

OVERNIGHT ANALYSIS

Dutch Election 2017

Matthew Elliott, Thursday 16th March 2017

OVERNIGHT ANALYSIS OF THE 2017 DUTCH ELECTION

Following on from my pre-election guide to the Dutch election ([link](#)), this short report provides an immediate post-election analysis of the results. A longer paper will be published later in the year with a more considered analysis of the voting patterns and the new coalition government.

1. KEY POINTS

- The election saw **Mark Rutte's People's Party returned as the largest single party**, significantly beating expectations, albeit with a smaller cohort of 33 seats, down from 41 in 2012 (see Table 1).
- Geert Wilders increased the Freedom Party's representation to 20 seats, an increase on the 15 seats they won in 2012, but well short of the 25 won in 2010. **The Freedom Party is now joint second-largest party** in the Lower House for the first time, closely followed by two other parties, the Christian Democrats and Democrats 66 each with 19 seats.
- Labour, the current junior coalition party, slumped from 38 to 9 seats. Their performance exemplified the **collapse of the traditional parties of government**, whose overall share of the vote fell from 72 to 56 per cent, resulting in a lost 25 seats, falling from 109 to just 84 (see Table 2).
- The biggest beneficiary of **the rise of parties who have never governed** were the GreenLeft, who won 9 per cent of the vote, up from 2 per cent at the last election. Overall, parties which have never governed grew from 28 to 44 per cent of the vote (see Table 3).
- **Support for a Nexit referendum strengthened, but is still weak.** Pro-referendum parties gained 7 seats and now stand at 39 in total, but parties which have ruled out a referendum remained unchanged on 91. Parties which have not ruled out a referendum but nonetheless do not support one either are down 7 to 49 seats (see Table 4).

Matthew Elliott, Senior Fellow at the Legatum Institute, said:

“Although the Freedom Party has advanced into second position following yesterday’s election in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders underperformed, having been widely predicted to win more seats than any other party. That said, populist parties overall - from both the right and left - have performed well, and support for the traditional parties of government has collapsed.”

“The prospect of a Dutch exit from the European Union has similarly edged closer, but a Brexit referendum probably remains out of reach unless events - most plausibly another Eurozone crisis - prompts another shift in public opinion.”

2. OVERALL RESULTS

A full breakdown of the overall results is provided in Table 1. The *Peilingwijzer* (literal translation: ‘bearing pointer’) by Tom Louwse of the University of Leiden, combined polling from a number of pollsters to estimate the seats numbers. The *Peilingwijzer* figures in this table were from the 9th March. Election 2017 results are based on figures from 385 of 388 districts reported by NOS, the Dutch equivalent of the BBC. The official results will be announced by the Dutch electoral council on 21st March.

Table 1: Final results over the 2017 Dutch general election

PARTY	SEATS WON IN 2012		PEILZWIGER (%)	SEATS	SEATS WON IN 2017		CHANGE 2012 TO 2017	
	(%)	SEATS			(%)	SEATS	(%)	SEATS
People’s Party	26.6	41	16	25	21.3	33	-5.3	-8
Labour	24.8	38	8	12	5.7	9	-19.1	-29
Freedom Party	10.1	15	15	23	13.1	20	+3.0	+5
Socialists	9.7	15	9	14	9.2	14	-0.5	-1
Christian Democrats	9.9	13	12	19	12.5	19	+2.6	+6
Democrats 66	8.0	12	12	18	12.0	19	+4.0	+7
Christian Union	3.1	5	4	6	3.4	5	+0.3	0
GreenLeft	2.3	4	11	2	8.9	14	+6.6	+10
Reformed Party	2.1	3	2	4	2.0	3	-0.1	0
Party for the Animals	1.9	2	3	5	3.1	5	+1.2	+3
50 Plus	1.9	2	3	5	3.1	4	+1.2	+2
For the Netherlands	n/a	0	1	0	0.4	0	new	0
Think	n/a	0	1	1	2.0	3	new	+3
Democratic Forum	n/a	0	1	1	1.8	2	new	+2

3. ANALYSIS OF FIVE KEY FACTORS

In my pre-election guide to the Dutch election, I concluded with five key factors to look out as the results came in. Now the seats have been allocated, we are in a position to analyse the results against the five questions I posed in my conclusion.

A. Freedom Party

In my pre-election report, I asked the question ***“Will the Freedom Party achieve their objective of winning the most number of seats in the Lower House?”***

The Freedom Party has failed to become the largest party in the Lower House. It is unlikely that Geert Wilders will therefore be able to join a coalition and he will be unable to say that he ‘won’ the election. Nonetheless, he has regained some of the vote share and seats he lost in 2012 and now leads the second-largest party for the first time.

The Freedom Party’s failure to meet the high expectations it had built up – with Wilders repeatedly claiming that his party’s success would be the natural Dutch consequence of Brexit and Trump – will come as a blow to the Dutch populist. Nonetheless, he will be able to point to the improved position of his own party, and the fact that the People’s Party adopted similar populist rhetoric during the election campaign, to demonstrate that he is still influential in the Netherlands.

B. Coalition size

Another question I asked in my pre-election report was ***“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. It will now take at least four parties to form a coalition, assuming parties stick to their pre-election pledges not to work with the Freedom Party (most of the big parties) and the People’s Party (only the Socialists have ruled them out).

Four 4-party combinations are possible - the People’s Party, the Christian Democrats and Democrats 66 together account for 71 seats. Either GreenLeft (14 seats), Labour (9 seats), Party for the Animals (5 seats) or the Christian Union (5 seats) could take the group above the 75-seat threshold to form a majority.

The left wing GreenLeft or Party for the Animals would, however, sit uneasily with the centre-right People’s Party. Much of their support came from Labour voters unhappy with their party’s compromises in power. And would an electorally-chastened Labour want to risk further depleting its support by propping up another coalition in which it shrinks from being almost half of the coalition to having just one in nine of its MPs? Meanwhile, the Christian Union’s five seats would only be able to deliver the narrowest of parliamentary majorities, so a five-party coalition is perhaps more likely.

C. The People's Party and Labour

The third question in my pre-election report was *“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 while they remain the largest party, they now have just 33. That's better than they feared in early February when they trailed the Freedom Party by 2.5 percentage points in the polls, but despite their eve-of-poll bounce and better than expected performance, their result still leaves them seriously weakened.

That said, the People's Party did fare better than their junior coalition partners, Labour, who slumped from 38 seats to just 9. Their performance exemplified the collapse of the traditional parties of government, whose collective overall share of the vote fell from 72 to 56 per cent, resulting in a lost 25 seats, falling from 109 to just 84.

Table 2: Declining support for the traditional parties of government

PARTY	2012 SEATS	2017 SEATS	CHANGE
People's Party	41	33	-8
Labour	38	9	-29
Christian Democrats	13	19	+6
Democrats 66	12	19	+7
Christian Union	5	5	0
TOTAL	109	85	-24

D. Other populist parties

My fourth question was *“How will the other populist parties perform in the election?”*

The Freedom Party is not the only populist party in the Netherlands. The Democratic Forum on the right and older people's 50Plus party both gained two seats, but the biggest winners were GreenLeft who won 10 seats, up from 4 to 14. The Socialists lost one of their 15 seats while For the Netherlands failed to break into the Lower House.

Defining what constitutes a populist party is, of course, contentious. For simplicity, all the parties who have always sat in opposition are listed in Table 3. None of them are expected to join the new coalition government. It is worth noting that the Freedom Party had a confidence and supply agreement with the first minority Rutte cabinet of 2010-2012 but did not formally join the coalition. GreenLeft have never been in government, but they were formed by the merger of four parties, one of which was the Political Party of Radicals, which was in government from 1972 to 1977.

Table 3: Parties who have always sat in opposition

PARTY	2012 SEATS	2017 SEATS	CHANGE
Freedom Party	15	20	+5
Socialists	15	14	-1
GreenLeft	4	14	+10
Reformed Party	3	3	0
Party for the Animals	2	5	+3
50 Plus	2	4	+2
For the Netherlands	0	0	0
Think	0	3	+3
Democratic Forum	0	2	+2
TOTAL	41	65	+24

E. Nexit referendum

The final question I asked in my pre-election report was *“Could there be enough support in the Lower House for a Nexit referendum?”*

Euro-scepticism is undoubtedly on the rise in the Netherlands, but support for parties who support a Nexit referendum rose unspectacularly from 32 to 40 seats. They are still therefore outnumbered by the 60 MPs from parties which oppose a referendum (up 1 since 2012). Parties which have not ruled out a referendum account for a further 47 MPs. Should the Eurozone crisis return, this could be enough to put a Nexit referendum on the agenda, even if (as in the UK) the majority of parties support ‘Remain’. But, significantly, three of the parties being suggested as the new likely coalition, two of them (the People’s Party and the Christian Democrats) oppose a referendum, and one of them (Democrats 66) does not hold a position on the matter.

Table 4: Support for a Nexit referendum, 2012 vs 2017

NEXIT POSITION	PARTIES	2012 SEATS	2017 SEATS	CHANGE
Support Nexit	Freedom Party, Democratic Forum, For the Netherlands, Jesus Lives	15	22	+7
Support a referendum	Socialists, 50Plus	17	18	+1
Oppose a referendum	People's Party, Christian Democrats, Christian Union, Think	59	60	+1
Do not oppose a referendum	Labour, D66, GreenLeft, Party for the Animals	56	47	-9
Support Nexit but oppose referendum	Reformed Party	3	3	0

4. FURTHER READING

My pre-election guide to the Dutch election provides more details on the economic, social and political similarities between the Netherlands, the UK and the US, drawing on data from the Legatum Prosperity Index, the OECD and Gallup; and it looks at some of the similarities and differences between Geert Wilders, Trump and Brexit. A longer paper will be published later in the year with a more considered analysis of the voting patterns and the new coalition government.

