

Dutch Elections: What Wilders's Victory Means for the Green-Labour Alliance

Article by Sien Hasker

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Despite coming second in the snap election on 22 November, the Green-Labour alliance failed to create a broad platform for the Dutch Left. A far-right-led coalition would be bad news for Europe and the Netherlands, but it might offer the progressive camp an additional reason to stick together in defence of democracy.

The Dutch Left is no stranger to disappointing election nights, but watching Geert Wilders's far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) claim a decisive victory in the snap parliamentary election on 22 November was a shock even to the pessimists. It was particularly devastating to the Netherlands' one million Muslims, to many LGBTQIA+ residents, and to other groups and communities that have found themselves at the receiving end of far-right scapegoating.

The polls had only recently seen [PVV join the front pack](#) along with the liberal-conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the centre-right New Social Contract (NSC), and the new Green-Labour (GroenLinks-PvdA) alliance. In the end, Wilders's victory was emphatic, securing 37 seats to Green-Labour's 25, which came in second. In a 150-seat parliament, that is no guarantee of governing. But a coalition led by Prime Minister Wilders is certainly a possibility, even if the PVV (and other potential coalition partners) will have to scramble to find experienced leaders beyond their number one.

Milder Wilders?

Many factors have been cited as to why this time Wilders won, among them the fact that major centre-right parties kept the [door to a possible coalition open](#). Under its previous leader Mark Rutte, the VVD had rejected this. That same Mark Rutte – outgoing prime minister – had scuppered the previous government over an [arguably self-inflated asylum policy clash](#), setting the tone for a campaign where migration would play a strong role, alongside other topics like housing and secure livelihoods. Few are as adept at linking these socio-economic concerns to migration as Wilders, even if he consistently [gets the facts wrong](#). But even other parties accepted this frame now, and the connection between migration and the Dutch housing crisis formed a key question in the [final pre-election debate](#). This helped the PVV further solidify itself as a genuine change after 13 years of Rutte and as the *real (original) deal* on restricting migration.

On the other hand, there was also a sense in the campaign that we were seeing Geert *Milders* – a somehow more toned-down, acceptable, and collaborative iteration of the fiery radical leader, willing to put some of his more controversial (and unconstitutional) asks on the back burner. However, neither Geert Wilders, nor his party, nor his electorate expressed any remorse or reconsideration of their deeply [racist and Islamophobic platform](#), which still seeks to ban mosques and the Quran, and paints asylum seekers as profiteering criminals. Nor has he dropped his general disdain for human rights, the judiciary, or international institutions.

Suggestions that the PVV is economically left require serious disclaimers too. While the party wants to increase the minimum wage, raise pensions, and reduce the cost of social housing, it has no credible plan to finance these measures, and lacks any redistributive intention. In fact, it wants to cut most taxes and rely instead on scapegoating and targeting migrants, Europe, and “lefty hobbies” like culture and public broadcasting, international development, or climate investment.

Implications for Brussels

On Europe, there’s no need to fear “Nexit” just yet. While it remains in the PVV programme, both Wilders and his electorate seem to have deprioritised it. Among other potential coalition partners, NSC and the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) share a critical view of the EU, particularly on climate and migration, and a frustration that the Netherlands currently contributes more than it receives. A right-wing coalition with these parties would be a clear ally to Hungary’s Orbán, and it’s no surprise that he congratulated Wilders on his victory and its “winds of change”. Concretely, expect additional hurdles to any EU enlargement, and complete obstruction on climate and biodiversity measures. Scrutiny on EU spending and investment would also be high on a Wilders-led government agenda. The PVV seeks an opt-out from European agreements on asylum and migration, and finds support for that among other right-wing parties and EU governments. An area of potential contention would be continued military aid to Ukraine, which the PVV opposes but possible coalition partners are more supportive of.

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For the Netherlands, this election also means losing strong voices – and associated influence – in Brussels. While Rutte was far from universally beloved, he positioned himself over the years as a skilled negotiator and experienced authority among European leaders. Former Green Deal chief Frans Timmermans left the EU in pursuit of the prime minister’s office, but it is unlikely that the Green-Labour alliance will lead a government anytime soon. It’s not apparent who, if anyone, can fill their shoes, as the current leaders on the Dutch Right lack much expertise or even interest in the European stage.

Disappointing results for the Green-Labour alliance

This was the first joint parliamentary election for the Netherlands’ Green-Labour alliance, and on the face of it, it was not a bad night. The joint list came second overall, and gained seats when compared to the two parties’ individual results in 2021. But that is where the good news ends.

Left parties as a whole lost further terrain, now representing just a third of the overall parliament. Of the 24 seats lost by other parties on the left, only eight were picked up by Green-Labour. In the case of left-liberal D66 and Volt, many strategic voters found their way to the alliance instead. But for others like the Socialist Party and Party for the Animals, their 2021 voters just as easily went for NSC and even PVV this time, or did not vote at all.

Where back in 2022 the first joint climate vision of the two alliance parties had been presented as deep red and bright green, the manifesto slogan this time around was “together for a hopeful future” – a clear push to pick up and unite the (strategic) Left, but also the centrist voters unhappy after countless years of Rutte, and enticed by the clear direction and experienced hands of Frans Timmermans.

This effort to build a broader electoral base resulted in a campaign that veered towards the middle, and

at times exposed the strategic and policy rifts between and within the Greens and Labour. Kauthar Bouchallikht, a popular young Green MP and candidate on the joint list, dropped out in October citing a lack of historical nuance in leaders' one-sided support to Israel immediately following the Hamas attacks on 7 October. The turmoil in the Middle East was one of the topics on which the parties had to seek compromise, and appeasing Green members' unhappiness on this topic was a central issue at the joint election congress on 14 October. Later in the campaign, Timmermans angered some by stating that the Netherlands' 2030 nitrogen emissions reduction target could be reconsidered, contradicting the alliance's manifesto. He missed key debates in favour of meetings with Olaf Scholz and speeches in Malaga, reinforcing his statesman credentials but leaving gaps on the Left at crucial moments.

Ultimately though, the strategy did not pay off. Aside from some strategic voters on the Left, the Green-Labour alliance did not manage to attract voters beyond the two parties' core constituencies, nor to mobilise significant numbers of non-voters. 44 per cent of those who gave them their vote on 22 November had already voted Green or Labour in 2021; 29 per cent had voted left-liberal D66; but beyond that it's just 5 per cent former socialist voters, 5 per cent non-voters, and little more. This means they also failed to convince some of their own electorate to stick around, with 13 per cent of previous Labour voters now going for NSC, and 9 per cent of previous Green supporters not voting at all. Above all, the demographics of Green-Labour voters remain much the same – urban and highly educated.

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If the objective of the cooperation between the Greens and Labour was to strengthen the Left, broaden its base, and deliver a government and prime minister, then clearly it has failed. And yet, there was a strong and coherent manifesto and a diverse slate of candidates representing all the strengths, expertise, and lived experiences of these movements. Perhaps their voices got lost in an election campaign dominated by strong leaders.

How willing party members and politicians are to continue the Green-Labour experiment probably relates to how they felt about it before the elections as well. There is a certain path dependence to what has been set in motion, but deep reflection will be necessary before the 2024 EU elections and any future steps. It is an uphill battle in a country that lurches ever more to the Right.

What next

On election night, Frans Timmermans gave what some considered to be the best speech of his campaign. Visibly emotional, he asked people to hold on to each other and insisted that this cooperation on the Left is precisely there to signal to everyone that “we’ve got your back.” He affirmed the belonging of minority groups and people with migration backgrounds. He made clear that refugees will always be welcome in the Netherlands under Labour and the Greens. And after the crowd booed his congratulations to Geert Wilders, he argued that the challenge now is not just to respect democracy, but to defend it.

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For years, the Greens found themselves in “constructive opposition” – supporting centre-right Rutte governments in key votes and legislation, particularly when it came to common climate and social goals. In part, this also functioned as a democratic barrier to the radical right opposition that was ready to derail at every turn. Now, Green-Labour could potentially find itself the largest opposition force to a far-right-led government. It shakes up what defending democracy will look like, and what tools will need to be used. It could offer a new dimension to the progressive cooperation, standing together and organising not just with the rest of the Left, but also civil society, the cultural sector, and other groups under attack. There are still many questions as to what will happen next, as even a centrist government coalition that includes Green-Labour (but not the PVV) is not entirely off the table. Either way, there is a lot of building yet to do.



Sien Hasker is a Programme Manager at the Green European Foundation.

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