



EVENT REPORT

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Reconnecting Europe II

Bewilder(s)ed and Bemused? The Dutch Parliamentary Election Explained to Other Europeans¹

On 15 March the Dutch voters kicked off a crucial European election year. After the shockwaves of the Brexit referendum and Trump's victory in the States, all eyes were on Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (PVV). According to [opinion polls](#) just before the election Wilders's modest variation on Trump's election slogan 'Make the Netherlands ours again' attracted 16 percent of the vote, though the trend had been going downward for a while. Still, there was only one party which seemed to be competing for the pole position and that was Prime Minister Mark Rutte's centre right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). All other parties, including Rutte's coalition partner, the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) were way behind. But even with the PVV in a winning mood, the likelihood that Wilders would become the next Dutch Prime Minister or at least a partner in a government coalition was as good as zero (of course, this was what most of us thought about the chances of Brexit and Trump's victory as well), as the majority of parties had excluded an alliance with the PVV. But whatever government will emerge after the March election, the question remains: how could it come so far that in a rich and uneventful country like the Netherlands, co-founder and model pupil of the European Community, famous for its apparent tolerance and European-mindedness, a Eurosceptic and xenophobic politician can dominate the public debate like Wilders has done for many years now? Many outside the Netherlands have difficulties understanding this development of a country whose citizens have little to worry about compared to many others in Europe and elsewhere. We invited two journalists from countries of the south of Europe with totally different political agendas and realities, Spain and Greece, as well as the audience to ask the questions to a Dutch trio consisting of a politician, an ex-politician and a journalist.

After the **results** of the Dutch parliamentary election were known, a wave of relief went through Europe: the right wing populist candidate Geert Wilders and his *Freedom Party* (PVV), which had been leading in the polls till briefly before the election, only came second with 13.1% of the vote. The party of acting Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy* (VVD) won the election with 21.3%. Headlines of newspapers in many countries hailed the alleged triumph over populism and celebrated the victory of tolerance. But do these rather self-congratulatory conclusions really correspond to the truth? What can be said for sure is that with 81.4% the turnout has been extremely high (7% higher than in the 2012 election). This is a sign of a healthy and lively democracy. What can also be said is that more people have become interested in politics and have been taking parts in political debates than expected.

¹ The event took place on 22 March 2017. The **Dutch panellists** were: **Bas Eickhout**, Member of the European Parliament (Greens-EFA); **Michiel van Hulten**, ex- Member of the European Parliament and former Chairman of the Dutch social-democratic party PvdA, currently independent consultant and Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE European Institute; **Marc Peepkorn**, Brussels correspondent *De Volkskrant*. The questions were asked by **Lucía Abellán Hernández**, Brussels correspondent *El País* (Spain), **Eleni Varvitsioti**, Brussels correspondent *Kathimerini* (Greece) and the **audience**. **Marianne Ebertowski**, director European Policy Programme Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, acted as MC.

Prior to the election the international media was obsessed with the populist **Wilders**, whereas the Dutch media coverage was generally informative and very balanced. From the beginning of the election campaign the debate in the Netherlands was much more nuanced than abroad. Wilders has been in Dutch politics since 10 years and in former elections his party had been able to reach even higher scores in the opinion polls. But just as already in the 2010 and 2012 elections, when the party lost potential voters just shortly before Election Day, this time also the high scores for Wilders started dropping in the end of 2016. Therefore the Dutch weren't surprised about the final result, whereas the international media was confused and somehow slightly disappointed about the 'unexpected' turnout and Wilders's second place. This may explain first international reactions such as 'populism has been beaten'. Even though this is not quite the case as Wilders actually won compared to the results of 2012, the fact that Wilders didn't gain spectacularly was greeted with relief by the rest of the political spectrum in the Netherlands.

International analysts and media claimed that **Rutte** had been shifting to the right in the last few months, that he started using a similar rhetoric as Wilders. Does this prove that, in fact, populism did win the election? Indeed, Rutte and the VVD, but also the Christian democrats (CDA) have been incorporating some of Wilders's rhetoric into their campaign, and we can certainly speak of a populist and Eurosceptic tendency in these parties (even within the social democratic party). However, what is important is that this is not new for these two parties; this tendency has been there for years. The internal political debate in the Netherlands has been shifting to the right, but due to the fact that many foreign correspondents only came for the election, this long term aspect was not considered by and visible for the international media. As far as the accusation is concerned that Rutte has turned into a 'Wilders light version', one has to make clear that Rutte has always been and still is a liberal with rather progressive ideas on many issues. And even though Rutte might not be the biggest fan of the EU, he does see the importance of the Union and he certainly does not want to leave it as is demanded by Wilders.

One of the striking facts compared to the previous election is the **drop in support for both Rutte's liberals and the social-democratic labour party**. Over the last few years the VVD-PvdA government put much effort into reforms many of which had been advised for years but former governments hesitated to implement them. Rutte and his government implemented several unpopular reforms including cuts in healthcare, the retirement system, the mortgage system and the educational system. When looking at the election results, it seems as if the ruling parties were 'punished' for that. The liberals lost 8 seats and the social democrats 29 (!). But were these reforms really crucial for the (poor) result of the two parties? The one reform that seemed to influence the election campaign was the healthcare reform. With this reform, the liberalisation of healthcare became a fact; the healthcare system was opened to market behaviour. But also the reforms of the pension system had been under discussion, and yet the parties who opposed this reform, like the left-wing Socialist Party (SP) could not profit from this opposition.

What seems to have led to the poorer results of the coalition parties is their '**TINA discourse**', the claim that 'There Is No Alternative' to the political decisions taken, as if there is some sort of mainstream idea of how society is supposed to function and which direction it is supposed to take. With regard to the economic and financial crisis European leaders totally focused on what they saw as 'the only way forward', whereas other countries in the world, but also critical politicians and economists in Europe, especially the south, claimed that Europe was addressing the crisis in a wrong way. For years Dutch society had to live with serious government spending cuts. Since recently the unemployment rate has been going down and the general welfare is on the increase again. While the crisis management during this period was heavily criticised by

many economists, no Dutch centre party was open to other options. The crux of the matter is that if people are told that there is only one option, they tend to opt for parties who offer an alternative (at least pretend to). Geert Wilders seemed to do just that, but his 'alternative' was based on fear blaming institutions (the EU) or groups of people (migrants) for what went wrong in Dutch society. The ongoing challenge for political parties is to stand up for real(istic) alternatives.

The biggest winner of the 2017 election is the Green Left Party (and to some extent the centre-left liberal democrats (D66)), whereas the left-wing Socialist Party (SP), most strongly opposed to the government and its anti-healthcare reforms could not capitalise on the general discontent. The reason for this was the fact that the debate on **socio-economic issues** was turned into a socio-cultural debate on migration and Dutch culture, which is a no-win situation for the left. This shift of focus in the political debate was made possible due to the 'no alternative' attitude on socio-economic issues by the governmental parties and Wilders could profit from it.

Migration is not the biggest problem in Dutch society, even though it cannot be denied that there are problems which need to be tackled. However, what is important is that it is perceived as the biggest problem by many. The migration debate tends to lead to a debate on 'Dutch identity' which many see under attack. The media turned this issue into a main topic during the election campaign. Whereas the parties to the right claimed that, indeed, Dutch identity was threatened, left wing parties disagreed with this assumption. To everybody's surprise, the leader of the Green Left Party, Jesse Klaver, (seemingly) went along with the claim of the right, but then defined Dutch identity as tolerant, open and hospitable. This was a clever move which caught everybody's attention and may have positively affected the debate about identity as well as the election result for Groen Links.

Other factors influencing the election campaign and results were **Brexit** and the presidential victory of **Donald Trump**. Brexit showed the Dutch voters that there will be economic consequences for the departing country although clear predictions about the future of the British economy cannot be made yet. For a trading nation like the Netherlands losing export partners is threatening. Trump's first months as president on the other hand showed how dangerous populism can be with regard to stability, the strength of democracy and the rule of law. People who support Wilders mostly want to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the current political situation. After Trump's inauguration, people could see what happens when a populist candidate gets elected. The 'Trump-effect' which was supposed to bring the 'patriotic spring' to Europe did not have the expected effect on Wilders's popularity. On the contrary, his popularity dropped whereas Brexit hadn't affected him much.

Another factor influencing the election was the **tension with Turkey** due to incidents in the weekend before the election, when the Dutch authorities prevented two Turkish ministers from campaigning in favour of Erdogan's proposal for an executive presidency. This led to riots and demonstrations by Turkish-Dutch citizens in many parts of the Netherlands. So shortly before the election it gave Prime Minister Rutte the opportunity to show a firm hand against Erdogan's provocations, which according to polls affected Rutte's election result positively. After the election and Erdogan's unprecedented verbal attacks on the Netherlands, his focus might now shift to Germany where his chances to get more attention and gain more influence are higher. Yet, this incident has deeply impacted Dutch public opinion on Turkey and its potential EU membership and has seriously damaged the Dutch-Turkish relations. It will take years or even decades to rebuild the trust that was once between the two countries. Moreover, the long promised visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens will probably not be approved by the EU Member States (which could blow up the EU-Turkey migration deal).

Russian influences on the election are hard to prove. Due to the multi-party system in the Netherlands it is harder to influence the political system compared to a binary political system like in the US. If there was any foreign influence on the country's election at all, it could only have little impact on the results, possibly this was the case with the newcomer party Forum for Democracy (FvD).

The **trend of fragmentation** is an EU-wide trend, but due to restrictions and clauses this fragmentation isn't always recognisable in national parliaments. The Dutch system makes the trend of fragmentation visible. As the fragmentation forces the parties to make compromises and form coalitions, it is difficult for them to keep their own identity, but on the other hand most people feel represented. Perhaps political alliances should be formed prior to the election in order to be more effective and to make future governmental parties/coalitions more predictable for the voters. After the 2017 election a coalition of four parties has to be formed. Different combinations are possible; the option considered most seriously is a coalition between Rutte's centre-right VVD, the Christian democrats (CDA), the centre-left liberals (D66) and the Green Left Party (Groen Links).

Whereas the Dutch have always been **pro-European** and supportive of the idea of a cooperative Europe, at the moment they seem to not know what the European Union stands for anymore. Also generally Dutch politicians tend to think that they cannot win votes with a pro-European attitude and lack the courage to defend the European Union. The EU has become a silent issue in the current political debate and was little discussed during the election campaign. This attitude needs to change. A government with Groen Links and D66 could and should become an exponent of pro-European politics.

Post scriptum: Currently VVD, CDA, D66 and Groen Links are negotiating a coalition agreement. It is expected that the new Dutch government will take office before the summer vacation.

Also read: **[The Dutch Election: Populism Loses a Round, but Democracy Is Still in Trouble Netherlands – No Game Changer in European Elections?](#)**