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# A brief guide to the Dutch election:

Will the rise of populism  
continue into 2017?

by **Matthew Elliott**

## PROMOTING POLICIES THAT LIFT PEOPLE FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

by **Matthew Elliott**,  
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13th March 2017

2016 delivered two major political shocks to the West with profound global consequences: first the decision by British voters to leave the European Union and then the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. These two events can be seen in a broader context of what some are referring to as the 'rise of populism', a realignment of politics away from the Third Way consensus started in the 1990s by Clinton, Blair and Schröder (and indeed their Dutch forerunner, Wim Kok) in favour of populist leaders and movements, from Podemos, Syriza and Momentum to Ukip, the Freedom Party of Austria and the 5 Star Movement.

Over the coming year, I will be looking into the underlying factors contributing to the rise (or otherwise) of these populist movements, beginning with the Dutch general election on Wednesday 15th March. In this report, published on the eve of that election, I give an overview of the general political situation in the Netherlands. Some say that the recent polling success of Geert Wilders is just the Dutch manifestation of 'Brexit' and 'Trump'. There are others who claim that there is no similarity, that they are fundamentally different events with no common themes linking them. Both assertions are wrong.

There are important differences between Trump's election and the Brexit vote. Both are also distinct from the other populist insurgencies happening elsewhere. It would be a mistake to assume, for example, that anyone who was pro-Brexit, is automatically pro-Trump, pro-Wilders or pro other countries leaving the EU. But while they are clear distinctions, international economic changes and global shifts in social attitudes point to some important similarities.

As part of my Senior Fellowship at the Legatum Institute, I intend to compare and contrast these similarities and differences. For the forthcoming elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany, I intend to publish a brief guide to the vote on the eve of the election; put out some initial analysis immediately afterwards; and then edit a longer, more considered analysis at a later date.

This is not a completely new project for the Legatum Institute. In September 2016, the Institute published *48:52: Healing a Divided Britain* in conjunction with the Centre for Social Justice. This project will build on that publication, and I encourage readers to refer back to it for an excellent analysis of the UK situation.

The Dutch election this week might well result in yet another upset in global politics. I hope you find this guide to the election, the parties, the polling and the social and economic trends useful, and I would appreciate any feedback you might have.

I am grateful to Rory Meakin for his research assistance and number crunching; to Alexandra Mousavizadeh and her team for providing additional data from the indispensable *Prosperity Index*; to Giles Dilnot for his detailed feedback on each draft; to Jonathan Isaby for his careful sub-editing; and to Philippa Stroud for inviting me to undertake this research project and for providing me with such a welcoming home at the Legatum Institute.

## 2 . THE DUTCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy, very similar to the United Kingdom. King Willem-Alexander succeeded his mother Princess Beatrix when she abdicated as Queen in 2013. Unlike the UK, elections are conducted using a system of proportional representation, and the Netherlands has not had a single party government since the introduction of PR in 1917. The government is appointed by the monarch when a coalition can command the support of a majority of members of parliament following an election.

### 2.1 PARLIAMENT

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The Dutch parliament, the *Staten-Generaal*, is a bicameral body comprised of the 150-member Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*, literally 'Second Chamber')<sup>1</sup> and the 75-member Upper House (*Eerste Kamer*, or 'First Chamber'). The Upper House meets once a week and can only pass or reject legislative proposals. It has no power to initiate or amend legislation.

### 2.2 THE TIMING OF ELECTIONS

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The maximum parliamentary term is five years, but elections to the Lower House are normally held every four years, usually in March and usually on Wednesdays. Elections to the Upper House are held within three months of the general election. Polling closes at 9pm and counting begins immediately. The results are usually known by midnight and initial results announced the following morning, although recounts often delay a final definitive result for a few days, which can make minor adjustments to seat allocations.

### 2.3 ELIGIBILITY TO VOTE

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All Dutch citizens, EU citizens resident in the Netherlands, and citizens of other countries legally resident for over five years, who are aged 18 or over, are eligible to vote, unless prevented by a court.

### 2.4 THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

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The 150 members of the Lower House are elected on a party list system of proportional representation. This means that parties are given seats in proportion to their share of the total votes cast across the country. Parties have a list ranking their candidates, so if the party wins 10 seats then the candidates ranked 1-10 will be elected. But because it is an 'open list' system, this means that ballot papers include a full list of the candidates, allowing voters to vote for a specific candidate on the list. Candidates who receive enough of these personal votes are selected irrespective of their position on their party's list. So if a party wins 10 seats and a candidate ranked 11th wins enough personal votes, candidates 1-9 and 11 will be selected instead of candidates 1-10.

A date hasn't been set yet for the Upper House elections, but they are likely to be before the summer. The 75 members of the Upper House are elected by the members of the 12 provincial assemblies, *Provinciale Staten*. The members' votes are weighted by the population in their province and candidates are selected by party list proportional representation, in a single national constituency.

## 2.5 FORMING A GOVERNMENT

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The Dutch cabinet is appointed in a multi-stage process after the election of the Lower House. During an advice phase, the monarch meets the leaders of the political parties, as well as the presidents of the Lower and Upper Houses and the State Advisory Body, to discuss the results. The information phase then follows, when a veteran politician (an 'informateur'), typically from the largest party, is appointed to seek a coalition of parties and barter election pledges.

If the informateur is successful, they return to the monarch who then appoints the leader of the largest party in the coalition as the 'formateur', a prospective Prime Minister who resolves the remaining coalition issues and the allocation of ministerial portfolios. The monarch then formally invites the formateur to form a government and appoints the ministers by royal decree, who then resign from parliament due to separation of powers rules.

This is not a quick process, and can take a number of months. For example, the last general election was held on 12th September 2012, but the new government wasn't appointed until almost nine weeks later, on 5th November. The previous cabinet took over four months to be appointed after the 2010 election, and in 1977 it took seven months.<sup>2</sup> So don't expect a new government on the Thursday morning.



## 3 . PARTIES AND LEADERS

The Netherlands has had a multi-party system and coalition governments since the introduction of proportional representation in 1917. No party has ever achieved a parliamentary majority. To do so, a single party would need to secure 76 seats. The Christian Democrats won the largest number of seats ever by a single party in 1986 and 1989, winning 54 out of 150 in both years.<sup>3</sup>

The table below gives a general overview of the parties which currently have seats in the Lower House. To give an indication of their political leanings, the group they are associated with in the European Parliament is listed, along with the UK party also belonging to that group (where applicable). Note that the number of Lower House seats refers to the allocation following the 2012 election. Some totals have changed due to subsequent defections and expulsions (see Table 3a, p6).

### 3.1 PEOPLE'S PARTY FOR FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY (VVD)

The People's Party is currently the largest party, and leads the governing coalition with Labour. It is a centre-right liberal party which is allied to the Liberal International and a constituent member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats, along with the UK Liberal Democrats. It is a pro-European party which supports the EU's four freedoms (goods, services, labour and capital) and a common European defence policy.

**Mark Rutte** became leader of the People's Party in 2006 and Prime Minister in 2010. Following a career in business, he was elected to parliament in 2002 and became a minister soon after, first for welfare and then for higher education and science in 2004.

One of the factors suggesting that Geert Wilders will struggle to form a government if he wins the largest number of seats in the forthcoming election, is that all the other major parties have ruled out joining a coalition with his Freedom Party. It is worth noting, however, that there is precedent for working with him in the past. The Mark Rutte's VVD formed a coalition with Geert Wilders' PVV and the Christian Democrats after the 2010 election, when it won 31 seats and they won 24 and 21 respectively, making a coalition total of 76, just enough for a majority in the 150-seat Lower House. The coalition collapsed in March 2012, leading to elections later that year, when the VVD won its current 41 seats while the Freedom Party and the Christian Democrats fell back to 15 and 13 seats. The collapse was prompted by the Freedom Party's rejection of austerity measures designed to prevent the budget from breaching Eurozone rules. Labour increased its allocation from 31 to 38, leading to its forming the 'purple coalition' with the People's Party.

### 3.2 LABOUR PARTY (PVDA)

Labour is the second largest party and is currently the junior partner in the governing 'purple coalition'. It is a centre-left party and a member of both the international Progressive Alliance and the Party of European Socialists group in the European Parliament, along with the UK Labour Party.

Table 3a: Current composition of the Lower House

PARTY	DUTCH NAME	LEADER	EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT GROUP (UK MEMBERS)	SEATS
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)</i>	Mark Rutte	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (Liberal Democrats)	41
Labour Party	<i>Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)</i>	Lodewijk Asscher	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (Labour)	38
Party for Freedom	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)</i>	Geert Wilders	Europe of Nations and Freedom (no UK party, but former UKIP MEP Janice Atkinson sits with them)	15
Socialist Party	<i>Socialistische Partij (SP)</i>	Emile Roemer	European United Left–Nordic Green Left (Sinn Féin)	15
Christian Democratic Appeal	<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA)</i>	Sybrand van Haersma Buma	European People's Party (no UK party, since the Conservatives left in 2009)	13
Democrats 66	<i>Democraten 66 (D66)</i>	Alexander Pechtold	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (Liberal Democrats)	12
Christian Union	<i>ChristenUnie (CU)</i>	Gert-Jan Segers	European Conservatives and Reformists (Conservatives)	5
GreenLeft	<i>GroenLinks (GL)</i>	Jolande Sap	Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens, SNP, Plaid Cymru)	4
Reformed Political Party	<i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)</i>	Kees van der Staaij	European Conservatives and Reformists (Conservatives)	3
Party for the Animals	<i>Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD)</i>	Marianne Thieme	European United Left–Nordic Green Left (Sinn Féin)	2
50Plus	<i>50Plus (50+)</i>	Henk Krol	None	2



The party has recently moved from its social democratic roots to become more centrist, not least in its support of the purple coalition since 2012 which has reduced public spending from 47.1 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 45.1 per cent in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The party has traditionally based its support on working class and ethnic minority voters, but some of the ethnic minority support has diverted to *Denk*, a breakaway party of former Labour members unhappy with the Party's response to Geert Wilders' Freedom Party.

**Lodewijk Asscher** became leader of the Labour Party in 2016, having been Deputy Prime Minister since 2012. As Deputy Prime Minister, he announced an investigation into four Dutch-Turkish organisations due to concerns about hindering integration. This prompted criticism from two Dutch-Turkish Labour MPs who were expelled from the party and who subsequently established *Denk*.

### 3.3 FREEDOM PARTY (PVV)

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The Freedom Party was founded by Geert Wilders in 2006. After the 2012 election, it was the third biggest party with 15 seats, but is now the fifth biggest with 12 seats, following an expulsion and two defections. The party has founded an international group called the International Freedom Alliance, but it claims no other member parties. It is a member of the Europe of Nations and Freedom European Parliament group, along with the French *Front National*, Italian Northern League, Austrian Freedom Party and former British UKIP MEP Janice Atkinson.

The party is best described as right-wing populist, although some of the rationale for its authoritarian policies on religion and nationality defy traditional categorisation as right wing or populist, such as its emphasis on the importance of women's and LGBTQ rights, and harsher punishment for hate crimes against Jewish and LGBTQ people. It also withdrew from the coalition government in 2012 in opposition to austerity measures, designed to adhere to the Eurozone deficit ceiling and one MP defected, citing the party's opposition to welfare and health spending cuts.<sup>5</sup>

Policies include cutting income tax, leaving the EU, lowering the retirement age to 65 and indexing pensions, more funding for police, defence and services for the elderly, and cutting for foreign aid, art, culture and environmental initiatives. But its overriding policy is to 'de-Islamise' the Netherlands, including closing mosques and Islamic schools, banning the Koran and headscarves in public places, and ending asylum applications and immigration from Muslim countries.<sup>6</sup>

**Geert Wilders** joined the People's Party in 1989 and was elected to parliament in 1998. In 2004 he left the VVD to form his own '*Groep Wilders*', which he later renamed the Freedom Party. He has led the PVV ever since. So, unlike Donald Trump's recent emergence onto the US political scene, Wilders is not a new face on the Dutch political stage.

Wilders is anti-EU primarily because of the limits that membership imposes on attempts to restrict Muslim immigration via citizenship of other EU states, rather than the free movement of non-Muslim Europeans. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he said: "I'm not like the Brexiteers. I don't deny that we have to permit immigration and the right of establishment for capital and services." He added: "I also don't have a problem with people from Slovakia and Lithuania. But I do have a problem with immigration from Islamic countries. The EU leaves us no freedom to determine our own immigration and asylum laws. That's why leaving the EU is necessary."<sup>7</sup>

### 3.4 SOCIALIST PARTY (SP)

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The Socialists were founded as the Communist Party in 1971, changing their name a year later. They won their first seats in 1994. Their peak was in 2006 when they won 17 per cent of the vote and 25 seats. They currently have 15 seats. They are led by **Emile Roemer** and they currently have no international affiliations.

### 3.5 CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC APPEAL (CDA)

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Along with Labour, the Christian Democrats are one of the two historic parties of government (before Mark Rutte, all Prime Ministers had belonged to one of the two parties). In 2010, their vote share halved from 27 to 14 per cent, and in 2012 it fell again to 9 per cent, leaving them with just 13 seats. They are led by **Sybrand van Haersma Buma**.

### 3.6 DEMOCRATS 66 (D66)

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Democrats 66 are a centrist party in the same European and International groups as the UK Liberal Democrats. They reached 16 per cent of the vote and 24 seats in 1994 but have had 12 seats since the 2012 election. They are led by **Alexander Pechtold**.

### 3.7 DENK / ARTIKEL 1

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*Denk* was founded by two Dutch-Turkish Labour MPs who were expelled from the Labour Party after their disappointment with what they saw as the party's failure to support minorities. A poll of ethnic minority voters found 40 per cent of Dutch Turks and 34 per cent of Dutch Moroccans plan to vote for *Denk*.<sup>8</sup> *Artikel 1* is a breakaway group from *Denk* founded by an ex-TV host.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.8 MINOR PARTIES

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There are 28 parties taking part in the 2017 Dutch general election. Some of the more significant ones include the **Christian Union**, a moderate left Christian party (which currently has 5 seats but which is forecast to win 6), the left-wing **Greens** (currently 4, forecast 17), the traditionalist conservative liturgical **Reformed Party** (currently 3, forecast 4), the animal rights **Party for the Animals** (currently 1, forecast 5), older voters' interests party **50 Plus** (currently 2, forecast 5), populist right **Democratic Forum** (currently nil, forecast 1), and also populist right **For the Netherlands**, (currently nil, forecast still nil but close to gaining a seat).

### 3.9 STANCES ON NEXIT AND A NEXIT REFERENDUM

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**Support Nexit:** The Freedom Party, the Democratic Forum, For the Netherlands and Jesus Lives all support a referendum on Dutch Exit from the European Union ('Nexit') and advocate Nexit.<sup>10</sup> Jesus Lives is unlikely to gain a seat, but the Democratic Forum and For the Netherlands might gain one each. The Reformed Party advocates Nexit but opposes referendums on principle.

**Support a referendum on Nexit:** The Socialists and 50Plus all support the holding of a referendum, but not necessarily a Nexit outcome,<sup>11</sup> although it's worth noting that 63 per cent of 50Plus voters support Nexit.<sup>12</sup> D66, the Greens, Labour and the Party for the Animals either didn't answer or had no opinion, so they are not necessarily opposed to a referendum.

**Soft Eurosceptics:** In addition to the parties advocating a Nexit referendum, the Greens and the Christian Union are mildly eurosceptic. While the Christian Union opposes referendums in principle, the Greens have not taken a stance. Together, they are tipped to win around 30 seats in the next parliament.

The table below groups all the parties which have not ruled out a referendum on Dutch membership of the EU. In the current Lower House, 32 MPs represent parties who support a Nexit referendum, regardless of their stance on Nexit itself; they are opposed by 62 MPs. If the current election predictions prove to be correct, these figures are set to change to 42 MPs and 55 MPs respectively, a much more finely balanced situation than in the current Parliament. Anyone interested in the likelihood of a Nexit should therefore pay close attention to how well these groupings fare in the election.

**Table 3b: Party support for a Nexit referendum**

NEXIT POSITION	PARTIES	2012 SEATS	2017 SEATS PREDICTED
Support Nexit	Freedom Party, Democratic Forum, For the Netherlands, Jesus Lives	15	24
Support a referendum	Socialists, 50Plus,	17	18
Do not oppose a referendum	Labour, D66, Greens, Party for the Animals	56	53
Support Nexit but oppose referendums	Reformed Party	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>92</b>	<b>99</b>

## 4 . POLLING OVERVIEW

At the last general election, six parties won enough votes to receive an allocation of at least 12 seats. Five minor parties won five seats or fewer. The largest two—the People’s Party and Labour—have lost significant support since 2012, especially Labour, which has slumped from its 38 seats to a projected average of 12 in an average of polls in the 28 days up to 9 March 2017. They place the People’s Party on an average of 25 seats, down from its 2012 election result of 41.

Meanwhile, the other significant parties have gained support, in a trend that some are calling the rise of the medium-sized parties. None has gained as much as Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party, which now leads the polls, indicating an average of 26 seats, up from its 2012 result of 15, although an average of the seven polls taken prior to 9 March 2017 has them tied with the People’s Party at 25 seats while the *Peilingwijzer* (see section 4.2) places them 2 seats behind with 23 seats. A further note of caution here, too, as the Freedom Party’s election results typically fail to match its pre-election poll results and there is an unusually wide variation between the level at which it is polling, ranging from 20 seats to 35.

While the Socialists have slipped from their 2012 result of 15 seats to an average polling equivalent of 12, the Christian Democrats and Democrats 66 have grown from 13 and 12 seats respectively in 2012 to averages of 17 and 16.

### 4.1 RECENT TRENDS IN THE POLLING

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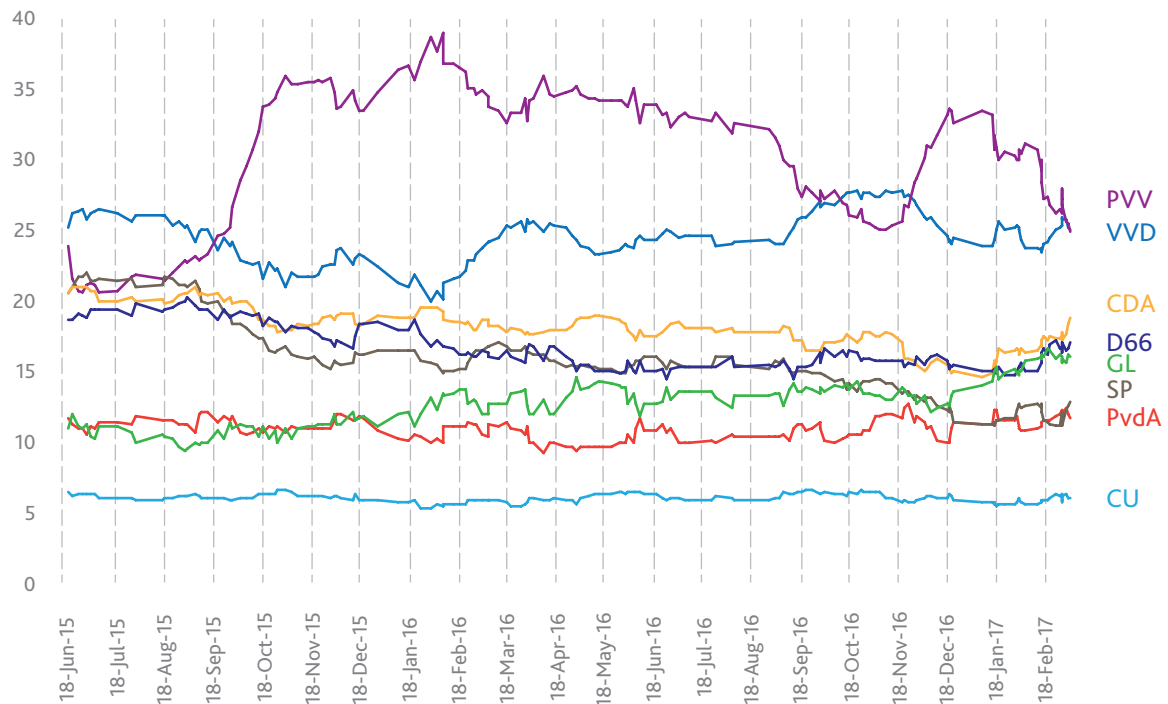
Polls in late February show the Freedom Party (PVV) on course to win 27 seats, measured by a simple average of the seven most recently published figures. From October 2015 to June 2016, their lead over the People’s Party (VVD) looked much greater, with their numbers pointing to them winning around 35 seats and the People’s Party trailing in second place with seat projections in the low twenties. Fortunes changed, however, with the People’s Party leading by 28 seats to 25 in November 2016, before reverting back to a lead for the Freedom Party over the New Year, and then moving to its current neck-and-neck position on the eve of the election.

The other notable trend is the weakening support for the Christian Democrats and the Socialists and the increasing support for the Green Party.

### 4.2 A ‘POLL OF POLLS’ FOR THE DUTCH ELECTION

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After the polling difficulties with the 2015 general election in the UK, with the EU referendum, and with the recent US Presidential election, we should be mindful of what polls can and cannot tell us. After all, they were said to predict the wrong result in all three events. But there are reasons to be less concerned when it comes to Dutch elections. Clinton was predicted to win the popular vote, and she did. The Trump victory was a surprise because the polls did not accurately pick up what was happening in the Mid West. Final Brexit polls were close and so was the result.<sup>14</sup> The simple majority referendum and first past the post electoral systems made for big outcome surprises when the results differed from the predictions by



a relatively small fraction, within the margin of error. By contrast, the proportional representation electoral system in the Netherlands means that small differences in expected votes make for small differences in parliamentary calculus.

The *Peilingwijzer* (literal translation: 'bearing pointer') by Tom Louwerse of the University of Leiden, combines polling from a number of pollsters to estimate the seats in the Lower House.<sup>15</sup> Figures from the *Peilingwijzer* 9 March 2017 update are listed on Table 4a, (p12).

### 4.3 THE DECLINE OF THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES OF GOVERNMENT

One of the features of this election may well be the decline of the traditional parties of government. As the table below shows, the five parties which have previously been members of cabinets are projected to fall from their haul of 109 seats in 2012 to approximately 80. Meanwhile, the parties which have never been in a cabinet are expected to increase their number of seats from 41 to 70. (See Table 4b, p12).

Above: Chart 4a: Moving average of seven most recent polls (expressed in seats) from the major pollsters<sup>13</sup>

Table 4a: The 'Peilingwijzer' projection for the 2017 Dutch election

	PARTY	SEATS WON IN 2012	COMBINED POLL (% VOTE)	2017 SEAT ESTIMATE	SEATS RANGE
VVD	People's Party	41	16	25	23-27
Pdva	Labour	38	8	12	11-13
PVV	Freedom Party	15	15	23	21-25
SP	Socialists	15	10	15	14-16
CDA	Christian Democrats	13	12	19	18-20
D66	Democrats 66	12	12	18	17-19
CU	Christian Union	5	4	6	5-7
GL	Greens	4	10	16	15-17
SGP	Reformed Party	3	2	4	3-5
PvdD	Party for the Animals	2	3	5	4-6
50+	50 Plus	2	4	5	4-6
VNL	For the Netherlands	0	1	0	0-1
Denk	Think	0	1	1	0-2
FvD	Democratic Forum	0	1	1	0-2

Table 4b: The 'Peilingwijzer' projection for previous parties of government

	PARTY	SEATS WON IN 2012	COMBINED POLL (% VOTE)	2017 SEAT ESTIMATE	SEATS RANGE
VVD	People's Party	41	16	25	23-25
Pdva	Labour	38	8	12	11-13
CDA	Christian Democrats	13	12	19	18-20
D66	Democrats 66	12	12	18	17-19
CU	Christian Union	5	4	6	5-7
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>74-81</b>



Table 4c: The '*Peilingwijzer*' projection for parties who have always sat in opposition

PARTY		SEATS WON IN 2012	COMBINED POLL (% VOTE)	2017 SEAT ESTIMATE	SEATS RANGE
PVV	Freedom Party <sup>16</sup>	15	15	23	21-25
SP	Socialists	15	10	15	14-16
GL	Greens <sup>17</sup>	4	10	16	15-17
SGP	Reformed Party	3	2	4	3-5
PvdD	Party for the Animals	2	3	5	4-6
50+	50 Plus	2	4	5	4-6
VNL	For the Netherlands	0	1	0	0-1
Denk	Think	0	1	1	0-2
FvD	Democratic Forum	0	1	1	0-1
TOTAL		41	48	70	63-83

#### 4.4 POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS FOR THE NEXT COALITION

Two political factors heavily restrict the possibilities for workable coalitions, if recent polling data turns out to be an accurate forecast of the election results. The first is that most parties have ruled out joining a coalition with Geert Wilders' Freedom Party. The second is that the Socialists have ruled out joining a coalition with Mark Rutte's People's Party. Without the Freedom Party, a coalition is likely to have to involve at least four parties to command a majority. Ruling out the People's Party too would require at least five parties. There is only one combination of four parties with enough projected seats to secure a majority (People's Party, Christian Democrats, Democrats 66 and the Greens) and only one combination of five parties without the People's Party (Christian Democrats, Democrats 66, the Greens, the Socialists and Labour). It remains to be seen how robust these stances prove to be after the votes have been counted, but if the parties stick by them, the Netherlands could be in for an historically large coalition, which does not bode well for strong and stable government.

## 5. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SIMILARITIES WITH THE UK AND US

Following the EU referendum, the Legatum Institute teamed up with the Centre for Social Justice to publish *48:52: Healing a Divided Britain*.<sup>18</sup> This publication examined some of the economic, social and political drivers behind the Brexit vote, and they are the prism through which we will continue to examine the rise of populism. A more detailed analysis of the situation in the Netherlands will follow in the longer publication after the Dutch elections, but below are some initial observations, drawn from the Legatum Institute's world renowned *Prosperity Index* and the Gallup World Poll.<sup>19</sup>

### 5.1 ECONOMIC SIMILARITIES

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Among the strongest drivers for support for Brexit and Trump were economic factors, such as incomes, growth and economic inactivity. The Autumn 2016 Eurobarometer survey showed that 81 per cent of people in the Netherlands answered 'good' when asked to assess the national economy, much more than the 51 per cent of British respondents, indicating markedly more satisfaction in the Netherlands with the Dutch economy overall.<sup>20</sup>

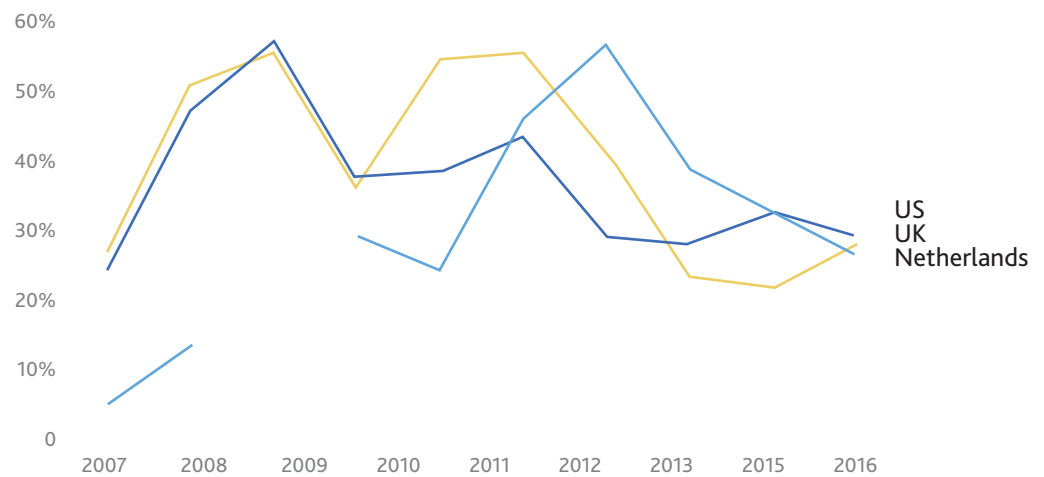
This figure, however, masks a more negative feeling about how people perceive their local (city) economies. The proportion of Dutch people who viewed their local (city) economy as getting worse climbed from 31 per cent in 2011 to 58 per cent in 2013, before falling to 43 per cent in 2014 and 33 per cent in 2016 (see Chart 5a).<sup>21</sup> Perceptions of local economic performance are therefore roughly back to where they were at the last Dutch election in 2012, but people are still considerably more negative than they were in 2007, when only 15 per cent agreed with this statement.

By contrast, the UK and the US are roughly back to where they were before the financial crisis. In Britain, the proportion of people who viewed their local economy as getting worse was 33 per cent in 2007, and stood at 34 per cent in 2016. In the US, the figures were 31 per cent and 35 per cent respectively.

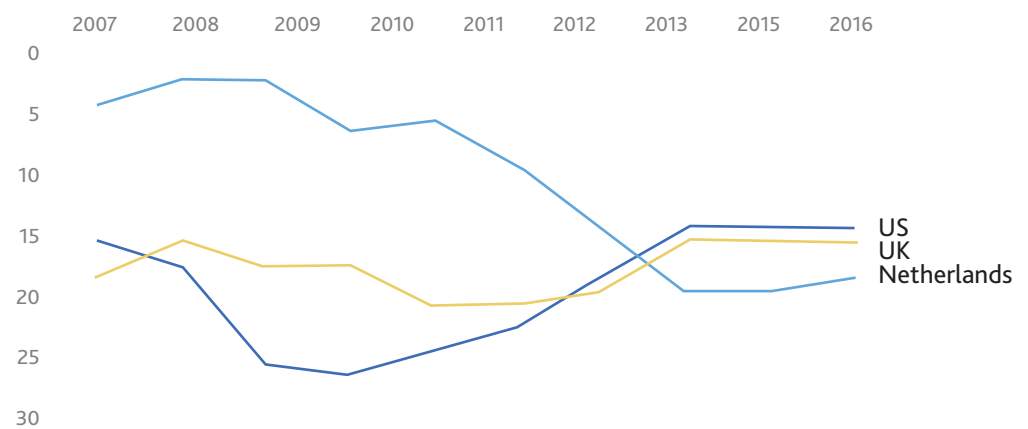
The Legatum Institute's *Prosperity Index* ranking on unemployment shows the Netherlands largely unchanged in the years since 2012.<sup>22</sup> In fact the global ranking has improved from 71st to 66th place. Britain and the United States did less well, at 85th and 97th position in 2016. That said, the Dutch position is—again—down dramatically from where it was prior to the financial crisis. To go from 14th position in 2008 to 66th position in 2017 is a considerable drop.

Considering the Dutch unemployment ranking within the OECD group of 28 advanced economies reinforces this point (see Chart 5b). Between 2011 and 2014, the Netherlands fell from 5th to 19th, highlighting an alarming decline in employment relative to similar countries.

Top: Chart 5a:  
Proportion who  
agree that their local  
(city) economy is  
getting worse  
(Gallup)



Bottom: Chart 5b:  
Unemployment rank  
within OECD  
(OECD)



That said, there doesn't appear to be a link between unemployment and support for the Freedom Party (see Table 5a). Support is strongest in Geert Wilders' home region, Limburg, an area of industrial decline with relatively low household incomes and tertiary education rates.<sup>23</sup> They also poll well in Flevoland, Groningen and Zeeland. But while Groningen and Flevoland suffer from the highest and second highest unemployment rates in the Netherlands, Zeeland and Limburg enjoy the lowest and second lowest rates, making any link between economic inactivity and support for the Freedom Party ambiguous.

**Table 5a: Education, unemployment rates and support for the Freedom Party (Eurostat)** <sup>24</sup>

REGION	TERTIARY EDUCATION (%)	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (%)		HOUSEHOLD INCOME (€)	PVV SUPPORT
		Total	Long term		
Utrecht	46.8	6.4	2.6	24,100	Medium
Noord-Holland	41.6	6.2	2.6	23,300	Low
Zuid-Holland	36.1	7.8	3.6	22,300	Medium
Gelderland	34.0	6.3	2.7	21,000	Low
Groningen	33.7	9.1	4	17,700	High
Noord-Brabant	33.2	6.5	2.7	20,800	Medium
Overijssel	31.4	6.9	2.8	19,100	Low
Flevoland	30.0	7.9	3.8	20,900	High
Limburg	29.4	6.3	2.5	18,700	Highest
Drenthe	28.6	7.5	3.4	18,700	Lowest

## 5.2 SOCIAL SIMILARITIES

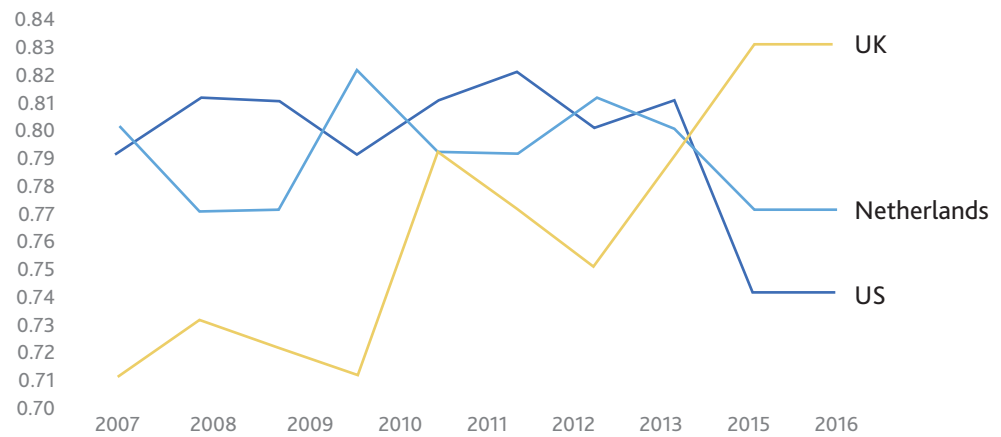
The *Prosperity Index* also includes useful data on 'Tolerance of migrants' (see Chart 5c). Interestingly, Britain's score has climbed markedly over the past decade, suggesting that either a referendum held in previous years could have been easier for the Leave campaign, or that the Brexit vote was perhaps not as strongly connected to migration as some might think.

The second interesting trend is that tolerance has reduced markedly in the United States and the Netherlands, which might go some way to explaining the Freedom Party's good fortunes since the 2012 elections, and Trump's success last year.

By contrast, the people's perception of their safety in the Netherlands and the US has stayed largely flat in the last five years, with a slight deterioration in the United States score and small improvement in the Netherlands score (see Chart 5d). Many more people in the UK, however, now feel safe walking home at night in the UK.

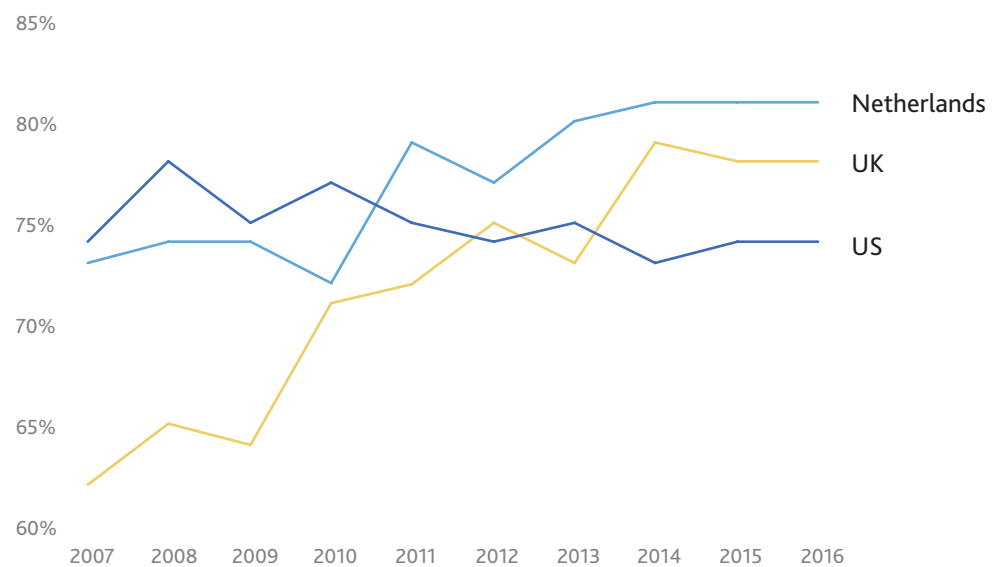
Top: Chart 5c:  
Tolerance of Migrants  
2007-2016

(Legatum Prosperity  
Index)



Bottom: Chart 5d:  
Safe Walking Alone at  
Night, 2007-2016

(Legatum Prosperity  
Index)



### 5.3 POLITICAL SIMILARITIES

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A widespread anti-establishment, anti-elite mood was associated with the victories of both Trump and Leave, against what was seen as a vaguely corrupt, cosy culture in Westminster and Washington that needed to be shaken up. “Drain the swamp”, to use Trump’s mantra.

A proxy for this feeling might be confidence in national government, one of the measures included in the *Prosperity Index* (see Chart 5e). While people in the Netherlands and the US now have less confidence in their government than they did ten years ago, British people now have more confidence. That said, the 2017 ranking for the Netherlands (53) is markedly higher than the UK (86) or the US (111), and this level of satisfaction with the government does not point to a major political upset in the elections this year.

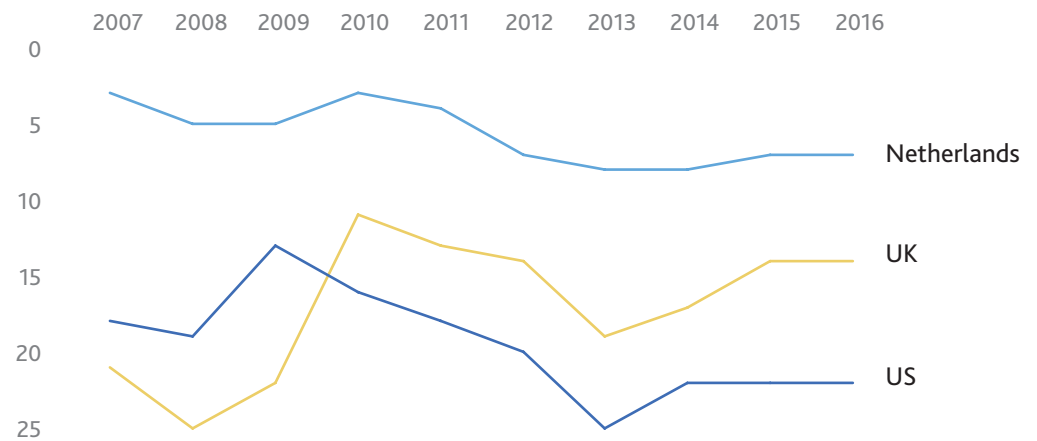
Another more direct proxy could be the perception of corruption. The overall figures from the Gallup World Poll on this measure are not especially surprising. People in the Netherlands are less likely to agree that “corruption in government is widespread” than people in the UK, who in turn are more positive than people in the US. Since 2011, the perception of corruption in all three countries has risen compared to their OECD counterparts. The Netherlands has fallen from 5th to 12th place; the UK has fallen from 9th to 21st; and the US has plummeted from 13th to 24th place.

Among the bottom income quintile in Dutch society, the perception of corruption has increased even more rapidly (see Chart 5f). In 2011, 26 per cent of the Dutch population agreed that corruption in government is widespread. Amongst the bottom income quintile, a slightly smaller proportion, 24 per cent, agreed. By 2016, while this perception had grown to 40 per cent of the whole population, among the bottom quintile it had more than doubled to 59 per cent. These are the kind of voters who were crucial to Leave’s victory in the EU referendum, so it will be interesting to see whether their pessimism about corruption in the Netherlands translates into greater support for populist parties including the Freedom Party.

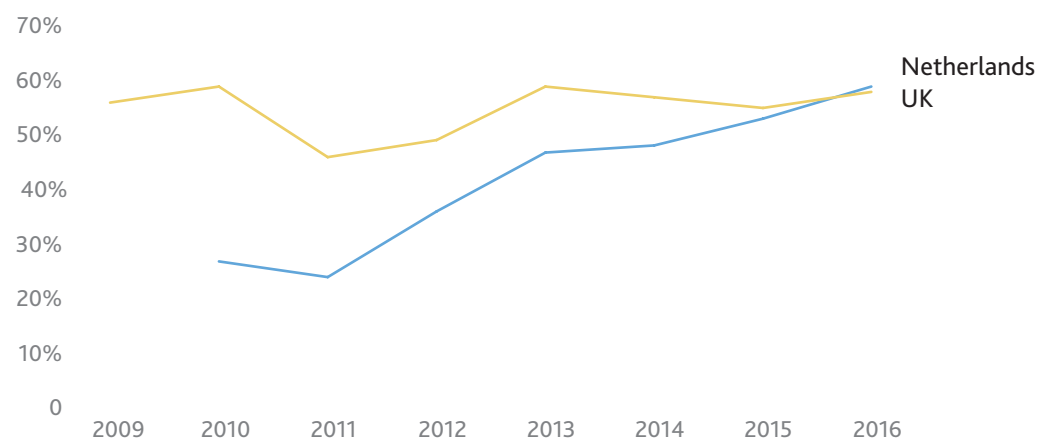
Other key policy issues to follow are migration and public services. Eurobarometer finds immigration and health/social security to be the most frequently mentioned issues facing respondents in both Britain and the Netherlands. Both are issues at the heart of the Brexit debate in Britain and the appeal of populist parties in the Netherlands. But while 25 and 27 per cent respectively mentioned them in Britain, the concern among Dutch respondents was much more widespread at 34 and 49 per cent, respectively.<sup>24a</sup> Unsurprisingly, Geert Wilders is tapping into these concerns.



Top: Chart 5e:  
Confidence in  
National Government  
ranking, 2007-2017  
(*Legatum Prosperity  
Index*)



Bottom: Chart 5f:  
Perception of  
corruption among  
the poorest income  
quintile  
(*Gallup*)



## 6. COMPARISON WITH TRUMP AND BREXIT

Although certain politicians get lumped together as being populist—including Donald Trump, Nigel Farage and Geert Wilders—defining populism can be tricky. Populists can be left or right wing, militarist or pacifist, and can support or oppose restrictions on free speech.

One definition holds that populism is when proponents claim to represent the people and cast all others as illegitimate.<sup>25</sup> This definition captures both Donald Trump and Ukip, who have claimed to be the only people genuinely capable of representing “real people” because of an alleged corruption of the “Washington Beltway” and “SW1 elite”. “Nobody knows the system like me, which is why I alone can fix it”, Trump told the 2016 Republican National Convention; “I am your voice”.<sup>26</sup>

The populism of Geert Wilders is different, however. The group he focuses on is not the elite itself but Muslims and Islam, which he treats as effectively indistinguishable from Islamism. His contention is that the people are under threat from Islam, and they must be protected.

Moreover, the Freedom Party is not the only party in the Netherlands which could be said to be populist. Democratic Forum and For the Netherlands are both Eurosceptic parties which back stricter controls on immigration, and the Greens and the Socialists also have their own populist tendencies. For example, the Socialists have proposed dispersing immigrants across the country to avoid spatial concentration.<sup>27</sup>

To make matters even more confusing, both Mark Rutte’s People’s Party and the Labour Party have also tilted in the direction of Wilders in many respects. For example, Rutte criticised migrants by saying that they “abuse our country’s freedom to cause havoc, when they came to our country precisely for that freedom”, warning them to “act normal or go away”.<sup>28</sup> And disquiet within Labour prompted Dutch-Turkish Labour MPs to form the breakaway *Denk* party, which is expected to win up to two seats.<sup>29</sup>

### 6.1 KEY SIMILARITIES WITH TRUMP

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There are many similarities between Donald Trump and Geert Wilders. They share a proclivity for attention-grabbing language which breaks taboos, and a willingness to challenge policy conventions, most notably on the subject of immigration, in particular Muslim immigration. While Trump announced a “complete and total shutdown on Muslims coming to this country until our elected representatives can figure out what is going on”, Wilders has referred to “Moroccan scum” and called for an end to new migration from Muslim countries, including asylum seekers.

On the other hand, both Trump and the Freedom Party have conspicuously supported LGBTQ causes. Trump stood on a stage with a rainbow flag to make the point and was the first Republican nominee to mention the LGBTQ community in his nomination acceptance speech, while the Freedom Party’s manifesto promotes anti-hate crime laws mandating harsher sentences for homophobic crimes. Trump also vowed to “do everything in my power to protect our LGBTQ

citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology<sup>30</sup> in the wake of the Orlando gay nightclub massacre, mirroring the rationale found in Wilders' statement that "the more Islamic apostates there are, the less misogyny, the less hatred of gays, the less anti-Semitism, the less oppression, the less terror and violence, and the more freedom there will be."<sup>31</sup> Many are unconvinced by Trump's overtures to the LGBTQ community, not least because of concerns about the Vice-President's views, some of his executive appointees and worries that Supreme Court nominees may lead to a reversal of the 2015 ruling on gay marriage. But it is undeniable that his election campaign was notable, in a Republican context, for being explicitly sympathetic to some LGBTQ causes.<sup>32</sup>

Both Trump and the Freedom Party also advocate deregulation and tax cuts. Trump has spoken in favour of fracking and loosening environmental regulations<sup>33</sup> and campaigned on a substantial tax reform programme.<sup>34</sup> The Freedom Party, meanwhile, has campaigned for low taxes and reducing environmental and noise regulation in Schiphol to promote growth.<sup>35</sup>

## 6.2 KEY DIFFERENCES WITH TRUMP

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While dealing with problems posed by Islamism was an important plank of Trump's campaign, it was not as central to 'Making America Great Again' as other issues such as trade reform, "building a wall" along the southern border and "draining the swamp" of elite Washington insiders. By contrast, Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party regard tackling the problems they see in Islam as the overarching goal itself, and policies such as leaving the EU are the necessary tools needed to accomplish that goal.

In contrast to their authoritarian platform as it relates to Islam, with negative, exclusionary rhetoric and proposals to ban the Koran, wearing headscarves and Islamic schools, the Freedom Party is remarkably liberal in other respects. They promise to repeal a smoking ban and abolish speed restrictions on motorways, for example. They also call for trade barriers to be broken down and Wilders has spoken about his relaxed attitude to non-Muslim migration, saying he doesn't "have a problem with people from Slovakia and Lithuania. But I do have a problem with immigration from Islamic countries."<sup>36</sup>

## 6.3 KEY SIMILARITIES WITH BREXIT

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The similarities between Wilders and Trump are far more striking than those between Wilders and the official Vote Leave campaign in the EU referendum, which was diametrically opposite to where the Freedom Party is politically. That said, echoes of their messaging could be found in some of the other Brexit campaigns. For example, Ukip's infamous 'Breaking Point' poster, depicting a long, winding column of Middle Eastern migrants was criticised by some for resembling Nazi propaganda.<sup>37</sup>

Another similarity would be the use of national symbolism, with the Freedom Party promising to restrict official communication to Dutch and Frisian, support Afrikaners and ask the EU to remove the Dutch star from its flag. Nigel Farage also repeatedly made the point that Britain is "more than just a star on somebody else's flag", and there was talk of returning to the traditional blue British passports, although these were not central messages for the Leave campaign.

## 6.4 KEY DIFFERENCES WITH BREXIT

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During the Brexit campaign, the British public were undoubtedly concerned about the scale of migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe in summer 2015, and about the prospect of Turkish accession to the EU. But the concern focused on the scale of migration and the size of Turkey's population, rather than religious issues. The message focused on controlling migration, rather than specifically Muslim immigration. This contrasts with the Freedom Party's message that Islamism is the fundamental problem, and the suggestion that Dutch exit from the EU is necessary to stop its spread in the Netherlands. Critics of Brexit might seek to undermine the result by suggesting that it shares political roots with the Freedom Party, but an objective analysis shows this not to be the case. One focused on sovereignty ('Take Back Control') while the other focuses on the threat of Islam.

## 7 . CONCLUSION

“Last year the wind began to turn, it brought us the victory of Trump!”

Geert Wilders, January 2017.<sup>38</sup>

But how apposite is the Dutch populist to link his chances to the shock victory of Donald Trump in America last year? And how closely linked are the economic, social and political drivers behind Brexit to the rise of populism in the Netherlands? These questions will be easier to answer once we are in a position to analyse the results of the Dutch election on Wednesday 15th March.

In the meantime, here are five things to look out for when the results come through. Do look out for my immediate analysis of the results immediately after the election, and a longer publication on the Dutch election later in the year.

**A. Will the Freedom Party achieve their objective of winning the most number of seats in the Lower House?**

Irrespective of whether Geert Wilders is then able to form a coalition government (probably not), if his party does win most seats, he would then be able to say that he ‘won’ the election, giving him the mandate to constantly undermine the new government. More widely, will Wilders manage to expand his base from his home region of Limburg? Can he hold together the fiscal hawks and those who want to protect welfare spending?

**B. How many parties will it take to form a coalition?**

After the last election, the People’s Party and the Labour Party had enough seats between them to form a Government with 79 of the 150 seats in the Lower House, allowing them to form a stable two-party coalition. Recent projections suggest that it might take at least four parties to form a coalition after this election.

**C. Will the People’s Party manage to avoid a catastrophic fall in their support in the Lower House?**

They won 41 seats in 2012, and are now predicted to fall to 25 or perhaps fewer. Unless they retain significantly more seats than the other parties, they will lack the mandate to take the lead in forming a new, multi-party coalition.

**D. How will the other populist parties perform in the election?**

The Freedom Party is one of several populist parties in the Netherlands, on both the right (Democratic Forum and For the Netherlands) and left (Greens and the Socialists). In 2012, their combined support in the Lower House was 34 seats. In this election, they are forecast to reach as high as 55 of the 150 seats.



Above: Geert Wilders

Source: Robert Hoetink /  
Shutterstock.com

**E. Could there be enough support in the Lower House for a Nexit referendum?**

Euroscepticism is undoubtedly on the rise in the Netherlands, and support for a Nexit referendum could rise from 32 MPs to 42 MPs. Should the Eurozone crisis return, this could be enough of a boost to bring about a referendum on Dutch membership of the EU, even if (as in the UK) the majority of parties support 'Remain'.



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Matthew's work at the Legatum Institute is focusing on a UK-US trade deal and researching the rise of Populism abroad. Having been Chief Executive of Vote Leave, the official Brexit campaign in the 2016 EU referendum, Matthew is now one of the UK's foremost political campaigners. He also led NOtoAV and won the 2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote. As a policy entrepreneur, he has founded and run numerous award-winning campaigns, starting with the TaxPayers' Alliance (TPA), where he won the Atlas Templeton Freedom Award for 'The Single Income Tax'. At Business for Britain (BfB), the precursor to Vote Leave, he oversaw the publication of 'Change, or Go: How Britain would gain influence and prosper outside an unreformed EU', which became a key blueprint for Brexit and was serialised in the *Daily Telegraph*. Matthew has been described by the *Financial Times* as "one of the most formidable political strategists in Westminster", and by the *New European* as "an unsung titan of the Brexit cause". He has written four books, numerous op-eds, appears regularly on TV and radio, and is a frequent speaker both in the UK and overseas.



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