The Dutch Parliamentary Elections: Outcome and Implications

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The March 15, 2017, parliamentary elections in the Netherlands garnered considerable attention as the first in a series of European contests this year in which populist, antiestablishment parties have been poised to do well, with possibly significant implications for the future of the European Union (EU). For many months, opinion polls projected an electoral surge for the far-right, anti-immigrant, anti-EU Freedom Party (PVV), led by Geert Wilders. Many in the EU were relieved when the PVV fell short and the center-right, pro-EU People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), led by incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte, retained its position as the largest party in the Dutch parliament. Several commentators suggest that the Dutch outcome may be a sign that populism in Europe and "euroskeptism" about the EU are starting to lose momentum, but others remain cautious about drawing such conclusions yet.

Election Results

The Dutch political scene has become increasingly fragmented; 28 political parties competed in the 2017 elections for the 150-seat Second Chamber, the "lower"—but more powerful—house of the Dutch parliament. Concerns about immigration, national identity, and the role of Islam in the Netherlands (approximately 5.5% of the country's 17 million people are Muslim) dominated the campaigning. The VVD came in first, with 33 seats, but lost roughly one-fifth of its previous total. The PVV finished second, with 20 seats, making modest gains on its 2012 election results but not performing as well as expected. The center-left Labor Party (PvdA)—the VVD's former coalition partner—suffered huge losses, largely because of anger among its base over compromises on various issues (including austerity measures and health care reforms) while in government.

Analysts contend that the high voter turnout (over 80%) and Prime Minister Rutte's tough response to a diplomatic spat with Turkey in the final days of the campaign benefitted the VVD. Some note that even before the conflict with Turkey, Rutte and the VVD were tacking farther right in an attempt to stem the PVV's advances. Unease among Dutch voters following the 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom in favor of leaving the EU (or "Brexit") and the election of U.S. President Donald Trump—both fueled, in part, by populist, antiestablishment sentiments—may have produced second thoughts about supporting Wilders and the PVV. Fears of hacking and interference by foreign entities (including Russia) prompted Dutch authorities to forego computers and count all ballots by hand.

Table 1. 2017 Dutch Parliament (Second Chamber) Election Results

Political Party	# of Seats (150 Total)	Vote %	+/- Seats (compared to 2012 results)
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD; center-right)	33	21.2	-8
Party for Freedom (PVV; far-right, euroskeptic)	20	13	+5
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA; conservatives)	19	12.4	+6
Democrats 66 (D66; centrist)	19	12.2	+7
Socialist Party (SP; far-left, euroskeptic)	14	9.1	-1
Green Left (GL; greens/leftists)	14	9.1	+10
Labor Party (PvdA; center-left)	9	5.7	-29
Christian Union (CU; center-right)	5	3.4	—
Party for the Animals (PvdD; left-wing)	5	3.2	+3
50$_+$ (centrist/populist, pensioners)	4	3.1	+2
Reformed Political Party (SGP; right-wing)	3	2.1	—
DENK (left-wing, pro-immigrant)	3	2	+3
Forum for Democracy (FvD; right-wing, euroskeptic)	2	1.8	+2

Source: For election results, see NOS (Dutch Broadcast Foundation).

Notes: The Netherlands has a bicameral parliament. The Second Chamber is also known as the

House of Representatives. The less powerful 75-seat First Chamber, or Senate, is indirectly elected by representatives of the 12 provincial councils (regional parliaments); the most recent elections for the First Chamber were in May 2015.

The Netherlands' proportional representation voting system tends to produce coalition governments. The VVD is expected to lead the next government but will need at least three other parties to secure a majority of 76 seats. Although the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Democrats 66 (D66) appear to be likely partners for the VVD, together they still would fall short of a majority. Some analysts suggest the Green Left (GL) could emerge as kingmaker; others doubt that the GL would risk its newly found support by bolstering a center-right government.

The PVV is not expected to be invited to join the government. All of the major parties have announced they will not work with the PVV. However, as the largest opposition party in parliament, Wilders and the PVV likely will remain prominent voices in Dutch politics.

Possible Implications for the EU

Overall, Dutch voters in 2017 largely preferred parties that support the EU and continued Dutch membership in the bloc. Both the GL and D66, which made significant electoral gains, ran openly pro-EU campaigns. Nevertheless, concerns voiced by Wilders and others about immigration have pushed the VVD and the CDA to the right. In addition to influencing domestic policies, this shift could affect the next government's positions within the EU on key challenges, including migration and terrorism, and have implications for the EU's ongoing debate on its future shape and character. The next Dutch government could be a leading voice for EU reform in the years ahead.

Has Populism in Europe Peaked?

Following the elections, incumbent Prime Minister Rutte claimed that the Netherlands had put a stop to the "wrong kind of populism." Although the outcome of the Dutch elections may provide a psychological boost to EU leaders and mainstream parties in countries such as France and Germany (where populist parties have been ascendant ahead of upcoming elections), some commentators point out that there is scant evidence that the fate of populists in one country influences electoral results in another. Experts also note that key differences between the Dutch political system and those of other European countries make any sweeping comparisons suspect.

At the same time, populist and euroskeptic views in Europe may be losing some appeal. Recent polls indicate that the tide may be turning in France's close presidential race in favor of independent centrist Emmanuel Macron against far-right populist and staunchly anti-EU candidate Marine Le Pen. In Austria's December 2016 presidential contest, voters rejected far-right, euroskeptic candidate Norbert Hofer. Polls also indicate that support for the EU across Europe has increased since the Brexit vote, and some analysts suggest that euroskeptic candidates could face a political backlash.