

NETHERLANDS VOTERS DEFY ANTI-EU TREND

ERGEBNISSE DER EUROPAWAHL 2014 IN DEN NIEDERLANDE [EN]

Michael A. Olson, 25.5.2014

Dutch politicians on both the Left and the Right who sought to make a statement by exploiting what were assumed to be high levels of dissatisfaction with the European Union and the euro were caught short by the results for the European Parliament elections in their country. In a set of country-by-country elections held over a four-day period among all EU member-states for the first time under the new legal framework of the Treaty of Lisbon, the procedures used in the Netherlands voting also called into question the viability of EU authorities' efforts to prevent any influencing of later voters by those called upon to vote earlier.

THE OFFICIAL RESULTS

Name - Long Name (Leader)	% of votes	New EP Seats	Old EP Seats
<i>D66 – Democraten 66 (Pechtold)</i>	16,5	4	3
<i>CDA – Christen Democratisch Appel (Van Haersma Buma)</i>	16,1	5	5
<i>VVD – Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Rutte)</i>	12,8	3	3
<i>PVV – Partij voor de Vrijheid (Wilders)</i>	14,2	4	4
<i>SP – Socialistische Partij (Roemer)</i>	10,3	2	2
<i>PvdA – Partij van de Arbeid (Samsom)</i>	10,0	3	3
<i>SGP/CU – Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij/ChristenUnie (Van der Staaij/Slob)*</i>	8,1	2	2
<i>GroenLinks – GroenLinks (Grashoff)</i>	7,4	2	3
<i>PvdD – Partij voor de Dieren (Thieme)</i>	4,5	1	0

Voter turnout was 37,3% of the eligible voting population.

*The VVD and PvdA parties (**in bold**) form the current Dutch coalition government.*

** The SGP and CU, two parties representing the Protestant religious right, put forward common candidates for the 2014 European Parliament election.*

THE SYSTEM

The Treaty of Lisbon (which entered into force 1 December 2009) for the first time determined the parameters of these elections to the European Parliament. Among the changes this brought about were adjustments to the national allocations of seats in the European Parliament, under which the Netherlands delegation was increased by one from 25 to 26.

Given each member-state's allocation of MEP seats, the Treaty prescribes that they be distributed among the various competing political parties in elections by a *degressive* proportional representation system, meaning one designed in some way to slightly favor the chances of smaller parties for gaining representation. The system used by the Netherlands for this (described, in Dutch, here: <http://tinyurl.com/Wijze-van-Verkiezing>) is the very same as that country uses nationally to elect representatives to its lower house of parliament, the *Tweede Kamer*. The effective electoral hurdle is determined mathematically from the number of seats up for allocation (it amounts to 100% divided by 26 seats = 3.85%); as long as a party gains at least that percentage of the vote, it stands a chance of gaining an additional seat(s) from the redistribution of preference votes from other parties that did not meet that hurdle.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

With the growing political importance of the European Parliament (another effect of the Treaty of Lisbon), the impact of European-wide elections such as these on national politics – still the main prize – has increased considerably. The essential dynamic of these 2014 elections in the Netherlands was that they came roughly in the middle of the current cabinet's expected term in office (unlike, for example, neighboring Belgium, where the European elections were held the same day as national federal elections). This fact on the one hand constrained the electoral behavior of the parties making up the current governing coalition, the liberal VVD and the Labor Party PvdA. On the other hand, it encouraged several parties who are out of government to advance their positions in the eyes of the public in preparation for eventual national elections, taking advantage of a focus on several Europe-related issues which during an ordinary national campaign might be expected to figure less prominently.

That current Dutch cabinet is a Grand Coalition, a joining of the two parties that gained most votes during the last national election (September 2012), parties which also in ordinary situations would not be inclined to be so closely associated, as one (VVD) is a mainstay from the center-Right while the other (PvdA) is the same from the center-Left. The practical effect of that Grand Coalition on this European campaign was a constraint on these parties' campaign efforts: as they still have to work together daily to agree upon and accomplish national business, they could not do much to emphasize their differences for campaign purposes, at least on the part of those groups of party personnel at the very top holding key positions in the national government. A likely result of this was slightly disappointing results: the VVD only held on to the number of seats it holds in the European Parliament, and the PvdA did the same but only after forecasts had first predicted a one-seat loss.

This particular timing for the European election offered greater opportunities for Dutch parties that do *not* make up the government, and in particular for those in a position to exploit key issues that had arisen with respect to the EU. Clearly, these 2014 elections to a very great extent were a referendum on the European Union itself: this could be seen in the speeches and electoral materials so often centering around the question "Do you want more Europe? Or less?" For most parties, the correct answer was "Less," and that was due to key sub-issues related to the EU about which there was clearly voter dissatisfaction: the economy, and immigration.

How could the EU affect the Dutch economy, when the free trade that it brings does so much to boost it and national contributions to the common EU budget are still at such comparatively low levels? Actually, Brussels' effect has been direct and clear-cut, in the form of an insistence that governments return as directly as possible to holding no more of a national budget deficit than 3% of GDP. This pressure has caused the Rutte Cabinet to push through controversial cuts to public funding in areas such as the health system, public arts, and the like. It has all gone under the label "austerity" (often the English word) and is unpopular, particularly among voters and politicians of Left, who wonder how that can be suitable policy for a Dutch economy still struggling with the effects of the financial crisis that started in Europe in 2009. While at first benefiting from their close ties to the buoyant German economy, Dutch fortunes have lately suffered various setbacks; for instance, the Dutch are European champions in holding household debt (for the most part tied up in real estate whose price-level has stagnated for years), and this has exercised a considerable drag upon consumer demand and employment.

Related to this is the question of immigration – related because of popular perceptions that cheap immigrant labor steals jobs that should be for the Dutch. Such perceptions often are irresistible themes for the media, particularly the popular press, which is not above exaggerating the issue to boost readership. This was very closely tied to "Less EU!" sentiment as well, for as a member-state the Netherlands does not hold complete control over its over immigration policy but must follow EU guidelines. It was dissatisfaction with this in particular that the right-wing, anti-immigrant PVV party, headed by Geert Wilders, hoped to exploit in order to build upon its surprising result at the last European elections in 2009 (four seats) to gain momentum for the next national Dutch election – and, secondarily, to join with various other like-minded parties in other EU member-states (e.g. the French *Front National*, the UK's UKIP) to build a powerful anti-EU fraction within the EU Parliament itself. Indeed, in the run-up to the 2014 elections many polls predicted that Wilders' party – which actually urges a Dutch withdrawal from the EU – would be able to do

exactly that by winning more MEP seats than any other Dutch party.

UNEXPECTED RESULTS – AND A LESSON FOR THE LEFT

Even the initial exit-poll projections made it clear that Wilders would not succeed in that aim, however, and official results show his PVV coming in fourth place, only retaining its four-seat MEP allocation. What was perhaps more surprising was the similar failure of Leftist parties to harness the real national resentment over what is perceived as EU-imposed austerity to make real gains themselves.

That is perhaps not so surprising when we consider again the effect of the presence in government of one of the two main leftist parties, the PvdA (the other being the even more-leftist *Socialistische Partij* or SP). First there was the effect mentioned above of having to be restrained in its campaigning; but it also turns out that the SP had decided to take advantage of the PvdA's governmental presence to use these European elections to surpass it as the true "anti-Europe" party of the Left (with a view to the next Dutch election, of course), even raising €700,000 for its campaign to do so (according to an *NRC Handelsblad* analysis: <http://tinyurl.com/ofgn7pk>).

The result was that there was pronounced disunity and competition on the Left, and disappointing results followed. Of course, it was no disaster: the PvdA largely held on to its usual voters concentrated mostly in the North (in Friesland and Groningen provinces) and in Amsterdam; and the SP did the same with its traditional heavy support in the more working-class Dutch cities (Arnhem, Nijmegen) towards the German border. (The following site provides valuable maps of Dutch party support: <http://tinyurl.com/mcfwf2x>) Both parties retained the seats that they held. But those Leftist parties wanted more than that – indeed, the SP had budgeted to win more than that, convinced that austerity's unpopularity gave it a good chance, and that that other pole of anti-EU sentiment, Wilders' bloc of PVV voters, had to be countered. Instead, Dutch voters (or the 37.3% who turned out) as usual provided a more uncertain verdict (MEP seats to be divided among nine separate parties). But that did have the slightly surprising element of an endorsement of a pro-EU stand by a significant part of the voting electorate – another sort of countering of the PVV - as seen in the gains of the parties that were the top-two finishers, the unabashedly pro-European liberal D66 and the somewhat pro-European Christian-Democratic CDA.

Finally, that there would be some sort of surprise result of these European elections in the Netherlands, including a setback for the PVV, was apparent shortly after Dutch polls closed on the evening of Thursday, May 22. This was even though things were not supposed to be that way: Brussels had imposed strict rules on holding the release of official election results until just before midnight of the following Sunday, May 25, the day when most other member-states did their voting. But European officials had not counted on transparency provisions in Dutch law requiring vote-counting to be done publicly, with totals at individual polling-stations immediately announced to whoever asked for them. A couple of polling/media organizations took advantage of these provisions to gain an early idea of how the results would go, with the result that these forecasts were soon under widespread discussion.