

Dutch Elections: More than Populism's Next Test

Contrary to predictions about a populist victory in the upcoming parliamentary election in the Netherlands, the Dutch may, in fact, be a bellwether inspiring citizens in Europe to engage again in serious national debates on core issues of fundamental politics.

By Robert Hoppe and Margarita Jeliaskova

Quite a few foreign media frame the upcoming parliamentary election in the Netherlands as setting the stage for a 'Nexit' (Dutch withdrawal from the European Union) and more populist breakthroughs in later French and German elections. They are all stunned by Geert Wilders' media shows, but turn a blind eye to the clearly visible emergence of serious national political debates on core issues of fundamental politics.

True, by clever use of social media and Twitter, Wilders turns every public performance in a media spectacle. Anticipating Donald Trump's style, over the years Wilders has been able to reach out to his supporters and shape a remarkably stable block of voters. However, not many floating voters mention Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) as a likely choice.

That said, Wilders' ever more radical call for 'de-Islamization' of Dutch society does have a broader impact. For example, in a bow to PVV's anti-Islam rhetoric in the fight for undecided voters, Conservative Liberal prime-minister Mark Rutte's recent campaign letter to 'act normally' is widely interpreted as an 'adapt to this country's codes of conduct, or leave it' message to second or third generation Dutch Muslims and other immigrants.

Paradoxically, Wilders' de-Islamization call has opened up a political market of fringe political parties for 'grumpy' immigrants. The PVV promises to 'give Holland back' to its indigenous citizens; the immigrant parties express the disappointment of those who 'don't feel at home anymore' in a formerly tolerant Dutch society.

But obviously there is a need to give voice to both Dutch and immigrant electorates' fear to lose 'entitlements' of living in the Netherlands, until recently taken for granted. This

'integration paradox' is the most visible political response to concerns about social, cultural and economic developments that are actually shared by many more Dutch voters.

Reform needs in many traditional state functions in the Netherlands

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's [2016 Sustainable Governance Indicators \(SGI\) report for the Netherlands](#) shows that the Dutch have good reasons to worry about the performance of their state. In a traditionally egalitarian society, the distance between an established elite (15%) and uncertain workers and a precariat (30%) grows ever larger. There is overdue maintenance and repair work to be done in some of the traditional state functions. Intended reforms in the police, the judiciary, and public prosecution have run into implementation, expertise and integrity problems. Even the tax apparatus' effectiveness is currently in doubt through badly executed reforms.

The Dutch also have legitimate concerns about a future 'business model' for the Dutch economy in transition to a sustainable global economy. With national gas reserves nearing depletion, a new energy policy is badly needed. Transportation, infrastructure and water management require considerable investment. Labor market policies face a difficult balancing act between flexibilization and guaranteeing decent wages and work-family balance. An aging population demands accessible and affordable health care. Young and old are concerned about pension reforms.

The signs of political alienation of a significant part of the Dutch voters are clear. The digitization of everything (tax forms, identity papers, applications for social benefits, communications with local governments, train tickets), frequently without citizens' prior knowledge or consent, creates an image of the corporate and governmental worlds as a kind of Orwellian data-driven 'big brother'. For many Dutch citizens the care provided by the welfare state has been replaced by 'responsibility' requirements and by the prying eyes of a stern administrative state.

Simultaneously, [SGI data for the Netherlands](#) show that citizens' opportunities for genuine between-election political participation are very limited, indeed. This feeds the 'populist' attack on the rules of the political game and the resonance of Wilders' brazen rule-breaking public performances.

For most Dutch voters, Nexit is not the solution to their country's problems

Nonetheless, it seems that for most Dutch voters, these serious concerns cannot be simply dealt with through a 'less Moroccans' anti-Islam call, and even less by a Brexit. The Dutch appear to respond to the challenges in two distinct ways.

Partly, the electorate clings to an issue-driven, group-interest political thinking, like in pensions and health care costs. Representing these interests in parliament is the sole purpose of one political party, 50PLUS. Increasingly, voting apps no longer primarily focus on identifying the political party that aligns best with a voter's overall political preferences. There are now scores of special interest voting apps, like for small entrepreneurs, for car owners, for children's rights activists, cyclists, and even bird-lovers.

Countering this fragmentation in competing interest groups, voters and political parties alike start to finally care about fundamental issues of institutions, nature and purpose of politics again. The political and ideological colors of many parties visibly re-emerge. Party platforms pledge a restoration of a civil discourse code in political and media debate.

This year, a few parties claim that their policy proposals went far beyond economic modelling. At the same time, five political parties, including the PVV, but surprisingly also the Conservative Liberals (VVD) and Christian-Democrats (CDA), seem to run proposals that violate the country's rule-of-law principles according to an analysis of a committee appointed by an apparently alarmed Dutch Bar Association.

Even more telling is the amount of attention for democratic reforms. Not just the PVV and other populist newcomers, but also the Social Liberals (D66), Socialists (SP) and the Green-Left (GL) are in favor of binding referenda of different formats and scope, particularly in cases of sovereignty transfer; while establishment parties (VVD, CDA, Labor) reject this as going against the grain of representative democracy. Contrary to many predictions about the death of party politics, political parties such as D66 seem to attract a record number of new members.

The probability of a Wilders-led government is practically nil

The EU-issue strongly divides political parties, but it does not *openly* dominate the election campaign because most voters remain ambivalent on the issue. An illuminating example is a very recent IPSOS poll, which registered a large majority of Dutch voters in favor of both allowing the Dutch to work anywhere they wanted, and restricting incoming migrant labor.

PVV, SP and the 'newcomers' all are in favor of opting out. Establishment parties (Conservative Liberals, Labor, Christian-Democrats) treat the EU as the 'elephant in the room', to be mentioned as little as possible. Only the Social Liberals (D66), like Emmanuel Macron in France and Angela Merkel in Germany, publicly insist that this '*I-want-to-eat-my-cake-and-have-it-too*' attitude is politically irresponsible and against citizens' informed self-interest.

If the PVV should come out first, the probability of a Wilders-led government and a Nexit is practically nil. First, the PVV is not the only 'protest vote' party. There are also the populist-right wing fringe parties like FvD, Geenpeil, and VNL that compete for the same electorate. PVV may 'win' with 16-17% of the vote and 24-28 seats out of 150, due to the fact that the other parties are even smaller, taking 10-15% of the vote each. A 17% 'win' cannot be credibly compared with Brexit, Trump and a possible Le Pen victory in France.

Next, the Netherlands has a system of proportional representation with no electoral thresholds. No party ever had or will get an absolute majority. Partisan mutual adjustment is unavoidable. All other political parties, most importantly the Conservative Liberals (VVD) which poll equally strong, have rejected a government coalition including the PVV.

Moreover, Wilders is not a new player: he already left a coalition government with Conservative Liberals and Christian-Democrats in 2012. Ever since, Wilders has deliberately chosen a political strategy of radical insularity. Add to this the dictatorial leadership of a party with only one 'member' and no roots in local government, and it becomes clear why, according to some analysts, Wilders does not actually desire to become prime minister. He fears that his party would implode during his first term in office.

The long-term health of the Dutch polity depends on the way the governance system deals with the finally emerging political issues to do with striking a viable balance between national and frequently populist identity politics and inevitably continuing globalization. Instead of dealing with immigration and the EU by a populist blame game, the Netherlands and other countries as well need a serious, honest debate on all the fundamental political issues entailed. If the Netherlands must be a bellwether, let it be the inspiring first to engage in such debates in the run up to its own and other European countries' elections.

Robert Hoppe is emeritus professor of Knowledge and Policy in the Department of Science, Technology, Society and Policy (STePS) at the University of Twente. He co-authored the 2016

Netherland's report of the [Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators \(SGI\)](#) project.

Margarita Jeliakova is assistant professor in social science teaching at ELAN Institute, University of Twente.