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The European Parliament elections of 2024 were held over four consecutive days within member states. The Netherlands was the only country to have elections on the first day (Thursday the 6th of June), so the exit polls attracted a lot of interest internationally, especially as earlier polls had predicted a substantial surge for the far right across Europe. The EP elections in the Netherlands were held seven months after the Dutch national elections that ended in a major victory for the far right. Consequently, the Netherlands were seen to be a test case with regard to the likelihood of a far-right surge, which was predicted by opinion polls. Compared to the EP-elections of 2019, Dutch far-right parties did indeed do better. However, pro-EU parties won approximately two-thirds of the seats in Parliament, so the election result was met with some relief by EU supporters. This brief report reflects on the context of the elections, as well as its results.

The context of the EP-elections in the Netherlands

All Dutch elections are fully proportional, and voters select candidates from a party list. The number of seats for each party will usually go to the candidates highest on the list, but the order of candidates may change consequent upon the number of personal votes each individual candidate receives. In the EP elections of 2024, 31 seats were allocated to the Netherlands, so a party would need to win roughly 3.3 percent of the vote to secure one seat. The Dutch party system is highly fragmented. In both 2019 and 2024, ten different Dutch parties obtained at least one seat in the EP, with several ending up in the same European party group. A unique feature of the 2024 EP elections was that the Labour party (PvdA) and the Greens (GroenLinks) participated with a joint

list, even though candidates of these parties joined different party groups in the European Parliament.

Ever since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, the dominant perspective in the literature has been that these are second order national elections. Voters mainly orient themselves on domestic politics and use their vote to send a message to the national parties (e.g., Reif and Schmitt, 1980). One of the reasons is that there is no executive power at stake. To change the second order nature of the EP elections, European election campaigns were spearheaded in the last three elections by leading candidates (the so called 'Spitzenkandidaten') of the European party groups. So far, there is little evidence that this has worked, neither in 2012 (see e.g., Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2016; Gattermann *et al.*, 2016), nor in 2019 (Gattermann and De Vreese, 2020). Very few voters know any of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, and the debates between these lead candidates were rarely viewed. However, on the positive side, the debates in 2019 did focus mainly on the real issues that were being decided at the EU level, such as agriculture, environmental protection and 'social Europe'. One important element of the previous EP elections in the Netherlands was that the lead candidate of the social democratic party group was Dutch: Frans Timmermans. He was quite well-known in the Netherlands, and he performed convincingly in the debates. Partially as a consequence, the Dutch labour party (PvdA) performed relatively well in the EP elections of 2019, becoming the largest party with 6 of the 26 seats in Parliament. In 2019, the two far-right parties performed poorly, gaining only three seats initially (3 for *Forum for Democracy* and 0 for the PVV).[1] Parties that supported the EU were generally happy with the outcome.

The situation was quite different in the run-up to the European elections of 2024. After serving as an EU-Commissioner, Frans Timmermans returned to Dutch politics in 2023 to become the lead candidate for the joint list of the PvdA and the Greens in the Dutch national election on November the 22nd 2023. Even though the joint list of the two left parties increased its share of seats (from 17 to 25 seats), their result was overshadowed by the major victory of the PVV, which became the largest party in the Dutch second chamber with 37 seats. The success of the PVV placed the VVD, the largest mainstream right-wing party, in a difficult position. The VVD had been the largest party in the Dutch parliament for more than a decade, but was now the third largest

1 After the Brexit, the Netherlands got three more MEP's, two of which went to the far-right (one for Forum and one to the PVV).

(with 24 seats). Since the party made immigration a central campaign theme and because it ran a negative campaign against the left, it felt obliged to negotiate with other (far) right-wing parties about forming a governing coalition. By the time the European Parliament elections took place, a coalition agreement had been reached between four parties: the far-right PVV, the NSC, which is a split off from the Christian Democrats, the *BBB*, a new party claiming to safeguard the interests of the agricultural sector, and the *VVD*. It was also known that Dick Schoof, a non-partisan former high ranking civil servant, would become the new Prime Minister, because the lead candidate of the largest party Geert Wilders was too controversial. It is difficult to say how this affected the European elections. On the one hand, voters tend to be enthusiastic about a new government: the first six months are described in the literature as a "honeymoon period" (e.g., Hix and Marsh, 2007). On the other hand, it may have been a mobilizing factor for left-wing voters who felt very negative about this new cabinet in which the far right played a leading role.

The campaign for the EP-elections

Like in many EU-member states, European election campaigns in the Netherlands tend to be rather lacklustre. MEP's are not well known, so national politicians often appear in media coverage of EP-elections, where debates tend to focus on the (un)desirability of further European unification. The PVV, the largest party in the national parliament, waged an anti-EU campaign, declaring a desire to become larger in Europe in order to oppose European policies and/or to reform the EU. Other right-wing parties also expressed criticism of the EU, but did not go as far as that.

An interesting new player was the Farmer Citizen Movement (the BBB). The Netherlands has a large, industrialized and export-oriented agricultural sector, which places a heavy burden on the environment. A reduction of this sector became almost unavoidable after the highest administrative court ruled in May 2019 that existing government policies regarding nitrogen emissions were in violation of EU-agreements on the protection of nature reserves (Otjes and Voermans, 2020). The announcement of new policies to reduce cattle led to farmers' protests, and the BBB was formed in the wake of their objections. The BBB was much opposed to these EU-agreements on environmental protection, but it is not an anti-EU party. Without the EU and its subsidies, the export oriented Dutch agricultural sector would not be sustainable.

Controversies about reduction of cattle became part of a larger debate on environmental sustainability that has become increasingly politicised in the Netherlands. Far right parties (the PVV and FvD) repeatedly expressed their cynicism regarding the need for costly measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions; they also expressed their solidarity with the farmers' protests. Environmental protection thus became an important issue in the campaign, which became strongly framed in terms of left versus right, in part because the former EU-commissioner Frans Timmermans had been responsible for the *European Green Deal*. Much of the discontent about the EU's environmental policies were directed against Timmermans, who had now become the leader of the joint faction of Labour and Green Left.

Immigration was the second significant issue in the campaign. Many citizens hold the EU responsible for mass immigration, not only for immigrants coming from other EU member states, but also for the arrival of refugees (e.g., Harteveld *et al.*, 2018). It has been argued that this is partially the result of a 'new' ideological dimension that separates those who feel that contemporary issues should be solved by transnational collaboration, from others who want to defend the nation state and protect national sovereignty (e.g., Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). The latter position is expressed in a forceful way in the popular Brexit slogan "Take back control", which refers largely to controlling immigration.

The election result

The 2024 EP-elections were held only 7 months after the national elections, so second order election theory would predict a particularly low turnout in these elections (e.g., Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk *et al.*, 1996). Yet, turnout at EP-elections in the Netherlands has steadily *increased* over the past two decades, from 36.8% in 2009, to 37.3% in 2014, 41.8% in 2019 to a relative high of 46.2% in 2024.[2] So, while one could reasonably argue that turnout in EP elections is low, and much lower than in national elections,[3] the increasing turnout rate could indicate that they are losing some of their second order character. While still a bit speculative at this point, one reason might be that the campaigns now focus on the substantive issues more so than they did in

2 Election results discussed in this publication are the official results published by '*De Kiesraad*': https://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/.

3 Turnout in the national elections of November 2023 was 77.7%.

the past. A recent comparative study of six EU member states, which did not include the Netherlands, revealed a similar finding (Costa Lobo, 2023).

Table 1. Party vote share and representation in the European Parliament: 2019 vs. 2024

Political party*	Political group in the European Parliament	Results			
		Vote share (%)	Change compared to 2019	Seats	Change compared to 2019
Green Left-PvdA	Greens/EFA - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance & S&D - Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	21.1%	-8.8%	8	-1
PVV	PfE – Patriots for Europe Group	17.0%	+13.5%	6	+5
VVD	RE – Renew Europe Group	11.3%	-3.3%	4	-1
D66	RE – Renew Europe Group	8.4%	+1.3%	3	1
CDA	EPP – Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	9.5%	-2.7%	3	-1
Volt	Greens/EFA - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	5.1%	+3.2%	2	+2
BBB	EPP – Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	5.4%	Did not exist in 2019	2	Did not exist in 2019
NSC	EPP – Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	3.7%	Did not exist in 2019	1	Did not exist in 2019
SGP	ECR – European Conservatives and Reformists Group	3.7%	-3.1% (alliance with CU)	1	= (alliance with CU)
Animal Party	GUE/NGL – The Left group in the European Parliament	4.5%	-0.5%	1	=
50+	n.a.	0.9%	-3.0%	0	-1
FvD	n.a.	2.5%	-8.5%	0	-4
CU	n.a.	2.9%	-3.9% (alliance with SGP)	0	-1 (alliance with SGP)

*Source is De Kiesraad: https://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/ – *Parties in government are in bold – Incumbents means member of the new government that was agreed upon after the national elections, but not the caretaker government that was still officially in office.*

Table 1 presents the election results in 2024, compared to 2019. The biggest winner was the far-right party PVV, which grew from 1 to 6 seats. Yet, the far

right as a whole won just one additional seat since 2019, because the FvD lost all of its 4 seats. Even though the PVV won 5 seats, the election result was probably a bit disappointing for the party leadership, because having become by far the largest party in the last national election, it was now 'only' ranked second. Opinion polls showed that this 'poor' result was mainly due to a low turnout among potential far right voters.[4] It may be difficult for these parties to motivate their supporters to turnout for an election for a polity they oppose.

The three traditional 'mass parties', the social democrats, the Christian democrats (CDA) and the conservative liberals (VVD) each lost one seat. At the same time, two parties that were explicitly enthusiastic about European collaboration won 3 seats, D66 gained one seat and Volt gained two. So, after many speculations about a potential surge of anti-EU and far-right parties, the actual changes in the Netherlands were quite limited when comparing 2024 with 2019.

Looking forward

The new Dutch government has expressed its intentions to protect the Dutch agricultural sector from policies that were agreed at the EU-level to protect the environment. This is a priority for the BBB, which is mainly a single-issue party. The government has also promised to reduce the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. To accomplish these things, the current government will need to renegotiate some of the agreements reached at the EU-level. Most specialists say that this is not realistic. The most likely outcome is that the government will disappoint its voters and then blame the EU for not keeping its own campaign promises. Ironically, two of the governing parties are members of Von der Leyen's European Peoples Party Group in the EP. It remains to be seen how these parties, the BBB in particular, will perform this delicate balancing act.

4 According to a poll conducted by Ipsos I&O, only 44 percent of those who voted for the PVV in the national elections of 2023 turned out at the EP-elections. Among those who voted for the PvdA-GL in the national elections, the number is 77 percent. See: https://www.ipsos-publiek.nl/actueel/exitpoll-en-verkiezingsonderzoek-ipsos-io-de-europese-parlementsverkiezingen-2024/ (link accessed on the 31st of July 2024).

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