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Wilders' middle-finger appeal

Political scientist René Cuperus is optimistic anti-establishment sentiments in the Netherlands won't mean a far-right win

Millions of Dutch voters head to the polls today in a crucial general election which pits current Prime Minister Mark Rutte's centre-right party against that of populist Geert Wilders, who is running on an anti-immigrant ticket. The vote has been overshadowed by a diplomatic spat between the Netherlands and Turkey, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeating accusations of European "Nazism", following bans on rallies held by Turkish politicians in the Netherlands and Germany. It is also being viewed as a 'test election' for Europe's far-right, ahead of elections in France and Germany later in the year.

Anja Papenfuss spoke to Dutch political scientist René Cuperus ahead of the vote.

Before polling booths opened, Geert Wilders's Freedom Party was expected to get around 20 percent of the vote. The party could still come out ahead, setting off a political earthquake. Why are they doing so well?

We'll have to wait and see, but the polls in the Netherlands have fluctuated a lot in the weeks leading up to the election. Around 60% of the voters still hadn't made their minds up a week before the vote. The latest opinion polls suggest Geert Wilders' *Freedom Party* (PVV) is losing steam, with many surveys showing Prime Minister Mark Rutte's VVD coming out ahead.

My educated guess is that the PVV will not become the biggest party in the Netherlands and will not enter into government. The Netherlands – known for its open, liberal, progressive mind-set – will be saved from a national scandal, from a vulgar, right-wing populist party that is aggressively polarising Dutch society. The PVV doesn't respect the rule of law, for example in its anti-Islam agenda. Even if they win, the PVV won't be able to govern because most other established parties have ruled out forming a coalition with them.

The good news is that the nationalist-populist tsunami against the post-war establishment will stop in the Netherlands. It started with Brexit and Donald Trump's victory, and people assume it will continue with Wilders, then a le Pen win in France and maybe even a game-changing result for the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany.

The PVV's decreasing poll ratings are also to do with the fact that many Dutch voters want to flick their middle finger at the establishment, but don't actually want Geert Wilders to run the country.

Another explanation might be the "Trump effect". The more blunders the White House's new man makes, the less Geert Wilders refers to him as a beacon for the national-populist global revolt.

There are several parties congregated around the centre ground of Dutch politics. Is that another reason why Wilders has been so successful?

The post-war political party system is totally fragmenting. The Christian and Social Democratic parties are falling apart. There are now about 6 to 8 medium-sized parties which hold close to 12 per cent of the vote each. Many of our parties are also invested in identity politics – to the detriment of 'big tent' parties. So in the Netherlands we now have parties for academic professionals only (*GroenLinks*, *D66*), a party for the elderly (*50Plus*), a party for Dutch-Turkish migrants (*DENK*) and even a party for animals (*Pvdd*).

How would a Wilders victory affect the EU?

The international media is overestimating the potential impact of a PVV win. Wilders will not become prime minister. He will have only am indirect influence on policy formation. Most Dutch voters don't want to leave the EU – not even his own supporters, who care more about his anti-Islam and anti-Migration stance.

What are the overriding issues in this election?

Dutch identity, in terms of globalisation, Europe and as an immigrant society, the pension age, health care reform, refugee politics and integration.

The social democratic PdvA is running at around 8 percent in opinion polls – a 17 percent drop since the 2012 elections. Why?

The PdvA has suffered as the junior member of a 'grand coalition'

with their political opponents, the centre-right VVD. This has made the social democrats unpopular with some of their core voters. There's a theory in political science that the junior coalition partner always loses out, and we see it being played out in this election. It's the same with the FDP (Liberals) in Germany and the Liberal Democrats in the UK – but never with the party of the Chancellor or Prime Minister.

Another important reason the party is losing popularity is that the VVD/PvdA coalition drove through an agenda of reforms and austerity following the Eurozone crisis. This included big cuts to social provision which affected healthcare, pensions and mortgages. The reform measures cost the PvdA political clout and credibility. People said "you'll save the banks, but leave sick pensioners to fend for themselves".

Reacting to the low poll ratings, the PvdA held a leadership contest. Party leader Diederik Samsom lost the vote and was replaced by Lodewijk Asscher, the Deputy Prime Minister. People saw him as part of the old guard – not someone who could bring new ideas and a degree of self-criticism, and go after votes in the way that Martin Schulz has managed in Germany.



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