

ELECTION BRIEFING No.54 THE DUTCH GENERAL ELECTION OF JUNE 2010

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Key Points:

- The Dutch Parliamentary election of 2010 was held on 9 June 2010, about a year early due to the break-up of the fourth Cabinet of Prime Minister Balkenende over the issue of extending the presence of Dutch troops in Afghanistan.
- The turnout was, with 75.4%, lower than at the previous parliamentary election (80.4%). This is quite remarkable, as the election seemed to become a close race on the last few days of the campaign.
- In a neck and neck race the victorious Liberal Party managed to gather one seat more than the Labour Party, which lost a few seats in the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament (*Tweede Kamer*).
- The Christian Democrats of Prime Minister Balkenende suffered a historical loss, losing nearly half of their seats.
- The Freedom Party of Geert Wilders did better than expected in the final weeks of the campaign and was the major winner of the election. As a result the party became the third largest party in parliament, finishing ahead of the Christian Democrats.
- European issues played a minor role in the campaign. Instead, the campaign was dominated by socio-economic issues. The occasional references to 'Europe' were generally related to EU contributions and the European bail-out plan for Mediterranean countries.
- Due to the great fragmentation in the Dutch party landscape after the election, the formation of a stable governing coalition seems an arduous task ahead.

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Background/Context

The Dutch parliamentary election was held about one year ahead of schedule, due to the break-up of Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende's fourth government, a coalition between the Christian Democrats (CDA), Labour (PvdA) and the smaller Christian Union (CU). The cooperation between the two largest coalition partners could hardly be described as smooth and especially the personal relationship between Balkenende and Labour Leader and Finance Minister Wouter Bos seemed troubled. Disputes between the Christian Democrats and the Labour Party regularly occurred, for instance over labour market policy and over the government's reaction to a critical report on the Dutch position in the Iraq war. The coalition eventually collapsed due to disagreement about whether or not to withdraw the Dutch troops from Afghanistan. Labour, other than the other two coalition partners, stuck with the agreement reached in 2007 to withdraw. On 20 February 2010 the Labour Ministers resigned and Christian Democrat and Christian Union ministers carried on in a caretaker government. A new general election was scheduled for 9 June.

The government fell just a few weeks before the municipal elections on the 3rd of March, the result of which all of a sudden became a first serious opinion poll for the general election in May. Labour, which did very well in the previous local elections in 2006, lost almost a third of its seats in the local councils, but seemed relieved that the results were not as devastating as expected. Also the Socialist Party (SP) and the Christian Democrats suffered significant losses, while the Liberal Democrats (D66), the Liberals (VVD) and the Greens (GreenLeft, *GroenLinks*) extended their number of local council seats.

Much attention also went out to the performance of the Freedom Party (PVV). The party centred around its founder Geert Wilders, a former Liberal MP, is best known for its anti-Islam statements, anti-immigration stance and populist anti-establishment appeal. Previously, the results of the European Parliament election of 2009, in which the Freedom Party became the second largest party, had already shown that Wilders managed to build up a significant support base.² Also the local elections became a success, even though the Freedom Party only stood in two municipalities: The Hague, the nerve centre of national politics, and Almere. In the Hague, the party finished second behind the Labour Party and in Almere the Freedom Party even became the largest party.

A day after the municipal elections, Agnes Kant resigned as leader of the Socialist Party, following the post-election debate in which she had failed to leave a good impression. Opinion polls throughout the previous years suggested that the Socialist Party found it hard to retain the levels of support it received at the time of the 2006 general election (16.6% of the vote). Moreover, the resignation of the acclaimed party leader Jan Marijnissen in 2008 had

² See Van Kessel, S. and B. Crum (2009) 'The European Parliament Elections in the Netherlands, 4 June 2009', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network*, European Parliament Election Briefing Paper no. 28.

left a space that was hard to fill. Emile Roemer, a relatively unknown Socialist Party parliamentarian succeeded Kant with just three months to go to the general election.

Kant would not be the only prominent politician leaving 'the Hague'. On the 11th of March the Christian Democrat Transport Minister Camiel Eurlings declared he would leave politics in order to focus more on his family life. His departure was a blow for the Christian Democrats; the young and dynamic Eurlings was regularly referred to as 'crown prince' of the party and was, due to his roots, a popular candidate in the southern provinces.

The 11th of March was also marked by the death of Hans van Mierlo, the captivating co-founder of D66, the Liberal Democratic Party that from the outset promoted democratic reforms in the Dutch political system. The attention would shift away quickly, though, as the next day Wouter Bos, at least to the outside world, unexpectedly resigned as leader of the Labour Party. Just like Eurlings, Bos stated he wanted to spend more time with his family. Bos' retreat from politics was nevertheless well orchestrated, as Job Cohen, mayor of Amsterdam, presented himself as candidate leader later in the afternoon. Cohen did not receive any opposition and was indeed to become the new Labour leader.

During his period in Amsterdam, the composed and likeable Cohen was respected by many for his attempts to, in his own words, 'keep things together' (*'de boel bij elkaar houden'*). In this, he referred to the tensions between the 'native' Dutch citizens of Amsterdam and, most notably, the Moroccan minority population, which culminated in the murder of film director Theo van Gogh by an Islam fundamentalist in November 2004. On the other hand, Cohen was perceived to be too 'soft' by critics, wrongly trying to handle the street crime committed by Moroccan youngsters by, figuratively speaking, 'drinking tea' with their families, rather than by giving them proper punishment. Cohen, at least in public image terms, was thus in many ways the antithesis of Geert Wilders, who was known for his forceful crime-fighting language and confrontational stance against the Moroccan 'street terrorists'.

Labour seemed to benefit from the change in leadership. In the first weeks of March the main opinion pollsters (Synovate, Maurice de Hond, TNS NIPO) predicted quite different results if elections would have been held at that time, even though they all predicted a big loss for the Christian Democrats (from 41 of the 150 seats in 2006 to 24-29) and a smaller loss for Labour (from 33 seats to 24-27) – the Christian Democrats thus seemingly having to pay the greater prize for the breakup of the Balkenende IV coalition. Wilders, who had won 9 seats in 2006, was not far behind or, according to De Hond, even larger than the two former coalition partners. D66 and GroenLinks could also count on a large increase in their support. D66 went from a mere 3 seats in 2006 to a predicted 15-19 seats, GroenLinks from 7 to about 12. The Liberals remained quite stable (at around 20 seats) and the Socialist Party was expected to lose at least more than half of its seats (from 25 to 9-12). After Cohen was presented as the most likely new Labour leader, however, the party climbed in the polls to about 33 seats and was predicted to become the largest party in the weeks to come, at the electoral cost of, especially, D66.

The Campaign

The issues

The political parties presented their manifestos during April, even though the real campaign did not yet fully start. From the outset, the main questions that would dominate the campaign were in which way and to what extent each party was planning to cut public spending in light of the economic crisis and the growing budget deficit; one of the central issues being the tax relief on mortgage interest payments (*hypotheekrenteaftrek*, the ‘h-word’), a recurring issue in Dutch election campaigns. Critics argue that this policy is an unfair and expensive subsidy for (more affluent) home owners, whereas proponents fear negative effects for the housing market were the policy to be abandoned. Also raising the pension age, currently 65, amending the law on unemployment benefits and health care reforms were central issues in the campaign.

The Socialist Party, unsurprisingly, took the most left-wing approach on these issues, with the argument that low incomes were not responsible for the crisis caused by the excesses of neo-liberalism. Accordingly, the party, for instance, proposed a ceiling on mortgage interest relief, was against raising the pension age and did not want to touch unemployment benefits. Also the Labour Party presented a relatively left-wing programme, proposing to cap the tax relief on mortgages and to maintain unemployment benefits. It also opposed a more liberal labour market and proposed to introduce a new tax tariff of 60% for higher incomes. In contrast to the Socialist Party, however, the party was in favour of a gradual rise of the pension age and a reform of the student allowance system.

Consistent with its ecological roots, GreenLeft favoured a tax-increase for environmentally unfriendly businesses. In terms of socio-economic policies, the party proposed gradually abandoning the mortgage interest relief and cutting taxes for lower incomes, but was less unambiguously left-wing in proposing to limit unemployment benefits. Finally, also the Christian Union presented a left of the centre socio-economic programme, although its stance on moral-cultural issues was traditionally conservative.

D66 presented a more centre-right economic programme, involving larger spending cuts and no tax increase for higher incomes. The party also proposed to raise the pension age to 67 more swiftly than any of the other parties. Also D66, however, intended to reform the mortgage interest tax break. The Christian Democrats went further in their plans to cut spending, but were against touching the mortgage interest relief. Party leader Balkenende even went as far as making this latter policy a red line-issue (*breekpunt*) in terms of potential future coalition talks. Liberal leader Mark Rutte refused to go that far, even though also the Liberals were against amending the mortgage interest tax break. The party was also traditionally in favour of tax-cuts and proposed the most far-reaching spending-cuts plans, for instance touching on EU contributions and development aid. The Liberals further proposed preventing the inflow of low educated immigrants without positive labour market perspectives and bogus asylum seekers (‘economic refugees’).

Although Wilders' Freedom Party has been regularly depicted as a far-right party, this label hardly applied to the proposed socio-economic policies in its 2010 manifesto. Wilders had always been against raising the pension age, but generally favoured a smaller state and a flexible labour market. In 2010, however, the Freedom Party called for the preservation of the welfare state and was against easing the rules for laying off employees, amending unemployment benefits and more marketisation in the health care sector. At the same time, however, Wilders' party was against abolishing the mortgage interest relief and in favour of tax cuts and deregulation for business entrepreneurs.

Apart from socio-economic issues, much of the manifesto was filled with Wilders' populist rhetoric. After the surge of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the collapse of his party after his assassination, Wilders' Freedom Party had become the main populist successor in the Netherlands.³ Accordingly, the Freedom Party stated that it sided with the ordinary men and women – in the campaign Wilders used the 'commonplace' Dutch names Henk and Ingrid in order to personify these people - other than the dominant left-wing elites. Finally, Wilders' familiar themes 'Islamisation' and (the alleged extensive costs of) 'mass-immigration' frequently returned.

Rita Verdonk, a former Liberal Immigration Minister, participated in the election with a similar populist programme, although her appeal was much less focussed on the issue of 'Islamisation'. She would hardly play a visible role in the campaign, however, even though she managed to score a 'YouTube hit' with her remarkable campaign video that pictured a rather grim image of present-day Netherlands⁴. Finally, also the SGP, an orthodox Christian Party, and the Party for the Animals (PvdD), a party mainly defending animal rights, played a minor role in the election campaign

(The limited role of) 'Europe' in the campaign

The issue of European integration played only a very minor role in the election campaign, despite the high-profile news about the economic crisis in Greece, the European Union bail-out plan and, in particular, the considerable potential Dutch contribution to the emergency financial aid package. Wilders sporadically referred to it, arguing that no tax payer money should be spent on a country that had been lying about its budget for years. This position was consistent with the more general Eurosceptic appeal of the Freedom Party.

The Liberals also conveyed a rather Eurosceptic message in proposing to cut the Dutch contribution to the EU budget, even though the Liberals did not reject European (economic) cooperation more generally. The most Europhile message, on the other hand, came from D66; party leader Pechtold occasionally stressed the need for a 'strong Europe'.

³ Van Kessel, S. (2010) 'Swaying the disgruntled floating voter. The rise of populist parties in contemporary Dutch politics', *Sussex European Institute Working Paper*, no. 113.

⁴ See (recommended): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8huCnzOxfg>

In most instances, however, the issue of ‘Europe’ was simply framed in financial terms, whereas a debate on more specific elements of European integration generally remained absent. Moreover, for those who followed the campaign news without actually reading the manifestos, it could not have been easy to pinpoint the precise position of all the competing parties with regard to European integration.

The campaign warms up

After all the programmes were presented, the campaign news was marked by some weak television appearances of Labour’s Job Cohen. One of the alleged weaknesses of Cohen was his lack of economic knowledge and, when asked about some random economic figures in the current affairs programme *NOVA* on April 26, the seemingly uptight Cohen failed to give the answers or to dodge the questions in a witty manner. Also in the following TV debates Cohen regularly tripped over his tongue when trying to lay out his party’s position. The polls also showed that the positive effect of Labour’s leadership change started to wane; Labour’s leading position in the polls came under pressure and a few pollsters gave the party less than 30 seats at the end of May.

To make matters worse, confusion arose about Labour’s plans to gradually raise the pension age, which, according to its programme, was to start in 2020. However, this was not the year provided to the Central Planning Agency (CPB), which traditionally calculates the economic effects of each of the parties’ manifestos. Instead, the year 2015 was used in the CPB calculations, leading to a more positive outcome for Labour in terms of government expenditure. The pre-election CPB figures are treated very seriously, meaning that Dutch election campaigns are to a large extent focused on technocratic calculations rather than political choices, and parties generally aim to spin the results in their favour. Labour, however, was now attacked for flip-flopping, a critique that had been sticking to the party since the previous general election campaign.

The Christian Democrats also had their problems. In May, the polls still indicated that the Christian Democrats would gather well under 30 seats. Before, the question had already risen whether it was a smart move to re-elect Balkenende as party leader yet again. Many citizens seemed to have become a little ‘Balkenende-tired’ after eight years of his Prime-Ministership. Another blow for the Christian Democrats came when Jack de Vries, Defence State Secretary and Balkenende’s political adviser, resigned on 14 May after admitting an extra-marital affair with his personal aide. De Vries himself had become a prominent party figure, but subsequently disappeared from the campaign’s forefront.

Geert Wilders did not seem to fare too well either. In the polls in May the Freedom Party hovered at around 17 seats and did not seem to be in the race to become the largest party anymore. The party had been criticised for not taking the responsibility to enter the administrations of the municipalities it competed in at the local elections. Also the fact that socio-economic issues - thus not Wilders’ signature issues related to immigration and integration - were the dominant themes of the campaign seemed disadvantageous to the

Freedom Party. Wilders also seemed unable to preserve the unity in his party. In a current affairs talk show Freedom Party MP Hero Brinkman – who was placed relatively low on the party list – called for democratisation of the party. Moreover, Brinkman criticised the idea of his party supporting a minority government – Wilders previously stated this could be a possible scenario – and plainly asked people to cast their personal votes for him. Brinkman did not inform Wilders about his planned statements and seemingly caused the first turmoil within the party, even if Wilders reacted calmly in his public appearance the next day.

The Liberals, on the other hand, did experience a surge in the polls. The party's support levels had started to grow in April and by the second half of May the party, with about 37 prospected seats, took a steady lead over the other main parties. The Liberal Party had never become the largest party in post-Second World War Dutch politics and was heavily divided after the previous general election. With the election drawing near, however, Rutte's party, with its tough spending cuts and immigration message, managed to appeal to a substantial amount of voters. The Christian Democrats and Wilders appeared to be the main victims of the rather unanticipated Liberal surge.

The campaign truly reached its pinnacle once a series of television debates between the leaders of the (larger) parties commenced at the end of May. These debates, which would prove to be rather repetitive, again mainly focused on socio-economical issues and how the parties planned to deal with the economic crisis. Labour and, especially the Socialist Party, presented themselves as the parties that would not cut spending at the cost of the lower income groups. Wilders similarly did not want the ordinary hard working people to become the victims of the crisis, while he proposed to save a substantial amount of money by putting an end to 'mass-immigration'. GreenLeft and D66 stressed the need to modernise the Dutch labour market, while the Liberals were most radical in their appeal to cut spending in order to revive the Dutch economy. The Christian Democrats positioned themselves in between the Labour Party, which allegedly did too little to deal with the crisis, and the Liberals, who allegedly had too little eye for the social costs of spending cuts.

An item of current affairs programme *Netwerk* on 28 May actually calculated the effects of the proposed Liberal Party's policies on the purchasing power of different income groups, including people relying on welfare benefits. The programme showed how a woman belonging to the latter group burst into tears after hearing the detrimental results of the calculations. VVD leader Rutte reacted angrily and criticised *Netwerk's* calculation methods, but the broadcast reinforced the image of a socially harsh Liberal Party.

Whereas Labour leader Cohen made a shaky appearance in the first TV debate on the 23rd of May, four days later it was Christian Democrat leader Balkenende who slipped-up. After the female presenter repeatedly asked which coalition Balkenende would prefer, he finally tried to dodge the questions by saying: "you have such a sweet look in your eye" ("*U kijkt zo lief*"). This was perceived by many as a rather sexist remark – GreenLeft leader Femke

Halsema even allegedly stated that she would have ‘kneed’ Balkenende if he had said this to her.

On the 31st of May Balkenende was actually more clear and stated that his preferred coalition would consist of the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, D66 and GreenLeft, as these parties would be most willing to reform. Strangely enough, D66 and GreenLeft were parties eager to reform the mortgage interest relief, whereas Balkenende, unwilling to reform, repeatedly marked this as a red-line issue. D66 leader Alexander Pechtold, on the other hand, was very clear in desiring a new ‘Purple’ coalition – the first two Purple Cabinets governed from 1994 to 2002 - including Labour, the Liberals and D66. If required for a parliamentary majority, GreenLeft could also join a so-called ‘Purple plus’ coalition. Wilders was also clear in preferring to join a coalition with the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. These were, as a matter of fact, also the only major parties that did not rule out a coalition with Wilders. Labour, on the other hand, did not go further than wishing for a coalition that was as ‘progressive’ as possible. The Liberals, finally, remained very reluctant to state their preferences, but leader Rutte repeatedly mentioned that a coalition with Labour would be difficult, due to the large programmatic differences.

Whereas the strategy of the Christian Democrats of presenting themselves as the ‘reasonable’ alternative to both the Liberals and Labour seemed plausible, their number of seats in the opinion polls did not pick up. Things got worse when, on the first of June, the news media reported that anonymous prominent Christian Democrat members did not believe in a victory for their party anymore. Party leader Balkenende, however, remained unflappable – a character trait he often showed as Prime Minister before – declaring that, being from the stormy province of Zeeland, he was used to ‘cycling against the wind’. However, on a subsequent campaign trip to the village of Volendam, Balkenende again made an awkward impression by positively responding to the request of a local anti-drugs pressure group to wear a t-shirt reading ‘fuck drugs’ (and being photographed with it whilst having a beer).

On the other hand, Emile Roemer, the formerly unknown Socialist Party leader, attracted positive attention with his performances in the TV debates. His, regularly droll, one-liners were perceived to be witty and he managed to convey his party’s programme in a clear way. As a consequence, the party experienced a modest come back in the polls, even though the party was still predicted to lose about half of its seats. Wilders also made a strong impression in the last debates, but the final polls still suggested he would ‘only’ receive about 18 seats in the election.

Lastly, in the final stages of the campaign Labour Party leader Cohen managed to regain his composure to some extent and halted the downward spiral in the polls, which at this time suggested Labour could expect to receive about 30 seats. What is more, in the very last days prior to the election, it seemed that the election would end up in a close race after all, as the Liberal lead was shrinking. Pollster Maurice de Hond predicted that the Liberals were only four seats ahead with one day to go until the election.

The Results

It would become a nail-biting election night. The first prognosis on the basis of exit-polls indicated that both Labour and the Liberals would gather 31 seats. The main question became which party would become the largest party and, a bit precipitately, who would become the next Prime Minister: Rutte or Cohen? Perhaps more interestingly, for a long time it was unclear whether the most likely coalition including the Freedom Party (Liberals-Freedom Party-Christian Democrats), which won more seats than expected, could count on a majority.

Table 1: Dutch 2010 General Election results.

Party	% Vote 2010	Seats 2010	% Vote 2006	Seats 2006	Change % (Seats)
Liberals (VVD)	20.5%	31	14.7%	22	+ 5.8% (9)
Labour (PvdA)	19.6%	30	21.2%	33	- 1.6% (3)
Freedom Party (PVV)	15.5%	24	5.9%	9	+ 9.6% (15)
Chr. Democrats (CDA)	13.6%	21	26.5%	41	- 12.9% (20)
Socialist Party (SP)	9.8%	15	16.6%	25	- 6.8% (10)
Democrats '66 (D66)	7.0%	10	2.0%	3	+ 5.0% (7)
GreenLeft (GL)	6.7%	10	4.6%	7	+ 2.1% (3)
Christian Union (CU)	3.2%	5	4.0%	6	- 0.8% (1)
Orth. Protestants (SGP)	1.7%	2	1.6%	2	+0.1% (0)
Animal Party (PvdD)	1.3%	2	1.8%	2	- 0.5% (0)
Others	1.1%	0	1.1%	0	-/+ 0.0 (0)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>150</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>150</i>	

Data from: Kiesraad (<http://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl>)

Only around 3 AM, with most votes counted, a stable one-seat gap between the Liberals and Labour, in favour of the former, appeared to have materialised. Afterwards, the final results would not change anymore (see table 1), meaning that the Liberals indeed became the largest party with 20.5% of the vote and 31 seats. This was an amazing and quite surprising recovery after difficult years for the Liberals; in the European election a year earlier the party had only gathered 11.4% of the vote (see Van Kessel and Crum 2009).

Labour followed with 19.6% of the vote and 30 seats, causing mixed emotions within the party's camp. The party had done better than many had foreseen about half a year ago, but

when Cohen was announced as the new party leader it seemed Labour could certainly aim for more than it eventually got.

Wilders' Freedom Party, undoubtedly the biggest winner, became the third largest party with 15.5% of the vote and 24 seats. Similar to the situation in 2006, Wilders gathered more seats than expected beforehand. As Wilders had predicted himself, it seems likely that a substantial amount of voters had been reluctant to tell the opinion pollsters that they were inclined to vote for the, widely frowned upon, Freedom Party. In this way, the pollsters clearly underestimated the amount of Freedom Party votes and, at the same time, seem to have overestimated the amount of votes for the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. An analysis of research institute Synovate also indicates that many former Liberal and Christian Democrat voters defected to Wilders, but that the same applied to former Labour and Socialist Party supporters⁵. The support for Wilders also came from a large group of previous non-voters.

The Christian Democrats suffered a disastrous defeat. Their eventual vote share of 13.6% allowed them to occupy a mere 21 seats in the new parliament, a dramatic all-time low. Previous to the merger of three Christian Democratic parties into the CDA in 1980, the largest of those, the Catholic People's Party (KVP), never gathered less than 27 votes by itself (in 1972). After the merger, the former low of the Christian Democrats was 29 seats in 1998. Compared to the previous election of 2006, the vote- and seat share of the party almost halved. Following Synovate, most ex-Christian Democrat voters turned to the Liberals, whereas also a substantial amount of the party's former supporters now voted for the Freedom Party.

Given the results, it did not come as a great surprise that, on the election night itself, Balkenende announced he would resign as party leader and would not take up his seat in parliament. The smaller Christian Union, the former coalition partner, actually failed to profit from the Christian Democrat's plunge and lost a seat itself.

The Socialist Party, gathering 9.8% of the vote, lost 10 of its 25 seats, but the loss was hailed with delight. The terrific election result in 2006, after all, seemed hard to equal and leader Roemer successfully managed to put his party back on track in the little time available to him prior to the election. According to Synovate, many former Socialist Party voters nevertheless defected to Labour, whereas the Freedom Party and GreenLeft also received support from a substantial amount of ex-SP supporters.

D66 and GreenLeft gathered 7.0% and 6.7% of the vote respectively, providing them both with 10 seats. For both parties this was a decent win and especially D66 managed to recover from its electoral blow in 2006, when the party only gathered three seats. Still, polls in the previous years suggested that their electoral support could have been larger. The two parties

⁵ See: <http://www.politiekebarometer.nl/pdf/winst%20en%20verlies.pdf>

had successfully presented themselves as the main antagonists of Wilders and this led to a good result in the ('second order') European election in 2009 where GreenLeft gathered 8.9% of the vote and D66 no less than 11.3% (see Van Kessel and Crum 2009). At the *moment supreme* of the 2010 general election, however, both parties failed to win over the same amount of voters. This, most likely, had to do with the popularity of Labour leader Cohen and the last-minute horse race between Labour and the Liberals, which made a strategic Labour vote more appealing.

Finally, the orthodox Protestant Political Reformed Party (SGP) managed to mobilise its loyal conservative following once more and also the faunaphile Party for the Animals (PvdD) remained in parliament. Both parties retained their two seats.

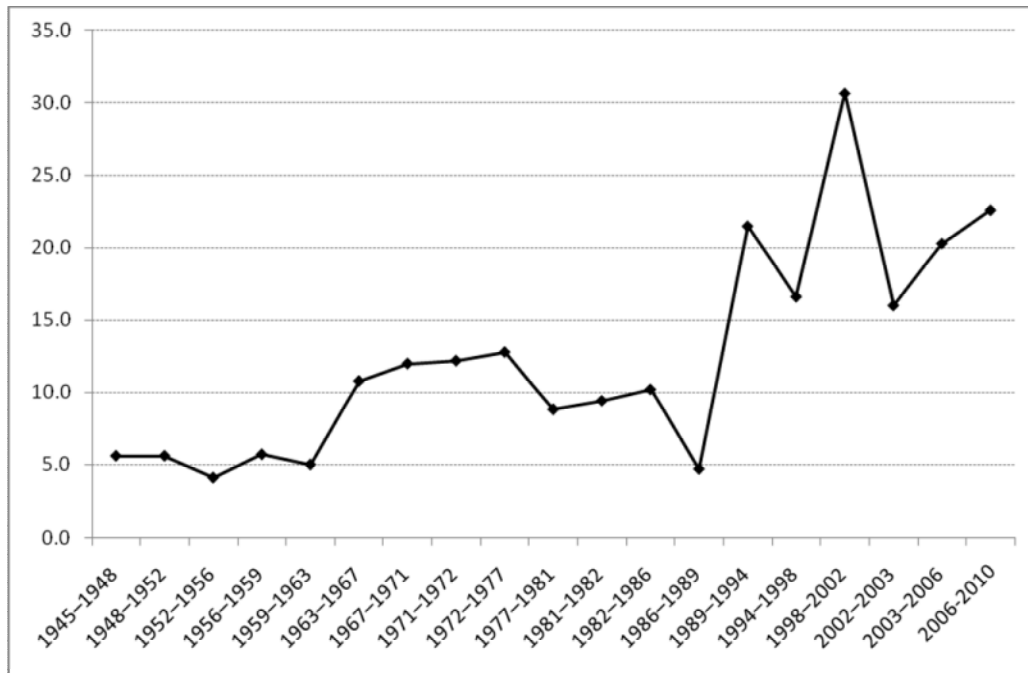
All in all, no new parties managed to enter the new parliament, whereas all parties that gathered seats in 2006 retained their presence. The official turnout figure would eventually be 75.4%, substantially lower than at the previous general election of 2006 (80.4%). Only at the general election of 1998 a lower turnout percentage was measured: 73.4%. This is quite remarkable, as the election seemed to become a close race on the last few days of the campaign. It was unclear which party would become the largest and also which governing coalitions would become possible. This would suggest that voters would be more stimulated to turn out and cast their vote.

Implications and Future Prospects

The Dutch general election of 2010 left the Netherlands with an incredibly fragmented parliament. An indication of this is that, despite its significant victory, the Liberal party became the largest party with the lowest number of seats (31) in Dutch parliamentary history; the previous record low being 37 seats for Labour in 1994. In addition, the combined amount of seats for the three traditional mainstream parties is telling. In 1959, when the number of seats in parliament was extended to 150, Labour, the Liberals and the three Christian Democrat parties KVP, ARP and CHU together gathered 142 seats. In 1981, after the three latter parties merged into the CDA, the traditional parties still gathered 118 seats, in 1986 even 133. In 2002, after the rise of Pim Fortuyn, the combined seat share of the Liberals, the Labour Party and Christian Democrat reached an all-time low: 90 seats⁶. But in 2010 the cumulative number of seats of these three parties was even lower; with 82 seats the traditional parties together just had a seven seat majority.

⁶ See Harmsen, R. (2002) 'Europe and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of May 2002, *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network*, Election Briefing Paper no. 3

Figure 1: Aggregate electoral volatility in the Netherlands



Source: Mair, P. (2008) 'Electoral Volatility and the Dutch Party System: A Comparative Perspective', *Acta Politica*, 43 (2-3), 235-253. Figure for 2006-2010 based on own calculations.

The election on 2010 was also marked by a high level of aggregate electoral volatility; the percentage of the vote shifting from one party to another (see figure 1)⁷. Thus, once more, a substantial part of the electorate voted for a different party than in the previous election, indicating that many voters do not feel attached to a particular party. This process of 'dealignment' has gradually advanced already since the 1960s, but only really materialised in unstable election outcomes since 1989⁸. Following Peter Mair, electoral volatility levels in the Netherlands are now even the highest in Western Europe⁹. Now that most people do not vote for a party that represents their particular social or religious group anymore – largely because the dividing lines between those traditional groups have essentially evaporated – the electorate has become much less loyal and much more available to any (new) party that is able to communicate a credible message. The extremely proportional Dutch electoral system, furthermore, provides ample room for new parties to gain representation.

⁷ The aggregate electoral volatility is measured as the cumulated (aggregate) gains in vote percentage of all winning parties in a given election. This generates the same results as calculating the cumulated (aggregate) electoral losses of all losing parties in the same election.

⁸ See e.g. Van Holsteyn, J. and G. Irwin (2003) 'Never a Dull Moment: Pim Fortuyn and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of 2002', *West European Politics*, 26 (2), 41-66.

⁹ Mair, P. (2008) 'Electoral Volatility and the Dutch Party System: A Comparative Perspective', *Acta Politica*, 43 (2-3), 235-253.

One of these parties has clearly been the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, which managed to gather a similar vote share (15.5%) as Pim Fortuyn's Party did in 2002 (17.0%). In particular Wilders' shift towards a more left-wing manifesto in terms of socio-economic issues seemed to have been a smart move. As Van der Brug and Van Spanje have argued, in Western Europe there is a substantial group of people who are left-leaning on socio-economic policies and right-leaning on immigration¹⁰. As in most other countries, in the Netherlands there was no party truly representing this group of voters, especially since the Socialist Party moderated its tough stance on immigration. It was thus a rationally sound decision for Wilders to amend his appeal. Indeed, as has been mentioned, the Freedom Party managed to win over many former, presumably 'left-wing', Labour and Socialist Party supporters. Also many former Liberal, Christian Democrat and non-voters cast their ballot on Wilders in 2010, however, indicating that Wilders truly had become a 'catch-all populist'.

In terms of future prospects, the election results have also provided a serious challenge to the political parties in forming a stable governing coalition, largely due to the fragmented character of the new parliament. At the time of writing, coalition negotiations are still in progress and the desire of Liberal leader Rutte – inspired by the, at least viewed through a Dutch perspective, brisk coalition formation in the UK in May – to finish coalition talks before the first of July has proven to be highly unrealistic. After the election, nevertheless, three majority coalitions seemed most likely or, perhaps more accurately phrased, least irrational.

Liberals-Freedom Party-Christian Democrats (76 seats): perhaps the most straightforward 'minimum winning' coalition at hand. Wilders seemed eager to try it out and, one day after the election, even announced that he was willing to compromise on the pension age issue, formerly a red-line issue for his party. However, after the immense electoral defeat of the Christian Democrats the CDA was reluctant to join coalition talks. Also the fact that many (prominent) party members expressed their clear disapproval of joining a coalition with Wilders explains the fact that the attempts to tempt the Christian Democrats to join coalition talks failed. Negotiations as regards this option have thus, at least for the time being, broken down. Also the fact that this coalition, with 76 seats, would only have the narrowest possible majority could be problematic, especially in view of the question whether Wilders will be able to preserve the unity within the Freedom Party.

Liberals-Labour-D66-GreenLeft (81 seats): the so-called 'Purple-Plus' option. For the Liberals this does not seem to be a very tempting option, however. Firstly, the Liberals would have to form a coalition with three more left-leaning parties (although the socio-economic programme of D66 actually seems quite centre-right). The Liberals would also face a strong opposition consisting of electoral rivals (the Christian Democrats and the Freedom Party), which might turn out to be costly at the next general election. Secondly, it does not seem an

¹⁰ Van der Brug, W. and J. van Spanje (2009) 'Immigration, Europe and the 'new' cultural dimension', *European Journal of Political Research*, 48 (3), 309-334.

easy task to bridge the socio-economic programmatic gap between, especially, the Liberals and Labour. This gap appears to be wider than in 1994 and 1998 when the first two Purple Cabinets were formed. Indeed, on 22 June, (initial) coalition talks broke down.

Liberals-Labour-Christian Democrats (82 seats): the grand-coalition that, however, is not that 'grand' anymore. As outlined, in historical terms this would be a rather peculiar coalition as the three traditional party families together used to control most of the seats by far. Times have obviously changed. Nevertheless, the problem of uniting Labour and the Liberals remains and the Christian Democrats still have to be convinced to join a coalition after all, even if this coalition may seem a bit less controversial. It further seems somewhat odd that the Christian Democrats and Labour would again form a coalition, as the former government actually broke down because these two parties repeatedly clashed. Finally, this variant could, especially by Wilders, be interpreted (and criticised) as the ultimate 'political establishment-coalition' between the parties – two of which who actually lost seats in the election - representing 'old politics'. Labour leader Cohen already declared that he is not willing to start negotiations over this option.

All in all, Dutch party politics has ended up in stormy waters and a stable government seems hard to form. The Christian Democrats are reluctant to join a coalition with Wilders, the Liberals are unwilling to try out the Purple-Plus variant and Labour has little appetite for the grand-coalition. At the same time, the Netherlands is not accustomed to minority governments, although it is unclear how such a minority alternative would make matters easier in the first place.

A central question with an eye on the longer run is how Wilders' Freedom Party will develop. If the Freedom Party stays out of government, many of his voters will be disappointed and Wilders can easily blame the 'political establishment' for building a *cordon sanitaire* around him. The next government, moreover, is unlikely to become a very popular government with the prospect of having to push through robust reforms. The breeding ground for extended Freedom Party success may thus well be created, although it remains to be seen whether Geert Wilders is able to keep his 24-person strong parliamentary fraction united.

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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>.