Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Dutch voters still all over the place

The run-up to the Dutch elections shows one thing above all others: voters are confused, uncertain, and easily swayed.

Recent elections have shown large cohorts ping-ponging from one new bright hope to another, including extremist and populist parties. And just a week before the vote, more than half of the electorate is still undecided.

The Netherlands is not unique in Europe. Traditional mainstream parties have lost support across the continent, and voters look to upstarts with new, or not-so-new but satisfyingly simple, so-called solutions.

As in many other countries, the main Dutch issues are migration, housing and healthcare. What distinguishes the Netherlands, among other things, is a highly fragmented legislature with a plethora of increasingly small parties.

Yet, having 50 per cent undecided in some polls so shortly before an election is high. In 2023, it was even higher, at over 60 per cent, and the final result showed that most of this support had gone to Geert Wilders' far-right populist PVV.

Undecideds skew hard right

In general, it seems that undecideds in opinion polls mostly skew hard right in the actual vote. This might have something to do with polling inaccuracies, the phenomenon of 'shy' far-right voters, and the appeal of highly emotive issues, such as migration, in the final stages of campaigns.

Opinion polls might now be better at correcting for such issues. But even allowing for that, it is more than likely that the PVV will once again be the largest party. Depending on how its actual vote is under-estimated, it might in fact become even more dominant.

This could undermine one of the main narratives of the election campaign: the relative return of the centre parties. This focused in particular on the coming back to life of the old ruling party by default, the centre-right Christian Democrat CDA.

> One far-right party, JA21, is slated to grow from just one seat in the 150-seat Dutch legislature to between 10 and 14

The story of the CDA until this campaign was typical for what many European centre-right parties had experienced: its attempts to copy the far-right's rhetoric fell flat amid distrust over its establishment credentials.

Then, in the 2023 elections, two copycat parties siphoned off almost all of its support.

Now, under the new, more centrist leadership of the relatively young Henri Bontenbal, the Christian Democrats are back.

They have mainly profited from the spectacular implosion of the main copycat party but also appeal to voters as the stable, trusted, even 'normal' face of Dutch politics.

This would imply that at least a segment of Dutch voters has become disillusioned with new parties promising pots of gold at the end of the rainbow. But that, alas, does not seem to be the case.

One far-right party, JA21, is slated to grow from just one seat in the 150-seat Dutch legislature to between 10 and 14. It's an amalgamation of deserters from other populist parties and positions itself as a 'decent' right-wing alternative.

Among a kaleidoscope of parties, the left flatlines

And that's not the only wild swing that can still be expected in the upcoming vote among a kaleidoscope of parties.

The Dutch political landscape is extremely fragmented, with 27 parties participating and 16 projected to enter parliament.

What is remarkable, though, is that most of the bouncing from one party to another appears to be taking place on the centre-right and far-right side of the political spectrum. The left is virtually stagnant.

The main progressive bloc, the Labour-GreenLeft alliance, might have a shot at becoming the second party after Wilders' PVV. But that's only by virtue of its two formerly independently formidable constituent parties having combined.

> The continued and seemingly irreversible decline of the left is puzzling in the Netherlands, one of the world's richest and most equal countries

Under the leadership of former vice-president of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, it gained some seats when it first participated as a bloc in 2023. Since then, and despite facing a bumbling, squabbling right-wing government, it has virtually flatlined.

More illustratively, any short-lived gains in the opinion polls very often appear to come at the expense of smaller left-wing parties. It suggests that the reservoir of Dutch left-wing voters is limited and shrinking.

True, there is one shapeshifting 'socially progressive, fiscally conservative' party, D66, that is doing quite well and might garner some confused left-wing votes. But its self-confessed liberal, i.e., in the Dutch context, conservative, roots could also mean its growth comes partly from disillusioned centre-right VVD voters.

The continued and seemingly irreversible decline of the left is puzzling in the Netherlands, one of the world's richest and most equal countries. While still setting store by some welfare state protections, it has also embraced the neoliberal narrative more than most other Western countries over the past decades.

Underregulated or over-regulated? The Dutch dilemma

Setting aside migration, the country's 'problems' appear to stem as much from an underregulated market as from over-regulation.

Plausible cases could be made for robustly left-wing solutions to all its main challenges, including housing, healthcare, education, labour markets and transport.

The housing crisis, with some 400,000 households looking for accommodation, is perennial but has worsened under the market-oriented regimes of the past decades.

Partial solutions, such as capping rents, have only made things worse, as there's a lack of new construction.

> A comprehensive solution is needed that requires at least some state intervention, yet there appears to be little appetite for this

Loosening some regulations to allow for more construction is only a very partial fix, as there are limits on space and infrastructure capacities. Clearly a comprehensive solution is needed that requires at least some state intervention, yet there appears to be little appetite for this.

In healthcare, the case for reducing private sector involvement, rather than expanding it as the Dutch are doing, is even more straightforward.

Several studies show that alternative, more tax-funded models, such as in Sweden and Denmark, deliver similar outcomes while significantly lowering administrative costs, leaching away of profits and lessening fragmentation and complexity.

There's very little granular detail in the election campaign on these issues. It's natural

for grand, emotive and ideological statements to dominate.

Migration: the ultimate 'feel' issue of Dutch politics

In the Netherlands, voters also know that whatever party they opt for, it will inevitably have to rule in a coalition, thus making overall ideological thrust more important than programme details that will not be implemented as stated in any case.

Geert Wilders blames restrictions – imposed by coalition partners, the courts and international treaties – for his failures

Of course, migration remains the main ideological litmus test. It is the ultimate 'feel' issue, with many of its statistics, from economic impact to crime, being open to interpretation.

Labour-GreenLeft has toughened its language on migration but to little avail. The overwhelming consensus across the Dutch political spectre now is that migration is a problem and that it needs to be 'tackled'.

Still, for almost a year while in power, the PVV and its like-minded allies proved unable to address the issue in a constitutionally compatible way.

When Wilders proposed measures that were likely to be slapped down by the courts, he pulled his party out of the coalition, rather than wait for his partners' response.

Of course, Wilders blames restrictions – imposed by coalition partners, the courts and international treaties – for his failures.

No political party dares make the case that it's very hard to 'solve' an issue that is actually not much of a problem and that's more a force of nature than a policy choice.