



BRIEFING PAPER

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Netherlands: 2021 general election

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Summary

The Netherlands held an election on 17 March, with early voting taking place from 15-16 March, to elect members to the House of Representatives.

37 political parties contested the election and 17 went on to win at least one of the 150 seats in the chamber.

The election campaign took place under the cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic and during a national lockdown. This meant candidates had limited opportunities to interact with voters.

Preliminary results show Prime Minister Mark Rutte is on course to convene his fourth consecutive coalition government and is holding talks with other parties to form an administration.

1. Background

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government.

The bicameral legislature – the Staten-Generaal (States-General) – is composed of the Tweede Kamer (“Second Chamber”, referred to as the House of Representatives) and the Eerste Kamer (“First Chamber”, known as the Senate). The House of Representatives is the main legislative body.

General elections in the Netherlands usually take place every four years and those eligible to vote must be Dutch nationals aged 18 or older and not previously disbarred from voting¹.

The electorate votes only for the 150 members of the House of Representatives; members of the 75-seat Senate are elected by the (directly elected) members of the Provincial Councils.

Elections to the House of Representatives take place using the Party List form of proportional representation.

In the open list system used in the Netherlands, each party presents a list of candidates on the ballot and citizens can choose which candidate to vote for. Within each party list, the order of the candidates is determined by the parties themselves, with the party leader usually topping the list and the last person on the list (the “lijstduwer” or “list pusher”) often being a well-known non-political personality².

Unlike the UK, the Netherlands is not divided up into constituencies; rather, there is a single national constituency, with seats allocated in proportion to the total national vote.

Since the current party list system was introduced in 1918, no political party has won an overall majority of seats and the Netherlands has been governed by coalitions for more than a century.

Incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte is seeking a fourth term in office as leader of the coalition government, with the 2021 elections coming two months after Rutte’s government resigning en masse due to a child welfare fraud scandal.

Thousands of Dutch families (particularly those from ethnic minority communities) were wrongly accused of childcare fraud and told to pay money back to the state, leaving many in financial difficulty³.

Some commentators have suggested the Government’s resignation was merely symbolic as elections had already been scheduled for March and the Government stayed on in a caretaker capacity in the interim, to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹ [Elections of the House of Representatives](#), Kiesraad (Dutch Electoral Council). [Retrieved 27 March 2021]

² [The Netherlands is going to the polls, but how do Dutch elections work?](#) Electoral Reform Society, 17 March 2021

³ [‘Dutch Rutte government resigns over child welfare fraud scandal’](#), *BBC News Online*, 15 January 2021

This year, unusually, voting took place over three days – from 15-17 March – with the official election day being 17 March. Early voting took place on 15 and 16 March to help contain the risk of spreading the coronavirus, with these dates primarily for more vulnerable voters such as the elderly and those in high-risk categories.

2. 2021 General Election

2.1 Political parties

With the open list system and an extremely low threshold required to gain a seat in the House of Representatives, numerous political parties have always contested elections.

In 2021, the Dutch Electoral Council announced 1,579 candidates – representing 37 political parties – were standing for election⁴. This is an increase from the previous elections, in 2017, when 28 parties fielded candidates.

The political parties contesting the 2021 elections included the 13 parties currently represented in parliament and a host of more established fringe groups and new arrivals.

The Netherlands' main traditional parties gained the most support.

People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy is a centre-right party and was founded in 1948.

The party advocates free enterprise, individual responsibility and freedoms, but also supports social security and the participation of employees in profits and management. Traditionally, it is the most ardent support of free markets of all Dutch political parties.

Mark Rutte has led the party since 31 May 2006 and, on 14 October 2010, became Prime Minister of the Netherlands; the first time the VVD had led a government.

In the 2021 election, the party aimed to secure a fourth consecutive term leading the coalition government.

Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)

The Christian Democratic Appeal is a centrist political party founded in 1980 following the merger of the Catholic People's Party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party and the Christian Historical Union.

Since becoming a unitary party, the CDA has participated in all but three coalition governments and its main support base continues to be religious voters – both Catholic and Protestant.

In 2012 the party adopted a centrist position, abandoning its centre-right origins.

Party for Freedom (PVV)

The Party for Freedom is a right-wing populist party founded in 2004 by Geert Wilders.

The PVV is anti-immigration and its manifesto has called for the "de-islamisation" of the Netherlands. Wilders wants a minister for re-

⁴ [37 parties participate in the House of Representatives elections](#), Kiesraad (Dutch Electoral Council), 5 February 2021

emigration, no more refugee permits for Syrians, and for the army to “retake the streets”⁵.

The party is also Eurosceptic and advocates withdrawal from the European Union.

GreenLeft (GL)

GreenLeft is a left-wing party founded in 1989 by a merger of four parties: the Communist Party of the Netherlands, the Evangelical People's Party, the Pacifist Socialist Party and the Political Party of Radicals.

GreenLeft's leading principle is to protect the earth and its ecosystems and aims to solve environmental problems such as climate change.

The party also supports strengthening the peacekeeping powers of the United Nations and to reform the Dutch Armed Forces into a peace force, with the functions of NATO being taken over by the EU and UN.

Democrats 66 (D66)

Democrats 66 is a socially liberal party and takes its name from the year it was founded, 1966.

Originally, the party's main objective was to make the Dutch political system more democratic, but it has developed a more socially liberal ideology over time.

D66's democratic reform policies include abolishing the Senate and proposes Prime Ministers be directly elected. The party supports tax cuts for the lower and middle classes and increased government spending on education.

D66 is particularly popular amongst graduates and its support is concentrated in and around university towns.

Labour Party (PvdA)

The Labour Party is a centre-left political party, founded in 1946 by a merger of progressive and liberal organisations: the Social Democratic Workers' Party, the Free-thinking Democratic League and the Christian Democratic Union.

The party is committed to the welfare state and its key policies centre around education, social security and welfare, with increased investment in education and health.

The Labour Party tends to gain most of its support from the Dutch working classes.

Socialist Party (SP)

The Socialist Party is a left-wing party founded in 1972.

The party's founding positions and activities centre on three concepts: human dignity, equivalence and solidarity.

⁵ [‘Netherlands election: Mark Rutte set to win big – but what next?’](#) the Guardian, 15 March 2021

SP opposes the privatisation of public services and supports increased government investment in health care, education and public safety.

The party is critical of globalisation and has adopted a soft Eurosceptic position.

2.2 Election campaign

The Dutch election campaign took place under the cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic and was widely seen as the least eventful in decades. Party leaders could barely meet with voters and only Thierry Baudet, leader of the far-right Forum for Democracy, campaigned like there was no coronavirus, which he had compared to a bad flu.

There were televised debates, but these had little impact on the polls.

Coronavirus was the key issue for most voters and Prime Minister Rutte maintained his popularity by steering the Netherlands through the pandemic.

Immigration and refugees continued to be a big issue in the election, as with previous elections. Although the number of refugees entering the Netherlands has fallen, far-right parties have continued to campaign against Muslim immigrants and even the Prime Minister has demanded migrant communities conform to Dutch values.

The European Union – and how well it works for the Dutch people – was a key election issue for many commentators.

2.3 Election results

Preliminary results show Prime Minister Mark Rutte's party winning the most seats in the House of Representatives. In securing his fourth consecutive election success, Rutte is one of the longest-serving leaders in Europe.

Whilst his VVD party's success was widely predicted, the electoral gains by the Democrats 66 (D66) party – a coalition partner in the previous government – was more surprising. D66 is now the second-largest party in the Netherlands and, with its pro-EU position, could force Rutte's new administration into a more pro-European direction.

Rutte has ruled out cooperating with the two main right-wing parties – the Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FVD) – but will have to engage with others. With 17 political parties holding at least one seat in the House of Representatives, Rutte has plenty of choice in building his coalition, which may take some time.

Preliminary election results

Candidate	Votes	% of votes	Seats
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	2,276,514	21.9	34
Democrats 66 (D66)	1,562,718	15.0	24
Party for Freedom (PVV)	1,125,022	10.8	17
Christian Democratc Appeal (CDA)	989,385	9.5	15
Socialist Party (SP)	623,436	6.0	9
Labour Party (PvdA)	595,799	5.7	9
GreenLeft (GL)	537,584	5.2	8
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	521,102	5.0	8
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	398,849	3.8	6
Christian Union (CU)	350,523	3.4	5
Volt Netherlands	251,634	2.4	3
Correct Answer 2021 (JA21)	245,859	2.4	3
Reformed Political Party (SGP)	215,354	2.1	3
Think (DENK)	211,053	2.0	3
50Plus (50+)	106,658	1.0	1
Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB)	103,868	1.0	1
Together (BIJ1)	87,635	0.8	1
Others	207,637	2.0	-
Total	10,410,630	100.0	150

Source: [Second Chamber \(Tweede Kamer\) \(The Netherlands\)](#), Europa World online, Routledge, London. [Retrieved 27 March 2021]

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