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THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN THE NETHERLANDS
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Key Points:

- Turnout rose for the first time in a European Parliament election since 1979 (to 39.1%), but remained at only half the level recorded in the most recent national election.
- All three parties in the centre-right governing coalition (Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Democrats '66) suffered losses, though the Christian Democrats, by a narrow margin, topped the poll.
- The Labour Party showed a significant advance over its 1999 European Parliament election result. Overall, however, the main parties of the left failed to make gains relative to their level of support in the 2003 parliamentary election.
- The Transparent Europe list, led by EU 'whistleblower' Paul van Buitenen, made a major electoral breakthrough, taking 7% of the vote and 2 European Parliament seats.
- The campaign saw a continuation of a now well-established Dutch debate on 'the limits of Europe', referring to both the geographical boundaries of the European Union and the desirable limits of its policy competence.

Background/Context

The contours of Dutch politics changed markedly in the years separating the 1999 and the 2004 European Parliament elections. In 1999, the Netherlands had entered into the fifth year of the so-called 'purple coalition' government, bringing together the Labour Party (PvdA), the Liberals (VVD) and the Democrats '66 (D'66) under the leadership of Labour Prime Minister Wim Kok. The EP elections of that year appeared as, in many respects, a classic 'second order' election, with the Christian

Democrats (CDA) in particular making significant gains as the largest of the opposition parties to the governing coalition.[1] In the ensuing years, however, this comfortably familiar political landscape was to experience a series of tremors.

The May 2002 national election was the most eventful in modern Dutch history, marked by the meteoric rise of populist politician Pim Fortuyn, as well as by the tragedy of his assassination only nine days before the nation went to the polls.[2] The election also saw a crushing defeat for all of the parties in the outgoing governmental coalition. In July 2002, a new government was formed under Christian Democrat Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, composed of the Christian Democrats, the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), and the Liberals. Yet, the Pim Fortuyn List, bereft of its leader and formed in great haste, proved to be a particularly volatile partner in government, prone to bitter and very public infighting. It was, indeed, an instance of such infighting, prompting the resignation of two Fortuynist ministers in October 2002, which led to the downfall of the government after less than three months in office.

Following the collapse of the government, Dutch voters again went to the polls in January 2003 – and again produced a rather surprising result.[3] While support for the Pim Fortuyn List dropped sharply, the Labour Party proved able to make an unexpectedly rapid recovery under new leader Wouter Bos. The Labour Party trailed only very narrowly behind the Christian Democrats, apparently setting the stage for the formation of a two-party government bringing together the Christian Democrats and Labour. Arduous coalition negotiations between the two parties, however, broke down in April 2003. This initial failure allowed the Christian Democrats to return to their expressed preference of seeking to form a government with the Liberals, though this necessitated the participation of a further coalition partner so as to secure a parliamentary majority. Ultimately, after initial discussions with the two small Christian parties present in parliament (the Christian Union – CU and the Political Reformed Party – SGP), it was the Democrats '66 who emerged as this partner. The Balkenende II government, composed of the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and Democrats '66, took office in May 2003.

The immediate party context of the 2004 EP elections was thus one of a centre-right government in office for a year, faced with an opposition predominately of the left. Within the opposition, the largest component is a Labour Party which had, in a revealing phrase, 'lost the formation' despite having made significant electoral gains in 2003. Beyond the immediate party line-up, however, it is the broader changes in the climate of Dutch politics which bear emphasis. Although the 2003 election appeared to mark a 'normalisation' of Dutch politics, in the sense of a return to a historically more normal distribution of support amongst the main national parties, this should not be allowed to mask the strong undercurrent of discontent with the governing 'cartel' which has made itself felt in recent years. There was clear evidence of a growing sentiment of scepticism as regards 'The Hague' which, *a fortiori*, extended across the border to 'Brussels'.

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[1] See further Henk van der Kolk, 'The Netherlands', in Juliet Lodge (ed.), *The 1999 Elections to the European Parliament* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 160-170.

[2] See further Robert Harmsen, 'Europe and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of May 2002', RIIA/OERN Election Briefing no. 3, at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper3dutch.pdf

[3] See further Robert Harmsen, 'Europe and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of January 2003', RIIA/OERN Election Briefing no. 9, at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper9dutch.pdf

The Campaign

The 2004 EP campaign in the Netherlands, as on previous occasions, was a low-key affair revolving around a mix of national and European issues. On the domestic front, the Labour Party most notably sought to cast the European ballot as a 'referendum' on the policies and record of the incumbent government. The Labour Party manifesto was structured around the central theme of a 'strong and social Europe',[4] thereby combining the presentation of its own, social democratic European project with a critique of the 'neo-liberal' tendencies of the governing coalition. Particular emphasis was placed on such issues as the preservation of public services and the need for a redefinition of the terms of the Stability and Growth Pact so as to place greater emphasis on economic growth and job creation. As regards both the European and the domestic agendas, Labour thus sought sharply to distinguish itself from what it portrayed as the 'deregulatory' and 'privatisation' agendas of the current government, most prominently associated with the Liberals and finance minister Gerrit Zalm.

Differences as regards Dutch policy over the Iraq war also figured in Labour's campaign against the record of the governing parties. Here, the lead candidate on the Labour Party list, Max van den Berg, repeatedly chided the government for the 'unthinking' (*klakkeloos*) manner in which it had fallen into line behind the Bush administration. Yet, by election day, the issue had significantly clouded over. The unanimous adoption of a UN Security Council Resolution on 8 June appeared to meet the conditions which the Labour Party had earlier set out as necessary if it were to support the continued presence of Dutch troops (first deployed in July 2003) as part of the stabilisation force in Iraq. The national Labour Party leader, Wouter Bos, nevertheless refused to commit the party one way or the other when pressed on its position during a televised leaders' debate on the night before the EP elections (though Labour did, after the election, come to support the government's proposal for an eight month extension of the troops' presence). As such, though both misgivings and opposition concerning the Iraqi conflict were definitely in the mix as part of the electoral campaign, it is rather unclear what effect they might have had on the outcome. It is clear, however, that the analysis which appeared in at least one British daily, presenting the election as having been dominated by the desire of anti-war voters to punish the government, is an untenable oversimplification.

While domestic issues inevitably played a major role, the European election campaign was nevertheless also significantly concerned with Europe. The campaign, in particular, was marked by the continuation of a now well-entrenched national debate on the 'limits of Europe' – referring to both the ultimate geographical borders of the European Union and the proper boundaries of its policy competence. As documented elsewhere,[5] European debate in the Netherlands has evolved in a markedly critical direction since the early 1990s. If the Netherlands long appeared to be one of the most reliable supporters of further integration, recent years have seen the increasingly

[4] The full texts of all party programmes have been archived on the web site of the Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen at the University of Groningen. See http://www.rug.nl/dnpp/verkiezingen/eu-p/2004/index

[5] See Robert Harmsen, 'Euroscepticism in the Netherlands: Stirrings of Dissent', in Robert Harmsen and Menno Spiering (eds.), *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration* (Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, 2004*), European Studies* no. 20, pp. 99-126.

public articulation of a sense that the present trajectory of the European project is no longer necessarily consonant with the 'national interest'. The size of the net national contribution to the European Union budget has fuelled a pronounced scepticism as regards 'Brussels' and its implied squandering of 'our money'. At the same time, the Eastern enlargement of the Union has been the subject of high-profile national debates. These debates reflected explicit concerns about the readiness of some of the new member states to assume the full obligations of membership, but also, if rather more implicitly, about the place of the Netherlands and its ability to defend its interests in a much larger grouping of states with a differing centre of gravity.

This growth of more sceptical sentiments found clear expression in public opinion surveys published on 1 May 2004, to coincide with the accession of the ten new member states to the EU. As regards the broad trajectory of the integration project, a poll commissioned by *de Volkskrant* found that 52% of those polled were in favour of a 'united Europe', as opposed to only 28% who opposed the idea. Tellingly, however, the more concrete question of whether further powers should be devolved to the European level produced a much more critical response. Only 30% of those polled supported further transfers of power to Brussels, while 43% opposed such transfers. The *Volkskrant* poll also revealed significant, persisting doubts concerning enlargement itself. Here, 34% saw enlargement as a positive development, as against 40% who saw it in negative terms. A broader sense of community with the new member states further appeared, at least at this initial stage, to be somewhat lacking. Asked if Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic 'belong with us' ('*net zo bij ons horen*') in the same way as Germany, France, and Belgium, a small majority of respondents answered in the negative. Similar findings also marked a poll commissioned by the *Algemeen Dagblad*, where 46% of those surveyed thought that EU enlargement would bring more disadvantages than advantages.

The general contours of the established limits of Europe debate were further accentuated in the first half of 2004 by two noteworthy interventions. In March, Frits Bolkestein, the Dutch member of the European Commission, published a book of interviews with prominent Europarliamentarians under the revealing title *De grenzen van Europa* – the borders of Europe. Bolkestein had already, while leader of the Liberals in the 1990s, established himself as one of the first prominent Dutch politicians to adopt a more openly critical posture towards the continued development of European integration. In the introduction to his 2004 volume, Bolkestein returned to these themes, arguing that the competences of the Union should be scaled back to a more limited range of activities. For Bolkestein, European-level policies should only be adopted insofar as they were required for the proper functioning of the internal market, allowed for the effective handling of cross-border issues, or benefited from obvious economies of scale. More controversially, the book also reiterated his view that Europe required clear and finite geographical borders, which excluded Turkey as well as Belarus and the Ukraine (countries which, it was argued, should be seen as forming part of a 'buffer zone' around the EU).

The debate surrounding the substantive limits of EU policy was also engaged in June 2004 by Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot. Bot, in a well-publicised speech delivered at the Humboldt University in Berlin, called for greater European 'self-restraint', citing a number of policy areas which he felt should be examined with a view to returning them entirely to national governments. The areas cited by Bot

encompassed cultural policy, aspects of the Common Agricultural Policy, the structural funds, health care, and social policy. In broader terms, the Dutch foreign minister also stressed the need to avoid 'undue regulation and intervention' from Brussels, which risked provoking a backlash of increasingly widespread non-compliance with European norms.

Within the EP campaign, the question of the geographical limits of Europe garnered comparatively little attention. The Liberals argued that no new member states should be admitted until 2009, so as to allow time for the EU to 'put its own house in order' prior to any further expansion. More generally, however, the potentially contentious issue of Turkish EU membership did not figure with particular prominence. Virtually all of the established Dutch parties expressed their acceptance in principle of this accession eventually taking place, while simultaneously stressing the need for the strict respect of the Copenhagen criteria, with particular reference to human rights. Only the combined list fielded by the two small Christian parties (Christian Union-Political Reformed Party) and the Pim Fortuyn List opposed the possibility of Turkish membership in principle. Hans Blokland, the lead candidate on the Christian Union-Political Reformed Party list, argued against membership for 'Asiatic Turkey' on the basis that this would set a precedent for the admission of other 'non-European countries'. The lead candidate on the Pim Fortuyn List list, Jens van der Vorm-de Rijke, added his own contribution to the limits of Europe debate, affirming that 'Europe ends at the last station on the Orient Express – which is before the Bosphorus'.

As regards the substantive limits of European integration, it is perhaps the issues raised by the Dutch 'policy of tolerance' (*gedoogbeleid*) concerning soft drugs which have the greatest symbolic resonance. Christian Democratic lead candidate Camiel Eurlings argued strongly during the EP campaign that the Netherlands would have to abandon this policy as part of the development of an effective, pan-European regime for tackling serious crime. He found support for this position, however, only from the Christian Union-Political Reformed Party, whose established opposition to a 'culture of tolerance' is clearly unconnected to wider European concerns. Conversely, Democrats '66 and GreenLeft heralded the exemplary character of the existing soft drugs policy, noting the extent to which the once distinctively Dutch approach to the question had increasingly come to inform the direction of policy in other European countries. In this vein, Kathalijne Buitenweg, the lead candidate on the GreenLeft list, accused Eurlings during a televised debate of seeking to cultivate a misperception of Dutch isolation in Europe merely as a pretext to bring about domestic policy change. Both the Liberals and the Labour Party, though acknowledging difficulties or inconsistencies with the existing policy regime, were nevertheless clear that it should remain exclusively a matter of national choice.

More general party attitudes towards the broad course of European integration may be captured with reference to the positions which they assumed relative to the European Constitution. The Democrats '66 again emerged as the most 'federalist' of the established parties. Lead candidate Sophie in 't Veld notably vaunted the merits of the party's 'European idealism' during the course of a televised list leaders' debate (on 2 June), arguing that 'D'66 is the only, true full-blooded European party'. As such, the party was a staunch advocate of the need for adopting a European constitution, a view in which it was broadly joined by both the Christian Democrats

and the Labour Party. By way of contrast, only rather more conditional support was forthcoming from GreenLeft. While the party expressed sympathy for the constitutional project in general, it nevertheless also gave voice to concerns that adequate attention had not been paid to the EU's underlying 'legitimacy crisis'. This stance, moreover, fitted the party's more general campaign leitmotif of being '*Eigenwijs Europees*' – a phrase which, in this context, suggests that it is 'stubbornly' pro-European on the basis of seeking to project its own vision of a more participatory and environmentally sensitive politics onto the European stage. A critical stance was also assumed by the Liberals. As the party's campaign literature pithily summarised their more general position on further European integration: 'The VVD is for Europe, but with borders'. This was reflected in the position assumed by Liberal lead candidate Jules Maaten as regards the European constitutional debate. While leaving the door open for eventual Liberal support, Maaten was nevertheless clear that this was contingent upon the extent to which the document, then still under negotiation, satisfied a number of key concerns: 'No constitution is better than a poor one'. Finally, opposition in principle to the constitutional project could be found towards both the right and the left margins of the Dutch spectrum. On the left, the Socialist Party (SP) made clear its opposition to a constitutional text which, in its estimation, served only to advance the progressive 'militarisation' of the EU and, more generally, to entrench 'a neo-liberal European superstate'. On the right, the Pim Fortuyn List rejected a constitution which it saw as a further step towards a 'federal Europe' and away from the desired preservation of 'a union of sovereign states, concerned above all with economic co-operation'. Hans Blokland, for the Christian Union-Political Reformed Party list, similarly affirmed that 'the European Union is not a state and for this reason has no need of a constitution'.

Beyond the increasingly critical turn of mainstream European debate, the constitutional issue thus also confirmed the existence of 'harder' forms of Dutch Euroscepticism. In varying ways, the small Christian parties, the Pim Fortuyn List, and the Socialist Party may all be described as hard Eurosceptic parties, in the sense of calling into question core aspects of the European integration project as it is currently conceived. Amongst the established Dutch parties, it was, however, the Socialist Party which appeared as the most effective exponent of these hard Eurosceptic views during the current campaign. The party, through slogans such as 'Silence is Consent' and 'Send a Watchdog to Brussels', clearly sought to canalise wider feelings of discontent about European integration. The latter slogan was, moreover, accompanied by probably the most effective visual image of the campaign – a television advertisement featuring an improbably small, but very feisty watchdog who becomes visibly agitated at his owner's feet while watching a European political broadcast. The advertisement then cut to scenes of the dog crossing the Netherlands on the way to Brussels, given directions and encouragement by his (or her?) compatriots, before arriving in front of the European Parliament building to bark – quite literally – objections at an unacceptable state of affairs.[6] Apart from ensuring a brief (and well-deserved) moment of fame for its canine star, the campaign sought to position the Socialist Party as a broader 'protest party' whose Eurosceptic appeal could potentially extend beyond its more traditional electoral base.

[6] The video may be viewed at http://europa.sp.nl/campagne2004/waakhond_naar_brussel.shtml .

In addition to the eight lists fielded by established parliamentary parties, a further six lists contested the 2004 Dutch EP election. These lists included a Democratic Europe list led by a dissident Liberal candidate, a regionalist Party of the North, and an Animal Rights Party. The 'outsider' who gained by far the most attention was undoubtedly Paul van Buitenen, at the head of the Transparent Europe list. Van Buitenen had first come to prominence in 1998-99, while a European Commission official, as the whistleblower (or 'bell-ringer' in a literal translation of the equivalent Dutch term) whose revelations concerning financial improprieties were one of the causes of the downfall of the Santer Commission. In van Buitenen's view, however, the intervening years had seen virtually no progress in the development of a more meaningful system of financial accountability within the European Commission. It was thus against this background that he founded the Transparent Europe list, as a means to secure a political platform within the European Parliament for his reform agenda. The movement defined itself as 'a-political' and avowedly 'single-issue', dedicated to instilling a stronger culture of transparency and accountability within the European institutions. To combat what it regarded as widespread fraud and impropriety in the disbursement of EU funds (affecting, by its estimates, nearly one-third of the total budget), the movement advocated a mix of both specific technical measures and the cultivation of a broader public awareness of the issues. Its self-appointed task was thus that of seeing through this specific reform agenda, and by doing so to render itself 'superfluous'. On this basis, Transparent Europe may be seen as, in some respects, a Eurosceptic movement, though this must be carefully tempered. It bears emphasis that the criticisms being put forward of the EU are certainly serious, but ultimately limited - it is the mechanisms of accountability within the European institutions which are being called into question, rather than the European integration project itself. Van Buitenen has, in this vein, revealingly spoken of both a persisting 'idealism' and a 'dose of scepticism' in his own attitude towards the EU. It might, nevertheless, reasonably be speculated that at least a portion of those who ultimately voted for Transparent Europe did so on the basis of rather less nuanced sentiments.

The Results

Table 1: Dutch European Parliament and National Election Results, 1999-2004

Party	% Vote 2004 EP Election + Seats (/27)	% Vote 2003 National Election	% Vote 2002 National Election	% Vote 1999 EP Election + Seats (/31)
CDA	24.5 (7)	28.6	27.9	27.0 (9)
PvdA	23.6 (7)	27.3	15.1	20.1 (6)
VVD	13.2 (4)	17.9	15.5	19.6 (6)
GL	7.4 (2)	5.1	7.0	11.9 (4)
ET	7.3 (2)	----	----	----
SP	7.0 (2)	6.3	5.9	5.1 (1)
CU	5.9 (2)*	2.1	2.5	8.8 (3)*
SGP	5.9 (2)*	1.6	1.7	8.8 (3)*
D'66	4.2 (1)	4.1	5.1	5.8 (2)
PvD	3.2 (0)	0.4	----	----
LPF	2.6 (0)	5.7	17.0	----

* Result for a combined Christian Union-Political Reformed Party list.

Party Index
CDA Christian Democratic Appeal
PvdA Labour Party
VVD People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Liberal)
GL GreenLeft
ET Transparent Europe
SP Socialist Party
CU Christian Union
SGP Political Reformed Party
D '66 Democrats '66
PvD Animal Rights Party
LPF Pim Fortuyn List

Dutch voters were amongst the first Europeans to go to the polls, on Thursday 10 June. The electoral system used for EP elections is the same as that employed for national elections, a highest average proportional representation system with seats allocated on the basis of a single nationwide constituency. While a list system is used, voters may express a preference for an individual candidate on a party list.[7] The results of the election were, in the Dutch case, released on the Thursday night – provoking strong criticism from the European Commission. The Commission argued that the Dutch government had violated European legislation, which requires that member states not release national results until voting has been completed across the

[7] If a candidate acquires a sufficient number of preference votes, it may allow him or her to move into an 'eligible' place on the list and thus to secure a parliamentary seat, in effect at the expense of a 'less preferred' candidate who had initially occupied a higher place. In the 2004 EP election, the exercise of this preference vote worked to the advantage of one candidate on each of the Christian Democratic Appeal, Labour Party, and Socialist Party lists.

Union (in the event, the night of 13 June). The Dutch government argued, in its defence, that confirmed national results were not made available until after the entire electoral process had been completed; it had only permitted the release of unconfirmed, local results.[8] While the Commission has threatened formal legal action, it has indicated that no action would, in any event, be taken until after the conclusion of the current Dutch presidency of the Council of Ministers at the end of the year.

Turnout in 2004, at 39.1%, rose for the first time since the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament. From a high of 57.8% in 1979, Dutch turnout in EP elections had progressively fallen until reaching a low of 29.9% in 1999 – the second lowest figure in the then 15 member states (after the United Kingdom). It can be safely assumed that the government's ill-starred public relations campaign concerning European integration, launched earlier in the year under the remarkably anodyne slogan 'Europe, Quite Important' ('*Europa. Best Belangrijk*'), played little role in reversing the historical downwards trend. Although a certain 'embarrassment factor' as regards the Netherlands' relatively poor showing on the European stage may have had some influence in encouraging voters to turn out, it is the broader changes in the Dutch political landscape over the past two years which likely played a decisive part. The dramatic developments in Dutch politics since 2002 have engendered something of a renewed interest in politics, as both the rise of a more prominent protest politics and a limited, attendant sharpening of differences between mainstream parties have allowed for the emergence of a somewhat broader range of choice in the electoral market place. These national trends can be seen to have spilled over into the European arena, producing, at least in relative terms, a higher level of public interest than might otherwise have been the case. Yet, the impact of these mobilising factors must also be carefully contextualised. While turnout rose by 9.2% between 1999 and 2004, the 2004 figure still represents only half that recorded in the most recent national contest (79.9% in the 2003 parliamentary election).

Turning to individual party performance, the 2004 election saw a mixed result for the Christian Democrats. Their share of the vote, at 24.5%, was down by 4.1% from their most recent national total and by 2.5% from their total, as the largest of the opposition parties, in the 1999 EP election. Given the overall reduction in the number of Dutch seats in the EP from 31 to 27, this drop in their vote further translated into a loss of 2 seats, down from 9 to 7. Yet, though something of a setback, the Christian Democrats nevertheless could content themselves with the symbolic victory of topping the national poll (edging out Labour by a little less than 1%) and also performing somewhat better on the day than the polls had been predicting through much of the

[8]Beyond differences of interpretation surrounding the specific requirements of the existing legislative framework, there are perhaps stronger arguments to consider as regards the balance of interests involved. The Commission argument is essentially that the early release of results risks unduly influencing voters elsewhere. Yet, given the relatively low levels of interest in EP elections, it would seem unlikely that this effect would be particularly pronounced. Balanced against this is the desirability of maintaining a reasonably immediate relationship between the act of voting and the publication of the results, both as a spur to turn-out and so as to remain consistent with the usual expectations of electors. In the present situation, it might reasonably be argued that the factor of 'immediacy' may be the more important, insofar as fostering an interest in the process would seem a more pressing policy consideration than concerns over possible distortions which might occur because of the avid, transnational tracking of results by large numbers of voters.

campaign (the party having hovered closer to the 20% mark until the final week before election day).

The obverse picture emerges as regards the Labour Party – a good result, but one which could be seen as falling below expectations. At 23.6%, its 2004 showing as the largest opposition party was more than 3% better than the result it had achieved in 1999, while the largest party in the purple coalition government. This allowed Labour to win an additional EP seat, equalling the Christian Democrats' total of 7. Yet, Labour's result was also down by almost 4% from its 2003 national election total and also well below the 30% which it had been polling for much of the campaign. Overall, the 2004 election confirmed the rapid revitalisation of the Labour Party under the national leadership of Wouter Bos, after hitting a historic low point in 2002 when its vote collapsed to only 15%. The result, however, fell somewhat short of clearly sustaining the Labour leadership's claim that the voters had delivered a vote of non-confidence in the government.

The Liberals were the biggest loser in the 2004 contest, seeing their vote drop by over 6% from their 1999 EP result and by over 4% from their 2003 national total. As a consequence, it lost 2 of its 6 EP seats. This loss is most immediately attributable two political crises which shook the party in the immediate run-up to the vote. Only days before the election, former Liberal leader Hans Dijkstal launched a vitriolic attack on the party's current leadership, publicly insulting the party's parliamentary leader, Josias van Aartsen. Substantively, Dijkstal's criticisms focused on what he termed the Liberals' adoption of a 'hard-line' immigration policy, stirring intense controversy by suggesting that the policy appeared to 'stir hate, criminalise members of ethnic minorities, and make the Netherlands ungovernable'. The party's problems were then further compounded, the day before the election, by the resignation of the Liberal junior minister for higher education, Annette Nijs. This resignation followed a very public personality conflict with her senior cabinet colleague, the Christian Democratic education minister Maria Van der Hoeven. The Liberals, going into the poll, thus looked to be a party in disarray – and paid the price. Beyond these immediate difficulties, however, parliamentary leader van Aartsen suggested that the party had also suffered because of having adopted an excessively pro-European approach during the campaign, relative to the expectations of its electorate. It was this, in his view, which had opened the door for the success of the Transparent Europe list (see below). Yet, given the strongly critical emphasis on the limits of Europe in the Liberal campaign, this analysis does not seem entirely sustainable. The Liberals, rather more, appeared to suffer from their own internal divisions – not only those which immediately made themselves felt in the last few days of the campaign, but also a deeper and longer running conflict between van Aartsen and Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm over the effective leadership of the party.

Transparent Europe was, indeed, amongst the clear winners of the election. Despite having only very limited financial and organisational resources, the list led by Paul van Buitenen was able to take 7.3% of the vote and 2 EP seats. This was one of the major surprises of the contest, and one which could be seen as reflecting the growth of critical sentiment as regards both the national political establishment and the direction of European integration.

The electorate's receptivity to newer political movements also found expression through support for the Animal Rights Party. Founded in October 2002, the party had passed largely unnoticed in the 2003 parliamentary election, when it won only 0.4% of the vote. In 2004, by way of contrast, it took over 3% of the vote (and over three times as many votes in absolute terms), failing to win a seat by only a relatively narrow margin.

Amongst the smaller established parties, the Socialist Party emerged as the lone clear winner. At 7% of the vote, the party gained almost 2% relative to its 1999 total and, more importantly, a second seat in the European Parliament. The Socialist Party's progress can again be seen as reflecting an undercurrent of protest, though in this case translating recent national gains into the European arena.

For GreenLeft, Democrats '66, and the Christian Union-Political Reformed Party combined list, the 2004 election produced rather more mixed results. Relative to the 1999 EP election, GreenLeft saw its vote drop off significantly, a loss of more than 4% costing the party 2 of its 4 seats. Nevertheless, the 2004 election did break a string of 3 consecutive national contests in which GreenLeft's support had declined; the party could console itself on election night with a gain of slightly more than 2% since 2003.

Democrats '66 similarly lost support relative to 1999. A decline of 1.6% cost the party 1 of its 2 European seats. While undoubtedly a setback, Democrats '66 nevertheless escaped the fate of being entirely eliminated from the EP, a fate which the polls had been indicating as a distinct possibility.

The Christian Union-Political Reformed Party list also saw its support decline relative to the previous European election, down from 8.8% to 5.9%. As a result, the small Christian parties lost 1 of their 3 European seats. Allegations of financial improprieties surrounding the list's sitting MEPs no doubt played a role in the parties' declining fortunes. The European performance of the combined list was nonetheless better than the results attained, cumulatively, by the two parties in recent national elections. This better European result may, however, be in large part attributed to the higher than average electoral participation rates of the core Christian Union and Political Reformed Party electorates.

Finally, the 2004 EP election marked yet another stage in the precipitous decline of the Pim Fortuyn List. The party was able to win only 2.6% of the vote. This represented less than half its result in the 2003 legislative election, and only a fraction of the 17% which it had won in the 'earthquake election' of 2002. The contrast is even starker when seen in terms of absolute numbers of voters. While over 1.6 million voters had supported the Pim Fortuyn List in 2002, only two years later this figure had dwindled to a little over 120,000. Even when the much lower turn-out at the EP election has been factored into consideration, the evidence nevertheless still points to the virtual electoral collapse of the movement.

Conclusion

The 2004 European Parliament election in the Netherlands displayed many of the classic characteristics of a second order election, but with significant qualifications.

The election unquestionably saw the success of new and smaller 'protest' parties. Indeed, one can easily make the case that 1 in 5 Dutch voters cast a protest vote, in the sense of supporting parties with clear Eurosceptic and/or anti-establishment agendas (Transparent Europe, the Socialist Party, the Animal Rights Party, and the Pim Fortuyn List). This total is well above the votes registered by such parties in the 2003 parliamentary election or relative to any longer-term national norm. Yet, it should also be noted that both the level and the impact of protest voting in 2004 fell significantly below that seen in the 2002 national parliamentary election, when the Pim Fortuyn List first burst onto the Dutch political scene. Similarly, while the electorate can be seen to have sanctioned the incumbent government, this too bears qualification. Support for the three governing parties was markedly down relative to that which they had won in the 2003 national election. The Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Democrats '66 saw their cumulative level of electoral support drop by 8.8% (from 50.6% to 41.8%). Nevertheless, these government losses did not translate into overall gains for the main opposition parties. The combined left (Labour, GreenLeft, and the Socialist Party), on the contrary, actually saw a very slight drop in its cumulative share of the vote (down from 38.7% to 38.0%).

In this vein, the election is perhaps better understood not so much as a second order election conforming to a distinctive electoral logic, but rather as more of a secondary confirmation of the national political trends manifested in the 2002 and 2003 parliamentary elections. Three such trends merit attention. First, as noted above, the 2004 election saw a significant incidence of protest voting, in keeping with the pattern of recent Dutch elections. There is, as noted in the introduction, clearly a strong undercurrent of anti-establishment opinion which has take hold in the Netherlands. This found particular expression in opposition to the development of the so-called 'sorry democracy', whereby, as critics of the established parties would put it, a culture of apology had replaced more fundamental notions of political accountability. It is against this background that the success of Transparent Europe may be understood. While specifically concerned with European institutions, its singular focus on the theme of accountability was nevertheless one which easily struck a more general chord in the country.

Second, the 2004 campaign confirmed the heightened salience of the left-right cleavage in current Dutch politics. As the brief account of some of the major campaign issues above will attest, Dutch politics remains resolutely multi-dimensional – with the country's multiplicity of parties grouping themselves in different ways around different issue clusters. Nevertheless, the current configuration of a clearly centre-right government and an opposition very largely composed of parties of the left, resulting from the failure of an attempt to form a Christian Democrat-Labour Party government 'across the centre', has created a heightened sense of opposition between competing 'neo-liberal' and 'social democratic' projects. This opposition corresponds to a deeper demand in the electoral marketplace for greater 'choice', after the blurring of traditional boundaries in the later years of the purple coalition governments. A consequent propensity to project individual party platforms around 'left' and 'right' alternatives was clearly visible in the 2004 campaign, and is likely to occupy a prominent place in structuring political competition – and perhaps even more political rhetoric – over the medium term.

Third, the EP campaign was also marked by a continuation of a now well-established national debate concerning the limits of Europe. The nature and significance of this debate, as expressed both in the current campaign and more generally, must nonetheless be carefully specified. Forms of hard Euroscepticism, calling into question the foundations of the integration project, unquestionably exist towards the margins of the Dutch party system. Yet, by way of contrast, much of what has been termed Euroscepticism, as regards more mainstream positions, may be better understood in terms of the Europeanisation of national political debate. Dutch parties have increasingly absorbed a European dimension into their national political agendas – variably both supporting and questioning European policy in light of its (non-) correspondence to their nationally determined policy goals. With that Europeanisation, there has inevitably been a rise in critical sentiment concerning the European Union, as particular policy choices are called into question. To term such critical stances as Eurosceptic, however, appears a misnomer. Rather, such critical engagements with European issues mark the entry of a stronger European dimension into 'normal' political life. While the limits of Europe debate thus signals the end of a certain 'federalist' tenor in Dutch European discourse, it also, rather more centrally, marks the embeddedness of Dutch political structures within those of the evolving European system of multi-level governance.

It is against this background that a consultative referendum will take place in the Netherlands on the Treaty Establishing a European Constitution, likely in the first half of 2005.[9] A campaign of this sort is very much uncharted territory in modern Dutch politics. No national referendums or plebiscites have, in fact, taken place since the Napoleonic period. There has, particularly in foreign media, been much speculation as to the possibility of a No vote. Certainly, the growth of both anti-establishment and Eurocritical sentiments would seem to point to a negative result as a possibility. Yet, these trends must be contextualised. Although relatively sceptical as regards the prospect of 'more Europe' (in the sense of an expansion of either membership or policy competence), Dutch public opinion nevertheless remains broadly favourable to the integration project as a whole. In the May 2004 Eurobarometer poll, 64% of those interviewed saw Dutch membership of the European Union as 'a good thing', well above the 48% average for the EU15.[10] There is also a strong party-based consensus which has emerged in favour of the Constitutional Treaty. The Christian Democrats, Labour Party, Democrats '66 and, after much hesitation, the Liberals have all announced that they will be campaigning for a Yes vote. This leaves the Socialist Party, the Pim Fortuyn List, and the Political Reformed Party together in the No camp, with the Christian Union leaning strongly towards a No vote and GreenLeft as yet undecided. The overall configuration of both public opinion and party positions thus creates a strong bias towards a favourable outcome in the referendum. The result cannot, however, be taken as a foregone conclusion – not the least in light of the recent volatility of the Dutch electorate. The referendum campaign will require an active engagement on the part of the Constitutional Treaty's proponents, putting forward a clear and critical case for its ratification in keeping with the character of

[9] The domestic legislative process necessary to establish the mechanisms for the holding of the referendum has not, at the time of writing, been completed. There is, however, a clear parliamentary majority in favour of the consultation taking place. Further information and updates are available from http://www.grondweteuropa.nl

[10] *National Report: The Netherlands*, *Eurobarometer* 61, Spring 2004, p. 16. Full report available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb61/nat_netherlands.pdf

recent Dutch debate on European integration. If they fail to rise to this challenge, the door may be opened to a backlash harnessing disparate elements of both domestic and European discontent. That little watchdog, shorn of specific partisan attachments, may just yet prove to have a bite as well as a bark.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html.