

In office for more than ten years, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte, is running favourite in the general elections in the Netherlands

On March 17, the Dutch are called to renew the 150 members of the House of the States General, the lower house of Parliament. Due to the health situation, which complicates the organization of the legislative elections, voting will take place over three days (between March 15 and 17) so that people in need of support have the time and space to fulfil their civic duty.

The pandemic (and the curfew in force) makes it impossible to hold election rallies in the Netherlands, so the campaign will be conducted mainly through the media, which undeniably favours Prime Minister Mark Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), which has a greater presence on television and the airwaves.

The Netherlands is governed according to the polder model, which is based on discussion and consensus. Governments always include several political parties. In the outgoing government, there are four parties: the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) led by Wopke Hoekstra, the Democrats 66 (D66) led by Sigrid Kaag and the Christian Union (CU) led by Gert-Jan Segers.

The large number of political parties competing in the parliamentary elections (37 parties are competing in the March 17 elections, the highest number for almost a century (1922)) reflects the high degree of fragmentation in Dutch politics, which makes it increasingly difficult to build a strong and coherent governing coalition (the average is 3 months (94 days)). Until the 1990s, governments comprised two parties, but this number has since increased to three. In the last legislative elections on March 15, 2017, it took no less than 225 days of negotiations to form a 4-party government.

"I don't know if Mark Rutte is directly to blame, but individualism has skyrocketed in the last 10 years. The idea of community has disappeared. The bonds of society are crumbling," says Sheila Sitalsing, a columnist from *de Volkskrant* daily newspaper. *"The gap is widening between the citizen and the government, as well as between communities with low and high levels of education,"* says journalist Joost de Vries, author of a book about the Prime Minister entitled *The Happiest Man in the Netherlands*.

Since 2017, the confrontation between the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the Freedom Party (PVV), a right-wing populist party led by Geert Wilders, has been the focus of political debate. The current health situation has made the Dutch forget their legendary budgetary discipline. In the short term and despite the expenses involved in managing the pandemic, it is unlikely that there will be a return to a policy of austerity, as this would be detrimental to growth. On the contrary, all political parties are in favour of increasing public investment.

THE ELECTORAL CONTEXT

For the past few months, the Netherlands has been shaken by a scandal in which several political leaders, including ministers and former ministers, have been involved.

Between 2013 and 2019, 26,000 families were falsely accused of child benefit fraud (they were receiving assistance for the care costs of their children under the age of 12) and were summoned to repay allegedly improperly received tens of thousands of euros. As a result, many people had to leave their homes, work

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harder to find the necessary money, others went through difficult periods that sometimes led them to divorce, etc. No explanations were ever provided to families accused of fraudulently collecting money.

In addition, it was demonstrated that a portion of the falsely accused recipients, approximately 11,000, were the victims of ethnic profiling, i.e. for holding dual citizenship, which is completely illegal.

"The State must protect its citizens from an all-powerful government. This has failed horribly. Innocent people have been criminalized, their lives destroyed. These mistakes have caused ruin, divorce and shipwreck for thousands of families," said Mark Rutte. The outgoing Prime Minister indicated that he would offer financial compensation of €30,000 to each of the victims of this scandal. Several political leaders, including former Minister of Social Affairs and Employment (2012-2017) Lodewijk Asscher (Labour Party, PvdA) and current Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra (CDA), are accused of having turned a blind eye to these malfunctions. 20 families have filed a complaint before the Supreme Court of the country against 5 ministers and high-ranking civil servants.

The resignation of the leader of the main opposition Labour Party (PvdA) and former Minister of Social Affairs (2012-2017) under the previous government, Lodewijk Asscher, led the leader of the outgoing government, Mark Rutte, who feared a vote of no confidence in parliament after the scandal was revealed, to tender his government's resignation on January 15. The political system allows a resigning government to run the day-to-day business until the next parliamentary elections are held.

PvdA supporters, however, are more critical of those responsible for the social benefits scandal than those close to the VVD. The Prime Minister succeeded in convincing his countrymen that the responsibilities were collective and, therefore, shared by all. He undoubtedly benefited from the singular situation created by the pandemic, which helped to mitigate the response of the Dutch to this case of false family allowance fraud.

MARK RUTTE, EN ROUTE TOWARDS ANOTHER VICTORY?

Mark Rutte leads the VVD list, he promised to completely renew the family support system and to create a government inquiry commission to investigate the scandal and, in particular, to uncover the racism or discrimination in it.

In a letter published a few days ago and entitled Together to the Finish Line. And beyond that, the Prime Minister wrote: *"We must strive to work together, because only in this way can we overcome the current crisis"*. He hopes that the current government coalition will continue its work of *"creating jobs and restarting economic growth"*.

The government has introduced a massive plan to support the economy, which has limited the recession to a 3.8% decline in GDP in 2020. Growth is expected to remain negative in the first quarter of 2021 to reach 1.8% for the year, the lowest level in the European Union. Public debt, which was less than 50% of GDP before the pandemic, is now over 60%.

Despite the potential for riots - a phenomenon of very unusual violence in the Netherlands - which erupted in January following the government's imposition of a curfew between 9 p.m. and 4:30 a.m., the first measure to restrict the mobility of Dutch citizens since the appearance of Covid-19, public opinion in the Netherlands supports the way the outgoing government has handled the health crisis. The curfew was annulled in court before being restored by a Court of Appeal.

Mark Rutte has long trusted his compatriots' *"sense of responsibility"* and *"social maturity"*; at the beginning of the pandemic, he bet on collective immunity. Only advice and recommendations were given to the public. However, after the summer, the number of people affected by the virus had increased considerably and the government was forced to take stricter measures. Smart containment became *"partial lockdown"*. Finally, the lockdown decided by neighbouring Germany a few weeks ago finally dispelled the reticence of the outgoing Prime Minister. Indeed, Mark Rutte was afraid that

the Germans, like the Belgians a few months earlier, would cross the border. He therefore decided that the Netherlands would be confined from December 14 to February 9.

Nicknamed *Teflon Mark* for his ability to avert crises, the outgoing prime minister, who has led three governments since 2010, is expected to remain in power after the March 17 elections.

The VVD is running a campaign very much focused on national issues to respond to the pressure exerted on it by Geert Wilders' PVV. It is asking for the establishment of quotas for the reception of refugees and wants to make it compulsory for all immigrants to learn Dutch. In addition, the party does not rule out closing the country's borders in the event of a new '*migration crisis*'.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Ipsos institute, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) is expected to lead on March 17 with 38 of the 150 seats in the House of General States. It is due to be followed by the PVV, 22 seats, the CDA, 20, D66 15 seats, the PvdA, 12; the Green Left (GL), 11; the Socialist Party (SP), 10; the Party of Animals (PvdD), 7; and the Christian Union, 6.

According to many political analysts, the outgoing government coalition may be re-elected. However, differences between D66 and the Christian Union on moral issues could prompt Mark Rutte to attempt to reduce the number of parties in his government and to relinquish the Christian Union's presence in it.

The change of leadership in three parties - the PvdA, D66 and the CDA - the last two belonging to the outgoing government coalition, could also have unintended consequences in the ballot box. In addition, the Prime Minister's VVD partner parties in the government are often subject to possible sanction votes on Election Day more than the latter.

AND WHAT OF GEERT WILDERS' REAL POWER OF INFLUENCE?

The legislative ballot is an important moment for PVV leader Geert Wilders, weakened by his systematic opposition to the outgoing government's handling of

the pandemic, with which the majority of Dutch people are satisfied.

He published a 51-page manifesto on January 9 that advocates the Netherlands' withdrawal from the European Union, closing the country to migrants from Muslim countries. For Geert Wilders, Islam should not be considered as a religion but as a "*totalitarian ideology*". As a result, the Koran, mosques and Koranic schools must, according to him, be banned. Geert Wilders also proposes to amend the constitution to state that Judeo-Christian culture is the dominant culture in the Netherlands. He wants "*Western freedoms*" to be taught in schools.

The PVV has broadened its vision since the 2017 elections. It is now fighting for an increase in the minimum wage, an increase in housing subsidies and allowances for the elderly, as well as a decrease in medical costs and the retirement age.

The leaders of the CDA and D66 as well as those of the Green Left have already ruled out any alliance with the PVV and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), a right-wing populist party led by Thierry Baudet.

THE DUTCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The States General is a bicameral parliament. The first chamber (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal), the Senate, has 75 members, elected every 4 years by indirect suffrage by the members of the assemblies of the 12 provincial states of the kingdom. The second chamber (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal), the House of the States General, has 150 members elected every four years from 18 constituencies, using the list system of full proportional representation (there is no electoral threshold), a system that favours the representation of a large number of parties.

Seats are distributed at the national level among the lists that have reached the national quotient (the number of valid votes cast at the national level divided by the number of seats to be filled, i.e. 150), which is at least 0.67 per cent of the votes cast in the kingdom as a whole. The seats not filled after this first distribution is allocated according to the Hondt system to the highest average.

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The electorate can vote in a preferential way. Seats obtained by a list are first allocated to those candidates who, in the preferential votes, obtained at least 25% of the number of votes needed for a seat (0.17% of the total votes). If several candidates on a list exceed this threshold, their ranking is determined according to the number of votes received. The remaining seats are allocated to the candidates according to their ranking on the electoral list.

Any political party wishing to run candidates in the legislative elections must collect a minimum of 25 statements of support from voters in each of the 18 constituencies in the kingdom, for a total of 450 signatures. In addition, if the party is not represented in the House of General States, it must pay a deposit of €11,250, which will be refunded if the party collects at least 75% of the required national quotient.

13 political parties are represented in Parliament:

- The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a liberal party founded in 1948 and led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte, won 33 seats;
- The Freedom Party (PVV), a right-wing populist party founded in 2002 by Geert Wilders, won 20 seats;
- The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), a centre-right party formed in 1980 from the merger of 3 parties: the Catholic People's Party (KVP), the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) and the Historical Christian Union (CHU). Led by Wopke Hoekstra, it won 19 seats;

- The Democrats 66 (D66) are the centre-left liberal reformers. Led by Sigrid Kaag, they won 19 seats;
- The Green Left (GL), an environmentalist party led by Jesse Klaver and founded in 1989, won 14 seats;
- The Socialist Party (SP), a far-left party led by Lilian Marijnissen, won 14 seats;
- The Labour Party (PvdA), founded in 1946 and a product of the trade union movement, led by Lilianne Ploumen, won 9 seats;
- The Christian Union (CU), founded in January 2000 from the merger of the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV), led by Gert-Jan Segers, won 5 seats;
- The Party of Animals (PvdD), founded in 2002 and led by Esther Ouwehand, won 5 seats;
- 50 Plus, a party founded in 2009 to defend the interests of pensioners and led by Liane den Haan, won 4 MPs;
- The Reformed Political Party (SGP), founded in 1918 and led by Kees van der Staaij, groups the Orthodox Protestant electorate (Calvinists of strict obedience). It won 3 seats;
- Denk, a party founded in November 2014 by Tunahan Kuzu and Selcuk Öztürk, former members of the Labour Party, advocates multiculturalism and decolonization. Led by Farid Azarkan, it won 3 MPs;
- The Forum for Democracy (FvD), a right-wing populist party led by Thierry Baudet, won 2 seats.

Reminder of the general election results of 15th March 2017 in the Netherlands

Turnout: 81.93%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	2,238,351	21.29	33
Freedom Party (PVV)	1,372,941	13.06	20
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	1,301,796	12.38	19
Democrats 66 (D66)	1,285,819	12.23	19
Left green (GL)	959,600	9.13	14
Socialist Party (SP)	955,633	9.09	14
Labour Party (PvdA)	599,699	5.70	9
Christian Union (CU)	356,271	3.39	5
Party of Animals (PvdD)	335,214	3.19	5
50 Plus	327,131	3.11	4
Reformed Political Party (SGP)	218,950	2.08	3
Denk	216,147	2.06	3
Forum for Democracy	187,162	1.78	2
Others	260,426	1.51	0

Source : <https://www.kiesraad.nl/adviezen-en-publicaties/rapporten/2017/3/kerngegevens-tweede-kamerverkiezing-2017/kerngegevens-tweede-kamerverkiezing-2017>

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