

Three parties are running neck and neck with 3 weeks to go before the Dutch general elections on 22 November

The Dutch are being invited to cast their votes early on 22 November to elect the 150 members of the Second Chamber (Tweede Kamer), the lower house of parliament known as the States General.

Mark Rutte (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD) resigned as Prime Minister on 7 July after finding it impossible to get his government to pass a bill to reduce the number of asylum seekers. Two of the four parties in the ruling coalition - the Democrats 66 (D66) and the Christian Union (CU) - were opposed to the bill, while the other two, the VVD and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), were in favour. Originally scheduled for 2025, the parliamentary elections are the second to be held in two years.

26 parties are running in the elections. 17 are represented in the Second Chamber. There is a saying in the Netherlands that there are more bicycles than people in the country, and that soon there will be more political parties than people. The Dutch political landscape could become even more fragmented. "*The Dutch electorate is very volatile. Around a third of voters change parties at each new election,*" says Benjamin Leruth, professor of political science at the University of Groningen.

37,000 Dutch people living abroad were allowed to vote for the first time in the provincial elections held on 15 March last. To date, 100,000 people living outside the Netherlands have registered to vote for MPs on 22 November.

According to I&O Research, housing, health and the fight against poverty are the most important issues for the Dutch. The latest opinion poll by the institute reveals that three parties are running neck and neck: Pieter Omtzigt's New Social Contract (NSC) with 27% of the vote; the outgoing Prime Minister's Party VVD with 26% and the single list presented by the Green Left (GL) and the Labour Party

(PvdA) with 25%. Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) is expected to come 4th with 19%, followed by the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BierBurgerBeweging, BBB) (11%), the Party for the Animals (PvdD) (7%), the Democrats 66 (6%), Volt (VOLT) and the Socialist Party (SP) (5%) and finally the CDA (4%).

AN EXCEPTIONAL CONTEXT

The general elections on 22 November are taking place in a rather exceptional context.

On 11 July, outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte declared that he would not seek a 5th term in office and that he was retiring from national politics after having led the government since 2010. This marks the end of a period in which the Dutch have been fond of politicians capable of governing over the long term, such as Prime Ministers Jan-Peter Balkenende (CDA) (2002-2010), Wim Kok (PvdA) (1994-2002), Ruud Lubbers (CDA) (1982-1994) and Mark Rutte, who is now the longest-serving head of government in the country's history. When asked about the event that had most marked him during his 13 years at the head of the country, he cited the destruction in flight on 17 July 2014 of the Malaysian Airlines plane flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, which was destroyed by a missile over the town of Donetsk in the Ukrainian Donbass, a region occupied by Russian forces. The attack killed 283 passengers and 15 crew members. 193 Dutch nationals were among the victims.

The leaders of several political parties have also decided to bow out: Wopke Hoekstra (CDA), appointed to the European Commission, has been replaced by Henri Bontenbal and Sigrid Kaag (D66) by Rob Jetten. Kees van der Staaij has resigned from the Reformed Party (SGP), which represents

the orthodox Protestant electorate (strict Calvinists) and has been replaced by Chris Stoffer.

Another unusual detail is that Jesse Klaver (Green Left, GL) and Attie Kuiken (Labour Party, PvdA) will not be leading their respective party lists, as the 2 parties have formed an alliance and will be presenting a single list led by Frans Timmermans, former First Executive Vice-President of the European Commission (2019-2023).

Lastly, a large number of populist parties are competing. Until three months ago, Caroline van der Plas's BBB topped all opinion polls; now, Pieter Omtzigt's New Social Contract (NSC) has taken its place. These two new parties do not prevent Geert Wilders' PVV from being in the race.

THE END OF THE RUTTE ERA

Mark Rutte's government fell after the Prime Minister decided to tighten the conditions for family reunification for asylum seekers. The head of government wanted to limit the monthly quota of children allowed to join their refugee parents in the Netherlands to 200. He also wanted to make the granting of asylum conditional on financial resources and to introduce dual refugee status: the first for people threatened with persecution in their own country and a second for people fleeing a country at war. The latter would not have been allowed to benefit from the same reception conditions as the former. 46,000 people applied for asylum in the Netherlands in 2022, and the number is expected to reach 70,000 this year. Mark Rutte seems to have set his coalition partners conditions that he knew they could not accept, so he used the asylum issue as a pretext to force a return to the ballot box. *"Mark Rutte made this gesture to win back right-wing voters and to force the leader of the Farmer-Citizen Movement, Caroline van der Plas, to take a stand on the issue of immigration and asylum. He has launched the debate into the public arena"*, said David Bos, a political scientist at the University of Amsterdam. However, the record will show that Mark Rutte chose to step down, but was not sacked.

DilanYesilgöz-Zegerius, former Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and Climate Policy (2021-2022) and outgoing Minister of Justice and Security, has replaced

Mark Rutte as leader of the VVD and will therefore lead the list in the general elections.

PIETER OMTZIGT, THE NEWCOMER

Pieter Omtzigt, a former CDA member, is not strictly a newcomer to the political scene, but he has taken the helm of a new party that he created in the summer of 2023. The New Social Contract is positioned in the centre of the political spectrum. It defends a rather right-wing economic policy but is on the left when it comes to social issues. It has indicated that it is close to the Green Left/Labour Party coalition on social issues and to the VVD on immigration. Omtzigt has ruled out working with Geert Wilders' PVV. *"Pieter Omtzigt is a centrist, anti-establishment candidate. People want alternatives to mainstream populists, who can be populists with a slightly calmer profile"*, says Cas Mudde, a Dutch political scientist at the University of Georgia (USA).

Popular as he is, the leader of the New Social Contract is attracting votes from parties on both the right and the left. Regarded as a man of integrity, he owes much of his popularity to his denunciation, in December 2020, of the family allowance scandal in which several politicians, including ministers and former ministers, had been implicated. Between 2013 and 2019, 26,000 families were wrongly accused of child benefit fraud and ordered to pay back tens of thousands of euros that they had allegedly received unduly. As a result, many people had to leave their homes and work harder to find the money they needed, while others went through difficult times that led to divorce, loss of employment for example. In addition, some of the falsely accused claimants, around 11,000 people, had been targeted by ethnic profiling, which is totally illegal. *"The state has a duty to protect its citizens from an all-powerful government. This has failed horribly. Innocent people have been criminalised, their lives destroyed. These mistakes have led to ruin, divorce and shipwreck for thousands of families"*, said Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

"Pieter Omtzigt is a kind of fairy godmother flying over people's heads. He is highly regarded for his integrity and because he is a thorn in the side of the established parties", said Peter Kanne, a researcher at I&O Research.

Pieter Omtzigt is in favour of controlled immigration and opposed to what he calls punitive ecology. Many of his ideas are close to those advocated by Caroline van der Plas. Like her, he has declined the opportunity to become Prime Minister. He has even declared that he does not wish to achieve too high a result at the ballot box, recalling the fate of Pim Fortuyn and above all Thierry Baudet and his Forum for Democracy (FvD), which won the provincial elections on 20 March 2019 before collapsing in the general elections of March 2021.

IS THE FARMER-CITIZEN MOVEMENT JUST A FLASH IN THE PAN?

On 15 March 2023, the Farmer-Citizen Movement came out ahead in the local elections in all provinces, including the Randstad, i.e. the country's major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. It should be remembered that these provincial elections cannot of course be compared to the legislative vote, and that they are often used as a way to protest. For Caroline van der Plas, the BBB was "*supported by normal citizens who don't feel they are being listened to, who are furious at the established order and who are being strangled by the state*". The BBB campaigned against the government's Nitrogen Plan, designed to reduce toxic emissions from the agricultural sector and limit livestock numbers. The Netherlands, a country of intensive agriculture, produces four times more nitrogen than the European average (61% of emissions come from the agricultural sector, fertilisers and livestock, in particular millions of tonnes of liquid manure). Nitrogen acidifies soils and pollutes water, and also causes green algae to proliferate.

In 2019, the European Union adopted a Nitrogen Plan that aims to reduce toxic emissions by 50% by 2030. According to estimates by the Dutch government, to achieve this target, more than 11,000 farms in the Netherlands would have to cease trading and a further 17,000 would have to drastically reduce the size of their herds.

"Farmers have been protesting against these regulations since 2019. They feel they are being sacrificed and are paying for the government's mistakes. The BBB has succeeded in thriving on this feeling and turning it into an issue of national identity," points out Benjamin Leruth, Professor of Political Science at the University of Groningen. "*The debate about nitrogen and the fate*

of farmers is deeply divisive in Dutch society. The CDA, which traditionally represents farmers and rural areas, has betrayed their interests so that it can remain in the government coalition. The BBB was born out of this situation", says Leonie de Jonge, a political scientist at the University of Groningen.

Caroline van der Plas maintains that it is possible to reduce toxic emissions by allowing farmers to innovate and make their production cleaner. She has announced that she will not be running for the post of Prime Minister. The BBB has chosen former Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and Climate Policy (2017-2021) and former CDA member Mona Keijzer as its candidate for the post.

Like Pieter Omtzigt, Caroline van der Plas defends a left-wing social programme and a stricter migration policy. "*Less state, less tax and fewer rules*" is her credo.

THE RETURN OF THE LEFT?

Labour and the Greens are standing on a single list, an exceptional event in the Netherlands. 92% of Green Left members and 88% of Labour Party members voted in favour of the union. The single list is led by Frans Timmermans, who is making his return to the Dutch political scene after 10 years at the European Commission in Brussels.

Responsible for the Green Deal, he resigned from his post on 23 August. He now hopes to see the Party for the Animals and the Socialist Party join the Red-Green alliance. He is also considering an alliance with the New Social Contract.

According to opinion polls, half of D66 and Socialist Party supporters are set to vote for the single Labour and Green list. But will Frans Timmermans suffer from his European label? Does he risk being seen as a representative of the elite?

The former European Commissioner has a classic left-wing discourse that could bring back voters who left the ranks of the left-wing parties in the last elections. The leader of the "red-green" list wants to eradicate inequalities, fight poverty and improve the care service, particularly for the elderly. He is proposing higher taxes on the wealthiest and on capital, especially that of the internet giants (GAFAM). He also wants to reduce the Dutch energy bill and move

General elections in the Netherlands

22nd November 2023

the entire industrial sector towards zero emissions, as well as abolishing all support for fossil fuels (the sector currently receives public support to the tune of €30 billion). He wants to carry out an in-depth reform of the way the state operates. He has described the outgoing coalition led by Mark Rutte as a "*scandal-prone government*" and said it had lost the confidence of the people.

THE DUTCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The States General are a bicameral parliament.

The First Chamber (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal), the Senate, has 75 members, elected every four years by indirect suffrage by the members of the assemblies of the Kingdom's 12 provincial states.

The Second Chamber (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal) has 150 members, elected every four years in 18 constituencies on the basis of a list system using full proportional representation, a system that favours the representation of a large number of parties.

The Netherlands has no electoral threshold (*kiesdrempel*). Seats are distributed at national level among the lists that have achieved the national quotient (the number of valid votes received at national level divided by the number of seats to be filled, i.e. 150), i.e. at least 0.67% of the votes cast throughout the kingdom. Seats not filled after this first distribution are allocated according to the d'Hondt system on the basis of the highest average. Voters may cast preferential votes.

The seats obtained by a list are first allocated to the candidates who, in the preferential votes, have obtained at least 25% of the number of votes required 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 won. The remaining seats are allocated to the candidates based on their ranking on the electoral list.

Any political party wishing to field candidates in the legislative elections must collect at least 25 declarations of support signed by voters in each of the country's 18 constituencies, i.e. a total of 450 signatures. In addition, if the party is not represented in the Second Chamber, it must pay a deposit of €11,250, which will be reimbursed if it raises at least 75% of the required national quotient.

17 political parties are represented in the current Tweede Kamer:

- The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a liberal party founded in 1948 and led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte, has 34 seats;
- The Democrats 66 (D66) are a group of centre-left liberal reformers. Led by Rob Jetten, they have 24 seats;
- The Freedom Party (PVV), a right-wing populist party founded in 2002 by Geert Wilders, has 17 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 Historic Christian Union (CHU). Led by Henri Bontenbal, it has 15 elected members;
- The Socialist Party (SP), a radical left-wing party led by Lilian Marijnissen, has 9 seats;
- The Labour Party (PvdA), founded in 1946 and originating from the trade union movement, led by Attie Kuiken, has 9 elected members;
- The Green Left (GL), an ecologist party led by Jesse Klaver and founded in 1989, has 8 seats;
- The Forum for Democracy (FvD), a right-wing populist party led by Thierry Baudet, has 8 MPs.
- The Party for the Animals (PvdD), founded in 2002 and led by Esther Ouwehand, has 6 seats;
- The Christian Union (CU), formed in January 2000 from the merger of the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV), led by Mirjam Bikker, has 5 MPs;
- Volt (VOLT), a European social-liberal party chaired by Jason Halbgewachs and Sacha Muller, has 3 seats;
- Juiste Antwoord 2021 (Just Answer, JA21), the result of a split from the Forum for Democracy, led by Joost Eerdmans, has 3 elected members;
- Denk, a party founded in 2014 by Tunahan Kuzu and Selcuk Öztürk, former members of the PvdA, advocates multiculturalism and decolonisation. Led by Farid Azarkan, it has 3 seats;
- 50 Plus, a party founded in 2009 to defend the interests of pensioners and led by Liane den Haan, has 1 MP;
- The Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB), founded in 2019 by Caroline van der Plas and representing the rural world in the Netherlands, has 1 seat;
- BIJ1, a radical left-wing party led by Sylvana Simons, has won 1 seat.

Results of the previous general elections of 15-17 March 2021 in the Netherlands

Turnout: 79.34%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes cast	Number of seats
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	2 279 130	21.87	34
Democrats 66 (D66)	1 565 861	15.02	24
Party for Freedom (PVV)	1 124 482	10.79	17
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	990 601	9.50	15
Socialist Party (SP)	623 371	5.98	9
Labour Party (PvdA)	597 192	5.73	9
Green Left (GL)	537 308	5.16	8
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	523 083	5.02	8
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	399 750	3.84	6
Christian Union (CU)	351 275	3.37	5
Volt (VOLT)	252 480	2.42	3
Juiste Antwoord 2021 (JA 21)	246 620	2.37	3
Reformed Political Party (SGP)	215 249	2.07	3
Denk (DENK)	211 237	2.03	3
50 Plus (50+)	106 702	1.02	1
Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB)	104 319	1.00	1
BIJ1	87 238	0.84	1
Others	40 731	0.39	0

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