

Can GroenLinks Bounce Back at Dutch Local Elections?

Article by Simon Otjes

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Amsterdam and other municipalities are up for grabs in March 2022. GroenLinks has a strong recent record of local governance. But this may not be enough to secure its hold on Dutch municipalities. After the 2021 national elections almost halved its seats in government, GroenLinks faces a crowded field of competition.

The notoriously complex Dutch political landscape became more fragmented after the 2021 general elections brought 17 parties into parliament. For GroenLinks, the result is a crowded field of progressives that is even harder to navigate.

The Dutch parliament historically had four progressive parties: the centre-left social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA), the left-wing eurosceptic Socialist Party (SP), the social-liberal D66, and GroenLinks. Respectively, these reflect the European party families of the Socialists and Democrats, (S&D), European Left (though the Socialist Party is not a member), Renew Europe, and the European Greens. D66 and the Labour Party have extensive local and national government experience.

Since 2006, the Animal Party (Partij voor de Dieren), which combines animal welfare with a critique of capitalism and EU integration, joined the field. In the 2017 elections, DENK (denk means think in Dutch and equal in Turkish) emerged, representing Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan communities that had tended to support the social democrats. This party combines conservative positions on issues such as vaccination, law and order with progressive ideas on immigration and economics.

In the 2021 elections, two new progressive parties entered the parliament Bij1 and Volt. Bij1 is an intersectional feminist party committed to fighting multiple forms of oppression such as patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. It offers a fundamental critique of Dutch society where the rise of radical right-wing populist parties has normalised nationalist and racist rhetoric. Meanwhile Volt is the pan-European party. It takes strong progressive moral and cultural positions but is more pragmatic on economic issues. The young force is committed to fighting climate change but does not shy away from more controversial plans such as expanding nuclear energy.

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Between moderate and radical

In the current landscape, GroenLinks is caught between more moderate and more radical versions of itself on every issue. The moderate version is often represented by parties with an aura of government competence. The radical version by a younger party, which is less encumbered by earlier decisions or the need for “realistic” solutions. On economic issues, GroenLinks finds the Socialists and the radical Bij1 to its left and the Social Democrats and D66 to its right. On the highly politicised issue of immigration and discrimination, Bij1 and DENK are more progressive than GroenLinks, while Social Democrats and the Socialists are more conservative. On environmental issues, the Animal Party is more radical than GroenLinks, while Labour and D66 are more moderate. On Europe, Volt and D66 are more uncritical in their support for EU integration and the Socialists and Animal Party are more Eurosceptic.

Boxed in by other parties, GroenLinks performed poorly at the 2021 elections. Since then, Dutch politics has been dominated by political manoeuvres rather than policy issues. During the extremely long coalition formation talks most substantive issues were debated around the negotiation table, but not in parliament. The coalition talks faced major challenges including a prime minister who lied about his plans to remove a critical member of parliament from office. Public trust in Prime Minister Mark Rutte fell and many people called for a reinvention of Dutch political culture. Serious discussions on public policy crowded out by process.

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The coalition that formed after the elections solidified GroenLink’s intermediate position. After months of negotiations, Liberal Party and Christian Democrats vetoed admitting GroenLinks and the Labour Party into national government. The social-liberal D66 joined the Liberals and Christian Democrats in government. D66 put its mark on the coalition agreement. This agreement clearly has a green character in particular where it comes to the transition towards a climate-neutral economy and sustainable agriculture. The government has committed to increased spending on education and childcare. On EU integration and migration, the coalition will also pursue a more progressive course. Yet, there are clear differences between the coalition agreement and GroenLinks agenda especially on taxation. The government will do little to combat income and wealth inequality and the agreement lowers taxes on business and pollution.

GroenLinks can take a constructive position vis-à-vis the new government. The environmental, European, and education agenda gives reasons while economic inequality doesn’t. It will not be easy for GroenLinks to position itself in opposition. The Socialists, Labour, Bij1 and DENK are more comfortable playing the role of the critical, uncompromising opposition party. In the Senate, where the government does not have a majority, GroenLinks and the Social Democrats are potential partners. Such a cooperation may make it difficult for GroenLinks to position itself as an alternative.

March local elections

GroenLinks did very well in the 2018 municipal elections where it won 9 per cent of the vote. It became the largest party in a dozen municipalities. This includes two of the four largest municipalities in the Netherlands, Amsterdam and Utrecht and university cities like Delft and Nijmegen and Wageningen. This result was hailed as part of the green wave and in part attributed to the on the ground and online campaign of the party. Since 2018 the strategic position of GroenLinks has become more complex and the party is unable to repeat its successful in-person campaign methods due to the pandemic.

The March local elections could deepen these trends. The political landscape in every municipality is different because not all national parties participate in every municipality. According to recent accounting by [the radio station BNR](#), GroenLinks participates in 69 per cent of municipalities. The Labour Party is running 91 per cent municipalities and D66 in 87 per cent.

The newer parties, Labour, DENK, Volt and Bij1 are running in fewer municipalities: 9, 6, 3 and 2 per cent respectively. But compared to previous elections, they are increasing their geographic coverage. They tend to compete in the larger municipalities that also tend to be the strongholds of GroenLinks. The Animal Party will bring its deep green agenda. DENK will mobilise its support in the Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan communities. Volt hopes to capitalise on European expats who can vote in the Netherlands after five years of residence. Bij1 campaigns on an agenda of radical economic and cultural change. The only party that is competing in fewer municipalities than in 2018 is the Socialists. Its coverage fell from a third to a quarter of municipalities due to internal problems.

The competitive environment for GroenLinks at the national level is thus replicated locally. GroenLinks faces most competition in the large municipalities where it currently governs. The party is in government in 9 of the 10 largest municipalities.

Dutch municipalities have broad responsibilities in the field of safety, housing, transportation, and zoning. Recently, these responsibilities have been extended to areas of social policy including elderly care and youth policy, as well as social security and labour market policies for the long-term unemployed. In cities where it is the largest party, GroenLinks has made a mark on environmental and social policy: for instance, in Amsterdam, [new housing](#) no longer relies on fossil fuels for heating: some are heated by warmth from the IJ river, excess heat from data centres, and sewage. In Groningen, the party championed experiments with reduced [restrictions on welfare recipients](#). But governing comes with a cost: [economists from Groningen University](#) have shown that municipal coalition parties tend to lose seats. [Coalition politics](#) also means accepting controversial decisions to avert crisis.

In smaller municipalities, GroenLinks has responded to this complex landscape by seeking cooperation. In about a seventh of the municipalities (especially in rural areas) the party cooperates with the Labour Party and other progressive parties on joint progressive lists. The prevalence of such arrangements is up by 10 per cent on previous elections. Yet in these municipalities the position of the left in general, and GroenLinks in particular, is weaker.

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Polling day prospects

Early polling by the pollster I&O indicates that the party will lose about a fifth of its support. The strong loss seen at the national level was thus not repeated in this poll. National polls indicate that the party has managed to win back some supporters that switched to D66 in the national elections.

More specific local polls show a less positive scenario. Amsterdam polls indicate a loss of between 50 and 25 per cent. Amsterdam municipal statistics bureau O+S polled a fall from 20 to 15 per cent. Pollster Maurice de Hond in a poll commissioned by D66 estimated a fall from 20 to 10 per cent. In the former case, the party would narrowly retain the top spot in Amsterdam. In the second poll, D66 would be largest and GroenLinks would compete with Liberals, Labour and Volt for second place. Both polls also predict increases for Bij1 and Labour. The outlooks for the Hague and Nijmegen are similar.

The most likely scenario will be that at the aggregate level GroenLinks will lose fewer votes as compared to 2021. The voters that stayed with the party in 2021 represent its most loyal supporters while those who switched to other parties have weaker party affiliations. About three quarters of the national voters from 2021 are expected to vote for GroenLinks in 2022. Some of the voters who tactically voted for D66 are likely to return.

The positive aspects of such a result may be overshadowed by poorer results in traditional strongholds such as Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Nijmegen. GroenLinks' history in municipal governments has electoral costs. Moreover, here the party will face more competition from Volt, Bij1, DENK, and Labour.

The 2022 elections will, in many ways, extend fragmentation at the national level to the local level. The left-wing vote will split between the main parties of the left, the responsible progressives of D66, and the host of different new left-wing parties. Progressive cooperation to stem the fragmentation of left-wing power has been limited to smaller municipalities.

There is still campaigning ahead. The ground campaign may be revitalised now anti-coronavirus measures are lifted. Televised debates between national party leaders may also affect the campaign. This may accelerate the decline of D66 nationally, and moderate the growing support for GroenLinks at the municipal level. A lot can happen in a few days.



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