

ELECTION BRIEFING No. 71 EUROPE AND THE DUTCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, SEPTEMBER 2012

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Key Points:

- The Dutch parliamentary election was held on 12 September 2012, just over two years after the previous election in June 2010. The early election was due to the dissolution of the governing minority coalition between the Liberals and the Christian Democrats, after the populist radical right Freedom Party withdrew its support in April 2012.
- The turnout was, at 74.6%, relatively low.
- The election eventually turned out to be a battle between the incumbent Liberal Party and the opposition Labour Party. The majority of the votes went to either one of these parties, the Liberals just pulling ahead of the social democrats in the end.
- The radical left-wing Socialist Party was unable to expand its seat share, which was a disappointing result in view of its surge in opinion polls in the preceding months.
- The biggest losers were: the traditionally dominant Christian Democrats, the Freedom Party and the Green party ('GreenLeft').
- For the first time, 'Europe' played an important role in a national election campaign. Debates mainly revolved around handing over sovereignty to the European level and bail-outs for Greece and other troubled Mediterranean countries. In general, however, clear and consistent visions on the future of the EU were lacking
- Besides Europe, the campaign was mainly dominated by issues related to reforms and austerity measures and the future of the welfare state.
- At the start of November, a new coalition government was installed formed by the Liberals and Labour and Mark Rutte began his second term as prime minister.

Background/Context

On 12 September 2012 yet another early parliamentary election was held in the Netherlands, which meant that Dutch voters made their way to the polls for the fifth time in just over a

decade.¹ This new election for the Dutch Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*) was scheduled after Geert Wilders' populist radical right Freedom Party (PVV) withdrew support from the minority coalition comprising the Liberals (VVD) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) on 21 April 2012. As a result, the coalition lost its *de facto* majority in parliament. Mr Wilders refused to go along with the new austerity measures which were drafted after seven weeks of negotiation between the three parties involved. Budget cuts and reforms were deemed necessary to deal with the economic crisis and to comply with the EU's 3% budget deficit rule. Mr Wilders' argument for blowing up the governing coalition was that the elderly (who were alleged to particularly lose out from the proposed measures) were not supposed to suffer the consequences from the senseless dictates from 'Brussels'. This statement turned out to be a prelude for Mr Wilders' discourse in the campaign that followed.

Mr Wilders was harshly criticised by the two coalition partners and by the Christian Democrat deputy prime minister Verhagen in particular. The break-up of the government was very untimely, since the new budget had to be presented to the European Commission by the end of the month. Yet the urgency to devise austerity measures was felt by several parties in parliament, and the Lower House showed remarkable assertiveness in the days that followed. On 26 April 26, without much involvement from Liberal prime minister Mr Rutte, the Christian Democrats and the Liberal Party managed to strike a deal with three opposition parties: the social liberals (Democrats'66, D66), the greens (GreenLeft) and the Christian Union. The agreement between the five parties included measures such as: a gradual increase in the pension age, restricting the entitlement to mortgage interest relief, increasing personal health care contributions, freezing public sector wages, and increasing VAT. Oddly enough, the agreement was soon dubbed the 'Kunduz Agreement', since the five parties that signed up to it were the same which had previously supported a 'police mission' to the Afghan province of Kunduz in 2011. The involved parties themselves preferred to speak of a more merry-sounding 'Spring Agreement', but the Kunduz label proved hard to get rid of.

The most prominent parties that remained outside of the deal were the Labour Party (PvdA), the largest opposition party, the smaller radical left Socialist Party (SP) and, unsurprisingly, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party. The refusal of the moderate centre-left Labour Party to partake was most surprising. Newly elected leader Diederik Samsom motivated his party's position by arguing that the 'pain' caused by the austerity measures would not be distributed equally. The non-participation of Labour was generally interpreted as a strategic error, since the agreement could rely on the support of a clear majority of the Dutch population, and this was not different among Labour supporters. Labour was now grouped together with the reform-averse Socialist Party – the party was regularly disparagingly referred to as 'SP-light' at this stage - and the Freedom Party - which seemed even more painful from a social democratic point of view.

In the opinion polls, Labour was already trailing behind the Socialist Party since the start of 2012.² Under the leadership of Job Cohen, a well-mannered ex-mayor of Amsterdam, who

¹ For information about the previous campaign and election results, see: Stijn van Kessel, 'The Dutch General Election of June 2010', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network, Election Briefing Paper No. 54* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-54.pdf>.

² The campaign was again marked by what some might judge to be an overkill of opinion poll data from various sources. The most dominant pollsters were Ipsos Synovate (*Politieke Barometer*), Maurice de Hond's *Peil.nl*, TNS Nipo and *De Stemming* (of the current affairs TV programme *EenVandaag*). Leiden-based political

was hardly a political ‘street fighter’, Labour had been rather ineffective in opposition. Mr Cohen resigned in February. Despite previous successes, the Socialist Party, a former Maoist splinter party which entered Dutch parliament only in 1994, had never been the dominant party on the ‘left’. What is more, at one point the Socialist Party even appeared to threaten the leading position of the Liberals. The latter party, however, appeared to have no problems retaining, if not expanding, its support levels since the 2010 election. The Freedom Party, in turn, was expected to lose some of its 24 seats (out of the 150 Lower House seats in total). But even though the party was clearly blamed for the government’s breakup by other parties, the Freedom Party’s popularity in the polls did not truly plunge after April. The polls did indicate yet another loss for the Christian Democrats, after their historical low in 2010. The fact that the party had entered office relying on the support from the radical right Freedom Party was not appreciated by a substantial share of the Christian Democrat supporters. It was feared that the government had to make too many concessions to Geert Wilders’ party. About one-third of the members had actually voted ‘no’ during a party congress in October 2010, which was held to decide on the Christian Democratic participating in the minority coalition. As far as the three remaining Kunduz parties were concerned, polls in the first half of 2012 indicated that Democrats 66 was about to increase its vote share significantly, while the Christian Union remained stable and GreenLeft was heading towards a defeat.

The Campaign

After the break-up of the government, Mr Wilders vowed that ‘Europe’ was going to be the central theme of the campaign. As will be discussed, this might have been slightly overstated, since issues relating to austerity measures and the future of the welfare state also played a prominent role. That said, European integration-related themes never played a more dominant role in the run-up to a Dutch parliamentary election than they did in 2012.

The role of Europe in the campaign

‘Europe’ was arguably most visible in the manifesto of the Freedom Party, which was even titled ‘Their Brussels, Our Netherlands’. As the title suggests, Mr Wilders clearly took a Eurosceptic position. While Geert Wilders’ party had consistently conveyed an anti-EU message in previous years, for instance by opposing bailouts for Greece, by April 2012 Mr Wilders even called for a Dutch exit from the EU. It is worth mentioning that, unfortunately for Geert Wilders, the presentation of the Freedom Party manifesto on 3 July was hijacked by two Freedom Party MPs. Directly after Geert Wilders’ presentation, the two MPs announced their departure from the party and expressed their discontent with their former party leader’s authoritarian ways. As a result, the news coverage on that day focused more on the internal troubles of the Freedom Party, than on the party’s Eurosceptic manifesto.

Be that as it may, in electoral terms there was some scope for Mr Wilders’ Eurosceptic course. In the run up to the elections, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) found that, even though support for EU membership was still relatively high among Dutch citizens, satisfaction with the way that the EU functioned had decreased and further transfers of powers to Brussels were increasingly being perceived as a threat. Yet, while other parties

scientist Tom Louwse also devised the *Peilingwijzer* which presented the weighted means of the individual poll results.

also adopted critical stances towards European integration - for example, with respect to the loss of budgetary sovereignty - the Freedom Party stood alone in its intention to leave the EU altogether.

In general, all parties were largely in favour of the European project. Even the Socialist Party had 'softened' its stance towards the EU and acknowledged the benefits that 'Europe' brought in terms of peace, security and welfare. The socialists now mainly directed their EU-criticism towards the supposed neo-liberal course of the EU. Deciding on the party's course on Europe must have caused a bit of a headache for party leader Emile Roemer, as his electorate was clearly divided on the issue. If the EU would become an important issue in the minds of voters, a pro-European stance could potentially push the Eurosceptic part of the Socialist Party's electorate into the arms of the Freedom Party, while a full blown anti-EU campaign could imply losing voters to the more pro-European Labour Party. This resulted in a certain ambiguity in the Socialist Party's stance towards the European issue. In an interview, for instance, party leader Emile Roemer conveyed a more Eurosceptic message, stating that he would not accept financial sanctions if the Netherlands would fail to meet the EU's budgetary rules. 'Over my dead body', Mr Roemer declared – a statement which he half-heartedly qualified after severe criticism from opponents. On the other hand, the Socialist Party supported stricter control over national budgets and the financial sector by the European Central Bank (ECB). Mr Wilders clearly aimed to take advantage of this ambivalence – calling Mr Roemer 'half a Europhile' – as the Socialist Party's position left political scope for the Freedom Party's more unequivocal anti-EU appeal.

The radical position of the Freedom Party clearly set the stage. During previous campaigns 'Europe' had only played a minor role. In the debate, the issue appeared only sporadically and was mainly framed rather crudely in terms of being either in favour or against further European integration. Now that the Freedom Party called for an outright Dutch exit, other parties were forced to take a clearer position on Europe, seemingly providing voters with more of a choice as far as EU-related issues were concerned. While parties did quarrel about vital European issues, however, they were still largely unable to explain what their specific EU stances implied for the everyday lives of Dutch citizens.

Four specific European themes were dominant in the campaign: the rationale for European integration, the issue of national sovereignty, solutions to over-come the Euro-crisis, and the issue of institutional reform. As regards the first theme, the rationale for European integration, the Liberals were quite clear: 'Europe is about a strong market and a strong euro', as party leader Mark Rutte stated in a television debate in the run up to the election. On several occasions during the campaign, the Liberals made it clear that they did not find it necessary to develop a 'grand vision' on the future of Europe. This pragmatic view was also adopted by the Christian Democrats and the smaller Christian Union. These parties did, however, see Europe as a community of values, which they particularly emphasised when the issue of European enlargement was raised. Labour, in turn, rejected an exclusively economic and monetary vision of Europe. The party emphasised that the EU was more than a single market with a common currency and argued that Europe was in need of a 'social face'. Yet only Democrats 66 dared to express the view that the EU should eventually become a real political union. The party argued that only a federal Europe could safeguard Dutch interests as well as an effective role for Europe on the world stage. On the whole, however, most parties were reluctant to convey their vision – if they had one in the first place – regarding possible outcomes of European integration in the long run.

In fact, grand visions about the nature of the European project were submerged by debates about the desirability to grant further autonomy to supranational European institutions. Most parties were careful enough to stress that national sovereignty had to be preserved. Mr Wilders again took the most radical position by repeatedly claiming that, as long as the Netherlands still was an EU member, all powers were to be given back to the nation state. Yet also the Democrats 66, who envisioned a federal structure for Europe, expressed the wish to preserve sovereignty.

This marks the ambiguity, or even inconsistency, of the parties' application of the concept of sovereignty, especially where it concerned the desired approach to overcome the Euro-crisis. On the one hand, most parties argued that 'Brussels' should not be granted influence on issues related to social security and labour market policies. These seemed particularly sensitive electoral issues, since the largest part of the Dutch electorate did not desire EU-influence in these areas. On the other hand, most parties presented far-reaching solutions to solve the Eurocrisis, which clearly would imply less room to manoeuvre for national governments. Another outstanding example of EU-related inconsistency could be found in the position of the Labour Party. The party proclaimed to respect the principle of subsidiarity – implying that political decisions in the EU must always be taken at the lowest possible level – whilst at the same time promoting a European social agenda, including EU-wide rules on minimal wages. Protection of national sovereignty also appeared to be an empty plea from the Liberals, as they promoted the enforcement of strong budgetary discipline, if needed with EU-sanctions, and a strengthening of the internal market and Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Even the Socialist Party, guardian of the Dutch social security system and antagonist of a European 'super-state', endorsed granting the European Central Bank (ECB) and the Commission greater powers in order to control financial markets. In more general terms, however, all parties except the Freedom Party agreed that the European crisis could only be dealt with by means of European co-operation, even if this meant a further transfer of power to Brussels. As such, the Freedom Party clearly stood alone by proposing to leave the EU, and other parties criticised Mr Wilders for being naive and opportunist, and for putting Dutch jobs at stake.

In the debate on the EU's alleged democratic deficit, the issue of national sovereignty played a prominent role as well. While some parties opted for European institutional reform, others argued that such European solutions would further undermine the powers of national parliaments. Using this line of reasoning, the Freedom Party even called for the abolishment of the European Parliament (EP). The party adopted the view that strengthening democracy at the European level would only make matters worse. Power had to be given back to the citizens, for example by giving them the opportunity express their opinion about future Treaty reforms by means of a referendum. The Liberals and Christian parties did not share the Freedom Party's more radical views, but they also had their reservations about European institutional reform. The parties argued that the power of the national parliaments had to be increased in order to protect national sovereignty. On the other hand, Labour, Democrats 66 and GreenLeft – the latter two being the most explicitly Europhile parties – made some far-reaching proposals to strengthen democracy at the EU level. These included, for example, the introduction of European candidate lists and proposals to increase citizens' influence on the composition of the executive, by means of either a direct or an indirect election of the Commission President.

Other prominent campaign issues

Besides Europe, other dominant campaign themes were mainly related to the austerity measures necessary to cope with the prevailing economic crisis, and related reforms of the welfare state. Even though these issues were not unrelated to the European crisis, they were not always framed in terms of this. It was no surprise that the governing Liberal Party developed a right-wing socio-economic programme, which favoured a smaller state and lower taxes. The party emphasised the importance of budgetary discipline and aimed to respond to the crisis by, for instance: raising the pension age (sooner than stated in the Kunduz Agreement), increasing personal health care contributions and cutting down the development aid budget. Concerning labour market policies, the Liberals favoured restricting the duration of unemployment benefits entitlement and easing the rules for laying-off employees. As regards a hot topic in Dutch campaigns, the Liberals intended to preserve the tax break for current home owners with a mortgage, but to make entitlement conditional for new home buyers.

The Christian Democrats, the former coalition partner of the Liberals, proposed socio-economic measures not dissimilar to those of their erstwhile government colleagues (although the Christian Democrats did not intend cutting the development aid budget). The party also proposed introducing a 'flat' income tax (yet people with high incomes would still have to pay more). Party Leader Van Haersma Buma further intended to stimulate a 'new morality' in society. Counteracting corporate greed among bankers was often used as an example of this, but for the rest it did not become entirely clear how this aim would translate into concrete policies.

Democrats 66, one of the smaller Kunduz partners in opposition, primarily stood out by its previously discussed pro-European attitude. In addition, the party traditionally emphasised its aim to invest more money in education. Democrats 66 further intended raising the pension age relatively soon (although not quite as soon as the Liberals), and the party proposed more radical reforms of the mortgage interest relief law than the Liberals and Christian Democrats. GreenLeft, in turn, intended to eventually get rid of this tax break altogether. The party further conveyed its usual pro-European, environmentalist and socially liberal message. As with the other Kunduz parties, the Christian Union programme was broadly in line with most of the agreed upon austerity measures, although it put a particular emphasis on Christian moral values (more explicitly so than the Christian Democrats).

Labour and the Socialist Party were not tied to the agreements made in April and were much less committed to short-term budgetary discipline in order to comply with the European rules. Labour nevertheless intended to fill the budget deficit by 2017. The party also proposed restricting entitlement to the mortgage related tax break and supported a gradual increase in the pension age. For the rest, the party conveyed a socio-economically left-wing message. It proposed an increased tax rate for high incomes, whilst it opposed (further) liberalisation of the health care sector and the labour market. As could be expected, the Socialist Party had an even more explicit left-wing programme. Compared to Labour, the party proposed a slightly higher tax rate for high incomes and opposed a rise in the pension age in the near future. The Socialist Party was also less concerned about budgetary discipline. The party further intended to make health care insurance fees and entitlement to mortgage interest tax breaks income-dependent.

Not unlike the Socialist Party, the manifesto of the Freedom Party showed a commitment to the preservation of the welfare state. The party opposed reforming the mortgage interest relief law, raising the pension age and increasing health care contributions. The Freedom Party also did not intend to decrease the budget deficit to 3% until 2015. Mr Wilders' party explicitly linked its position on socio-economic issues to the issue of European integration and the bailouts to Mediterranean countries in particular. Mr Wilders wondered why the Dutch had to suffer from cuts in the welfare system, whilst the origins of the crisis lay abroad. The issues of (non-Western) immigration and 'Islamisation' of the Netherlands, once the party's core concerns, played a remarkably marginal role in Mr Wilders' campaign discourse. As could be deduced from the previous sections, the main targets for Mr Wilders now were unelected 'Eurocrats', lazy ouzo-drinking Greeks and Eastern European labourers threatening to take over Dutch jobs. When Mr Wilders raised the issue of immigration, the Freedom Party leader now also tended to frame this as a European issue; referring, for instance, to the weakly protected EU external border and its malign common migration policy.

A short campaign with tables that turned

Even though the political parties presented their (draft) manifestos in June or early July, more attention during the early summer months went out to the various sporting events than to the up-coming election. It was only after the London Olympics had ended in mid-August when the campaign truly took off. This was also the time when a whole range of online voting advice applications (VAAs) were launched, which were supposed to aid voters in determining which party stood closest to their preferences after answering a series of questions.³ The campaign intensified further in the last three weeks before the election, when no less than seven televised debates were held between party leaders (in which smaller parties were not always represented).

As usual, the analyses of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) played an important role in these debates. Prior to Dutch parliamentary elections the CPB traditionally calculates the economic effects of the policies contained in each of the parties' manifestos. As a consequence, Dutch parliamentary election campaigns are largely dominated by technocratic economic calculations, instead of inspirational political visions. Another effect is that political parties are very selective in using favourable passages in the CPB report as a campaign tool, whilst ignoring outcomes which could be electorally damaging. In 2012, too, parties were happy to cherry-pick in this way. On the basis of the CPB report, for instance, the Liberal Party crowned itself the 'job champion', as its policies were projected to reduce unemployment to the greatest extent in the long run. Liberal Party leader Mr Rutte remained silent about the CPB's predictions that his policies would actually lead to a small *rise* in unemployment in years to come. In a similar vein, the Socialist Party claimed to be the 'purchasing power champion', ignoring less favourable outcomes such as the prospected negative economic growth figures.

Notably little attention, on the other hand, was paid to the April Kunduz Agreement. In their manifestos, the involved parties did not strictly stick to all of the policies which were agreed

³ The most popular VAAs were *StemWijzer* and *Kieskompas* - the latter being devised by political scientist André Krouwel of the VU University Amsterdam - which asked questions across a wide range of (salient) societal issues. There were also several VAAs focusing on parties' positions in one particular policy area and even some VAAs which mocked the phenomenon of VAAs, such as the *Speldwijzer* of the satirical website *De Speld* ('The Pin').

upon, and several measures lost the initial support of some of the Kunduz partners. A case in point was the previously intended measure to abolish the tax break for commuters. In the end, none of the Kunduz parties was willing to explicitly defend the Agreement, meaning that it hardly structured the debates.

Once the TV debates had started, the polls showed some remarkable developments in terms of the parties' popularity. Most notably, the popularity of the Socialist Party started to decline from the first debate onwards. In the preceding weeks the Socialist Party and its leader Emile Roemer had already been subject to negative campaigning by the largest employers' organisation VNO-NCW, which criticised the party for its allegedly irresponsible economic measures. A pro-business monthly magazine (*Quote*) even included a poster showing a blood stained Mr Roemer holding a similarly blood stained chain saw, in order to illustrate the undesirability of the Socialist Party leader becoming prime minister. In reality, Mr Roemer was widely perceived to be a likeable figure and the failure of his party to sustain the promising support rates during the final weeks of the campaign was actually related to the perception that Mr Roemer was too docile and shaky in the TV debates. The alleged slip-ups of Mr Roemer at the start of the debate series fed into the perception that the Socialist Party leader had to 'put things straight' in the remaining debates, which turned Mr Roemer's campaign into an uphill battle. Mr Roemer further failed to make a strong impression when he half-heartedly qualified his 'over my dead body' statement and when he was unable to give a clear answer regarding his party's potential willingness to compromise its pension age position in future coalition negotiations.

While the pressure on Mr Roemer only increased, his left-wing competitor Mr Samsom made a solid impression in the TV debates from the outset. In the immediate past, the Labour leader was known for his tendency to be slightly hot-headed and rash in political debates. But in the final weeks of the campaign, Mr Samsom (now wearing a tie!) managed to reveal a more calm and 'prime-ministerial' side to himself. This paid off, as the Labour leader was pronounced the 'winner' of the first TV debates – presumably reflecting the broadcasters' urge to increase their competitive, as opposed to informative, element. The opinion polls confirmed that fortunes seemed to change rapidly for Labour as well as the Socialist Party. On 22 August, the day the first televised debate was held (with Mr Roemer and Mr Rutte still deliberately absent), Labour was still trailing behind the Socialist Party. By the start of September, the tables had turned and Labour was clearly ahead of the Socialists.

In the end, it became clear that not Emile Roemer, but Diederik Samsom would become Liberal leader Mark Rutte's main opponent as far as the 'prime-ministerial battle' was concerned.⁴ The Liberal Party never appeared to suffer much competition from like-minded parties, even though its campaign was hardly flawless. It seemed difficult for Mr Rutte to praise his previous government. The minority construction with support from the Freedom Party clearly turned out to be not very durable (it had only lasted 18 months), and the government had proven unable to cope effectively with the economic crisis. Perhaps as a result, Mr Rutte spent quite a bit of energy on negative campaigning, warning about the alleged economic dangers of 'socialism' in particular. After the first few TV debates, Mr Rutte himself was accused of (to put it mildly) being a bit too creative with facts in order to put his own party in a better (and other parties in a worse) light. The Liberal leader was also criticised by pro-European politicians after the TV debate on 5 September; Mr Rutte had

⁴ The leader of the largest party after the election usually the Dutch prime minister.

opted for ‘no’ when the question was raised whether parties were willing to ‘give everything’ in order to save the Euro zone. Then again, this criticism may not have been too harmful, as Mr Rutte’s words probably resonated among the Eurosceptic voters whom Mr Wilders intended to attract.

In any case, both the Liberals and Labour profited from the electoral ‘horse race’ between the two of them, which intensified in the last week of the campaign. The opinion polls suggested that Labour was closing in on the Liberals rapidly, which provided an incentive for floating voters on both the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ to vote strategically for either one of the leading parties. On the left, both the Socialist Party and the, already troubled, Green Party appeared to suffer from this. Democrats D66 also seemed right to be worried about losing voters to either one of the parties. In view of the Liberals’ mild flirtation with Euroscepticism and their hard line stance on immigration, the Freedom Party, in turn, particularly had to fear competition from Mark Rutte’s party. That said, it was expected that the support for the Freedom Party would in the end be higher than the polls suggested; the opinion data were presumed to include voters afraid of openly expressing their support for the Freedom Party, due to its stigma of politically incorrectness. In 2010, it turned out that support levels for the Freedom Party had been seriously under-estimated. Finally, the Christian Democrats’ support levels in the polls had been rather stable throughout the preceding weeks. This did not necessarily mean good news for Mr Buma’s party, however, since the polls indicated another historical defeat.

Results

Table 1: Results of the Dutch parliamentary election of 2012

Party	% Vote 2012	Seats 2012	% Vote 2010	Seats 2010	Change % (Seats)
Liberals (VVD)	26.6%	41	20.5%	31	+ 6.1% (10)
Labour (PvdA)	24.9%	38	19.6%	30	+ 5.3% (8)
Freedom Party (PVV)	10.1%	15	15.5%	24	- 5.4% (9)
Socialist Party (SP)	9.7%	15	9.8%	15	- 0.1% (0)
Chr. Democrats (CDA)	8.5%	13	13.6%	21	- 5.1% (8)
Democrats ’66 (D66)	8.0%	12	7.0%	10	+ 1.0% (2)
Christian Union (CU)	3.1%	5	3.2%	5	- 0.1% (0)
GreenLeft (GL)	2.3%	4	6.7%	10	- 4.4% (6)
Orth. Calvinists (SGP)	2.1%	3	1.7%	2	+ 0.4% (1)
Animal Party (PvdD)	1.9%	2	1.3%	2	+ 0.6% (0)
50 Plus	1.9%	2	-	-	+ 1.9% (2)
Others	0.9%	0	1.1%	0	- 0.2% (0)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>150</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>150</i>	

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

On election day, 74.6% of the eligible voters showed up at the polling stations, which meant that turnout was ever-so-slightly higher than at the previous election of 2010. Considering the turnout in the past decades, this percentage was relatively low, particularly since the ‘horse race effect’ of two parties competing to win the most votes could normally have been expected to attract more voters. As in 2010, the first exit polls predicted a close call between

the Liberals and Labour, although the former party would never give away its prospected leading position in the more accurate polls that followed.

As Table 1 shows, the final results confirmed that the election had turned into a race between Labour and the Liberals, yet both parties gained many more seats than expected. The Liberals won 41 seats (10 more than in 2010) and remained the largest party in parliament. The victory must have come as a relief, in view of the predicted neck-and-neck race with Labour, and the uncertainty about the popularity of the Freedom Party, one of the Liberals' closest electoral rivals. The fact that the party never won as many seats before – the previous record being 38 seats in 1998 – gave the Liberals even more reason to celebrate. As in 2010, the election results may have led to some mixed feelings among Labour supporters, since the party had lost 'the battle' with the Liberals. Yet considering the much less rosy prospects no less than a month before the election, the results were much better than the social democrats could have hoped for. The party won 8 more seats than in 2010, increasing its seat share to 38.

The other parties ended up a respectable distance from the two greatest victors. The Freedom Party and Socialist Party both received 15 seats. This meant a serious defeat for the Freedom Party, which lost 9 out of its 24 seats. This time, there had been no underestimation of the party's popularity in the opinion polls. The provocative style of Mr Wilders had seemingly attracted fewer voters than before and it can be wondered whether 'Europe' provided a similarly fertile campaign theme for him as immigration and Islam had been in the past. The fact that the party was widely held responsible for the government's breakdown in April and suffered from several internal struggles and splits in the preceding months probably did not increase Mr Wilders' party's electoral appeal either; even if these events did not seem to harm the party's popularity much initially. The Socialists did not lose any seats, but the results were nevertheless terribly disappointing for the party. As discussed, the Socialist Party seemed to have a serious chance of becoming the largest party in parliament, but even lost its dominant position on the 'left' towards the very end of the campaign.

The successes of the Liberals and Labour might be interpreted as the electorate's return to established centrist parties. The painful defeat of the Christian Democrats, however, is not quite consistent with this reading. The party had already reached an all-time low in 2010 with 21 seats. Now the Christian Democrats lost another eight seats, becoming only the fifth largest party in parliament. To put this in perspective, in its first election in 1981, after its three constituent confessional parties had officially merged, the party won 48 seats. For most of the period between 1946 up until 1967, the three confessional parties together even controlled a majority of the seats in the Lower House. The long-term trend, and the election results of 2012 in particular, indicate that Christian democracy has ceased to be a dominant political ideology in the secularised Netherlands. In this campaign, party leader Mr Buma was also unable to clarify what truly distinguished his party from the rest, and the party seemed to have been punished for its participation in the governing minority coalition. Its agreement to support a construction involving the radical right Freedom Party is likely to have harmed the Christian Democrats' aspired image of 'decent centrism', which seems its most important weapon left to attract secular voters.

As regards the remaining three Kunduz parties, the Democrats 66 finished just behind the Christian Democrats with 12 seats. This meant that the social liberals had won two seats more than in 2010. Although party leader Mr Pechtold uncorked the champagne bottle, polls earlier

in the year suggested that an even greater victory was possible. Moreover, in view of the massive wins of both the Liberals and Labour it now seemed questionable whether Democrats 66 would be needed to form the ‘progressive centre’ coalition desired by Mr Pechtold. The Christian Union won enough votes to retain its five seats. Remarkably, the smaller confessional party was unable to profit from the loss of the Christian Democrats. Finally, GreenLeft suffered a painful defeat, losing 6 of its 10 seats in parliament. From the outset, the party’s new leader Jolande Sap faced a challenge in having to succeed the popular Femke Halsema. Furthermore, the party faced criticism from many supporters after endorsing the (actual) Kunduz mission in Afghanistan in 2011 and ended up in an embarrassing internal row after a GreenLeft MP challenged Mrs Sap’s leadership in May 2012.

After the election there was also room in parliament for three other parties. The Orthodox Calvinists (SGP) mobilised their small yet loyal group of deeply religious supporters and even managed to attract enough votes to win three seats this time. The Party for the Animals, an environmentalist one-issue party, did not manage to profit from GreenLeft’s misery, but retained its two seats. Finally, two further seats were allocated to the new one-issue party ‘50 Plus’, which sought to promote the rights of the more ‘ripened’ segment of the electorate.⁵ The most notable party which failed to win enough votes for representation in parliament was Hero Brinkman’s Democratic Political Turning Point. Mr Brinkman was a former MP for the Freedom Party, who had left the party in March 2012 after having fruitlessly pleaded for the democratisation of the party organisation. Nine other parties, most of them practically unknown, also failed to enter parliament.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

The Dutch parliamentary election of 2012 turned out to be a race between Labour and the Liberals, two traditionally dominant parties in the Netherlands. After the election the two parties together controlled a majority of seats in the Lower House (79 out of 150) and eventually formed a two-party coalition installed on 5 November despite disagreement over several crucial socio-economic policy issues, and despite some unfriendly exchanges during the campaign. The coalition got off to bumpy start, as reforms making healthcare insurance fees income-dependent attracted widespread protests from Liberal Party members and supporters. But after a round of negotiations the cabinet, once again led by prime minister Rutte, resumed its duties.

At first sight, the election results appeared to indicate a return to the ‘old’ parties as well as a rejection of radical politics – as embodied by the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party in particular. Considering that both Labour and the Liberals were essentially pro-European, the election results could also have been interpreted as a vote *for* Europe and a sign that public trust in Europe among the Dutch voters has been restored (as Martin Schultz, President of the European Parliament, argued). However, we would argue that these readings of the outcome of the 2012 Dutch parliamentary election require some serious qualification to say the least.

First of all, the electorate’s return to the two traditional parties appeared to be very half-hearted, and the third traditional party, the Christian Democrats, again suffered a historical

⁵ The victory provided enough reason for a small choir of elderly ladies to cheerfully serenade party leader Henk Krol (one of the highlights of the election night broadcast).

defeat. Labour and the Liberals could hardly be confident about long-term electoral prosperity either. One only has to bear in mind their fluctuating election results during the past decade. Furthermore, the ‘horse race effect’ appeared to have been particularly strong during this campaign, and it was likely that many floating voters, with no particular loyalty to the two eventual winners, were tempted to join the ‘prime-ministerial battle’ between the Liberals and Labour. If the coalition between these two parties turned out to be unpopular, the next election could well lead to another fragmented parliament (as was the case in 2010). In any case, the fact that many voters seemed to have changed their minds in the very last weeks, if not days, of the campaign showed that the Dutch electorate is still very volatile.

Secondly, the election results may have been disappointing for the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party, but both parties appeared to have built up a considerable core electorate in the past years. Both parties still won roughly 10% of the vote each. What is more, if it was not for the unfortunate last weeks of the campaign and the gravitational force of the prime-ministerial battle, the Socialist Party would probably have been among the winners of the election. As for the Freedom Party, it is worth bearing in mind that Geert Wilders’ party survived quite well electorally, in spite of the breakaways and harsh criticism from former MPs concerning the party leader’s alleged dictatorial style. It is clear that the Freedom Party has relied very much on its leader, which could certainly pose a problem as far as the party’s long term viability is concerned. Yet, at the time of writing, Mr Wilders shows no intention to quit. Particularly in opposition, both the Freedom Party and the Socialist Party may well be able to (re-)gain strength. This may particularly apply to the Freedom Party if issues related to immigration and Islam would become more salient again.

Finally, it is highly questionable whether the outcome of the election reflected Europhilia on the side of the Dutch electorate. True, the defeat of Mr Wilders’ Freedom Party indicated that there was little appetite among the Dutch population for a Dutch ‘exit’, even if Dutch voters had become more critical of European integration. Yet it is highly questionable whether voters truly based their decisions on the parties’ positions on Europe in the first place. Further research is required to determine to what extent voters actually *cared* about the issue.

It is safe to say, in any case, that the campaign did not provide voters with very clear cues about the position of parties on Europe. Parties did reveal different opinions, particularly where the rationale and future of the EU were concerned. The Liberals, for instance, took a very pragmatic approach towards the EU, portraying it as an organisation that could serve the *Dutch* interest, thereby stressing the Union’s instrumental, instead of its intrinsic, value. For Labour, on the other hand, Europe needed to develop a social agenda, which implied moving beyond the internal market and common currency. Yet when these visions were linked to practical implications, the different choices that the parties offered became obscured, and party stances appeared ambiguous, if not inconsistent. This was particularly due to the fact that the issue of the Euro-crisis dominated the debate on Europe. While parties were all careful to stress that the Netherlands should retain its sovereignty, all of them except the Freedom Party, in one way or another, supported a further transfer of powers to Brussels in order to overcome the Euro-crisis (and this was exactly what many citizens were afraid of). The upshot was that voters who did not reject the EU altogether (the Freedom Party line) and those who did not fancy an ultimately federal Europe (more the Democrats 66 and GreenLeft line) probably had a hard time deciding on the basis of parties’ stances on EU-related issues alone, if these mattered to them in the first place.

After the election, the eventual partners failed to provide much more clarity as far as ‘Europe’ was concerned. The document outlining the coalition agreement between Labour and the Liberals hardly clarified the government’s position on the future of the EU. The section related to ‘Europe’ mainly referred to the internal market aspect of European co-operation and lacked grand visions. The coalition expressed support for measures such as the creation of a banking union and the application of the European Stability Mechanism, but remained silent or vague concerning more divisive issues such as the creation of Eurobonds. What is more, even though Labour had previously expressed the intention to reduce the democratic deficit, the coalition did not refer to European-level institutional reforms whatsoever.

Typical of the Dutch attitude in the past, the second Rutte cabinet seemed to have embarked on a pragmatic course as far as European integration was concerned. With this, the public debate on Europe seems to have been quelled once more, while deliberation and vision might actually be pre-requisites for giving citizens the sense that they can influence their government’s position on European integration. That said, whether Europe will be a prominent theme in future campaigns also depends very much on the future of the EU itself, and this is clearly beyond the control of Dutch politicians alone.

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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/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork>.