

## Did the Dutch Elections Go Wrong for Groenlinks?

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What happened at the March 2021 Dutch elections? With negotiations to form the country's next government still ongoing, much remains to be decided, yet the results of the vote are a clear indication of certain trends and shifts. Grasping these, however, requires an understanding of the Netherlands' exceptionally crowded political landscape, particularly among the Left.

Four years ago, the Dutch Green party Groenlinks was a major part of the Green wave rising throughout Europe. It achieved its best election result in history and a realistic shot at entering government. In 2021, however, the party lost almost half its seats after four years of opposition. The other social-democratic and socialist parties that are traditionally counted among the Dutch Left haven't fared much better. What explains this poor showing?

The Netherlands has an extremely open electoral system and, along with that, an extremely fractionalised party system. In 2021, 17 parties won seats in the parliament. (see Table 1 and figure 1)

Abb.	Party name (English)	Ideology	2017	2021
VVD	Liberal Party	Conservative liberal	22%	23%
D66	Democrats 66	Social liberal	13%	16%
PVV	Freedom Party	Radical right-wing populist	13%	11%
CDA	Christian-Democratic Appeal	Christian-Democrat	13%	10%
PvdA	Labour Party	Social-democrat	6%	6%
SP	Socialist Party	Socialist	9%	6%
GL	Groenlinks	Green Left	9%	5%
FvD	Forum for Democracy	Radical right-wing populist	1%	5%
PvdD	Party for the Animals	Deep green	3%	4%
CU	Christian Union	Christian-social	3%	3%
50PLUS	-	Pensioners' interests	3%	1%
SGP	Political Reformed Party	Christian-conservative	2%	2%
DENK	Think/Equal	Rights of bicultural citizens	2%	2%
Volt	-	European Federalist	-	2%
JA21	Yes21	Radical right-wing populist	-	2%
Bij1	As One	Intersectional feminism	0%	1%
BBB	Farmer-Citizens Movement	Farmers' Interests	-	1%

Table 1: Dutch Parties in Parliament (percentages indicate share of seats)

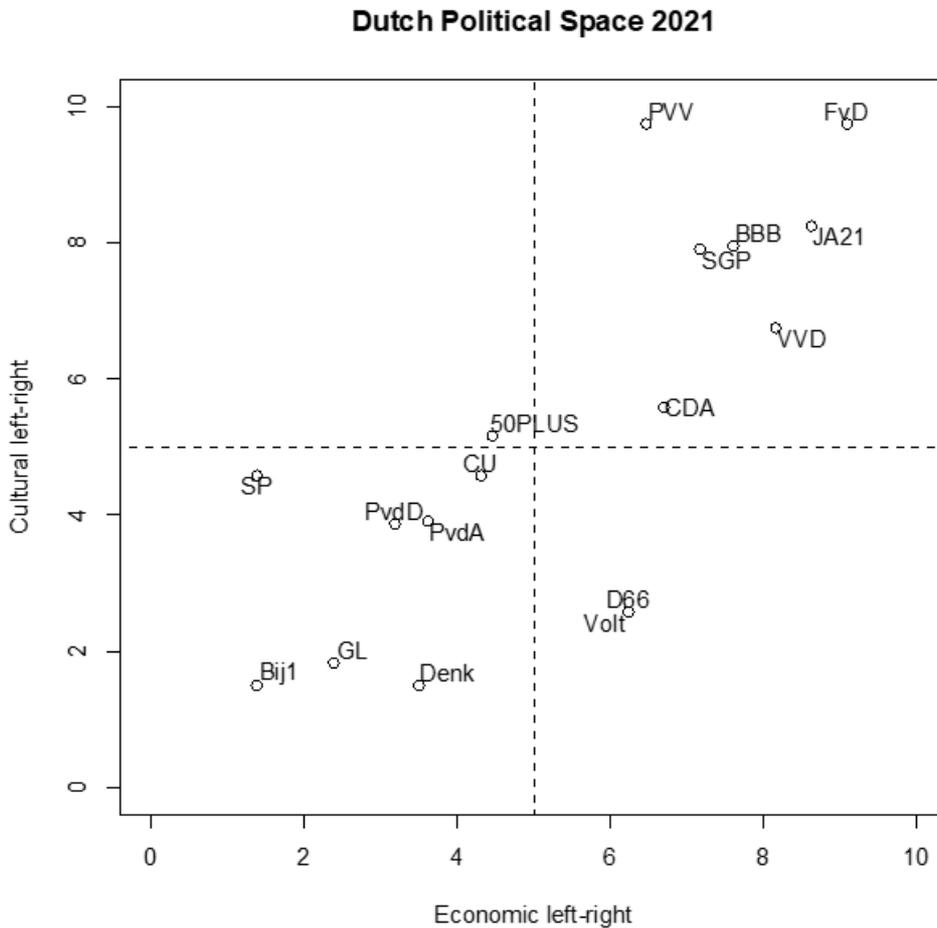


Figure 1: Dutch Political Space 2021

## **Groenlinks: Good intentions, strategic errors**

Groenlinks, the Dutch green party, went into the election with high hopes of doubling its share of seats, which would have provided a strong basis from which to join talks of possible government formation. Four years ago, it had backed out of governing with the conservative-liberal VVD, Christian-democratic CDA and social-liberal D66. It hoped this time to come to the negotiating table in a stronger position.

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Over the last four years, the party had sought to build a constructive relationship with prospective coalition partners: both with the centre-right parties in the government and with the left-wing parties in the opposition. One of the major environmental achievements of the new government was the climate bill which committed the Netherlands to specific climate goals. This was actually a parliamentary initiative by Groenlinks which the government parties subsequently co-opted. In 2019, Groenlinks made sure that the

government's budget would have a majority in the Senate without asking for any meaningful policy concessions. The party explained its decision by saying that it wanted to put an end to politics that is more focused on short-term media tactics than actually achieving meaningful change. In 2020, Groenlinks coordinated with the Labour Party (PvdA) and the trade unions to achieve a deal with the government on pension reform. During the Covid-19 crisis, the party supported most of the government's economic and healthcare policies. Despite being an opposition party, Groenlinks has undeniably operated in a constructive way in parliament.

The party did not just hope to have a stronger numerical position at the negotiating table but also a stronger strategic position. The party leadership had advocated a left-wing alliance before the elections consisting of the Socialist Party (SP), PvdA, and D66. The party had even printed posters with message "More Lilian (Marijnissen, SP leader), Lilianne (Ploumen, PvdA leader), Sigrid (Kaag, D66 leader) and Jesse (Klaver, Groenlinks leader)". The campaign backfired, however, with the other party leaders stating that they had not been consulted about the poster and did not intend to form a pact with other parties. The poster, which was supposed to boost Groenlinks' credibility by positioning it as the central player in a potential left-wing alliance, instead exposed a lack of meaningful cooperation and coordination among the Left. At the March 2021 elections, Groenlinks' vote share fell to 5 per cent, down from 9 per cent in 2017.

## **The fate of the big players of the Dutch Left**

The 2021 elections were a major defeat for the Dutch Left as a whole: together the three parties (SP, Groenlinks, and PvdA) won 25 per cent of the seats in 2017 which fell to 17 per cent 2021. In 2012, these parties together won 38 per cent of the vote.

The social-democratic PvdA had hoped to improve its seat total compared to the disastrous 2017 election in which it won only 6 per cent of the seats. This 'pasokification' was the result of governing with the liberal VVD for four years and implementing much of its austerity agenda. There were indications that a better result for PvdA was possible, especially following the party's strong performance at the 2019 European elections. But this comeback failed to materialise. Instead, PvdA kept the exact same number of seats as it had in 2017. An unfortunate leadership switch three months before the elections, when its party leader Lodewijk Asscher stepped down following the scandal surrounding false allegations of benefit fraud while he was minister of social affairs, did not help the party.

The radical left-wing Socialist Party positioned itself as a prospective government party as well. It had argued that the Covid-19 crisis had vindicated many of its long-held principles: the need for strong government intervention and for a robust public sector. The party expected that it would be rewarded for its leading role in uncovering the scandal that had forced Asscher to step down. But instead of improving its seats share, the party went from 9 per cent to 6 per cent of the seats. A deep cut for the party was that some of the victims of the fraud scandal, the people that the SP had championed, had voted for Forum for Democracy, as this was the only party that opposed the pandemic-related restrictions.

## **Elsewhere on the Left**

This is not the whole story, however. The Dutch political landscape has become even more

fractionalised over the last 20 years. The latest election confirms this, as four additional parties, also on the Left, won seats in the Dutch parliament.

The Party for the Animals went from 3 to 4 per cent of the vote. This party took an explicit stand against what it calls “compromism”, the notion that the process of striking deals is more important than the long-term effect of these deals on humans, animals, and the environment. The party’s position can be likened to that of the “fundis” in the debates within Green parties in the 1990s. On policy issues, the party is deep green – committed to degrowth in order to deal with the climate crisis, but also Eurosceptic, and opposing compromises and deals.

Also among this group is the As One party, a feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist party, with its ideology rooted in intersectional feminism. Its leader is TV-presenter turned anti-racism campaigner Sylvana Simons. The party appealed to far-left circles unhappy with the cultural conservatism of the SP and the eagerness of Groenlinks to enter into a prospective government. It also appealed to Dutch Antillean and Dutch-Surinamese voters. The party gained some attention during the ‘Black Lives Matter’-protests following the murder of George Floyd. The party won just below 1 per cent of the vote but was able to gain a seat, making it the first party led by a black woman to enter parliament.

Elsewhere on the Left we find the Christian-social CU, which maintained its 3 per cent of the vote. This party has a classically Christian-democratic vision for a social market economy. With a platform shaped by religious values, it sees the need to house refugees and protect the environment. Finally, there is the party that advocates the interests of bicultural Dutch people, DENK, which has strong roots in the Dutch-Turkish community. This party maintained its 2 per cent of the seats.

Like the SP, Groenlinks, and PvdA, these parties are left-wing in the sense that they support strong government action to fight inequality, that they favour the Netherlands opening its borders to refugees and that they see the need for strong measures to fight the climate crisis. If we look at these six parties together, the Dutch left won 27 per cent of the seats in 2021, down from 33 per cent in 2017 (and 43 per cent in 2012).

## **Stability on cultural issues, but a shift to the right on the economy**

In order to understand the poor result of the Dutch Left, we need to look at one of the victors of the elections: Democrats 66. This social-liberal party went from 13 to 16 per cent of the vote. This result was not expected half a year before the elections, when the party was hovering around 9 per cent in the polls.

Despite the party governing in a centre-right coalition, D66 had repositioned itself as more left-wing over the last four years, particularly on economic matters. The party now clearly sits at the mid-point of the economic left-right spectrum: compared to 2017, the party now shows more concern about the redistribution of income and wealth and favours higher business and wealth taxes. On cultural matters, the party has always been unequivocally left-wing. Moreover, it also recognises the need to address the climate crisis, though continues to argue that environmental measures should cause minimal disruption to the economy.

D66 performed well in the elections with the promise of 'New Leadership'. The party's leader, Sigrid Kaag, the sitting minister of development cooperation and foreign trade, positioned herself as a prospective prime minister. As a former UN-diplomat and a polyglot, she had the aura of a stateswoman. The prospect of the first female prime minister appealed to progressive Dutch voters.

The appeal of Kaag became clear in the last two weeks of the elections where she performed particularly well in the televised debates. In the final debate before the elections, Kaag powerfully rejected allegations by Geert Wilders that she had betrayed the Netherlands by wearing a headscarf in Iran. She responded forcefully that she had gone to Iran to defend the Dutch interest by advocating for peace and stability in the region. This clearly appealed to a segment of the Dutch population seeking a strong rebuttal of Wilders' anti-Islamic rhetoric.

Much of the votes that Kaag won came at the expense of left-wing parties; in particular Groenlinks, which according to exit polls lost about a fifth of their 2012 support to D66. But PvdA and SP also lost votes to the party.

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In addition to D66, there is one party that falls in the same culturally left-wing and economically right-wing quadrant: the pro-European party Volt which won 2 per cent of the seats. Volt Netherlands is part of a pan-European party, which has also won seats in the European Parliament (in the German constituency). It is unabashedly federalist in its policy on the EU. On economic issues its more centrist. On matters of immigration, it also sees a larger role for the European Union in creating a humane refugee policy. On environmental issues, it advocates for nuclear energy to address climate change.

Both D66 and Volt are centrist on economics. In Figure 1 and Table 2 they are classified as right-wing. They are also progressive on immigration and climate change. If we look at them together, the parties in this quadrant went from 13 to 18 per cent of the seats. If we then look at the trend in the two lower quadrants in Figure 1 combined, we see striking stability. Together the nine parties in the culturally progressive half of the spectrum won 45 per cent of the votes, down from 46 per cent in 2017 (and 48 per cent in 2012).

	<b>Economic Left = Pro-redistribution</b>	<b>Economic Right Anti-redistribution</b>
Cultural Right = Anti-immigration	3% -> 1%	53% -> 54%
Cultural Left = Pro-Immigration	31% -> 27%	13% -> 18%
Share of the seats in 2017 -> share of the seats in 2021		

*Table 2: Vote share in a two-dimensional space*

## **Flipping the chess board**

What appears to have happened is that D66, under the leadership of Kaag, has unified a

significant share of the left-wing vote. It was quite clear in the last weeks of campaigning that a vote for Kaag was the surest way of steering the new coalition in a progressive direction. This was not the first election in which left-wing voters waited until the last minute to flock to the party that promised to give them influence over the formation of a new cabinet. The same had happened in 2012, but in that year PvdA had credibly made this appeal.

What is striking about this, however, is that voters that traditionally vote for parties that are economically left-wing now cast their vote for a party that is centrist on questions of government intervention in the economy and income redistribution. Perhaps the left-wing move of D66 in recent years and the major government intervention in the economy during the Covid-19 crisis supported by virtually all parties have blurred the differences between parties on this issue. What seems more likely, however, is that economic issues are less important for voters. Cultural issues, in particular those related to immigration, the civic integration of migrants, national identity, and Islam have become more important. The ease with which Dutch voters switched between Groenlinks and D66 indicates that for them cultural issues are more fundamental than economic ones. Kaag persisted in the party's strategy of campaigning on these issues, while Klaver decided to focus on climate over culture.

## **Lessons for Greens**

Groenlinks has likely lost voters to a number of sides: the positive results for the culturally progressive party As One, the deep green Party for the Animals and the Eurofederalist Volt are likely related to the poor showing of the Greens. The largest significant share of those who voted for Groenlinks in 2017 cast their votes for D66, however. This is not strange: in 2017 Groenlinks won many voters who had voted PvdA in 2012 to influence the formation of a new government. Now, in 2021, these voters hoped once again to shape the formation of a new government by voting for D66.

The combination of idealism and realistic perspective of entering government that had fuelled the victory of Groenlinks in 2017 sits uneasily now. There are parties (Party for the Animals, Volt, As One) positioning themselves as more idealistic choices, and in this election D66 had a far more realistic claim at being the party that could pull a future government in the progressive direction.

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They are loyal to their own ideals.*

The poor showing of Groenlinks in 2021 has three key lessons for the Greens elsewhere:

**Don't be fooled into believing that there will be a better opportunity to enter government:** in 2017, Groenlinks did not enter government. The assessment that the party leadership made was that after four years of opposition it would be in a better position to enter government. Instead, at the negotiating table it faces the same parties as it did in 2017 but now the party is considerably smaller. This was not the first time that Groenlinks had backed away from entering the government. It did exactly the same in

2006, only to find its dreams of entering government in 2010 crushed by VVD, CDA, and the Freedom Party.

**Realise that your votes are always borrowed:** the notion that you start the election campaign with the votes you won in the last elections is patently false. Voters are no longer loyal to a specific party. They are loyal to their own ideals and use their vote in the hope of bringing those closer to reality. This is particularly true of former social democrats who in recent elections have cast their votes for Greens. These are truly borrowed votes, however. If anything, these former social democrats are used to having a grip on the formation of a new government with their vote. If you cannot deliver or if there is another party with a more credible chance of pushing a new government in a progressive direction, these voters have no qualms about switching parties.

**Climate ownership is a boon and a bane:** despite competition from the deep green Party for the Animals and the more market-friendly 'bright green' D66, Groenlinks still has ownership of the climate issue. This can be a major boon when this issue is central to the public debate as it was in the elections in 2017 and 2019. If, however, the climate is not centre stage, as it wasn't in this election, it can also be a bane as the Greens are not associated with the major issues on the agenda. The Dutch 2021 election lacked any real substantial debate and was focused on leadership, something on which the Dutch Greens did not have a credible voice.

## Prospects

Currently, government formation talks are ongoing. These talks will be long and complex. This is partly to do with the extremely fractionalised parliament but more so with factors unrelated to the election, such as the governing style of Mark Rutte. Whether Groenlinks will enter the coalition is unclear. The left-wing cooperation initiated during the campaign appears to have paid off to some extent: PvdA and Groenlinks have indicated that neither wishes to govern without the other. D66 has indicated that it wants a more progressive course for the government, opening the door for more left-wing coalition parties. It may very well be that after half a year of coalition negotiations, both PvdA and Groenlinks enter government, despite their poor showing in the elections. It is also possible that, as in 2017, a broad coalition spanning from the VVD to Groenlinks will be impossible. The decision of whether or not to enter government will be fundamental for the strategic and electoral position of Groenlinks in the coming years.



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