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The Netherlands: Political development and data for 2017

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Introduction

The year 2017 was a period of contradictory developments in terms of political stability in the Netherlands. On the one hand, the Mark Rutte II cabinet, the longest serving cabinet since the Second World War, was the first since 1998 to complete its entire term. On the other hand, the highly volatile 2017 national elections yielded the most fractionalized parliament in Dutch history. The ensuing cabinet formation was the longest one to date.

Election report

In the 2017 election campaign a number of issues were hotly debated. Healthcare was a key issue: an important element in these debates was how it was to be financed. A number of parties, among them the Socialist Party (SP), Freedom Party (PVV), GreenLeft (GL) and Labour Party (PvdA), proposed scrapping the healthcare deductible, that is, the requirement that citizens first pay for part of their healthcare costs themselves before being allowed to use their insurance. The PvdA had actually increased the deductible while in government as an austerity measure. The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the ChristianUnion (CU) proposed decreasing the deductible. This left only Democrats 66 (D66) and the Liberal Party (VVD) to defend the policy. The SP with the support of smaller parties such as the Party for the Animals (PvdD) and the pensioners' party 50PLUS went even further and proposed to replace the system of competing healthcare insurers with a single national health insurance fund. In the realm of healthcare, it was not only the economic left–right dimension that mattered, but also the moral dimension. Just before the election the VVD Health minister Edith Schippers proposed to allow people who did not suffer physical problems but felt they had lived a full accomplished life to end their lives with assistance from professionals (called 'accomplished life'). The D66, PvdA and GL were in favour of this plan, but it would meet opposition from the Christian parties, the CDA, CU and Political Reformed Party (SGP), and from the SP.

In addition, cultural issues related to national identity, civic integration and immigration polarized the left and right. This debate remained at a rather abstract level until the week before the election when the Dutch government came into conflict with the Turkish government. Turkish government ministers intended to campaign in the Netherlands in favour of a 'Yes' vote in the April 2017 referendum in Turkey on changes to the Turkish constitution. The Liberal–Labour government coalition did not want the Turkish government to treat Dutch-Turkish citizens as Turkish subjects and also expected that the

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campaign meetings would create civil unrest. It banned the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu from landing at Rotterdam Airport and declared the Turkish Minister of Family and Social Affairs, Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya, an 'unwanted alien' and had the police escort her back to Germany where she had traveled from. This led to civil unrest among Dutch-Turkish citizens and to protest from the Turkish government.

The elections saw the second highest level of electoral volatility in Dutch history: 25 per cent of the seats changed hands. The governing Liberal–Labour coalition lost heavily. Unlike previous elections, this one did not show a clear winner. Instead, the political landscape flattened: the fractionalization of the Dutch Parliament increased by more than 40 per cent (from 5.7 to 8.1 'effective parliamentary political parties'). The social democratic PvdA lost three-quarters of its support. This had been long predicted in the polls: the cooperation with the VVD in a cabinet that pursued heavy budget cuts and far-reaching welfare state reforms in a period of economic crisis would cost the Social Democrats heavily. Programmatically, the party veered to the left and it had elected Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher as its new leader in 2016, but to no avail. The SP hoped to benefit from the loss of the Social Democrats, but was unable to do so, losing one of its 15 seats. By introducing the idea of a national health insurance fund, it sought to concentrate the debate on economic issues knowing that its working-class voter base would be attracted to the PVV if the elections were to focus on cultural issues. The GL, which had performed particularly poorly in the 2012 elections, nearly quadrupled its support. The party pulled former Social Democratic voters with its charismatic young leader Jesse Klaver and his campaign, which heavily borrowed from the American playbook.

The governing VVD lost one-fifth of its support. Despite this, the party clearly stayed well ahead of the opposition. It pursued a right-wing course on both economic and cultural matters. In particular, the diplomatic incident between the Netherlands and Turkey appears to have bolstered the support of the VVD among more culturally conservative voters. It did not just boost support for the VVD but also for the new party by, for and of immigrants: DENK. This party was founded by two Dutch-Turkish MPs who had been forced out of the PvdA (Otjes & Voerman 2015: 216). Programmatically, the party focused on anti-discrimination. Polling among ethnic groups indicated that the party was particularly strong among Dutch-Turkish voters (Otjes & Krouwel 2018).

For a long time, the radical right-wing populist PVV had been leading in the polls. Support for the party had surged since the large influx of refugees in the fall of 2015 and was further boosted by the criminal conviction of party leader Geert Wilders for discriminatory statements concerning Dutch-Moroccans in the fall of 2016. It allowed Wilders to say that the political elite wanted to suppress his truth-telling style of politics. During the campaign the support for the party slumped after Wilders had refused to participate in two of the four televised debates. The centre-right Christian Democrats 'jumped' into the void the PVV had left. The party chose a clear right-wing course on cultural issues, for instance proposing to make the teaching of the national anthem in schools obligatory. The PVV also suffered competition from some new smaller right-wing populist parties. Of these, only the Forum for Democracy (FvD), led by Thierry Baudet, was able to win seats. Baudet had come to public attention as one of the driving forces behind the petition for a referendum on the European Union–Ukraine association agreement that was held in the spring of the 2016 (Otjes & Voerman 2017).

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Table 1. Elections to the lower house of Parliament (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) in the Netherlands in 2017

Date of election	15 March 2017	Previous election	12 September 2012
Electorate	12,950,685	Total seats	150
Total votes cast	10,563,456	Turnout	81.6%
Valid votes cast	10,516,041	Share of valid vote	99.6%

	Votes			Seats			
Party	*N*	%	Δ%	*N*	%	Δ*N*	Δ%
Liberal Party/*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD)	2,238,351	21.3%	−5.3%	33	22.0%	−8	−5.3%
Freedom Party/*Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV)	1,372,941	13.1%	+3.0%	20	13.3%	+5	+3.3%
Christian-Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA)	1,301,796	12.4%	+3.9%	19	12.7%	+6	+4.0%
Democrats 66/*Democraten 66* (D66)	1,285,819	12.2%	+4.2%	19	12.7%	+7	+4.7%
GreenLeft/*GroenLinks* (GL)	959,600	9.1%	+6.8%	14	9.3%	+10	+6.7%
Socialist Party/*Socialistische Partij* (SP)	955,633	9.1%	−0.6%	14	9.3%	−1	−0.7%
Labour Party/*Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA)	599,699	5.7%	−19.1%	9	6.0%	−29	−19.3%
ChristianUnion/*ChristenUnie* (CU)	356,271	3.4%	+0.3%	5	3.3%	0	0.0%
Party for the Animals/*Partij voor de Dieren* (PvdD)	335,214	3.2%	+1.3%	5	3.3%	+3	+2.0%
50PLUS/*50PLUS*	327,131	3.1%	+1.2%	4	2.7%	+2	+1.3%
Political Reformed Party/*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP)	218,950	2.1%	0.0%	3	2.0%	0	0.0%
DENK[a]	216,147	2.1%	+2.1%	3	2.0%	+3	+2.0%
Forum for Democracy/*Forum voor Democratie* (FvD)	187,162	1.8%	+1.8%	2	1.3%	+2	+1.3%
Others	161,327	1.4%	–	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Notes: [a] *Denk* means 'think' in Dutch and 'equal' in Turkish.
Source: Kiesraad (2018).

In the centre, finally, D66 campaigned as a progressive liberal party on cultural issues, in particular European Union integration, but also on the aforementioned 'accomplished life' proposal. This brought it into conflict with the smaller conservative Christian parties, the CU and SGP. While these three parties had been able to cooperate with the Liberal–Labour cabinet on a range of ad-hoc deals to ensure a majority in the Senate, there were still strong differences on matters of principle between them.

Cabinet report

For most of the year the cabinet Rutte II governed as a caretaker cabinet. It was only replaced by a new cabinet on 26 October, 225 days after the elections.

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For the sitting Rutte II cabinet the year was not without turbulence. On 26 January, the VVD Minister of Security and Justice, Ard van der Steur, stepped down after a parliamentary debate concerning a settlement between a criminal and public prosecutor Fred Teeven in 2000. In 2015, the Minister of Security and Justice, Ivo Opstelten, and the then Secretary of State for Safety and Justice, the same Fred Teeven (now a VVD MP), had also stepped down over the fact that the minister had not disclosed all relevant information to Parliament (Otjes 2016). As an MP Van der Steur had advised Opstelten to remove the amount of the settlement from a letter the minister planned to send to Parliament.

On 4 October, another VVD minister stepped down: Jeanine Hennis, Minister of Defence. She took political responsibility for an accident with a faulty grenade that had cost the lives of two Dutch soldiers serving in Mali in 2016 and had injured another.

During most of the year political attention was focused on the cabinet formation. At least four parties were necessary to form a parliamentary majority. On 16 March, the Speaker of Parliament, Khadija Arib, asked minister Schippers to lead exploratory talks. Before the elections all larger parties, including the VVD, had announced that they would not cooperate with the PVV because of the discriminatory statements for which Wilders had been convicted. The SP barred cooperation with the VVD because of their differences on social–economic issues. The PvdA had announced that it would not enter government after its heavy electoral loss.

The exploratory round ended on 27 March. Schippers was then appointed *informateur* to study the possibility of a coalition that would consist of the VVD, CDA, D66 and GL. These talks failed on 15 May over the issue of immigration. The GL opposed the deal the European Union had struck with Turkey to take back refugees. The VVD and CDA wanted to extend those deals to other countries. Schippers then searched for other options, but came to no conclusion. Herman Tjeenk Willink, a member of the PvdA and former vice-chair of the Council of State, was asked to serve as *informateur* on 30 May. He reinitiated talks between the VVD, CDA, D66 and GL, but those became stranded on the exact same immigration deals on 6 June. Yet, Tjeenk Willink was more successful in exploring a new option. On 27 June, he announced that a coalition cabinet could be formed by the VVD, CDA, D66 and CU. This coalition held only 76 of 150 seats in the House and 38 of 75 seats in the Senate. On 28 June, a former Liberal Minister of Finance, Gerrit Zalm, was appointed *informateur*. He led the negotiations between these four parties. On many economic, cultural and environmental issues the centre-left parties CU and D66 were at odds with the centre-right Christian Democrats and VVD. On moral issues, however, the D66 and VVD took more libertarian positions than the CU and CDA. On 10 October, the parties presented the coalition agreement. They decided to invest in the public sector: in police, defence, education and healthcare. The coalition agreed on a tax-reform package: the four-tier income tax system would be replaced by a flat-tax system 'plus' with only two tiers, which involved a major reduction in taxes for families. In order to ensure that income differences would not increase, the mortgage deduction for homeowners would be reduced even further. The value added tax (VAT) would be raised and corporate taxes reduced. The coalition also committed itself to reaching the Dutch targets of the Paris Climate Agreement, and agreed on working in the European context to strike more deals such as the one with Turkey, while at the same time increasing spending on foreign aid. Schools would be required to teach

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Table 2. Cabinet composition of Rutte II in the Netherlands in 2017

Duration of cabinet	Inception	5 November 2012		Dissolution	26 October 2017
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2017		Until	26 October 2017
Type of cabinet	Minimum winning coalition (MWC)[a]				

A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2017	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	7	53.8%	3	42.9%	40	26.7%
Labour Party (PvdA)	6	46.2%	2	33.3%	35	23.3%
Totals	13	100.0%	5	38.5%	75	50.0%

B. Composition of Rutte II cabinet on 1 January 2017

See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook* for the Netherlands (Otjes & Voerman 2017) or http://politicaldatayearbook.com

C. Changes in composition of Rutte II cabinet during 2017

Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Security and Justice	Ard van der Steur (1969 male, VVD)	26 January 2017	Stef Blok (1964 male, VVD)	Resigned[b]
Minister of Defence	Jeanine Hennis (1973 female, VVD)	3 October 2017	Klaas Dijkhoff (1981 male, VVD)	Resigned

D. Party/gender composition on 26 October 2017	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	6	50.0%	2	33.3%	33	22.0%
Labour Party (PvdA)	6	50.0%	2	33.3%	9	6.0%
Totals	12	100.0%	4	33.3%	42	28.0%

Notes: [a]As the government lacked a majority in the upper house, it was in effect a minority coalition from its start.
[b]Blok previously was Minister for Housing and the Central Government Sector. This post was abolished and brought under the responsibility of Ronald Plasterk (1957 male, PvdA), Minister of Interior and Kingdom Relations.
Source: PDC (2018).

the national anthem. The cabinet would not continue with the 'accomplished life' proposal. However, the liberal soft drugs policies would be complemented by experiments with the government production of soft drugs. The 2015 advisory referendum law would be abolished, while mayors would no longer be crown appointed.

For the final part of the cabinet formation talks, the prospective Prime Minister Rutte was appointed as *formateur* on 12 October, and he held formal talks with the prospective ministers. In order to allow the smallest parties in the cabinet to have two ministers, but still to reflect the differences in party strength in the cabinet, three additional ministerial positions were deemed necessary. To allow for this increase in ministerial positions, the Ministry of Agriculture (abolished in 2010) was re-established and four ministries would be led by two ministers: justice, foreign affairs, healthcare and education.

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Table 3. Cabinet composition of Rutte III in the Netherlands in 2017

Duration of cabinet	Inception	26 October 2017	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of 2017
Period covered by table	From	26 October 2017	Until	31 December 2017
Type of cabinet	Minimum winning coalition (MWC)			

A. Party/gender composition on 26 October 2017	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	6	37.5%	1	16.7%	33	22.0%
Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA)	4	25.0%	1	25.0%	19	12.7%
Democrats 66 (D66)	4	25.0%	3	75.0%	19	12.7%
ChristianUnion (CU)	2	12.5%	1	50.0%	5	3.3%
Totals	16	100.0%	6	37.5%	76	50.7%

B. Composition of Rutte III cabinet on 26 October 2017

Ministerial Title	Minister
Prime Minister and Minister of General Affairs	Mark Rutte (1967 male, VVD)
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport	Hugo de Jonge (1977 male, CDA)
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations	Kajsa Ollongren (1967 female, D66)
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality	Carola Schouten (1977 female, CU)
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Halbe Zijlstra (1969 male, VVD)
Minister of Justice and Security	Ferdinand Grapperhaus (1959 male, CDA)
Minister of Education, Culture and Science	Ingrid van Engelshoven (1966 female, D66)
Minister of Finance	Wopke Hoekstra (1975 male, CDA)
Minister of Defence	Ank Bijleveld (1962 female, CDA)
Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management	Cora van Nieuwenhuizen (1963 female, VVD)
Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy	Eric Wiebes (1963 male, VVD)
Minister of Social Affairs and Employment	Wouter Koolmees (1977 male, D66)
Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation	Sigrid Kaag (1961 female, D66)
Minister for Legal Protection	Sander Dekker (1975 male, VVD)
Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media	Arie Slob (1961 male, CU)
Minister for Medical Care	Bruno Bruins (1963 male VVD)

C. Changes in composition of Rutte III cabinet during 2017

There were no changes during 2017

D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017

Same as on 26 October

Source: PDC (2018).

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Table 4. Party and gender composition of lower house of Parliament (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) in the Netherlands in 2017

	1 January 2017				23 March 2017, election				31 December 2017			
	All		Women		All		Women		All		Women	
Party	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	40	26.7%	14	35.0%	33	22.0%	10	30.3%	33	22.0%	10	30.3%
Labour Party (PvdA)	35	23.3%	19	54.3%	9	6.0%	5	55.6%	9	6.0%	5	55.6%
Freedom Party (PVV)	12	8.0%	3	25.0%	20	13.3%	6	30.0%	20	13.3%	6	30.0%
Socialist Party (SP)	15	10.0%	5	33.3%	14	9.3%	5	35.7%	14	9.3%	5	35.7%
Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA)	13	8.7%	4	30.8%	19	12.7%	5	26.3%	19	12.7%	6	31.6%
Democrats 66 (D66)	12	8.0%	6	50.0%	19	12.7%	7	36.8%	19	12.7%	6	31.6%
ChristianUnion (CU)	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%
GreenLeft (GL)	4	2.7%	2	50.0%	14	9.3%	8	57.1%	14	9.3%	8	57.1%
Political Reformed Party (SGP)	3	2.0%	0	0.0%	3	2.0%	0	0.0%	3	2.0%	0	0.0%
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	2	1.3%	2	100.0%	5	3.3%	3	60.0%	5	3.3%	3	60.0%
50PLUS	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	4	2.7%	2	50.0%	4	2.7%	2	50.0%
Group Bontes-Van Klaveren/*Groep Bontes van Klaveren* (Bontes)[a]	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Group Van Vliet/*Groep van Vliet* (Van Vliet)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
DENK[b]	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	3	2.0%	0	0.0%	3	2.0%	0	0.0%
Group Klein/*Groep Klein* (Klein)[c]	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Group Houwers/*Groep Houwers* (Houwers)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Group Monasch/*Groep Monasch* (Monasch)[d]	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	–	–	–	–	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	57	38.0%	150	100.0%	53	35.3%	150	100.0%	53	35.3%

Notes: [a]The MPs Bontes and Van Klaveren, who had split from the PVV during the 2012–17 parliament, ran for parliament, unsuccessfully, with For the Netherlands/VoorNederland (VNL).
[b]The MPs Kuzu and Öztürk, who had split from the PvdA in 2014, ran for parliament successfully with DENK.
[c]The MP Klein, who had split from 50PLUS in 2014, ran for parliament unsuccessfully with the Freethinking Party (VP).
[d]The MP Monasch, who had split from the PvdA in 2016, ran for parliament unsuccessfully with New Roads (NW).
Source: Tweede Kamer (2018).

Parliament report

On 29 March, Parliament re-elected Khadija Arib (PvdA) as Speaker. This is remarkable because Arib is a member of the PvdA, which had only nine seats, whereas traditionally one of the two largest parties supplies the chair.

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Table 5. Party and gender composition of upper house of Parliament (*Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal*) in the Netherlands in 2017[a]

	1 January 2017				31 December 2017			
	All		Women		All		Women	
Party	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	13	17.3%	6	46.2%	13	17.3%	6	46.2%
Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA)	12	16.0%	4	33.3%	12	16.0%	5	41.7%
Democrats 66 (D66)	10	13.3%	3	30.0%	10	13.3%	3	30.0%
Party for Freedom (PVV)	9	12.0%	3	33.3%	9	12.0%	1	11.1%
Socialist Party (SP)	9	12.0%	3	33.3%	9	12.0%	3	33.3%
Labour Party (PvdA)	8	10.7%	4	50.0%	8	10.7%	5	62.5%
GreenLeft (GL)	4	5.3%	2	50.0%	4	5.3%	2	50.0%
ChristianUnion (CU)	3	4.0%	1	33.3%	3	4.0%	1	33.3%
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	2	2.7%	1	50.0%	2	2.7%	1	50.0%
Political Reformed Party (SGP)	2	2.7%	0	0.0%	2	2.7%	0	0.0%
50PLUS	2	2.7%	0	0.0%	2	2.7%	1	50.0%
Independent Senate Parliamentary Party/ *Onafhankelijke Senaatsfractie*	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Totals	75	100.0%	27	36.0%	75	100.0%	28	37.3%

Note: [a]Members of the upper chamber are elected by the members of the 12 provincial councils (Provinciale Staten) every four years in proportion to their population size.
Source: Eerste Kamer (2018).

Political party report

Table 6. Changes in political parties in the Netherlands in 2017

A. Party institutional changes in 2017
For the Netherlands/*VoorNederland* (VNL) was liquidated on 17 June after unsuccessfully contesting in the 2017 national elections
B. Party leadership changes in 2017
Socialist Party (SP) parliamentary leader Emile Roemer (1962 male) stepped down on 13 December; He was replaced by Lilian Marijnissen (1985 female). Roemer had led the party since 2010

Institutional change report

Minor changes were made to the electoral process. In June, the Senate passed a bill that abolished the possibility of parties entering into electoral alliances to gain more remainder seats. In October, the Senate passed a change to the constitution in a second reading that allows Dutch citizens living in the Caribbean islands that form part of the Netherlands (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) to determine indirectly the composition of the Senate.

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A special electoral college would be elected by Dutch citizens on the islands that would be allowed to cast their votes for senators together with members of the States Provincial from the European Netherlands.

Issues in national politics

The year 2017 was sandwiched between years in which the Netherlands held a referendum. In 2016, a majority of Dutch voters again voted for the European Union–Ukraine association agreement. In order to meet the concerns of Dutch voters, Rutte negotiated that an additional declaration would be added to the treaty in October 2016, which read that Ukraine would not necessarily join the European Union. In February, the House and in May the Senate voted in favour of ratifying the association agreement.

A new advisory referendum had already been planned for 2018. A group of students took the initiative to require a referendum on the new bill on the security services, which sought to modernize the competences of the security services for the internet age. The initiators were particularly opposed to the fact that the bill would allow for the undirected collection of online data by the security services. After the initiators had collected sufficient signatures, the Electoral Council announced on 1 November that the referendum would be held in 2018.

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