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and Florian Lippert**

SHOCKS TO THE SYSTEM.

**Lessons from Geert Wilders' Victory
in the Dutch Elections**



Main thesis

1. Two crucial factors contributing to the “shock” victory of Geert Wilders’ far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Dutch elections on 22 November 2023 were:
 - an overdose of right-wing appeasement strategies by established parties in previous years and,
 - the peculiarities of the fragmented Dutch party landscape.
2. The PVV’s victory and good combined results of various right-wing and far-right parties increases the potential of democratic backsliding in the Netherlands to a considerable extent.

Introduction

The word “shock” has been amongst the most-used terms in media reactions across Europe to the Dutch election results of 22nd November 2023, when Geert Wilders’ far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) emerged as the strongest force in the new Dutch parliament. This represented the best result in its history. The party had advocated, amongst other things, for prohibitions on mosques in the Netherlands and Islamic headscarves within government edifices, as well as a referendum on leaving the EU (“Nexit”). It has also supported stopping the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions and putting key climate agreements “through the shredder” (Wilders). More recently, it has promoted the idea of withdrawing support for Ukraine. With this agenda, the PVV more than doubled its previous electoral performance from 2021.¹

While congratulations arrived from political opponents, as well as from far-right figures across Europe – including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, Marine Le Pen of France and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – Wilders promised that “Dutch voters (would) be put first again.” Regardless how the new Dutch government will look like, the word “shock” is an adequate description of Wilders’ massive victory. The term not only aptly describes the state of mind of various commentators, analysts and political opponents; it also points to a number of lingering cultural and political issues that have led to what political scientist Tom van der Meer has called “the biggest (political) shift we have ever seen in the Netherlands”.² “Shock” is an umbrella term for a number of divergent phenomena. If the medical definition of “shock” is the insufficient perfusion of blood to the body’s tissue due to issues within the circulatory system – a condition which can have a number of divergent and complex underlying causes and can be seen in symptoms such as weakness, a fast heart rate or anxiety – the omnipresent metaphorical use of the term in our context encourages questions concerning the underlying complexities of the present shift in the Dutch and European political landscape.

1. Overdoses of “good populism” and right-wing appeasement strategies

Some six years ago, following the Dutch parliamentary elections of March 2017, Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the liberal centre-right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy

1 From almost 11% in 2021 to 23,5% in 2023.

2 Quoted in: Pieter Haeck, Jakob Hanke Vela, Far-right leader Geert Wilders wins Dutch election, *Politico*, 22.11. 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-leader-geert-wilders-wins-dutch-election-exit-poll/>.

(VVD) (in)famously proclaimed a triumph of “good populism” over “bad populism”. This picked up on a then-prevailing notion that the most effective strategy to counter the populist radical right would involve adopting a moderated version of their agenda, all the while sidelining the party itself. However, as Cas Mudde stated in a comment piece titled “Why ‘good populism’ is the wrong strategy to fight ‘bad populism’”, Rutte’s proclamation lacked solid empirical support already back in 2017. In fact, in comparison to the 2012 election, Rutte had experienced a significant decrease in support while the PVV made gains. Additionally, the then new far-right party Forum for Democracy (FvD) had garnered almost 2%, contributing to these parties’ combined score of 15%. Notably, this cumulative figure was only marginally lower than the PVV’s peak score in 2010. Apart from the strategic questionability of the “good populism” stance, Mudde also stressed its ethical and normative repercussions: “In the end, of course, the question is, or should be, a moral one. Copying the issues and frames of the populist radical right leads to populist radical right discourses and policies, whether adopted by populist radical right parties or mainstream parties. This is also the lesson of the Netherlands, where the exclusion of the PVV has not prevented the mainstream right from even further toughening immigration and integration policies. Assuming that we (still) consider both the messenger and the message as a threat to liberal democracy, ‘good populism’ is both empirically and normatively the wrong strategy to fight ‘bad populism’.”³

The current “shock” of 2023 shines a sharp light on the fact that big parts of the political mainstream, above all the VVD itself, have not followed these insights, but rather intensified their right-wing policies and appeasement efforts. In medicine, one of the four most common variants of shock is known as “distributive shock”. This can be caused, amongst other things, by sepsis or overdoses of harmful substances. Following our metaphorical discussion, it might not be an exaggeration to speak of a “populist right-wing policy overdose” within mainstream parties. This has ultimately led voters to choose, in Jean-Marie Le Pen’s notorious and much-quoted words, the right-wing “original over the copy”.

A prime example of this is the reason for the very timing of the 2023 elections. This was the rift over asylum policies that resulted in the collapse of the coalition government in summer 2023. The VVD and Christian Democratic Appeal’s (CDA) plans to restrict the influx of asylum seekers, which were prompted by a dispute the previous year regarding overcrowded migration centres, had faced opposition from the Christian Union and the socially liberal D66. Particularly controversial was the CDA’s proposition, backed by the VVD, to categorize war refugees under a distinct status from other refugees, and to impose various restrictions on them under certain conditions.

After the rift and Rutte’s announcement of a withdrawal from politics, another example of an ill-advised right-wing appeasement strategy followed when Dilan Yeşilgöz, Rutte’s successor, refrained from categorically excluding possible collaboration with Wilders’ PVV. Despite this, in the week before the elections, she said that she would not collaborate with Wilders if he was prime minister. The general signal that the VVD would be open to at least letting Wilders’ party enter government is likely to have made the PVV significantly more attractive to voters as a “serious” political force. It seems that many voters were no longer scared by the PVV’s radical demands. Instead, they rather primarily saw a chance to have an impact on the direction of future government reforms. These strategic voters might actually have “overshot” and voted for a party with a more far-reaching programme than what they actually would want and expect to be implemented.

³ Cas Mudde, ‘Why ‘good populism’ is the wrong strategy to fight ‘bad populism’’, *The Guardian*, 3.01.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2019/jan/03/good-populism-wrong-strategy-fight-bad-populism>

A third example of right-wing populism entering the mainstream can be seen in the anti-internationalist and anti-intellectualist debates stirred up by Pieter Omtzigt, leader of the new party New Social Contract (NSC). This group had been leading some polls in the weeks before the election but ultimately came fourth, with almost 13% of the vote and 20 seats. One of Omtzigt's key demands has been to reverse big parts of the successful internationalization of Dutch universities by massively reducing the use of English as the language of teaching, which would lead to a strong decline in international students and staff. The group representing universities in the Netherlands, the UNL, strictly objected to this idea and called proposals to scrap the use of the English language "ridiculous" in economic, strategic and cultural terms. Numerous university representatives, experts, and the then-acting Minister of Education Robbert Dijkgraaf strongly opposed it as well.⁴ A much quoted example was the case of Denmark, which had imposed restrictions similar to those suggested by Omtzigt in 2021. Due to clear labour shortages, the country would perform a U-turn only two years later. Despite all the evidence, Omtzigt, who himself studied in England and obtained his PhD in Italy, has insisted on the idea of restrictive measures, claiming that reducing the use of English at universities would be of "profound cultural importance". He also connected the topic directly to the current housing crisis – an oversimplistic shortcut that has recently become common in many Dutch media discourses.

While before the elections, Omtzigt had actually excluded the possibility of collaborating with Wilders, things seemed much less certain directly after election day: NSC entered extensive talks with the PVV, the VVD and the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB). Regardless of the results of these talks, anti-internationalism and anti-intellectualism in relation to higher education can be considered a common denominator amongst parties of the rightwing spectrum.

2. Ambivalences of the fragmented party landscape

The 2023 elections were also a shock to those who had been convinced that the Dutch party landscape, characterized by the presence of many small parties in the second and first chambers of the Dutch parliament, provided a safeguard against radicalization. In this regard, we must differentiate between questions of forming a government and the overall development of the political landscape. In terms of creating a government, the fragmentation of the Dutch party landscape has made strong, single-minded and radical leaders – as, for instance, in the Fidesz government in Hungary – highly unlikely. The negotiations to form a government coalition in the Netherlands require compromise, as they often involve three to five parties with very different agendas. This practice is deeply embedded in Dutch political culture. It reflects not only a practical need for consensus-building, but also a pluralistic ideal in Dutch society, where numerous interests and perspectives are accommodated within the democratic framework. Connected to this is the fact that political discourse in the Netherlands is marked by a strong tradition of direct debate. This is facilitated by a proportional representation electoral system, which allows for a more diverse array of parties to enter the Dutch parliament.

In relation to the development of the overall political landscape, however, things are less clear. The party spectrum has been fragmented to a great degree, with groups strongly focusing on a few core themes. In conjunction with the decreasing influence of traditional

⁴ Senay Boztas, Dutch universities slam 'ridiculous' proposal to cap foreign students, *The Guardian*, 17.11. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/17/dutch-universities-slam-proposal-cap-foreign-students-omtzigt>

moderate people's parties, as well as the mainstream right wing's appeasement policies we addressed above, this reality has encouraged the mainstreaming of certain degrees of illiberalism, Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia. This has ultimately led to a radical party turning into the biggest party of the right-wing spectrum. This process is not limited to the 2023 campaign but has developed gradually, particularly over the last decade since the European migrant crisis, in the Netherlands and also elsewhere in Europe.

In the Dutch case, right-wing parties have for a long time held a prominent place in politics, advocating for various conservative, liberal and nationalist principles. The historical roots of right-wing politics in the Netherlands can be traced back to the late 19th century, with the emergence of various conservative and Christian democratic movements. From the right wing emerged the contemporary far-right parties. The PVV was founded by Geert Wilders in 2006 and has achieved significant electoral successes from the outset. In the same year, it became the fifth largest party and in 2010 the third largest. Soon after this, it gained a significant role in policy making by becoming a support party for Rutte's minority government (2010-2012). In the last decade, then, several new right-wing parties evolved, including the nationalist Forum for Democracy (FvD) that we mentioned above. This group was founded by Thierry Baudet in 2016. In 2020, JA21 emerged as a splinter group from FvD, placing a strong emphasis on conservative values. The farmer-focused BBB, although not inherently a far-right party, has received backing from far-right elements since its founding in 2019, and has veered more towards the right when members from PVV and JA21 joined its faction in September 2023. Together, PVV, FvD, JA21 and BBB cover many different facets of right-wing thought and appeal to a wide array of conservative and right-wing voters. This puts them in competition with the once-dominant VVD. In the 2023 elections, these far-right parties together received around 31% of the vote.

Given the PVV's radical programmatic positions, after 22nd November 2023, some international commentators were shocked by the willingness of mainstream parties to cooperate with Geert Wilders and to even consider him fit for the prime minister's office. This is despite, in some cases, pledges to the contrary before the elections, as we saw above. For most Dutch commentators, in contrast, this came as no surprise. A poll conducted in November 2023 by Hart van Nederland showed that 53% of participants would find Geert Wilders an acceptable prime minister.⁵ Besides the general political culture of negotiation and compromise, which we addressed above, a second important factor was the fact that Wilders had aimed to create a milder, less radical impression in the weeks before the elections (earning him the mocking label "Milders"). As a result, he had promised to put his most radical policies "in the fridge". It is highly unlikely that Wilders will permanently abstain from his racist, nativist and anti-EU stances.⁶ As Frans Timmermans, a candidate for the GroenLinks-PvdA alliance, commented: "I don't know what it is like at your house, but when you put something in the refrigerator, you put it in to keep it good and to be able to take it out later."⁷ Still, in the ultra-pragmatist discourses present after the election, this strategy contributed to the possibility of initial talks (and their justification) regarding the options for a right-wing cabinet between Wilders, Yeşilgöz, Omtzigt and Caroline van der Plas of the BBB.

5 Hart van Nederland, *Helft van Nederlanders vindt Wilders acceptabele premier, linkse kiezer wil samen regeren met rechts*, 22.11.2023, <https://www.hartvannederland.nl/panel/helft-nederlanders-vindt-wilders-acceptabele-premier-linkse-kiezer-wil-samen>

6 Jan Willem Duyvendak, Josip Kesic, *Geert Wilders kán zich niet matigen*, *NRC Handelsblad*, 01.12.2023, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/12/01/geert-wilders-kan-zich-niet-matigen-a4183020>

7 NOS Nieuws, *Timmermans: plannen Wilders staan in ijskast voor later moment*, 29.11.2023, <https://nos.nl/collectie/13962/video/2499667-timmermans-plannen-wilders-staan-in-ijskast-voor-later-moment>

Thus, as the mainstreaming of populist and radical right-wing ideas has impacted both public debate overall and governmental discourses, the radical right-wing parties have also become eligible for participation in government. The sheer possibility of the PVV participating in a government, or even leading it, points to a potential stress test for the Dutch constitutional system.

3. Risks of democratic backsliding

A shock can lead to a “crisis” in the term’s original, medical sense: a turning point in the development of a disease when an important change takes place, for better or worse. In our context, if we use this metaphor for Dutch constitutional traditions, then these might either be compromised or evolve into a more robust system of safeguards.

Following the 2023 elections, Niels Graaf claims that the Dutch constitutional system relies predominantly on informal rather than formal democratic safeguards.⁸ The consensus omnipresent in Dutch governance is a tradition rather than an institutionalized framework. Radical forces such as the PVV might indeed unsettle those existing traditions, should they come to power. Wilders, for instance, has been openly hostile to judges and journalists as well as constitutional guarantees of the protection of minorities. A former president of the Dutch Supreme Court, Geert Corstens, said in 2016 that Wilders is creating a hostile environment for judges and spreading mistrust towards them. In 2021, the same Supreme Court judged him guilty of group defamation with regard to his racist call for “less Moroccans”.

The consensual constitutional culture in the Netherlands also means that the institutional safeguards of the rule of law are relatively weak. The Dutch constitution does not foresee constitutional review of legislation. This means that if the parliament were to pass legislation that violates the rights of, for example, certain religious minorities, then no Dutch court could uphold the constitutional right of freedom of religion to quash that legislation. There is still a possibility of Dutch courts directly using international law and declaring such legislation incompatible with, for instance, the European Convention on Human Rights, which the Netherlands has signed and ratified. However, the direct usage of international treaties to control national legislation seems to require a rather active stance from the judges.

The position of judges might be further at risk due to a comparatively weak system of protecting judicial independence. If a parliamentary majority were to take over control of the Supreme Court, it would be procedurally easier than in other European constitutional systems. Dutch appointments to the highest court have also been largely based on a constitutional tradition of the parliament appointing the first candidate suggested by the judges themselves. The Dutch system is in general characterized by a significant degree of judicial self-government.⁹

In the future, we might be able to test in practice the importance of formal constitutional checks as opposed to the importance of constitutional culture. In the case of scrutinizing reforms that might be unconstitutional, the Dutch constitutional order so far has relied

8 Niels Graaf, Dutch Rule of Law Alert: Why Dutch Constitutional Culture Is Not Prepared for Geert Wilders' Shock Electoral Win, *VerfBlog*, 28.11.2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/dutch-rule-of-law-alert/>, DOI: 10.59704/259a705a61e21fe0.

9 Elaine Mak, Judicial Self Government in the Netherlands: Demarcating Autonomy, *German Law Journal*, 2018, 19(7), pp. 1801-1838. doi:10.1017/S2071832200023245

comparatively more on its constitutional conventions and culture than formal checks and balances. A government under a radical leadership might check the resilience of those mechanisms concerning protection of the constitution.

Conclusions

The “shocks” associated with the 2023 Dutch elections have raised, as we have seen, questions about the failed strategies of the country’s centre-right mainstream, the orientation of its fragmented party landscape, and the robustness of its constitutional traditions. The fiction of “good populism” and multiple signals of openness towards the PVV have influenced voters, who eventually came to “prefer the original” and became strategic and “overshooting” voters. The fragmentation of the Dutch party landscape, in turn, shows both advantages and disadvantages in terms of preventing shocks to the political system. On the one hand, the representation of many small and medium-sized parties and the need to negotiate make radical shifts in government policies unlikely. This is true even in the case of unexpected election results such as this one. On the other hand, fragmentation is likely to have, over time, strengthened far-right discourses and empowered radical parties as competitors of the moderate right.

The fragmented political landscape in the Netherlands includes a number of small parties that focus on a few particular issues. The voters then strongly associate those issues with that party. Simultaneously, the culture of coalition negotiations in the Netherlands involves some “horse trading” and lengthy negotiations. In this context, parties focus on delivering on their core issues and are more willing to compromise on others, as crucial as they might be for the government in general. If parties, and their voters, are driven by specific issues and do not have a strong general commitment to liberal democracy, then the result of such coalition negotiations could be that liberal democracy in the Netherlands will be subject to a significant stress test.

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