DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 20.09.2023 | Simon Pieter Otjes

The hope of the Dutch left

Frans Timmermans is running for Dutch prime minister. Can the former vice-president of the EU Commission lead his left-wing alliance to victory?

At the end of August, Frans Timmermans, the first vice-president of the European Commission and one of the most influential people in Brussels, stepped down to run for prime minister of the Netherlands. How has his candidature been received? And what are his chances?

The name Timmermans has been buzzing in left-wing circles in the Netherlands for three years. In 2019, he led the Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) – which had been 'pasokified' after governing with the right-wing Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD) for five disastrous years – to a major victory in the European Parliament (EP) elections. Surrounded by the unknown European Parliament candidates, Timmermans, who had already served two years as foreign minister, three years as junior minister for Europe and five years as European Commissioner, appeared like a true statesman. It paid out: Timmermans got more personal votes than any of the other parties got for their entire list and doubled the number of seats for his party. For the first time since 1989, the social democrats were the largest party in the Dutch EP constituency. The hope in left-wing circles now is that Timmermans can replicate this result in the national elections scheduled for 22 November.

A progressive candidate in a polarised landscape

In the past, the Dutch GreenLeft (*GroenLinks*, GL) and the Labour Party had gradually started cooperating. The two parties participated jointly in the 2021 coalition formation and formed a bloc in the Senate. Just before the summer, the Dutch cabinet fell apart and the long-serving PM Mark Rutte announced that he would withdraw from politics, leaving a big 'Rutte'-shaped hole in the political system. From the perspective of the Labour Party, Timmermans, with his international and European experience, appeared as an ideal candidate for the position. The

social democrat, who had served as climate commissioner for the last four years, was also a good fit for the program of the GreenLeft. Thus, in the summer, the GreenLeft and the Labour Party decided to run with a joint list and coronated Timmermans as their top candidate without a challenger.

With the joint list and under Timmermans, the GreenLeft and the Labour Party do better than if they had run separately. A recent poll shows that the GreenLeft-Labour Party list is now statistically tied with the governing Liberal Party and the social-conservative newcomer New Social Contract (*Nieuw Sociaal Contract*, NSC) for first place. But this success is mainly driven by the credibility of the new joint list on climate issues — and not as much by Timmermans' popularity.

There are three major forces: the GreenLeft-Labour Party list of Timmermans, the governing Liberal Party and the new party New Social Contract.

The responses to Timmermans are polarised: he is well-liked by the voters of the joint list, supporters of the social-liberal party Democrats 66 (*Democraten 66*, D66), as well as amongst the younger, higher-educated, migrant and female voters. For them, his strengths lie in the years he has spent in Brussels and in his work on climate. He is also known for his eloquence, as, for instance, during an emotional appeal to the UN Security Council in the Summer of 2014 after the Russian-controlled forces in Ukraine shot down the airplane MH17 filled with 298 civilians, two-thirds of whom were Dutch. These progressive voters also value his knowledge of foreign languages, as Timmermans speaks Dutch, English, German, French, Russian and Italian.

Yet, in the broader electorate, there are also concerns about Timmermans' 'arrogance', as well as a feeling that he appears rather out of touch with the common voter. Spending nine years in the 'Brussels bubble' further reinforced this image. Compared to the leaders of the other two largest parties – the popular MPs Pieter Omtzigt (NSC) and Dilan Yeşilgöz, who is the new leader of the Liberal Party, the minister of Justice and Safety and a conservative hardliner – Timmermans scores worse on general appreciation, expected reliability as PM and in his 'understanding of the ordinary people'. His best trait, according to the polls, (although even there, he trails behind Omtzigt and Yeşilgöz) is his leadership skill.

Expectations for the upcoming elections

As mentioned, there are three major forces: the GreenLeft-Labour Party list of Timmermans, the governing Liberal Party and the new party New Social Contract. And there are two possible ways in which the election campaign can develop: both the Liberal Party and the joint list of the GreenLeft and the Labour Party want to make the elections a referendum on the future prime minister. Will this be Timmermans or the new liberal leader Yeşilgöz? Both are hoping to create a horse race between the two of them. Timmermans and the GreenLeft-Labour Party combination would pick up left-wing, environmentalist, progressive and pro-European voters from smaller parties like the social-liberal D66, the Eurofederalist party Volt and the deep-green Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*, PvdD). Yeşilgöz and the Liberal Party, on the other hand, would win conservative and right-wing votes from the radical-right populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV), the Christian-Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*, CDA) and the rural party Farmer-Citizen-Movement (*BoerBurgerBeweging*, BBB).

It is by no means certain that Timmermans will become the next Dutch PM. Out of the leaders of the three largest parties, his current prospects actually appear the worst.

This kind of dynamic has occurred in nearly all national elections since 2003. In 2021, D66 put forward the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Sigrid Kaag as a PM candidate. In the last *month* of the campaign, her party doubled in the polls and became the second-largest in the election, mainly due to strategic voting from social-democratic and green voters. Timmermans is now hoping for a reversed pattern, and opinion polls already indicate that voters are considering casting a strategic vote for the GreenLeft-Labour Party list.

The newly created social-conservative party NSC, led by Pieter Omtzigt, is hoping for a different dynamic. It wants to change the Dutch political culture and reform the political system, seeking to challenge the political establishment, including the Liberal Party and the Labour Party. Omtzigt has already announced that he does *not* want to become prime minister. His key agenda is to strengthen the parliament *vis-á-vis* the executive. Making the parliamentary elections about the executive runs counter to that logic. But Omtzigt's presence may prevent it from becoming a horse race for the office of the prime minister, in particular because in every poll, his party scores the most votes. And since 1986, the top candidate of the largest government party automatically becomes prime minister.

All in all, it is by no means certain that Timmermans will become the next Dutch PM. In fact, of the leaders of the three largest parties, his prospects seem the worst. But Timmermans does not need to convince *all* the voters. The GreenLeft-Labour Party joint list will simply need to become the *largest* party. For this, three things will need to happen: the joint list will need to consolidate left-progressive voters that are currently divided between them, Volt, D66 and PvdD. Secondly, the right-wing conservative voters will need to remain more divided between the VVD, PVV and BBB. And, finally, Omtzigt's NSC, which currently has the momentum of the front-runner, will need to falter.



Simon Pieter Otjes

Simon Pieter Otjes works as an assistant professor at Leiden University. His research examines political parties, parliaments, interest groups and public opinion in the Netherlands and Europe.