

Will Dutch Voters Keep Right or Turn Left?

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The Netherlands' 2021 general election is set to take place in mid-March, against a backdrop of public outrage around the child benefits scandal and fierce criticism of the government's pandemic response. While many political commentators proclaim an end to the neoliberal consensus that has dominated Dutch politics for the last 40 years, the right-wing parties lead the polls, while the left-wing parties lag behind, despite a favourable climate. A closer look into the reasons why may give some indication of what to expect come election day.

The pandemic has been the main issue in the Netherlands over the past year. As in many other countries, the pandemic has exposed weaknesses in Dutch society. A healthcare system made “efficient” by budget cuts and austerity measures has struggled with the number of patients (what's more, in 2011, the Dutch government privatised the Dutch Vaccine Institute, which used to produce vaccines for the government). The economy's reliance on transport hubs such as Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, which has seen a decline in passenger numbers, has been exposed and a labour market with one of the highest rates of precarious contracts in Europe, many of which were terminated when the crisis hit, has left many workers without social assistance. Among the workers who retained their jobs, inequalities between those who can work from home and those who cannot have become apparent.

Meanwhile, the government response to the pandemic has been a series of unfulfilled promises, underreactions, and outright failures. At almost every point, the Dutch government performed badly: the first lockdown was comparatively late and promises of smart ways of fighting the virus (apps and contact tracing) have proved ineffective. More recently, the Dutch government has refused to limit flights from Covid-19 hotspots but did decide to institute a blanket curfew. Currently, the Netherlands has some of the highest infection rates in Europe and one of the lowest levels of vaccination.

The allowances scandal: exposing an unprecedented injustice

A second major crisis affecting Dutch politics, the childcare allowance scandal, had been brewing for a number of years but in January toppled the government (a four-party coalition consisting of Prime Minister Mark Rutte's liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66), and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and Christian Union (CU) parties).

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The scandal saw, as part of a crackdown on benefits fraud, the Dutch tax service ruin the lives of over 9000 families. Without evidence or the right to defend themselves, affected families were charged with committing serious fraud over minor infractions or due to fraud committed by their childcare agencies. The tough anti-fraud laws dictated that all parents who were labelled as “benefits cheats” had to pay their entire allowance back. The tax agency specifically pursued Dutch people with a dual nationality as they considered them more likely to commit fraud. Given that these tend to be low-income families, for most of them this meant financial destitution. But as they were marked as fraudsters, they were not even eligible for debt relief. This overzealous prosecution is particularly striking given the fact that the Netherlands actively facilitates tax avoidance by large companies. While the parties of the Right had pushed most strongly for anti-fraud policies in recent years, many measures that contributed to this scandal were supported broadly by both the Left and the Right.

Scrutiny on this scandal had been growing for years as journalists and MPs from the opposition Socialist Party (SP) and the governing Christian Democrats (CDA) had pressed the government for openness. The charge was led by Renske Leijten of the SP, and CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt. Of these two, Omtzigt has taken centre-stage despite the fact that, less than a decade ago, he spearheaded calls for a crackdown on allowance fraud. Only in the past year did other parties begin to pick up the scandal: notably the Green party, GroenLinks, which took the initiative for the parliamentary research and threatened to table a motion of no confidence when the government refused to step down.

However, the government was extremely reluctant to provide information. In December 2019, the junior minister of taxation stepped down over the scandal. Parliament subsequently delved deeper into the political decision-making surrounding the affair. Its report, Unprecedented Injustice, came to two conclusions: the government had violated basic principles of the rule of law in the relentless prosecution of the fraud cases and had not fulfilled its constitutional obligations with regards to transparency. After its violation of these principles came to light, the government resigned in January.

The neoliberal moment is over

These two crises come at a time when the Dutch political elite is seriously reconsidering the 40-year-old neoliberal paradigm that has underpinned the targeting of low-income families in the context of a clampdown on fraud, and years of austerity. Even before the crisis, the centre-right government was examining the possibility of increasing public borrowing to invest in the long-term development of the Dutch economy. In response to the pandemic, the traditionally austere Dutch government has borrowed heavily to keep companies and families financially afloat. This shift comes after a decade of successive governments prioritising controlling public debt over investment in education, the energy transition, and innovation.

As a result, one could conclude that now is the time for the Dutch Left. As some left-wing MPs have announced: the neoliberal moment is over. Left-wing critiques of austerity, privatisation, the constant suspicion that people relying on government support are out to cheat the system, and the all-too-cosy relationship between big business and the government are now the subject of broad consensus.

Yet the Left appears unable to exploit this advantage. Most Dutch people still believe that Mark Rutte is a good crisis manager. Weekly press conferences and two national addresses have given him an air of a competent statesman fighting for the health of the nation, despite the ballooning infections and the sluggish vaccination rate.

Whereas the Left in the Netherlands has fragmented into multitude of parties, the three largest being GroenLinks, the social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA) and the left-populist Socialist Party (SP). The governing D66 party is sometimes counted among the Left and a few smaller parties have also popped up, such the single-issue animal rights advocacy Party for the Animals and the anti-discrimination party Bij1.

The Labour Party, traditionally the leading party on the Dutch Left, is in disarray after its leader, Lodewijk Asscher, stepped down because of his role in the allowances scandal as the minister of social affairs and employment from 2012 to 2017. He has now been succeeded by Lilianne Ploumen, a relatively unknown MP who also was a minister in the previous Liberal-Labour government. It remains to be seen whether she can oversee a recovery for the PvdA, following its disastrous results at the previous elections (when the party won nine seats out of 150, down from 38).

The Socialist Party is also in trouble: the party leadership aimed to court culturally conservative voters by adopting a discourse more critical of migration but soon found itself in conflict with its membership who wanted to follow a far more progressive path on cultural issues. To make matters worse, the party leadership recently cut off support to its youth wing, accusing it of having become infiltrated by revolutionary communists.

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GroenLinks is currently the largest of the three left-wing parties. The party had hoped to campaign on the climate crisis, driven by its conviction that it presents the greatest challenge to our generation and that it is a winning electoral issue. But the pandemic has pushed all other issues off the agenda. Furthermore, social distancing has put an end to the Greens' previously successful strategy of organising large meet-ups with voters and has prevented mass mobilisation by young climate strikers that had forced the climate up the political agenda.

New forces to be reckoned with

The situation for some of the smaller parties on the Left looks more promising. D66 was the only left-leaning party to enter the centre-right Rutte government. The government, and in particular D66 ministers and junior ministers, have fallen short on key priorities such as limiting greenhouse gas emissions and investing in education. For D66, governing has usually always come at the same cost: losing half their seats. This time, the loss appears likely to be limited to one third of the seats, thanks to the party's choice of Sigrid Kaag, the popular minister for foreign trade and development cooperation, as its lead candidate.

The single-issue Party for the Animals looks set to expand its seats slightly compared to its already impressive 2017 result of five seats. The party has consistently connected the health crisis to the treatment of animals in agriculture and has already warned that the next pandemic could come from the intensive agriculture taking place in the West.

Bij1, the party of TV presenter turned anti-racism campaigner Sylvana Simons is predicted to win a single seat in parliament by a number of pollsters. This intersectional left-wing socialist party appears to have benefited from the increasing awareness of racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

Remote but not impossible: prospects for Green and Left gains

The real campaign has yet to kick into gear and, given the volatility of Dutch voters, the final weeks and days of the campaign are likely to be the most decisive. The campaign will take place exclusively online, on television, and in the newspapers. In the regular media, the ability of parties to set the agenda is limited and what will go viral online is unpredictable. So, the results are by no means set in stone, but the cards currently do not favour the Left.

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As March 17 draws nearer, a number of aspects stand out in the electoral picture. First, the health crisis is reinforcing faith in the competence of Rutte as a crisis manager. The recent riots against the lockdown are likely to strengthen the “rally around the flag” effect that aids incumbents. Second, the welfare fraud scandal is seen as a failure of government generally and the tough anti-fraud policies were supported by parties of the Left and Right. Neither of the pandemic or the scandal appear to be winning issues for the Left and their prominence has pushed other issues such as the climate out of the public eye.

Ironically, despite the poor electoral expectations for the Left, a new government is likely to be programmatically more left-wing than the current government. D66 and the CDA have presented more progressive election manifestos than in the past. Even Rutte has claimed that the Netherlands is “at its core a deeply socialist country”. There is a significant chance that a large number of left-wing policies, such as raising the minimum wage, making childcare free at point of service, and investing in the energy transition may be implemented by a largely centrist or centre-right government.

However, campaigns are unpredictable and there is an outside chance, albeit small, that Rutte’s popularity will diminish. All other parties, including his former coalition partners, are criticising him for the neoliberal policies of the past decade. But whether the Left can benefit from this joint assault and the renewed focus on strengthening the welfare state remains to be seen.



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