



By: TA | AP Brief

Dutch voters head to the polls in an uncertain election with a focus on immigration



Voters cast their ballots at polling stations across the Netherlands on Wednesday in a close-run **snap election** called after anti-Islam lawmaker Geert Wilders brought down the last four-party coalition in a dispute over a crackdown on immigration.

The campaign focused on migration, a housing crisis and whether parties will work with Wilders in a new coalition if his **Party for Freedom** repeats its stunning victory from two years ago.

The vote comes against a backdrop of deep polarization in this nation of 18 million and violence at a recent **anti-immigration rally** in The Hague and at protests across the country against new asylum-seeker centers.

In The Hague, a steady stream of commuters stopped to vote at a polling station set up at the city's central railway station, next to the Dutch parliament building.

Voters could cast their ballots at venues from city halls to schools, but also historic windmills, churches, a zoo, a former prison in Arnhem and the iconic Anne Frank House museum in Amsterdam.

Voter Olga van der Brandt, 32, said she thinks voters may turn their backs on parties that made up the last right-wing government that was led by Wilders' party.

Her hope is that "this time there will be a more progressive party who can take the lead."

Polls suggest that Wilders' party, which is calling for a total halt to asylum-seekers entering the Netherlands, remains on track to win the largest number of seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives, but other more moderate parties are closing the gap and pollsters caution that many people wait until the very last minute to decide who to vote for.

"It hasn't been this tense for a long time," Wilders said late Tuesday on Dutch news show Nieuwsuur after leaders held a final debate.

Among those first in line at the ornate former

city hall in the central city of Delft, wearing bathrobes and carrying mugs of coffee, was a group of students who live together and study at the local university.

"It's a house tradition" to vote together, Lucas van Krimpen told The Associated Press.

No single party can win a majority

Polls close at 9 p.m. and broadcasters publish an initial exit poll immediately followed by an update a half hour later.

The Dutch system of proportional representation all but guarantees that no single party can win a majority. Negotiations will likely begin Thursday into the makeup of the next governing coalition.

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Mainstream parties have already ruled out working with Wilders, arguing that his decision to torpedo the outgoing four-party coalition earlier this year in a dispute over a crackdown on migration underscored that he is an untrustworthy coalition partner.

Rob Jetten, leader of the center-left D66 party that has risen in polls as the campaign wore on, said in a final televised debate that his party wants to rein in migration but also accommodate asylum-seekers fleeing war and violence.

And he told Wilders that voters can "choose again tomorrow to listen to your grumpy hatred for another 20 years, or choose, with positive energy, to simply get to work and tackle this problem and solve it."

Frans Timmermans, the former European Commission vice president who now leads the center-left bloc of the Labor Party and Green Left, also took aim at Wilders in the final debate, saying he is "looking forward to the

day — and that day is tomorrow — that we can put an end to the Wilders era.”

Wilders rejects arguments that he had failed to deliver on his 2023 campaign pledges despite being the largest party in parliament, blaming other parties for stymying his plans.

“If I had been prime minister — which I earned as leader of the biggest party — then we would have rolled out that agenda,” he said.

Wilders backed away from becoming prime minister during negotiations after the last election because he did not have the support of potential coalition partners.