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ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

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The Dutch parliamentary elections of March 2017

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Democratic elections fulfil various purposes, such as the selection of representatives, influencing public policy, providing a mandate for office holders, and legitimising the political and administrative system. However, the specific role that elections should serve in providing for a new government is dependent on the existent political and electoral system and is often problematic. 'A supposed inability to install a government sometimes is raised as an argument against an electoral system' (Katz 1997: 102–3).

This argument is warranted in the Dutch case. The Netherlands is a prime example of an established parliamentary democracy with a difficult and often slow translation of the electoral results into a new government (for a general review of the Dutch system, see Andeweg and Irwin 2014). 'Important as they are, elections seldom have a determining impact on the formation of a government' (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 140). This is demonstrated by the fact that elections for the Dutch Second Chamber or lower house were held on 15 March 2017, but a new governing coalition was not installed until 26 October 2017. The formation of this cabinet had consumed 211 days, much longer than the post-war average of some 80 days (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 147). The post-war record of 1977 (208 days) was broken after a somewhat uneventful campaign, which nevertheless resulted in an election with a surprisingly high turnout, the breakthrough of new parties, and a Second Chamber without genuinely large parties. The latter was important for the long process of forming a new government coalition.

In the end a majority coalition was formed consisting of the liberal-conservative Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD), the religious centre-right Christian Democratic Appeal (*Christen Democratisch Appèl*, CDA), the progressive-liberal Democrats '66 (*Democraten '66*, D66), and the orthodox Calvinist Christian Union (*ChristenUnie*, CU) that could count on only the smallest possible majority of 76 seats out of 150 (for the number of seats of all parties, see Table 1). For the third time in a row the position of prime minister fell to Mark Rutte (VVD). This new centre-right cabinet is generally referred to as the Cabinet Rutte III (2017–).

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Table 1. Election to the Second Chamber of Dutch Parliament, 15 March 2017.

	2017	2017	2017	2012	2012	2012
	Seats	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes	Votes (%)
VVD	33	2,238,351	21.3	41	2,504,948	26.6
PVV	20	1,372,941	13.1	15	950,263	10.1
CDA	19	1,301,796	12.4	13	801,620	8.5
D66	19	1,285,819	12.2	12	757,091	8.0
GL	14	959,600	9.1	4	219,896	2.3
SP	14	955,633	9.1	15	909,853	9.7
PvdA	9	599,699	5.7	38	2,340,750	24.8
CU	5	356,271	3.4	5	294,586	3.1
PvdD	5	335,214	3.2	2	182,162	1.9
50Plus	4	327,131	3.1	2	177,631	1.9
SGP	3	218,950	2.1	3	196,780	2.1
DENK	3	216,147	2.1	–	–	–
FvD	2	187,162	1.8	–	–	–
Other parties	–	161,327	1.5	–	88,655	0.9
Turnout	150	81.9%		150	74.6%	

Note: See for the full party names and short descriptions of their ideologial charatcer: Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 72.
Source: For election results Kiesraad Databank Verkiezingen.

The election campaign

After the parliamentary elections of 2012, in a relatively short period of time, a coalition was formed consisting of the moderate left-wing social democratic Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) and the VVD. By a process of log-rolling in the formation process, the fairly substantial differences in ideology and standpoints between these parties were bridged by trading crucial issues. Such compromises were made partly in order to achieve the overriding goal to which both parties were committed: stability. The explicit goal of the Cabinet Rutte II was to achieve what few previous cabinets had failed to do, namely serve the full four-year term until the next elections. No one could have known at the time that this cabinet would not only achieve that goal, but due to the very long formation process in 2017, it would set a post-war record by serving for 1816 days.

That the Cabinet Rutte II and the policies that it implemented would form an element of the 2017 election campaign was quite evident. However, in a campaign that had already slowly begun to emerge from the shadows in the summer of 2016, 'formally' began in the second week of January 2017 with various party congresses in which the lists of candidates were finalised and the election manifestoes were adopted (see, for example, *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 January 2017), and truly heated up in February,[1] it never became completely clear exactly what the central theme or defining political question was. This was noted in, for instance, *de Volkskrant* as late as on 4 March 2017: 'Only eleven more days to go and the campaign teams are still searching. Because it remains unclear what the voter wants and what the election is about.'[2]

Maybe the central theme was the concept that is so difficult to define and grasp: 'Dutch identity'. Not only did the right-wing populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders point to this concept in its

slogan 'The Netherlands ours again', but with 'Be normal' and 'For a land that we will pass on [to new generations]' the VVD and CDA, respectively, also appealed to the idea of national unity and identity. 'These elections are about identity', argued the daily newspaper *Trouw* at the beginning of the campaign (7 September 2016); what various observers noted was the dissatisfaction of 'the common Dutchman'. In a rather provocative full-page open letter in a number of newspapers, under the heading 'To all Dutch persons', VVD leader Mark Rutte emphatically appealed to feelings of nationalism and Dutch identity and their importance in the campaign: 'The coming days are decisive for the direction our country is to take. There is only one burning question: what kind of country do we wish to be?' (see, for example, *De Telegraaf*, 23 January 2017). Later in the campaign, CDA leader Sybrand Buma, in connection with a plea for reinvigoration of traditional norms and values, issued a call to require schoolchildren to stand and sing 'het Wilhelmus', the Dutch national anthem. The political question clearly connected to nationalism and Dutch identity and identity issues in general was immigration, which regularly emerged during the campaign, as did related questions concerning health care and the economy (*de Volkskrant*, 14 December 2016). And in the background of the campaign there was continually the question of how the established political order could maintain itself against the worldwide surge of right-wing populism (see, for example, *Trouw*, 27 September 2016), which in the Netherlands was represented by Wilders and his PVV but also by new groups such as For the Netherlands (*VoorNederland*, VNL) and the Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*, FvD) of Thierry Baudet (see for example *Trouw*, 27 September 2016; *de Volkskrant*, 28 September 2016). The question was whether the climate of opinion that everywhere seemed to be advantageous for populists would manifest itself in the Netherlands: 'Will Trump give Wilders and Co. a boost?' (*Trouw*, 10 November 2016).

Although social media such as Facebook and Twitter appear to be taking on a greater role in Dutch elections (see, for example, *de Volkskrant*, 1 October 2016, 13 January 2017; *Trouw*, 25 February 2017), it was nevertheless still the traditional mass media that gave the campaign its sounds and dynamics (see also Van Praag and Brants 2014). The coverage not only reported on what the leaders of the participating parties said, but surprisingly often focused on the meta-debate of the question of who would and who would not participate in the organised major debates (*Trouw*, 10 February 2017). Both Rutte and Wilders threatened to boycott the important televised debate planned for 26 February 2017 on the commercial channel RTL if more than four parties were invited to take part (*de Volkskrant*, 22 February 2017). The suspicion was that the parties leading in the polls desired to avoid the debates: 'The idea: many voters make their determination of who to vote for during the last weeks so save strength and avoid mistakes' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 8 February 2017). At the first major debate in the campaign, the Northern election debate of 8 February, Rutte and

Wilders had also not taken part; the VVD sent caucus leader Halbe Zijlstra as a replacement, while the PVV went unrepresented. In the end, Wilders first and then Rutte reiterated their unwillingness to participate in the RTL debate when it appeared that based on a tie in the polls, five rather than four of the party leaders had been invited. After this, the RTL cancelled the so-called 'Prime Minister debate' (*de Volkskrant*, 13 February 2017; *Trouw*, 13 February 2017). It was replaced by a rather mundane debate between five other party leaders that stressed the importance of the identity issue in this campaign and was succinctly summarised in the media as 'It was about one thing: identity' (*Trouw*, 27 February 2017). A few days later Wilders also pulled out of the so-called *Carré* debate because the co-organiser RTL News had published a critical interview with Geert Wilders' brother (*NRC Handelsblad*, 20 February 2017). Multiple politicians and political observers argued that Wilders did not help his cause by these repeated refusals to debate: 'If you stay away from one debate, you have nothing to lose. But the idea is if you do this too often, others can steal the show' (*De Telegraaf*, 21 February 2017).

Finally, on 13 March, the political gladiators Rutte and Wilders met in a debate organised by the news programme *EenVandaag*. In this debate, a diplomatic conflict that had emerged a few days before suddenly brought some life into the previously dull campaign and probably worked to Rutte's advantage. Some Turkish ministers had wished to enter the Netherlands in order to campaign amongst Turkish-Dutch voters for support of the amendment to the Turkish constitution to provide President Erdogan with more powers. The Dutch cabinet determined that their appearance would be a threat to public order and declared the visit undesirable; Turkish Minister of Family Affairs Kaya had already arrived in the city of Rotterdam, but on Saturday 11 March was escorted out of the country. This so-called 'Turkish uproar' provided Rutte with an ideal opportunity to 'emerge as a leader who could not be walked over. Not a bad image for someone who at the moment is doing everything possible to be elected with a strong mandate at the elections next Wednesday' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 13 March 2017; *De Telegraaf*, 14 March 2017). Even Wilders had to concur in the debate with the measures that Rutte had taken and praise him for his resolute actions.

The final debate on the evening before the elections took place with no fewer than 13 party leaders and provided an acrimonious discussion, but produced no surprises and few new relevant facts. The one exception may have been Lodewijk Asscher, who as the leader of the PvdA for the first time in the entire campaign made a convincing impression, especially in a portion of the debate between him and Wilders over the proposition that 'The Netherlands belongs to all of us'; the question of identity remained a central theme until the very last campaign day. However, this one positive appearance was too little, too late to help his party at the election the following day.

Election results

The elections for the Second Chamber on 15 March 2017 yielded a number of remarkable results. Here the focus will be on four attention-worthy aspects: the high turnout; the easy access to the political system; the difficult position of the coalition partners; and the stagnation in the growth of the right-wing populist parties (for more data on the elections and preceding election polls, see Table 2).

Undoubtedly the greatest surprise of the 15 March 2017 elections was the high turnout. At 81.9% the turnout for these parliamentary elections was higher than any previous Dutch general elections in the twenty-first century. The declining trend that seemed to have appeared after 2006 was stopped and in fact reversed. After the repeal of compulsory voting in 1970 (Irwin 1974), turnout before 2017 had on seven occasions been under 80% and seven times above that level. However, of the seven occasions above 80%, six of these had occurred before 1990. The Netherlands appeared to conform to a broader trend of declining turnout at elections. 'Voter turnout has been declining across the globe since the beginning of the 1990s', whereas for Europe one can even speak of '[p]lummeting voter turnout' (Solijonov 2016: 8 and 25). To a considerable extent the decline in turnout in Europe could be ascribed to the new democracies in the former Eastern bloc, but the established democracies in the West also showed 'a consistent decline in turnout of about 10 per cent' after 1980 (Solijonov 2016: 25).

Against this backdrop, the results of the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2017 are all the more remarkable, especially in the light of lack of obvious factors that generally are found positively to affect turnout, such as relatively high campaign expenditures or the closeness of the expected results. Also, there were no obvious changes in the electorate at the individual level that could account for this rise (Cancela and Geys 2016; see also Smets and van Ham 2013). Given the general trend and the results in the literature, new questions concerning explanation of turnout are raised by the Dutch 2017 election outcome (see also Dekker and den Ridder 2018).

Second, the results of the 2017 elections demonstrate yet again the openness of the Dutch party system (Mair 2008). It is quite simple for a political party or list to participate in the election, and the extremely proportional electoral system (Andeweg 2005), in which 0.67% of the vote is sufficient to obtain a seat in the Second Chamber, facilitates entry into the Parliament. In 2017, two new parties achieved success. One of these parties, DENK (quite literally translated, THINK) can formally be classified as a *split* party (Krouwel and Lucardie 2008). In the previous period, two members with a Turkish background departed from the PvdA caucus. They retained their seats in the Second Chamber and founded their own new party. The party professed to champion inclusiveness and interconnection, but sought support primarily among those voters who had cultural roots in another country than the Netherlands, primarily Turkey

Table 2. Changes in electoral support for parties in Parliament and in the polls 2002–2017.

	March 2017 seats	Seats in polls 15 March	Seats in polls 10 March	Seats in polls 9 March	Seats in polls 23 Feb.	Seats in polls 16 Feb.	Seats in polls 7 Feb.	2012 seats	2010 seats	2006 seats	2003 seats	2002 seats
VVD	33	24–28	23–27	23–27	23–27	22–26	22–26	41	31	22	28	24
PVV	20	19–23	20–24	22–26	24–28	24–28	27–31	15	24	9	–	–
CDA	19	19–21	18–20	17–19	16–18	16–18	15–17	13	21	41	44	43
D66	19	17–19	18–20	17–20	15–19	15–19	14–18	12	10	3	6	7
GL	14	16–18	15–17	15–17	16–18	15–17	14–16	4	10	7	8	10
SP	14	14–16	14–16	13–15	11–13	12–14	13–15	15	15	25	9	9
PvdA	9	10–12	11–13	12–14	11–15	11–13	11–13	38	30	33	42	23
CU	5	5–7	5–7	5–7	5–7	5–7	5–7	5	5	6	3	4
PvdD	5	4–6	4–6	4–6	3–5	4–6	3–5	2	2	2	–	–
50Plus	4	3–5	4–6	4–6	5–9	7–11	8–10	2	–	–	–	–
SGP	3	2–4	3–5	3–5	3–5	3–5	3–5	3	2	2	2	2
DENK	3	1–3	0–2	0–2	0–2	0–2	0–2	–	–	–	–	–
FvD	2	1–3	0–2	0–2	0–2	0–1	0–1	–	–	–	–	–
LPF	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	8	26
LN	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2
Other Parties	–	0–2	0–1	0–1	0–1	0–1	0–1	–	–	–	–	–

Source: For poll of polls site public broadcasting organization NOS (http://nos.nl/dossier/365768-nederland-kiest-2012/tab/461/peilingwijzer/blog); Tom Louwerse (http://peiling.tomlouwerse.nl).

and Morocco. As such, DENK, which gained three seats in the election, can be viewed as an ethnic political party, i.e. 'a party that is the champion of the particular interests of one ethnic category or set of categories' (Chandra 2011: 155). Indeed, initial analysis of the electoral support for DENK in 2017 'shows that immigrant parties can be successful in mobilising a significant segment of the population with a migration background in an open political system' (Otjes and Krouwel 2018: 14). In this particular case DENK could also profit from the major losses of the PvdA. According to the first results of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (in Dutch: *Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek 2017*, NKO 2017), almost 20% of the PvdA voters of 2012 voted for DENK in 2017.

The other new party that gained two seats as a newcomer was Forum for Democracy (FvD). This party is classified as a *birth* party that can be conceived when 'citizens without ties to established parties may decide to found a new party' (Krouwel and Lucardie 2008: 43). The party, under the leadership of the young and dynamic Thierry Baudet, presented itself as a right-wing populist political outsider that wished to lead the attack on what was consistently called the 'political cartel'. This cartel, according to FvD, consisted of all established parties. According to the FvD, this cartel had created an existential crisis for the Netherlands because of the double threat from (Islamic) immigrants and the European Union. Yet the cartel parties refused to recognise this and were in no way inclined to tackle the crisis and find an effective solution.

Of course an open party system not only implies easy access for new parties, but can also yield the opposite results. Some new parties turn out to be flash parties that disappear as quickly as they appeared. For example, in 2002 Liveable Netherlands (*Leefbaar Nederland*, LN) and, in particular, the List Pim Fortuyn (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, LPF) entered the Dutch political arena, but in 2003 the former and in 2006 the latter had already exited the Second Chamber. The LPF, which demonstrated another aspect of the open Dutch system by immediately participating in the governing coalition (Mair 2008), was dealt a deadly blow by the assassination of its leader Fortuyn and the lack of a strong organisational basis (de Lange and Art 2011; van Holsteyn 2018). The ghost of Fortuyn still lingers on today, as other politicians, such as Wilders and Baudet, attempt to pick up the political gauntlet and walk in the footsteps of Fortuyn or at least persuade the Dutch voters that they share in his political inheritance.

The third point that the 2017 elections again made evident is that participation in a government coalition can be extremely risky. Since the Second World War the results for coalition parties at elections have become more negative. Dutch voters exhibit retrospective voting behaviour, but 'rewarding the coalition is clearly the exception to the rule, and the degree of punishment is generally far greater than the rewards' (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 132). In the twenty-first century, not a single coalition has succeeded in increasing its number of seats at a subsequent election (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 131), and 2017 was no exception. The coalition as a whole lost almost half of their seats:

the VVD managed to contain its losses to 'only' 8 seats and remained the largest party with 33 seats, but the PvdA sustained enormous losses, falling from 38 seats in 2012 to 9 in 2017. It dropped from being the second largest party to seventh place and lost about three out of every four voters who had supported the party in the previous elections of 2012, not only to DENK (18% of 2012 PvdA voters) but also to GroenLinks (14%) and D66 (12%). This major loss of the PvdA in 2017 fits a more general pattern that the junior coalition partners are punished much more severely by Dutch voters than the biggest party or senior partner (van der Meer 2018: 18–19).

Although extremely painful, these results hardly came as a surprise. Long before the elections of 2017, the PvdA had fallen from grace in the eyes of voters, at least according to the polls.[3] Soon after the formation of the VVD–PvdA coalition in 2012, the latter lost substantial support, dropping to about 15 seats in the middle of 2013 and then stabilising at this number, only to drop further from the summer of 2015 to just over 10 seats. The change of leadership, following an internal vote of the party membership, from Diederik Samsom, who had led the successful campaign in 2012 and led the parliamentary caucus after the election, to Lodewijk Assher, vice-premier in the Cabinet Rutte II, did nothing to revive the party. Its electoral support remained stable and extremely low, and the campaign did not seem to have any positive effect (see Table 2). In the end the somewhat facetiously titled book *Will the PvdA Survive until 2025* (Peper 2017), referring to the classic essay *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?* by Amalrik, suddenly posed a serious and realistic question.

The data of the NKO 2017 have only recently become available for analysis, but some preliminary findings strongly suggest that the 2017 elections question the conventional wisdom that 'it's the economy' that matters most electorally. Overall Dutch voters were satisfied with the development of the Dutch economy and the way that the Cabinet Rutte II had handled economic issues. 'In 2017 more Dutch voters were of the opinion that the government had a positive than a negative impact on the economy and on employment' (van der Meer 2018: 19). In this respect the 2017 elections are similar to the 2002 elections, when the then coalition parties also lost heavily although voters' evaluations of the economy and governmental economic policies were positive (van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 53–5).[4] In 2002 and most likely also in 2017, the dominant electoral considerations were not of such a materialistic nature but were related to more diffuse immaterial – but not less relevant! – issues related to questions of (national) identity grounded in an underlying cultural dimension in Dutch politics. This is even more so among younger voters. For the so-called millennials, who entered the electorate in the twenty-first century, cultural issues and issues related to immigration and integration arguably are more important than economic issues (Rekker 2018). And the fact that political parties with a completely different but clear profile on this cultural dimension,

e.g. D66, FvD, GL, PVV, and DENK, did well in the 2017 Dutch parliamentary elections empirically supports this suggestion.

Fourth and finally, it should be noted that the fears of many observers concerning this election did not materialise. Internationally the elections received considerably more attention than is generally granted to Dutch elections because of fears of rising right-wing populism, in particular Geert Wilders and his PVV. 'After Britain's EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump in the US …, a PVV victory could be seen as fitting a developing narrative of nativist, anti-establishment movements on the rise', according to *The Guardian*.[5] Indeed, public opinion polls for some time pointed to a neck-and-neck race between the VVD and PVV to become the largest party, with the latter sometimes in the lead (see Table 2). However, as the election day approached, this apparent two-horse race disappeared. Whereas the VVD gained in support during the four- to six-week-long final stage of the campaign, and at the election did better than the polls had indicated (probably partly due to the 'Turkey conflict'), during this same period the PVV dropped to second place. Geert Wilders and his list ended up with only a modest gain of 5 seats, giving a total of 20, and in comparison to the 33 seats achieved by the VVD, these results were disappointing. New research will be necessary,[6] but the fact that the PVV was rejected by most other parties as a potential coalition partner along with the competition from the new populist FvD of Baudet surely contributed to its stagnation. While the PVV can rely on a hard core of supporters, during the campaign it was unable to draw many new, undecided voters (van Holsteyn and Irwin 2018).

The new government

After the elections in 2017, the VVD re-emerged as the largest party, but with 33 seats it was in fact of moderate size.[7] Since 1956, when the Second Chamber was expanded from 100 to 150 seats, only in 2010 was the largest party smaller (VVD, 31 seats). The impression of fragmentation of the Dutch political landscape is thus not simply the result of the large number of parties represented in the Second Chamber, but also results from the fact that truly large parties with more than 50 or at least 40 seats have disappeared from the scene. Consequently, in the Netherlands, where political convention dictates that after elections the attempt is to form a coalition that can count on the support of a majority of the seats in Parliament, it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve this goal. Mathematically it may be true that given the composition of the Second Chamber in 2017, there were no fewer than 4033 majority coalitions possible, of which 326 classify as minimal winning collations. Nevertheless, politics is not mathematics.[8]

In an attempt to democratise the process of coalition formation and to increase transparency, the role of the king was reduced in 2012 and the role of

the Second Chamber strengthened (Andeweg and Irwin 2014: 140–46). Thus, on 16 March 2017, the day following the elections, it was the chair of the Second Chamber, Khadija Arib (PvdA), who, after consultations with the leaders of the parliamentary caucuses and on the advice of Mark Rutte as leader of the largest caucus, sought to explore the possibilities of forming a coalition.

Edith Schippers (VVD), the outgoing Minister of Health, accepted the appointment to *informateur* and transmitted her report to the Second Chamber on 27 March. In part because before the elections the second largest party in the chamber and one of the winners at the elections, the PVV, had been excluded by most of the parties, and by the VVD and CDA in particular, she advised that negotiations be begun between VVD, CDA, D66, and the left-ecological GreenLeft party (*GroenLinks*, GL). The leader of D66, Alexander Pechtold, was a strong supporter of this rainbow coalition of left and right (*NRC Handelsblad*, 24 March 2017). The Second Chamber responded on 29 March by asking Schippers to serve as *informateur* in order to pursue the possibilities of forming such a coalition. However, her attempt did not lead to success and on 15 May Schippers informed the chamber that the attempt had foundered. Perhaps surprising at first sight, it was not environmental policy that provided the stumbling block between 'the asphalt lovers of the VVD and environmental hippies of the GreenLeft' (*De Telegraaf*, 2 March 2017), but questions of immigration and asylum policy. Yet when one examines the diverging positions taken by the conservative VVD and the leftist GL on these issues such an outcome is not really surprising (Pellikaan *et al*. 2017).

The Second Chamber discussed the situation on 17 May and asked Schippers to investigate what other possibilities there were to form a cabinet that could count on fruitful cooperation with the Second and First Chambers. The Christian Union entered the picture, although the reservations held by D66 against the CU emerged as an obstacle. D66 leader Pechtold let Schippers know that a combination with the orthodox Calvinist party was 'undesirable' (see, for example, *De Telegraaf*, 18 May 2017; *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 May 2017). The political stalemate in the negotiations seemed to be turning into 'chaos', a term employed by multiple newspapers (*De Telegraaf*, *de Volkskrant*, and *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 May 2017). Within two weeks Schippers returned her report and advised that the influential and respected administrator and authoritative adviser Herman Tjeenk Willink (PvdA) be assigned the task to continue the process of formation, in which a minority cabinet was no longer excluded from consideration.

On 30 May the Second Chamber gave Tjeenk Willink the green light to proceed with what was called a 'pre-reconnaissance' mission – an indication of the complicated political situation that had emerged. His attempt to persuade GL to join the so-called 'engine bloc' of the socio-economically related parties CDA, D66, and VVD surprisingly failed, to the bitter frustration of the leaders of these parties (*de Volkskrant*, 14 June 2017; *NRC Handelsblad*, 29–30 July

2017). This was due to last-minute differences, again concerning asylum-seekers and immigration.

The pressure on the PvdA to participate in the negotiations increased, but was withstood due to its crushing electoral defeat. The position of party leader Asscher, who following this defeat had remained in his position while the party chairman and campaign leader Hans Spekman had announced his resignation, was clear from the start. 'We are the seventh [largest] party in the Netherlands. The winners must assume administrative responsibilities. Not us' (quoted in *de Volkskrant*, 20 March 2017).

The party that once again entered the picture in order to achieve the desired majority in the Second Chamber was the CU, which with its 5 parliamentary seats (eighth largest in the Chamber) was just sufficient to bring the coalition to the desired 76 of the 150 seats. That this combination had a formidable built-in tension between the liberal-thinking D66 and the orthodox Calvinist CU, especially concerning medical-ethical questions and euthanasia, had already been revealed in earlier discussions. However, ex-minister Gerrit Zalm (VVD), who on 28 June had received the formation baton from Tjeenk Willink, eventually succeeded in bringing these parties together to reach an agreement. In the meantime it was 9 October; not only had the negotiations been difficult and time-consuming, but from 20 July to 8 August the parties took a break for a summer vacation, in keeping with a process in which there did not seem to be a great sense of urgency for any of those concerned. On 9 October the parliamentary caucuses of the four parties involved gave their approval to the coalition agreement, entitled 'Trust in the Future', which formulated the policies to be pursued by the new coalition.

The next steps were the distribution of ministerial posts among the coalition partners and the assignment of individuals to these posts. An advantage of the Dutch system is that it is rather easy for new positions, or even governmental departments, to be created, altered, or abolished in order to produce the proper proportional balance of minister and junior minister posts among the parties, albeit that this can cost some extra time. Seldom does a new cabinet contain the same number of governmental posts or the same descriptions of policy areas as its predecessor. In 2017, the final product included an expansion of the number of ministerial posts to 16 (from 13 in 2012) and 8 junior ministers (one more than in 2012). In addition, a tendency can emerge to create multiple positions for a single ministry, for example two ministers or one minister and one or more junior ministers, which can achieve the desired technical-substantive and political balance, especially in the more important ministries (Elfferich, 2017). As stated, the new cabinet was presented on 27 October, and on 1 and 2 November debates were held in the Second Chamber concerning the coalition agreement.

A rather long period of time had passed since 21 March, but the new cabinet could finally begin its work in the late autumn of 2017. How stable this coalition

will be[9] – with the political leaders of the CDA, D66 and CU not as members of the cabinet but as members of the Second Chamber to keep a critical eye on developments – and how quickly after a possible collapse new elections might be called is a question to which, in the volatile political world of today, no one would dare venture a definitive answer.

Notes

1. For a timeline concerning the most important events, see http://verkiezingen2017.dnpp.ub.rug.nl/
2. All translations from Dutch by the author.
3. For the 2012–2017 trend in the Dutch 'poll of polls', see *Peilingwijzer*: https://d1bjgq97if6urz.cloudfront.net/Public/Peilingwijzer/20170314/Peilingwijzer+2012-2017.html.
4. Rori (2016) and Little (2017) provide examples of other more recent reports in the elections in context series.
5. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/02/dutch-parliamentary-elections-everything-you-need-to-know-brexit-vote-trump-geert-wilders
6. As was also correctly noted in the media in reaction to the report containing the first results from the NKO 2017: 'There is still a bit of guessing to the factors that were ultimately decisive for voters' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 24 February 2018).
7. This discussion of the process of cabinet formation is partly based on the report found at https://wwwparlementcom/id/vkckrowfidhn/kabinetsformatie_2017
8. Thanks to Tom Louwerse for the calculation of the number of possible majority coalitions.
9. Already on 13 February 2018 the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Halbe Zijlstra, had to resign after it became clear that he had been lying since 2014 about being present in a meeting with Russia's President Putin.

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