



Double Dutch: Why Wilders wins, even if he stays out of government

by Rem Korteweg
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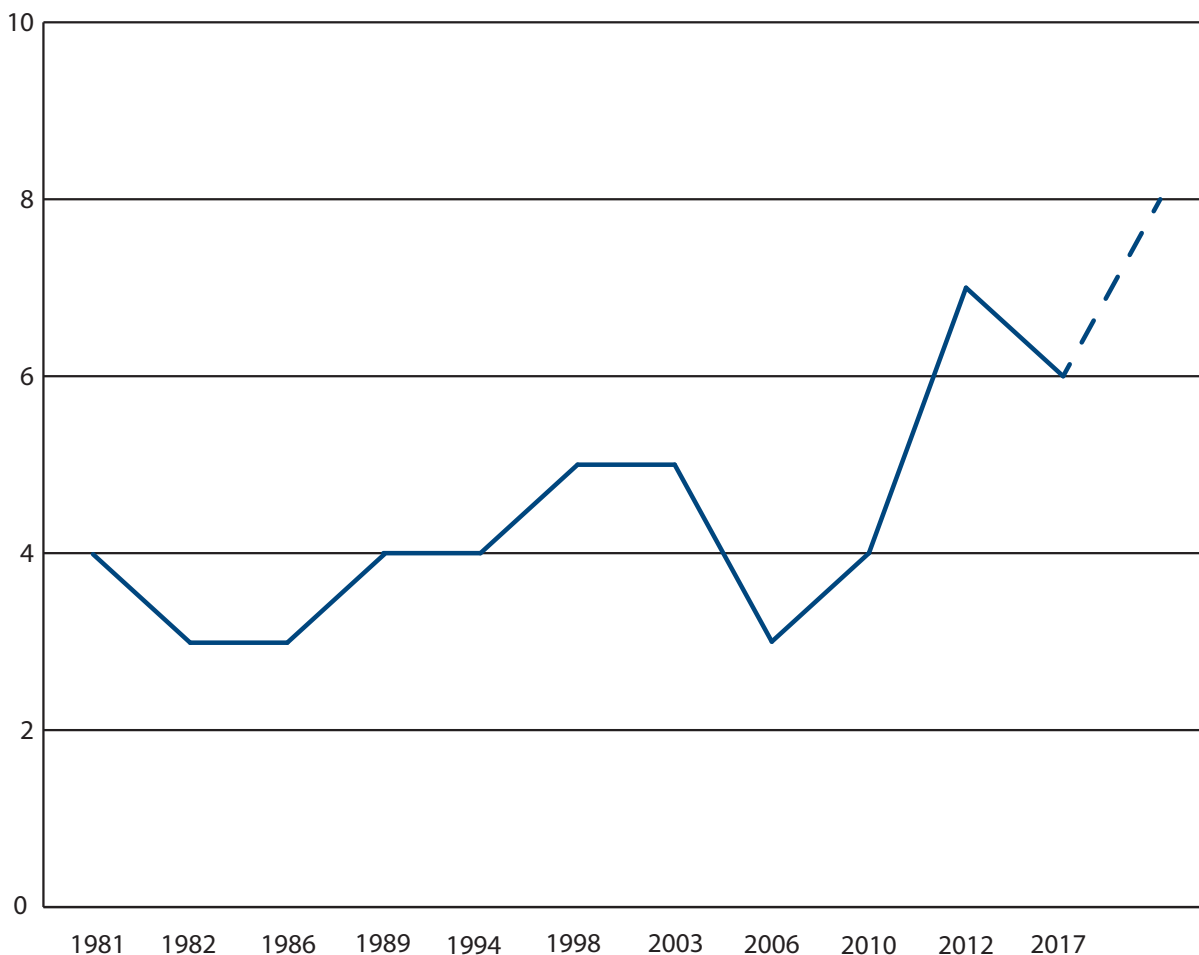
The anti-migrant, anti-Islam, eurosceptic firebrand Geert Wilders could come out on top in this month's Dutch elections. If so, he will be kept out of government, for now.

The headline from the Dutch elections on March 15th will be the success of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV). If the polls are to be believed, the PVV could win the most seats, riding a wave of popular discontent about the migration crisis, the eurozone crisis and multiculturalism. Currently the party holds 12 seats in the 150-seat parliament; in December projected support for the PVV peaked at 32 seats. Wilders' main rivals, the centre-right VVD (Party for Freedom and Democracy) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, were polling at 24.

But since December, support for Wilders has dropped somewhat. By the end of February, Wilders was projected to win 26 seats, a virtual tie with Rutte. Two things explain this development. The first is the "Trump effect". Wilders identifies with the rambunctious and politically incorrect US president. In election ads, he draws parallels between himself, Brexit and Donald Trump. Wilders' election slogan "Take our country back" echoes Britain's successful campaign to leave the EU. And like Trump, he is a self-styled populist who claims to be the only one who understands, and can solve the problems of the common man. But Trump's chaotic first weeks in office seem to have given some Dutch voters second thoughts. Secondly, on the campaign trail, Mark Rutte has lurched right, copying some of Wilders' anti-Islam, anti-migrant rhetoric.

Though enthusiasm for the PVV seems to have cooled a bit, Wilders could still end up with the largest number of seats in the Tweede Kamer, the Dutch parliament's lower chamber. But even if Wilders wins 32 seats – and he probably will not – it means he would only have the support of 20 per cent of the electorate. One of the most significant trends in these elections will be the further fragmentation of the political landscape. Thirteen parties may get into parliament, eight of which are expected to win ten seats or more. This is a historic high (see chart below).

Number of parties with 10 seats or more in the Tweede Kamer (1981-2017)



Seats are distributed by direct proportional representation and there is no threshold for parties to get into parliament. This system gives an advantage to single-issue parties, but the upshot is that it is almost impossible for one party to dominate politics, dictating the need for coalition-building and compromise. Besides, a government needs to get its legislation approved by the upper chamber, or senate, too. Voting for both chambers does not happen at the same time; the 75-seat senate will be elected again in 2019. The PVV only has 9 seats there now. This is the electoral straightjacket Wilders faces.

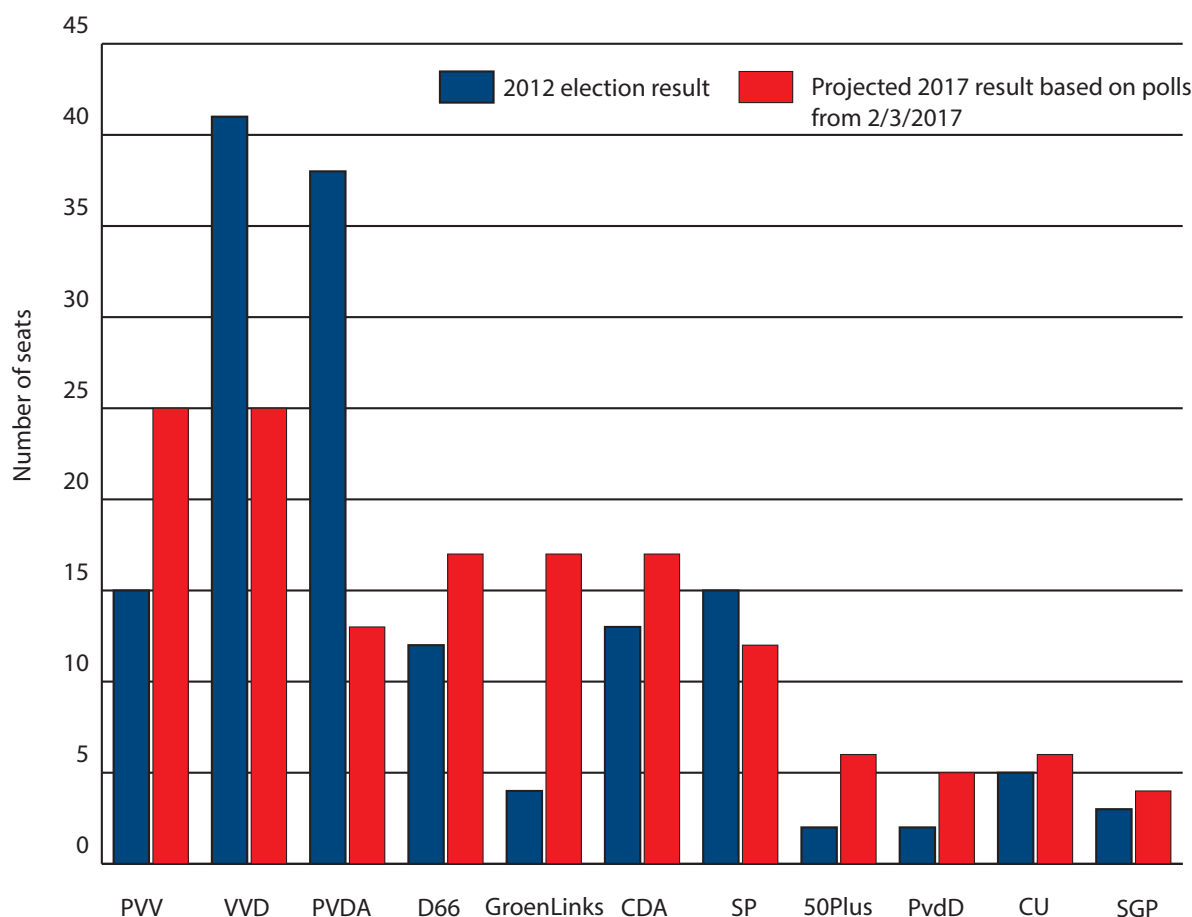
If the PVV ends up as the largest party, Wilders will get the first shot at crafting a governing coalition. But he has few friends in parliament, and those he has will not get him enough seats to reach a 76-seat majority. All mainstream political groups have ruled out forming a coalition with him.

Wilders' one-page manifesto ticks all the boxes of nativist populism au courant in Europe today. He wants to leave the European Union; freeze the pension age; close down mosques and Islamic schools; ban the Koran; close the door to all asylum-seekers; scrap all funding for development aid and for the arts; increase funding for the elderly; invest in defence and security; and decrease income taxes. His message gets him support from both the traditional right and left, even though his programme is unburdened by

any detail of how he wants to put it into practice. He knows that it would be very difficult to deliver on his promises in a coalition, particularly on his more radical ideas about migration and Islam. So he may resign himself to a role on the opposition benches again.

Outside government, he need not compromise on his message and could continue beating his populist drum, looking for simplistic answers to complex societal dilemmas while continuing to determine the tone and content of Dutch political debate. And as the leader of the largest party in parliament, his views would carry extra weight. Wilders has repeatedly denounced the government, parliament and judiciary as “phony”. He could then reinforce his narrative that the Dutch political system no longer reflects the will of the people, particularly if it deliberately keeps the largest party out of government.

Main political parties in the Tweede Kamer



Source: Peilingwijzer

A majority coalition that does not include Wilders would be a political Rubik’s cube. It would probably require five parties who would share little in common besides a desire to keep the PVV out of government (see chart below). Based on recent polling, if Wilders comes first, Rutte’s VVD – though it would lose seats – would be the second-largest party and might lead a new coalition. Three parties could come in third place. The Christian democrats (CDA) and the centrist liberal democrats (D66) would

both increase their share of seats, and be likely candidates to join the VVD in government. But the leftist Greens (GroenLinks) would nearly quadruple in size and claim a popular mandate to govern. Echoing a European trend of voters abandoning centre-left parties, the social-democrats (PvdA) – currently the junior partner in the governing coalition – could lose two-thirds of their support, though still return to govern. Several smaller parties that could be invited to make the electoral maths work are '50Plus', a populist pensioner's party; and CU and SGP, two smaller Christian parties. If the VVD fails in its coalition-building attempts, a left-wing coalition – led by GroenLinks – could possibly be formed and include the Eurosceptic and hard-left Socialist Party (SP) or even the fringe PvdD, an animal rights party.

Building a coalition could take a long time and any coalition of five, or more, parties would be inherently unstable. Expect a caretaker government to be in power for a while, and the possibility of early elections to loom large after a new government takes office.

This is bad news for Britain. On the one hand, some in Whitehall might have welcomed a Wilders government as it would considerably weaken the EU. On the other hand, a long period of uncertainty about the new Dutch government means that The Hague will not be able to play a leading role in discussions about Britain among the 27. When Theresa May activates the 'Article 50' process to leave the European Union in the coming weeks, she will not be able to count on one of the UK's all-weather friends. The Netherlands has much to lose if the UK leaves the single market and particularly the customs union, and it has an interest in pushing for a more moderate, less adversarial approach to the Brexit talks. But the chances are that the Dutch will be embroiled in a delicate coalition formation process which may last well into the summer. In the Netherlands, a caretaker government does not have to sit on its hands, but it would have limited credibility to make a strong case for the British.

While many in continental Europe will breathe a sigh of relief if Wilders is kept out of government, the longer-term effect of these elections may be more negative. Faced with an unstable or weak coalition that combines many, if not most, traditional mainstream parties, Wilders' populist message could become the only voice of opposition in the Netherlands. And if the alternative to a Wilders-led government is a period of prolonged political instability, the odds of him returning with even more seats next time around would increase. Keeping him out of government could then become very difficult indeed.

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