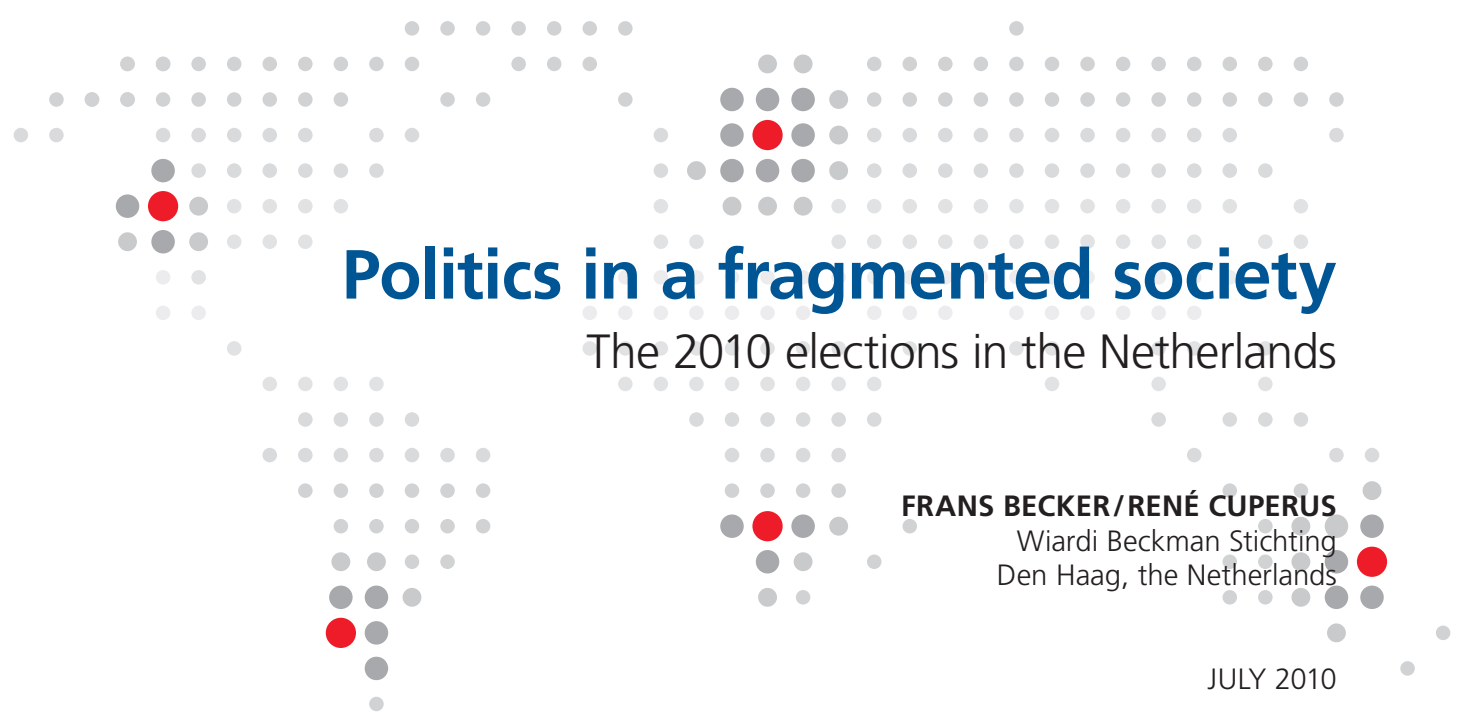


A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are grey, but several are red, highlighting specific countries or regions. The map is centered behind the title and author information.

Politics in a fragmented society

The 2010 elections in the Netherlands

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- In this paper Frans Becker and René Cuperus from the Wiardi Beckman Stichting have a closer look at the electoral campaign, the election results and the options for coalition building after the Dutch election in June 2010.
- Behind the high volatility of the electorate a number of structural trends can be discerned: One is the decline of the two main »Volkspartijen«, the Christian Democrats (*Christen-Democratische Partij* CDA) and the Social Democrats (*Partij van de Arbeid* PvdA); another is the loss of dominance of the Social Democrats on the left.
- Geert Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) was the big winner in the election. Right-wing populism in the Netherlands is characterised by a post-modern mix of conservative values, disgust with the left, xenophobia and liberal values, such as the protection of gay marriage, a strong emphasis on freedom of speech and women's rights.
- Today, the traditional working class voter is leaving social democracy, not only because of the cultural cleavage, but also for materialistic reasons: too soft on immigrants, too much tax. There is also an anti-establishment aspect to this. Many working class and lower middle class voters perceive the social democratic PvdA as an establishment party.
- At no time since the introduction of universal suffrage in the Netherlands has the country's biggest political party been as small as the right-wing liberal *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) is now. This illustrates the political fragmentation that is the main result of the election. As a consequence, forming a cabinet that can count on majority support in parliament will become exceedingly complicated. Put simply, the problem is: will a left party join the right block, or will a right party join the left block?



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And the winner is ...

Election night 2010 was like a scene from a political thriller. All evening long, the electoral race between the main parties on the right and the left – between the liberal-conservative VVD of Mark Rutte and the social democratic PvdA of Job Cohen – was too close to call. It was a real cliffhanger. Which party would be largest and enjoy the political and psychological advantage of taking the lead in forming a new coalition government? Both the PvdA and the VVD remained on about 30 or 31 seats until the early hours.

For both parties, ending up as the largest party in parliament would have been unthinkable only a few months previously. For the VVD, these elections marked a miraculous comeback. Mark Rutte's leadership had been severely contested by populist VVD MPs, who then left the party and started their own movement: Rita Verdonk with *Trots op Nederland* and Geert Wilders with the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV). The VVD had already witnessed a serious decline in its electoral fortunes and had remained very low in the polls until spring. There was fierce competition on the right. But Rutte restored stability and his excellent performance in the election debates – in which he was seen as the winner – suddenly gave wings to the conservative-liberals. Polling 38 seats, a week before the elections, for the first time in Dutch history the VVD would be the largest party in parliament.

The social democrats had also fought their way back, but they came from a very low starting point. At the beginning of 2010, the PvdA was in a depressing situation, with – according to the polls – the prospect of only around 13 to 15 seats in parliament, a mere 9 to 10 per cent of the vote. Then the PvdA decided to insist on ending the Dutch military participation in Afghanistan, which led to the fall of the extremely unpopular CDA-PvdA-CU coalition under Christian Democratic Prime Minister Balkenende (2007–2010). It was the start of a modest recovery. The municipal elections that shortly followed the fall of the government in March showed a drop of one-third in the number of PvdA council seats compared to the elections in 2006, but this result was – compared to the terrible advance polls – a positive first step on the road to recovery and was followed by a further upswing in the polls. The famous rule in Dutch politics – the party that is responsible for breaking up a coalition pays the price – clearly did not apply this time.

In April, the PvdA acquired a new leader. Wouter Bos resigned and Job Cohen, the popular mayor of Amsterdam, took over. Immediately, the PvdA climbed rapidly in popularity, Job Cohen causing a kind of Dutch Obama effect («Yes we Cohen»). But during the first phase of the national election campaign Cohen and the PvdA did not perform well and the Labour Party fell back again.

At the beginning of the PvdA's election night party in Amsterdam's popular music temple, the Paradiso, there was an exuberant mood. With the abovementioned history in mind, one can understand the enthusiasm of the crowd that was gathered there: from 10 per cent in the polls some months previously and after a not too successful campaign, the social democrats still had the prospect of becoming the largest party in parliament.

The evening ended in an anti-climax, however. When all the votes had been counted, at around 2.30 in the morning of 10 June, it turned out that the PvdA had lost 3 seats, retaining 30 seats in the Second Chamber, while the VVD took first place, with 31 seats. Nevertheless, the mood in the Labour Party was one of relief and satisfaction. Relief because, in the end, some damage control had been needed after the PvdA made serious blunders and unforced errors in its campaign, wasting the golden opportunity of Job Cohen's unprecedented appeal to the (progressive) electorate when he took over the PvdA leadership.

But how sustainable and well founded was this joy and happiness, if we look more closely at the election results, the options for coalition building they provide and the social and electoral backgrounds of the election outcome? What caused the «political earthquake», as both Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* and the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* labelled the results of the Dutch election? What kind of campaign preceded the outcome and what role did it play in framing the issues and positioning the parties?

The campaign of 2010

The campaign was a demobilising and depoliticising one. It turned on four basic elements, which reduced the campaign to a sort of shadow-boxing, involving badly organised debates and technocratic discourse.

Voters' Compass and electoral guides

A substantial part of the electorate – some 40 per cent – had not made up their mind which party they would vote for until just before or even on election day. In the end, the turnout was low compared to those of recent decades. Internet voter guides were used by many to determine which party to choose, but these guides have a bias in favour of more extreme positions; parties can manipulate their platforms in order to score better. The guides provide »consumer advice« for hesitant »customers« and have acquired a disproportionate influence over voting behaviour.

The polls

Polling has become a major part of the election process, following voters' preferences on a week-by-week basis. They haunt politicians and political parties by creating a virtual reality that has substantial effects on the real thing. Who is ahead? Who is in second place? Who is winning? Who is losing? And why? The media purveys strong images, to some extent creates its own news and deeply influences the campaigning process.

The polls not only provoke reactions during the campaign, but also influence the subsequent evaluation of the electoral outcome. For example, there is relief when the result is better than the polls had anticipated: the social democrats, likely to pick up only 15 seats according to the polls, in fact managed 30. However, these 30 seats represent a loss of 10 per cent in comparison to the previous election and constitute one of the worst outcomes ever. The virtual world of the polls is transformed into a real world of perceptions and images.

The debates: a postmodern twilight zone

Much of the campaign focused on a few radio and television debates between the leaders of the main four (or eight) parties. The Dutch political system has – as Manin has observed – become a spectators' democracy. Consequently, political campaigns have become a debating match. Never before have television debates played such a dominant role in political campaigns in Holland. Political leadership is tested in this (ill organised, compared to the British and American debates) setting in a very narrow

way: politicians get 30 seconds to give their views on integration or on the economy, followed by two-minute discussions. Debating skills are thus presented as the most important characteristic of modern political leadership.

The debates – on both commercial and public television – are followed by interpretation and evaluation in panel discussions involving supposedly objective experts, who frame winners and losers and deeply influence the perception of the outcomes in the newspapers and by the general public. We thus enter a post-modern twilight zone: campaigning focuses on interpreting the outcome of debates, but also the interpretation of the debates. In subsequent debates, politicians are confronted not only by their opponents, but also with their own shadow, that is, the image that was created of them in the preceding debate: shadow-boxing has become one of the higher arts of politics.

The Central Planning Bureau narrows the policy horizon

The Netherlands has a long tradition of technocratic policymaking: political visions or grand ideals are not part of daily political discourse. Neo-corporatist muddling through, a large role for experts and the depoliticisation of thorny political questions have been the regular practice of post-war politics. The role played by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB, the government's advisory institute on economic issues) in screening the electoral programmes of the political parties is a prominent example of this way of handling political differences. Almost every party submits its programme of policy proposals to the CPB, which assesses their likely effects on employment, the deficit, purchasing power and so on in great detail and for the short and long term. Dutch political culture is the opposite of *Stammtisch Politik*.

The CPB test has become a normal part of the electoral process – and it does have certain advantages. But this year, with the economic and euro crises overshadowing the elections, the influence of economic arithmetic was extreme and CPB figures dominated the election debates. The CPB results were presented live on television by the institute's director, framing budgetary cuts and austerity measures amounting to €30 billion as the natural and inevitable policy framework for the coming years.

In the political discussions that followed, the CPB outcomes played a major role and narrowed down political controversy to the number of jobs the political programmes were supposed to create in 2040! Evidently, economists still have a tendency and wish to impose discipline on politics – and most politicians seem to accept that role.

The resulting framework was not about the financial crisis, the role of the financial markets, the irresponsible behaviour of financial institutions and the risks of liberalisation and deregulation, but boiled down to the need for large budgetary cuts, partly because of the economic crisis, partly because of the ageing of the population. Almost all parties competed for the austerity prize. And – surprise, surprise – the conservative liberals won.

A closer look at the election results

Volatility

To begin with, this election was certainly an earthquake. Since the early 1990s, the Dutch electorate has been adrift in a way that renders the concept of »floating voter« an understatement. Every election has brought

about a large shift in the vote, and since 2002 it has been the political fringes in particular that have profited from footloose voters looking for a home. In 2002, it was Pim Fortuyn's party that obtained 26 seats after its leader was murdered. In 2006, it was the Socialist Party (similar to Die Linke in Germany) that managed 24 seats. In 2010, it was the PVV of Geert Wilders that grew from 9 to 24 seats. Figure 1 presents the election results of 2010 compared to those of 2006. In sum, 68 seats changed parties, almost half of the total number – 150 – in the Second Chamber.

The volatility of the electorate shows that party identification has become quite weak. Very few voters stick to their party, come what may. Most voters decide only when the election comes around which party will have their preference, often a few days before election day or only at the ballot box. Leaders, issues, media images and the internet Voters' Compass influence the choice they make.

The geography of the vote

Looking at the geographical distribution of the vote, the 2010 elections have a number of striking characteristics.

Figure 1: Election results, the Netherlands, 2006–2010

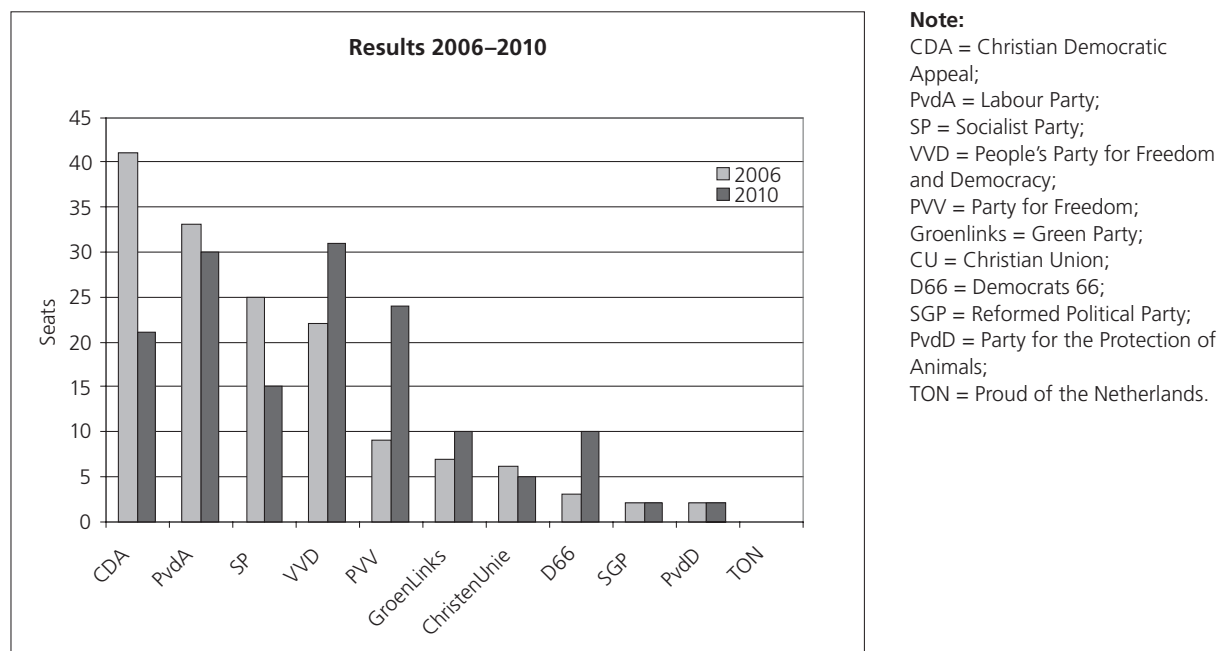


Figure 2: Largest party in each municipality at national elections, the Netherlands, 2002–2010

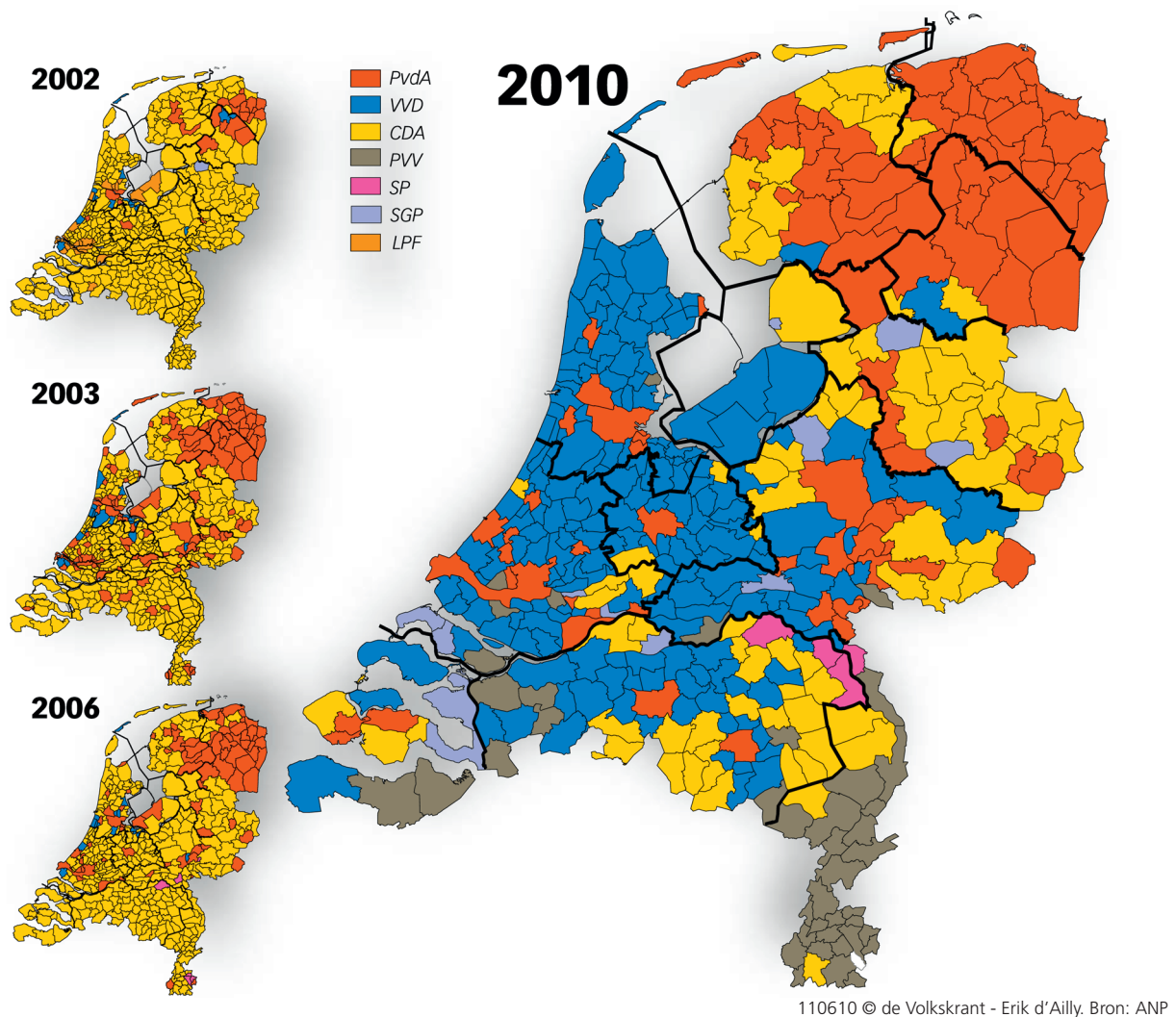


Figure 2 shows the largest party in each and every municipality at national elections, from 2002 to 2010. Social democrats remain strong in the large cities in the western part of Holland («de Randstad»), in the north (one of the most important breeding grounds of the socialist movement at the end of the nineteenth century) and in a few cities and regions in the east and south.

The VVD has taken over most of the countryside – regions where the Christian Democrats used to have a natural monopoly; specifically, in the province of Brabant – an economically booming region comparable to Baden-Württemberg, with Eindhoven as one of the «headquarters» of the new knowledge economy – dissatisfied CDA voters turned to the conservative liberals.

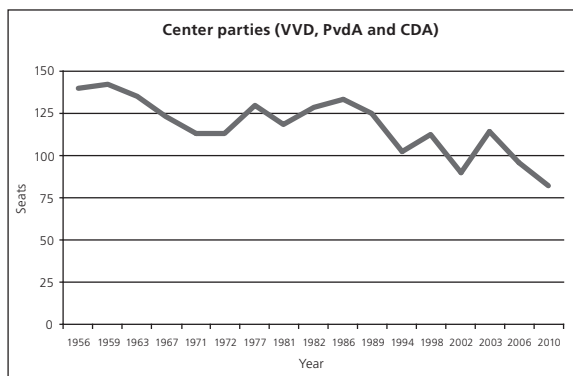
Wilders' PVV became first party in the more peripheral regions, especially in Limburg, his home region. A sense of alienation and of being treated unfairly by the central region in the west has probably also played a role in determining the vote in these parts of the Netherlands.

Two warnings regarding the data: the figure shows only which party is the largest; however, in some cities and regions the second party polled almost as many votes as the first, such as Wilders' PVV in Rotterdam and parts of the north. Second, there are enormous differences in terms of population density, and thus number of seats per region. The PvdA, for example, only gets one seat from the province of Groningen, in the red north-east, while getting many more in the densely populated western part of the country, where it might not be the first party.

The centre under pressure

A basic trend since the 1990s, like the growing volatility, is the decline of the three traditional »Volkspartijen«: the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Social Democrats (PvdA) and the conservative liberals (VVD). They have lost both members and votes and, most importantly, they are losing their grip on the formation of coalition governments.

Figure 3: Centre parties (VVD, PvdA and CDA)



There is a cyclical pattern, as Figure 3 shows: in the early 1970s the centre parties lost considerable ground, but they regained part of it in the 1980s. Since then, the pattern has resumed, but at a lower level. There is a cycle and a trend. The cycle might give hope to the centre parties, but the trend is merciless. The fringes are gaining strength, both on the right and on the left.

In general, there is now no single dominant party in the Dutch political landscape. The best two performers carry 20 per cent of the vote, the two next best between 14 and 16 per cent and the three runners up between 7 and 10 per cent – a nightmare for anyone tasked with the formation of a new government.

The end of the pivotal position of the Christian Democrats?

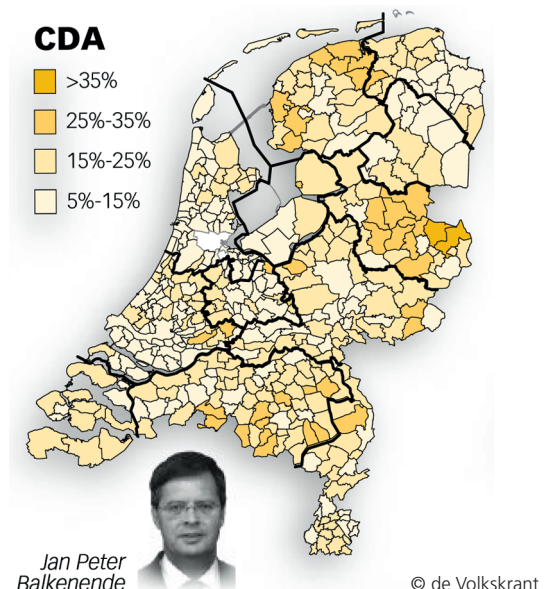
It is interesting to look at the winners, but what about the losers? One of the remarkable results of the 2010 elections is the dramatic decline of the Christian Democrats: from 41 to 21 seats. From 1917 until 1994 the Christian Democratic parties/party dominated Dutch politics, partly because of their size – for quite some time they had a majority – partly because of their pivotal posi-

tion in terms of power and government formation. It was the Christian Democrats who would decide to govern with the left (PvdA) or with the right (VVD).

In 1994, they lost this position for the first time, when the »purple coalition« of the PvdA, D66 and the VVD was formed. In 2002, they seemed to recover from the losses of the 1990s and regained the central position in the government power game.

In the 2010 elections, they were relegated to being only the fourth party in the country, being swept away in the big cities, but also losing heavily in the countryside, as Figure 4 (geographical distribution of the CDA vote) shows. What happened?

Figure 4



There are a few likely reasons. Prime Minister Balkenende had been in office for eight years. Not only couples, but voters seem to have a seven- (or twelve-) year itch: after a certain period, they want a change of personnel and coalition. Moreover, Balkenende performed poorly as government leader, seemingly not in control when needed and not up to the job of first man in the governing team when times were tough. He blundered his way through the Dutch commitment to the Iraq war and was invisible in times of crisis.

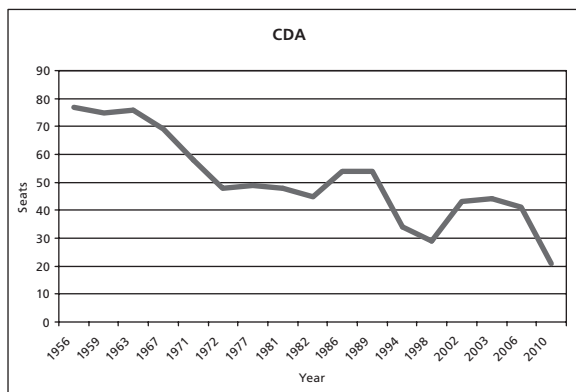
The CDA is a union of old rivals, Catholics and Protestants, founded in the 1970s. After an initial period in

which a balance was carefully maintained between the different constitutive groups, since the 1990s the Protestants have played a dominant role, with a strong mission of reforming Dutch society and the welfare state in a straightforward way. They have displayed a clear cut preference for cooperation with the VVD and followed a more or less neoliberal course in their policies, for example, by fostering market forces in the public sector. As two political scientists of the Free University of Amsterdam have observed, the Christian Democrats have moved in a more neoliberal direction in terms of economic policies and in a neoconservative direction in terms of cultural values.

As a result, the new Protestant leadership has alienated not only the more progressive parts of the Christian Democratic movement and parts of the third sector, but the more traditional Catholic voters in the south as well.

There is also a more structural explanation for the problematic situation the CDA finds itself in, as suggested by Kees van Kersbergen – one of the two political scientists mentioned above – in a comparative study of Christian Democracy and the welfare state in Europe.

Figure 5: Number of seats won by CDA in national elections, 1956–2010

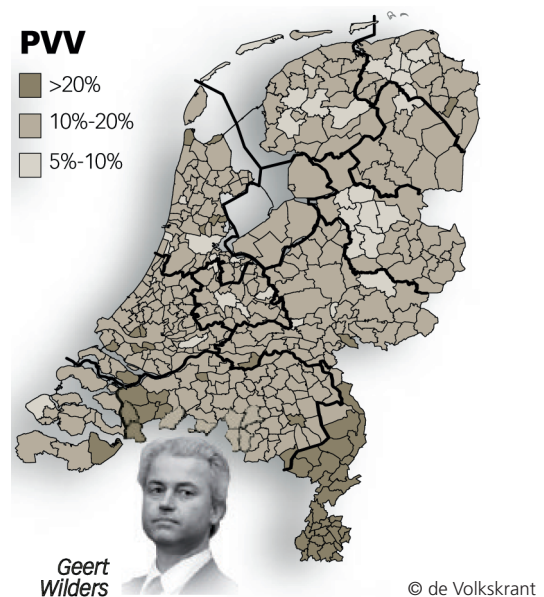


He is convinced that the Christian Democrats find themselves in rough waters not only because they have to operate in a deeply secularised environment – the Netherlands having lost its faiths at high speed – but also because they have lost one of their main political functions: mediating between different social groups, such as farmers, employers, employees, housewives and small entrepreneurs. Is he right? Figure 5 indicates a structural

trend of decline in electoral support, albeit with periods of resurrection. But given the volatility of the electorate and a large moderately conservative segment of the population, its chances might improve once again.

The rise of the Freedom Party

Figure 6



Since 2002, the Dutch political landscape has been characterised by populist movements – on both the left and the right. They appeal to a segment of society that is alienated from the existing political institutions – specifically, the so-called »established« parties and their politicians – angry about the malfunctioning of the public sector and, on the right, dissatisfied with the badly managed immigration and integration processes. Rather than having roots in extreme conservative or fascist circles or traditions, right-wing populism in the Netherlands is characterised by a post-modern mix of conservative values, disgust with the left, xenophobia and liberal values, such as the protection of gay marriage, a strong emphasis on freedom of speech and women's rights. Wilders is the most recent phenomenon of the Dutch populist wave.

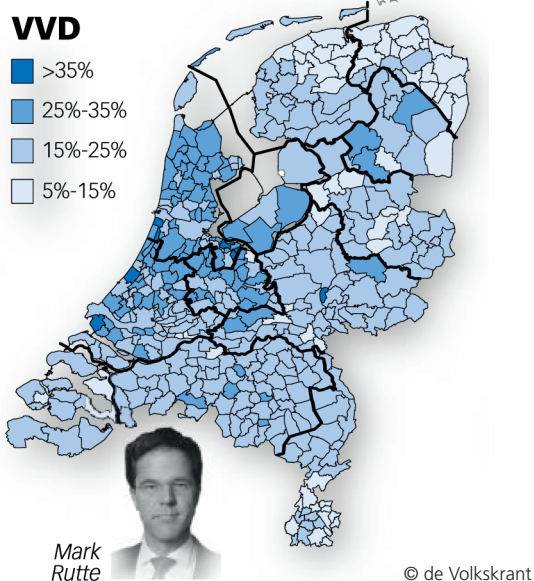
One could say that Geert Wilders' PVV was the big winner in the election, rising from 9 to 24 seats in parliament. While he ran a subdued campaign and polls predicted he would barely double his seats, Wilders proved especially popular in the (Catholic) south, in

particular in his native province of Limburg. His growing following is part of the reason the Christian Democrat vote was halved at the election. But Wilders was also very successful in Rotterdam – where the Fortuyn movement has remained strong in municipal elections – finishing in second place behind the PvdA. In his campaign he combined conservative values with leftist views on social and economic issues.

Elsewhere we have analysed the background of the rise of populism in the Dutch political laboratory more extensively. Basically, the growing unrest among a large minority of the Dutch population about globalisation, rapid European integration, immigration and poor integration, the profound changes made to the welfare state and the introduction of market forces in the public sector have not found an adequate representation in existing political parties. Instead, these things have met with a lack of concern on the part of the governing elites with regard to the negative aspects of all these changes. Wilders' party – largely a one-man affair – is dangerous because of its radical Islamophobic sentiments (among other things, calling for a ban on the Koran) and its encroachment on the rule of law. Nevertheless, the anxieties of his followers have to be taken seriously: one must be tough on populism, but also tough on the causes of populism.

An uneasy victory: the VVD

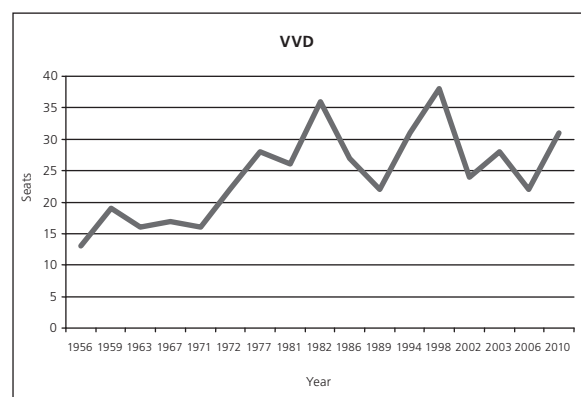
Figure 7



For the first time in their history, the conservative liberals won the election and became the largest party in parliament. Certainly, the VVD's strongholds are mainly in »de Randstad«, the western part of the Netherlands. But it performed quite well in the countryside as well, taking over Brabant as first party from the Christian Democrats. More than the other traditional »Volkspartijen« the VVD has profited from the depillarisation that took place from the 1970s onward.

The popularity of the party is extremely sensitive to the kind of leadership it offers, but it has performed much better since the early 1970s than in the first post-war decades. It has become a more complete and balanced party, not only encompassing the old elites, but also the middle classes and parts of the working class. As in many other countries, parts of the old working classes have become conservative voters, because they have climbed the social ladder and acquired other interests, or because the more materialistic, individualistic and anti-government attitude suits them better than the post-materialistic left. The framing of the issues in the election campaign – attacking the deficit, being harsh on immigration and fighting bureaucracy – has helped the VVD to reach these categories of voters.

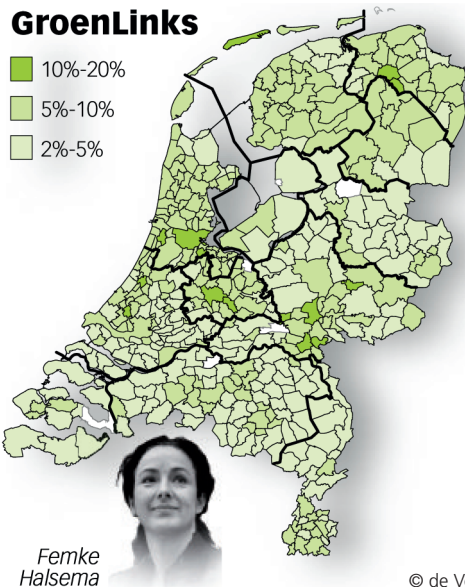
Figure 8: Number of seats won by VVD in national elections, 1956–2010



Rutte's victory might prove to be a Pyrrhic one, however. It will be extremely difficult to form a government that will reflect the shift to the right that occurred in these elections. This shift is even more telling when we look at the school elections: students at the secondary level massively support the PVV and the VVD.

The divided left

Figure 9

GroenLinks

Social democracy has lost the hegemonic position it has had on the left for decades. During the 2006 elections, it was the Socialist Party (SP) which broke its hold, gaining 25 seats, while at the 2010 elections the SP recovered from the low polls and got 15 seats, while D66 and the Green Left (GroenLinks – see Figure 9) both got 10. Basically, the left is divided between, on the one side, a more liberal, cosmopolitan progressivism, directed towards change and reform and with a strong emphasis on labour market reforms to help outsiders get in, to raise the age of retirement and to invest in knowledge and empowerment. It also appreciates the advantages of migration and globalisation. This side comprises the Green Left and D66. They unite well educated professionals, the urban middle classes and the student population, scoring high in university cities.

On the other side, there is the more conservative left, which cherishes the achievements of the welfare state, fights the introduction of market forces in the public sector and represents the interests of workers in the care sector and industrial areas. This side is represented by the SP (Figure 10), whose stronghold is the region around Oss and the surrounding areas in Brabant, as well as the traditional red regions in the north.

Figure 10

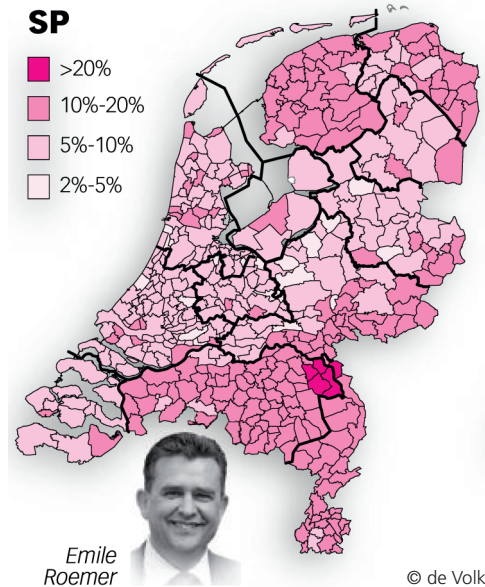
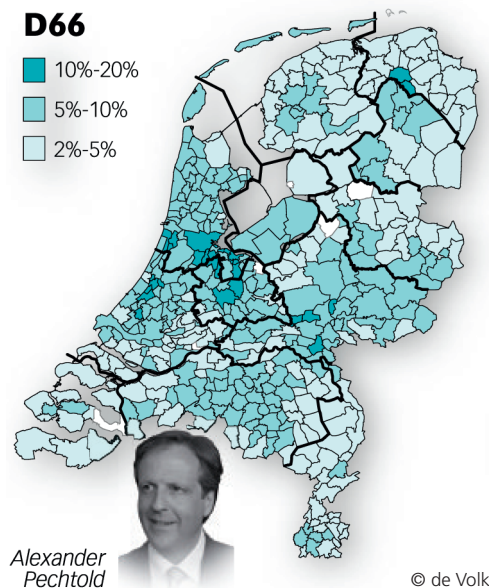
SP

Figure 11

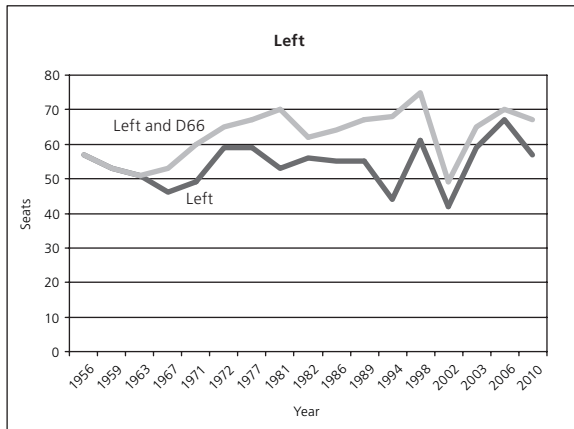
D66

The differences within the left are thus considerable – one of the reasons that closer cooperation between these competitors »on the electoral market« has not been possible. The left as a whole has been relatively stable, with between 60 and 70 seats in parliament, except for the dip in 2002 – but always lacking a majority thanks to the proportional representation system. One can argue



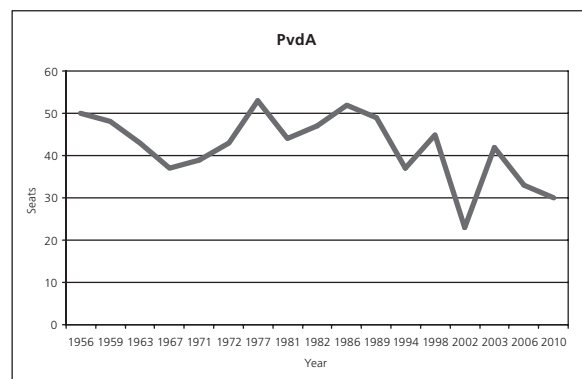
for the inclusion of the progressive liberals of D66 (Figure 11) in the political left, but others consider the party as on the right because of its economic programme.

Figure 12: Number of seats won by the left, 1956–2010



tion. It is also a dividing line between the higher and lower educated, between optimists and pessimists, between those who are profiting from the new economic order and those who are suffering. Moreover, lifestyles and cultural patterns and attitudes have gained relevance for political behaviour.

Figure 13: Number of seats won by the PvdA, 1956–2010

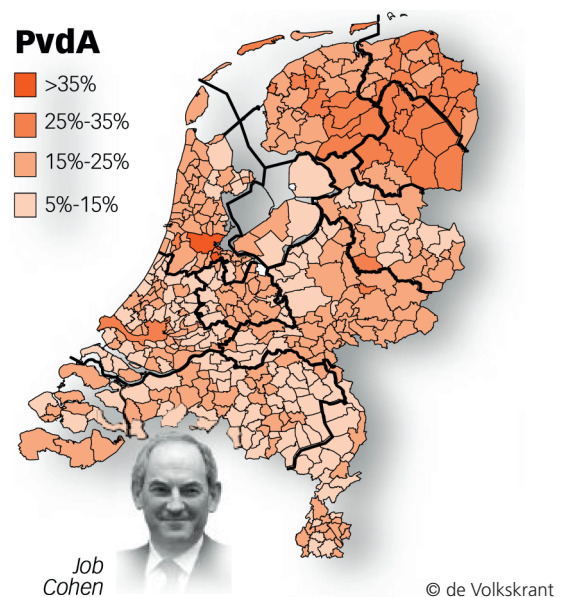


Social democracy and the sociology of politics

The voters might be footloose, but that does not mean that anything goes. Behind the volatility of the electorate we can discern a number of structural trends in election outcomes. One is the decline of the two main »Volksparteien«, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats; another is the loss of dominance of the Social Democrats on the left. As we can see in Figure 13, the PvdA has lost considerable ground since the Den Uyl period (1977: 53 seats; 1986: 52 seats): the peaks are less high, the troughs are lower and the trend is downward. The centre is leaking in all directions: to the liberal left (D66), to the traditional left (SP) and to the right-wing populists (PVV).

After the end of »pillarisation« in the Netherlands – the structuring of Dutch society in terms of several vertical socio-cultural »Lager«, such as the Catholic pillar or the socialist pillar – sociological cleavages seemed to lose their significance for voting behaviour and electoral outcomes. But the sociological factor is striking back. Class lines are reappearing, for example between D66 and the PVV, whose electorates are different in practically every respect. Moreover, a new cleavage has become relevant, this time a cultural one, around issues such as European integration, immigration and integration of immigrants, crime and domestic security, the nation and globalisa-

Figure 14



Fundamental trends – globalisation, liberalisation, immigration, new technologies and the growing role of knowledge – tend to redistribute opportunities and have centrifugal effects on society. They tend to reinforce inequalities and differences in opportunities between the lower and higher educated, between those who »know their way around« and those who are not so »well

connected«. Social democracy has been severely hit by these new socio-economic and cultural centrifugal forces. It used to unite the working and middle classes within the framework of a programme of material progress, public goods and post-materialistic values. This coalition was already coming under serious pressure in the 1970s, however, when the post-materialistic new left and special interest groups started to dominate. Today, the traditional working class voter is leaving social democracy, not only because of the cultural cleavage, but also for materialistic reasons: too soft on immigrants, too much tax. The VVD, the PVV and the SP are just as or even more successful in attracting the working class vote as the Social Democrats.

There is also an anti-establishment aspect to this. Many working class and lower middle class voters perceive the PvdA as an establishment party, an arrogant bunch of career politicians who are more interested in their own jobs than in the day-to-day lives of ordinary voters. There is a serious representation problem.

So much for the sociology. There has also been a programmatic flaw, with the PvdA being caught between the optimistic story of change, reform and progress of the liberal left and the story of social security, protection, public services and defence of rights purveyed by the traditional left. After a long flirtation with the so-called »Third Way«, the PvdA no longer had a clear programme. And if no clear signal is being emitted, as one of the experts we spoke to put it, there will be no resonance in the media.

The PvdA campaign failed to profit from the authentic Job Cohen message: »keeping it all together«. Cohen himself had trouble adjusting rapidly to the merciless debating and media game. As Figure 14 (geographical distribution of the PvdA vote) shows, he did well in Amsterdam and in the north of the country, but to regain a dominant position in the political landscape in the Netherlands, more will be needed than that.

»The coalition Sudoku«, or, What will be the next government in the Netherlands?

The power shifts and narrow gaps between the parties show that the Dutch electorate is more fragmented than ever.

At no time since the introduction of universal suffrage in the Netherlands has the country's biggest political party been as small as the right-wing liberal VVD is now. This illustrates the political fragmentation that is the main result of the election. The results confirm a trend that emerged in the municipal elections held earlier this year. As a consequence, forming a cabinet that can count on majority support in parliament will become exceedingly complicated. Put simply, the problem is: will a left party join the right block, or will a right party join the left block?

The question, therefore, was, will VVD leader Mark Rutte, the potential new prime minister who took the lead in forming a coalition, look to the left or to the right to tackle the Dutch budget deficit and push for reforms. There were at least three serious coalition options under consideration: (i) a right-wing coalition of the VVD, Geert Wilders' PVV and the CDA (a vulnerable majority of 76, one above the 75 threshold); (ii) a so-called Purple Plus coalition of the VVD (blue) and Labour (red), with the Green Party and left-wing liberals of D66 (an 81-seat majority); and (iii) a »national« emergency cabinet or Grand Grand coalition of the VVD, the CDA and the PvdA (82 seats).

The big »if« from the start was: is Geert Wilders ready to govern, and will established parties help him to do so? Many wondered whether Wilders was willing to make the compromises that come with multi-party coalitions, but the PVV leader himself announced he was ready. »I hope that we can govern. They can't get around us or push us aside«, he said after learning the results. It remained to be seen whether others wanted to include Wilders, who defected from the VVD in 2004 over his position that Turkey should never be allowed into the EU. Such a right-wing cabinet does have its drawbacks. The liberal VVD should ask itself whether it wants to govern with a party which is considered »extreme right« abroad, as well as wanting to enact policies that would be at odds with the Constitution. It is telling that the employers' organisations, traditional supporters of the VVD, have

voiced objections to a cabinet including the PVV («bad for international trade»). On the other hand, it is astounding how quickly the PVV has proved willing to compromise. Speaking only a day after the election, Geert Wilders said that his party would consider joining a government that would raise the age of eligibility for state pensions, something he had categorically ruled out during the campaign.

Another question was whether the CDA would be willing to join any governing coalition after being so severely beaten at the polls. It would be the first time ever that the party had participated in a coalition in which it was not the biggest party. Besides, within the CDA especially, concerns have been raised about the manner in which Geert Wilders has lashed out at religion and about his attitude towards Muslim immigrants. What was clear, however, was that neither the CDA nor the VVD, unlike the PvdA, both during and after the election campaign, ever excluded Geert Wilders from the prospect of cooperation.

In the meantime, a first round of formation talks took place under the guidance of «kabinetsinformatuur» Uri Rosenthal, leader of the VVD group in the Senate, having been appointed for the task by Queen Beatrix. After one week of deliberations between the two winners of the elections, the VVD's Mark Rutte and the PVV's Geert Wilders, as well as the third partner in the right-wing cabinet, the CDA, informatuur Rosenthal concluded that this coalition could not find sufficient support. The CDA in particular was not ready to enter serious coalition talks unless a pre-agreement was reached by the VVD and the PVV, but these parties did not agree to reaching such a negotiation agreement beforehand.

At that point – from 20 June – Mr Rosenthal started talks on an alternative coalition, partly the revival of the so-called Purple Coalition, which ruled from 1994 to 2002. Under Prime Minister Wim Kok, Labour led a coalition with the VVD and D66. Those three parties do not have a majority today, but GroenLinks seems a likely candidate to join such a government. This coalition would demand a significant number of compromises from all sides, however, as the VVD wants to push austerity measures amounting to 30 billion euros, while the left-leaning parties have said they do not want to strangle the economic recovery at birth and also wish to spare the underprivileged in society.

It is too early to tell whether the formation of the Purple Plus Coalition will succeed. Mark Rutte says that he is not really in favour of this too «progressive» coalition. He prefers the centre coalition, the option of a cabinet of national unity composed of the centrist parties VVD, Labour and CDA, as a better alternative. But the promises made by these parties to the voters during the campaign differ considerably and such a government would exclude winners the PVV, GroenLinks and D66, while including losers the CDA and Labour, the latter having lost three seats.

Given the election outcome, coalition negotiations will remain «very difficult», to quote Mark Rutte, for the next few weeks. As *NRC Handelsblad* has commented:

What is certain is that the results of this election call for unorthodox solutions and the economic crisis demands that a new government be formed post-haste. Whatever governing coalition assumes control, it will need to take some painful measures, and it will need to take them quickly. This requires a coalition that agrees to a general framework for government and has the courage to obtain ad hoc parliamentary majorities for its reforms as it goes along. Parties joining such a coalition will have to build up trust, first and foremost, in each other.



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Source of figures: *de Volkskrant*.



Appendix

Table 1: Election results in the Netherlands, 1956–2010

	1956	1959	1963	1967	1971	1972	1977	1981	1982	1986	1989	1994	1998	2002	2003	2006	2010
ARP	15	14	13	15	13	14											
CHU	13	12	13	12	10	7											
KVP	49	49	50	42	35	27											
CDA	77	75	76	69	58	48	49	48	45	54	54	34	29	43	44	41	21
SGP	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2
PvdA	50	48	43	37	39	43	53	44	47	52	49	37	45	23	42	33	30
CPN	7	3	4	5	6	7	2	3	3								
PSP		2	4	4	2	2	1	3	3	1							
PPR					2	7	3	3	2	2							
EVV									1								
GroenLinks	7	5	8	9	10	16	6	9	9	3	6	5	11	10	8	7	10
VVD	13	19	16	17	16	22	28	26	36	27	22	31	38	24	28	22	31
BP			3	7	1	3	1										
GPV			1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2				
RPF								2	2	1	1	3	3				
CU			1	1	2	2	1	3	3	2	3	5	5	4	3	6	5
D'66				7	11	6	8	17	6	9	12	24	14	7	6	3	10
DS'70					8	6	1										
NMP					2												
RKPN						1											
CP									1								
CD											1	3					
AOV												6					
SP												2	5	9	9	25	15
LN														2			
LPim Fortuyn														26	8	0	
TON																	0
PVV																9	25
PvdD																2	2
Turnout (%)							88.1	87.0	81.0	85.8	80.3	78.8	73.4	79.1	80.0	80.1	75.4
Centre	140	142	135	123	113	113	130	118	128	133	125	102	112	90	114	96	82
Left	57	53	51	46	49	59	59	53	56	55	55	44	61	42	59	67	57
Left + D66	57	53	51	53	60	65	67	70	62	64	67	68	75	49	65	70	67



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