

What happened to the Dutch left?

Opinion polls ahead of the Dutch general election have presented a bleak picture for the country's three classic left parties. But were these parties ever that strong and, if so, when did they decline? [Cas Mudde](#) addresses some popular myths about the Dutch left's past and the challenges now shaping its future.

What is happening to the Dutch left? This is a question that has been asked several times in recent weeks. It is often a response to a new poll in the run-up to the parliamentary election this Wednesday, which have consistently shown stagnation at low levels. The most recent aggregate poll ([Peilingwijzer](#)) has the country's classic left parties at a combined strength of between 21.2 and 25.6 percent. Where has the Dutch left gone? Was it ever that strong and when and why did it implode? The most common answers to these questions are wrong and reflect a poor understanding of both the past and the present of the Dutch left and will therefore not help us much in gauging its future.

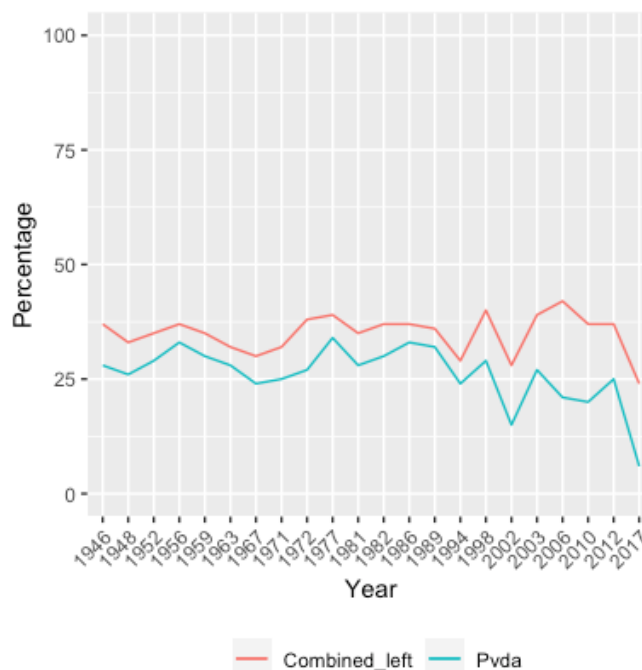
A glorious past that never was

When I grew up in the 1980s, the Netherlands was broadly seen as one of the most progressive countries in the world. For conservatives, Amsterdam was a modern-day Sodom and Gomorra, with its “free” drugs and prostitution. For liberals, it was heaven on earth, for partly the same reasons. Dutch politicians would consider the Netherlands a “Guiding Country” for the world (*Nederland Gidsland*) and would not shy away from telling other countries how to do “better.”

The reputation of Dutch progressiveness was always based far more on socio-cultural issues like drugs, sex, and sexuality than on socio-economic issues like the power of trade unions and the strength of the welfare state, however. And this progressive agenda was advanced, at times as much, by parties with a socio-economically right-wing profile, like *Democraten 66* (Democrats 66 – D66) and even the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy – VVD).

Classic left parties, i.e. those with ideological roots in socialism, have never even come close to capturing the majority of the national vote (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the highest combined vote for classic left parties was relatively recently, in 2006, when the social democratic *Partij van de Arbeid* (Labour Party – PvdA), the democratic socialist *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party – SP), and the “New Left” *GroenLinks* (Green Left – GL) together gained 42 percent of the vote. On average, however, the electoral support for classic left parties has mostly hovered just above one-third of the Dutch electorate in the postwar period.

Figure 1: Electoral support for combined left and PvdA (1946-2017)



Note: The figure indicates the vote share at each general election held in the Netherlands since 1946.

As the Netherlands has an extremely proportional electoral system, these parties have also never achieved a majority of the seats in the Dutch parliament. Consequently, while the country has had three different social democratic prime ministers, which governed the country for almost a quarter of the postwar period, it has never had a truly left-wing coalition, i.e. a government made up of only left-wing parties. At best, the governments were a combination of the PvdA and the (then) centrist *Christen Democratisch Appèl* (Christian Democratic Appeal – CDA).

A fragmented left in a fragmented country

The Dutch party system has always been very fragmented, particularly for a country without major regional cleavages (like Belgium or Spain). In fact, in recent times the (negative) term “[Dutchification](#)” has become more broadly used to describe the fragmentation of party systems. In the Netherlands, no single party has ever received more than 35 percent of the vote in postwar parliamentary elections. Within this fragmented party system, the PvdA was the biggest party eight times out of the 22 postwar elections. All of these victories were won by the party’s most iconic leaders, and only prime ministers: Willem Drees (1948-58), Joop den Uyl (1973-77), and Wim Kok (1994-2002).

While the PvdA was never the only left party in parliament, it was traditionally by far the largest, generally representing between 70 and 90 percent of the left-wing vote. In the early period the (only) other classic left party was the pro-Soviet, and therefore ostracised, *Communistische Partij Nederland* (Communist Party of the Netherlands – CPN). In 1959 they were joined by the *Pacifistisch Socialistische Party* (Pacifist Socialist Party), in 1977 by the progressive Catholic *Politieke Partij Radikalen* (Political Party Radicals – PPR), and in 1982 by the progressive Protestant *Evangelische Volkspartij* (Evangelical People’s Party – EVP). In 1989 these four parties merged into *GroenLinks*, which saved them from political oblivion, but barely increased their collective electoral support. In 1994, the *Socialistische Partij*, founded in 1971 as a Maoist party, entered the national parliament. The SP is more populist than the other left parties and has a more working-class electorate.

The 2017 elections took the left fragmentation into overdrive. As a consequence of its historic loss, the PvdA lost its traditional position as the dominant classic left party. In fact, it is the smallest of the three classic left parties in the outgoing parliament. *GroenLinks* and the SP became the joint-largest parties with 9 percent each, followed by the PvdA with a devastating 6 percent (rounded up!). Opinion polls show that the PvdA has since rebounded only very modestly, but will probably regain top position within the Dutch classic left because of predicted losses for both *GroenLinks* and the SP.

The decline of the left is the decline of the PvdA

As Figure 1 shows, the decline of the PvdA predates the broader decline of the classic left by several decades. The first electoral hit came in 1994, with a loss of 8 percent, but this was followed by a rebound and the last PvdA-led government of Wim Kok. More significant was the loss of 14 percent in the [2002 election](#), in which the party of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn (assassinated shortly before the election) took the political establishment by storm and [transformed](#) the Dutch party system.

Still, the PvdA rebounded the next year, making up 12 of the 14 percentage-points it had lost. This was short-lived, however, as the party slowly but steadily lost more and more of its support, in part being punished for government participation during the Great Recession, before the ticking timebomb finally exploded. In the 2017 election the PvdA suffered the biggest election defeat of any party in Dutch history, losing 19 percent and falling back to single digit support (5.7 percent). As current polls show, that drop is likely to be permanent. The PvdA has become part of the broader trend of “Pasokification”, which has seen once powerful social democratic parties reduced to political insignificance (e.g. the PS in France and PASOK in Greece), as the party will most likely remain a single digit party after Wednesday’s election.

In most countries the decline of the social democratic party was largely compensated by the rise of either Green or left populist parties. This was also the case in the Netherlands for most of the 2000s, when the losses of the PvdA were largely compensated by *GroenLinks* and the SP, even though their individual results were far from stable. *GroenLinks* dropped from 7 percent in 2002 to just 2 percent in 2012, while the SP grew from 6 percent in 2002 to 17 percent in 2006, only to fall back to 10 percent in 2012. But this changed in 2017. In the current and next parliament, there will be no big classic left party, just three fairly similar medium-sized parties of 6-8 percent of the vote. Hence, in the new parliament the PvdA will account for roughly one-third of the left vote.

The victim of Fortuyn?

There is no doubt that the rise of Fortuyn shifted Dutch politics to the right. Although this rise was itself enabled by (the mainstream responses to) the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which shifted the political agenda from socio-economic to socio-cultural issues, the fact that his List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) entered parliament with 17 percent of the vote in 2002, the biggest victory for a new party in Dutch history, and imploded a year later, meant that “the Fortuyn voter” became the most coveted prize in Dutch politics.

It has become received wisdom that the loss of support for social democratic parties is directly related to the growth in support for radical right parties. In other words, the idea is that social democratic parties have been haemorrhaging voters to right-wing populist parties because of either a too conservative socio-economic programme or a too progressive socio-cultural agenda. Despite the popularity of this theory, including in social democratic circles, it is [wrong](#). It is wrong in Western Europe and it is wrong in the Netherlands.

As research by [Sarah de Lange](#) has shown, the PvdA has lost most of its support to classic left parties like *GroenLinks* and, to a lesser extent, the SP as well as to the socio-culturally progressive D66. The social democrats have lost only modestly to right-wing populists like the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom – PVV) of Geert Wilders and, more recently, *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy – FvD) of Thierry Baudet. In other words, while it is true that the PvdA has lost because of prioritisation of and polarisation over socio-cultural values, it has mostly lost to parties that have a more outspoken *progressive* socio-cultural profile. And, as far as voters have moved from the left bloc to the right bloc, it has been mostly from the PvdA (and *GroenLinks*) to the social liberal D66 – which combines a right-wing socio-economic with a left-wing socio-cultural programme – rather than to the right-wing populist FvD or PVV.

Quo vadis?

Let's be clear, the short-term future does not look good for the Dutch classic left. Despite two decades of some of the most right-wing governments in Dutch history, most inspired if not outright supported by right-wing populists, they have not been able to profit electorally. The last Rutte government was exposed for its harsh austerity policies by the pandemic and for its authoritarianism and nativism by the so-called "[benefits scandal](#)", which ultimately led to the fall of the government. And still, the classic left was not able to profit and will at best stay stable in this week's elections.

On top of that, the classic left is more fragmented than ever, with no dominant party in the bloc and significant differences in terms of ideology and electorate. Most notably, the [SP and its voters](#) have a very different profile in terms of socio-demographic variables as well as ideological positions (particularly on socio-cultural issues) than *GroenLinks* and the PvdA. This is one of the main reasons why the decades-old discussion about a united left bloc, let alone one left party, is going nowhere – and *GroenLinks*' leader Jesse Klaver's [election stunt](#), in which he tried to publicly shame the other progressive parties (including D66) into a "progressive alliance" (seemingly under his leadership), have only made things worse.

As long as socio-cultural issues continue to dominate Dutch politics, the classic left parties will face fierce competition from a broad range of parties that do not have their origins in socialism but do share a (partly) progressive agenda. This includes the social liberal parties D66 and the new *Volt*, the *Partij voor de Dieren* (Party for the Animals – PvdD), and *DENK* (THINK), which was founded by former PvdA MPs with a migrant background, as well as *Bij1* (Together), founded by ex-DENK member Sylvana Simons.

The only way to truly revive the power of the classic Dutch left is to refocus the political agenda on socio-economic issues like education, health care, housing, and the welfare state. Polls show that the Dutch population wants [more left-wing policies](#) and there is [broad support](#) for the left-wing socio-economic policies proposed by classic left parties. However, changing the political agenda can only be achieved through fundamental changes that are not all within the direct control of the left.

Most notably, it requires a sea change in the [Dutch media](#), which almost twenty years after Fortuyn is still overcompensating for missing his rise and has consistently framed Dutch elections as a race between right-wing politicians (Rutte-Wilders, Rutte-Baudet, Rutte-Hoekstra). Still, more than anything, it requires much bolder and clearer left-wing programmes as well as more aggressive election campaigns and political opposition by the classic left parties, in part to distinguish themselves from the other parties, including right-wing parties, which have all rediscovered "the strong state" in the wake of the pandemic.

**I want to thank Sarah de Lange for comments on an earlier version. Opinions and mistakes are only mine.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Partij van de Arbeid \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)
