU is rather mediocre: only 5% of the voters base their electoral choice on the EU as a political theme. On average, the Dutch think they know a lot about the European Union, whereas tested knowledge of the EU in polls is only average.<sup>6</sup> Finally, some polls show more EU-critical inclinations but polls are difficult to compare given, for example, fluctuations over time, with a temporary drop in support for the EU during the euro crisis.

This discussion suggests that there is general support for the EU in the Netherlands, but this is sensitive to (negative) news about the EU (for example, fresh problems in the eurozone countries or growing migration flows). Therefore, it seems safe to assume that future plans for deeper European integration may run into difficulties in terms of public support in the Netherlands, though Dutch people could be more favourably disposed to flexible forms of European cooperation. The EU is generally not a matter of yes or no, but more part of normal political discourse, where some want more integration in one policy area and others may want something less or different in the same field (see below). After a long period of permissive consensus, the EU has become a normal political issue in Dutch debates.<sup>7</sup>

## Fragmentation

A second defining feature of these forthcoming Dutch elections is fragmentation. There are 28 parties on the ballot list and 50% of the voters are still undecided. Looking at the polls, one of the main questions is whether the elections will result in a stable government or whether, as happened, for example, in 1977, a long period of negotiations between potential coalition partners will follow the vote. Since four or five parties may be necessary to compose the more than 75 seats needed in the Parliament (out of a total of 150 seats), including the possibility for bigger political and party-cultural differences, the question is whether the next government will last for long.

Apart from Geert Wilders' PVV, the other main political contenders in these elections form a sizeable group of mostly centrist parties. TV channels organising election debates even have difficulties designing workable formats for discussions among six or eight party leaders, or deciding which parties to invite, given the sometimes razor thin differences in support for these parties in the polls.

The current government had a marginal majority of 79 seats. It consisted of the centre-right Liberal party (VVD) of Prime Minister Rutte and the centre-left Labour Party (PvdA) with a new party leader, Lodewijk Asscher. This coalition survived the four years in office thanks to a loyal opposition of parties that came to the rescue, backing the government whenever additional support was needed such as implementing drastic cutbacks and economic reforms. The willingness to find consensus between the government and different opposition parties underlined the political will in the Dutch Parliament to ensure political stability. Parties supporting the past government included the more left-leaning Liberal party (D66) and the smaller Christian parties (ChristenUnie, SGP). D66 has somewhat of a reputation as a party popular among undecided voters. With many voters still pondering on their preferences, D66 could thus end up having a strong electoral showing.

The Christian Democratic Party (CDA) headed by Sybrand Buma has made a comeback during the past four years. Aware of the need for a new profile, it opted for opposition status. This exposed it to criticism from the "loyal opposition" for attempting to avoid responsibility for the economic reforms. The election debates have shown that Buma has developed into a centre-right contender for Rutte. The Christian Democrats campaigned against wider application of the euthanasia law, against the formalisation of production and delivery of soft drugs to coffee shops, in support of tougher sentences for habitual criminals, higher spending on defence and, especially more attention for norms and values (learning the national anthem at school, a social year for students leaving school).

A growing star among the candidates is young Jesse Klaver (30), the head of Green Party (GroenLinks), who has Obama-like ambitions, borrows from Obama's lexicon in his speeches and resorted to innovative campaign methods organising, for example, "meetup" sessions (political rallies) to offer "hope and change".<sup>8</sup> Under his leadership, the Green Party rose from 4 to 17 seats in the polls. GroenLinks is left of centre and belongs to the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance in the European Parliament. Apart from its core theme of sustainable development, the Green Party favours a much more flexible approach to welcoming refugees and abolishment of the "own risk", together with a broad package of entitlements for health care.

Quite clearly, there are differences between the policy stances of the main contenders but, on the whole, these elections lack central themes and reveal a crowded mid-spectrum, which makes it difficult for the voters to settle on one party or the other. The Green Party is the only one with a more distinct and outspoken – left-leaning – profile.

In terms of size, two parties that are also worth mentioning include the Socialist Party (SP), traditionally in favour of big government and free health care, and the 50PLUS Party, a strong defender of the rights of pensioners. However, given their expenditure-intensive policy priorities, these two parties will not fit easily in a grand coalition. In fact, entitlements for pensioners is a major issue for both of these parties. SP wants to bring the retirement age, currently at 67 years, back to 65 (to be partly paid by cut backs in defence).

All other parties are expected to be of little interest in terms of election results. Table 1 offers some clues about the different combinations possible/needed to form a government. Some caveats are in order: the Socialist Party has ruled out a governing alliance with Rutte's Liberal Party, while Rutte has categorically dismissed Wilders' PVV from a future coalition government. Even though the first Rutte government was supported by the PVV, Rutte made it clear that he would not try this again because it would harm his credibility in defending Dutch interests at the European and international level. For the rest, as the table below shows, only two combinations of 4 or 5 political parties can probably result in a (small) majority. Still, it should be recalled that the prospects of the last Rutte government also looked slim and yet became a reality thanks to the compromising political culture of the Dutch centrist parties. Perhaps the same will happen this year as well.

**Table 1: Distribution of seats in the Dutch Parliament (5 March 2017 poll)**

	Seats in Parliament 2012	1-1-2017	5-3-2017
PVV	15	35	25
VVD	41	23	24
CDA	13	15	21
GroenLinks	4	14	17
D66	12	14	17
SP	15	11	13
PvdA	38	10	10
ChristenUnie	5	5	5
Partij voor de Dieren	2	5	5
50PLUS	2	11	5
SGP	3	3	3
DENK		3	2
Forum voor Democratie		2	2
VNL		1	1
Total	150	150	150
VVD+PvdA	79	33	34
VVD+PVV	56	58	49
VVD+CDA+D66	66	52	62
VVD+CDA+D66+PvdA	104	62	72
VVD+CDA+D66+SP	81	63	75
VVD+CDA+D66+GroenLinks	70	66	79
CDA+D66+GroenLinks+PvdA+SP	82	64	76

Source: @mauricedehond<sup>9</sup>

## The Dutch elections and the EU

Despite the sometimes heated debates on European integration in the Netherlands over, for example, deeper integration or rescue packages, the EU is not a major theme in the current election campaign. The issues that seem to preoccupy Dutch voters in these elections include<sup>10</sup>: healthcare (18%), social security (15%), economy (12%), norms and values (10%), safety and terrorism (9%), the integration of Muslims (7%), education (6%), EU (5%), environment (4%), and the international situation (3%). Other polls mention migration as one of the core themes. Some of the major questions of these election debates concern the financing of healthcare (some parties want to abolish the "own risk" threshold of EUR 360 that was introduced as a disincentive) and pensions (with some parties pleading to reinstate the retirement age of 65), as well as integration/migration issues linked to the ability of newcomers to adapt to Dutch norms and values (especially in view of, among others, growing concerns over discrimination of LGTBs and the influence of the Turkish government among Turks in the Netherlands).

As regards the party programmes, most candidates want a reformed EU. The five parties in the centre (CDA, D66, Groenlinks, PvdA and VVD), and two additional marginal parties, think that the EU is essential but should be improved. Ten parties are more critical and want a completely different Union, six favour NEXIT, and five do not mention the EU. The reforms the five centrist parties would like to see include issues such as the need for more democracy at the EU level (Greens & D66), providing own resources for the EU budget (D66), better-managed labour mobility based on equal pay for equal work (PvdA), deepening of the energy union (PvdA), as well as core groups (Christian Democrats) and a more pragmatic EU, oriented towards solutions, such as in the context of the migrant crisis or pending economic reforms in some member states (VVD). D66 is most outspoken and even argues for a European army and stronger roles for the European Parliament and the European Commission (including the related Treaty revisions). A short review of the programmes cannot do justice to the richness of their positions on the EU. Underlining that the EU is part of their political outlook in all areas, D66 does not have a separate chapter on the EU. The VVD emphasises in its chapter on the EU: economic interests, a need for the EU to focus on major issues only, and the need for countries to respect the EU rules to which they have agreed. PvdA focuses more on fairness. The Christian Democrats and Rutte's VVD are in favour of the ultimate punishment of euro-exit for non-reforming countries.

The more EU-critical parties want to remain in the EU but demand far-reaching reforms, advocating *inter alia* limiting the role of the European Commission (Socialist Party), a much more environmentally-friendly EU (Party for the Animals), greater subsidiarity, and the abolition of the EU flag (Christian parties). As regards the EU-critical parties, some are plainly against the EU (PVV and the VNL (Voor Nederland) or want a referendum regarding the Netherlands' EU membership (Thierry Baudet's new party, Forum for Democracy). The overview of positions on the EU suggests that European integration will not be a major obstacle in the negotiations for the next government as there is ample scope for compromise. Overall, the main centrist parties are interested in improving the EU.

## The Dutch elections among the other key elections of 2017

The French and the German elections will probably prove more important for the EU discussions and policies in the Netherlands than the Dutch election debates. There seems to be some apprehension in The Hague regarding possible new visionary plans from the traditional French-German motor of European integration. A victory of Martin Schulz in Germany and Emmanuel Macron in France might lead to new European ambitions that could go beyond what the Netherlands would support. This may also explain why these upcoming elections in the Netherlands are not so much about the EU. The Netherlands is a smaller member state with limited influence in the EU. The 2012 elections resulted in a rather traumatic experience for the Liberal Party (VVD) of Mark Rutte because he had promised in that campaign that no more money would be spent on the Greek euro crisis. This promise was broken when the third rescue package for Greece was agreed upon in 2015. There now seems to be a realisation among Dutch parties with experience in government that it is risky to make promises when there are 26 or 27 other member states involved in the decisions taken at the EU level. Electoral pledges about the future of the EU are thus hard to substantiate. By the same token, if France and Germany would agree to major new leaps forward in European integration, for example, in regard to economic governance, the next Dutch government(s) will probably have a hard time trying to sell Europe at home.

Similarly, one might have expected that other issues, such as the consequences of Brexit, or the doubts that exist concerning the sustainability of the euro in the long run, would have played important roles in these Dutch elections. Yet, there would have been few political relevant choices to be discussed at this stage and the Netherlands is but one of the many voices in the EU debates ahead. Hence, although the EU is a topic with many facets, it appears that the Dutch elections are not so much about the EU, after all.

**Adriaan Schout, Coordinator of EU affairs at the Netherlands Institute of International Affairs (Clingendael)**

- 
- 1 See, for example, "Dutch elections: all you need to know", *The Guardian*, 2 March 2017, found at: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/02/dutch-parliamentary-elections-everything-you-need-to-know-brexit-vote-trump-geert-wilders?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/02/dutch-parliamentary-elections-everything-you-need-to-know-brexit-vote-trump-geert-wilders?CMP=share_btn_tw), last accessed on: 9/03/2017.
  - 2 "Will Dutch follow Brexit with Nexit?", *BBC*, 7 July 2016.
  - 3 @Mauricedehond, found at: <https://www.noties.nl/v/get.php?r=pp170605&f=De+5+scenario's+voor+de+Europese+Unie.pdf>, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.
  - 4 See @Mauricedehond. A discussion on differences between polls and reliability of polls is avoided here. The pattern in the polls concerning the PVV is rather clear.
  - 5 Dekker, Paul (2013), "Public Opinion" in Schout, Adriaan and Rood, Jan (eds.), *The Netherlands as an EU member state: a normal partner at last?*, Portland: Eleven International Publishing.
  - 6 *Burgerperspectieven* (2016), Continue Bevolkingsonderzoek, Den Haag: SCP.
  - 7 Schout, Adriaan and Rood, Jan (2013), *op. cit.*
  - 8 "The 'Jessiah': the Dutch progressive trying to turn back the populist tide", *The Guardian*, 6 March 2017, found at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/the-jessiah-dutch-progressive-populist-jesse-klaver>, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.
  - 9 @Mauricedehond, found at: <https://www.noties.nl/v/get.php?a=peil.nl&s=weekpoll&f=2017-03-05.pdf>, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.
  - 10 "Meeste kiezers gaan voor inhoud, kieswijzers beperkte invloed", 03/03/2017, found at: <http://www.nipo.nl/nieuws/persberichten/meeste-kiezers-gaan-voor-inhoud.-kieswijzers-beperkt/>, last accessed on: 11/03/2017.