

Netherlands election preview: Will Geert Wilders follow Trump and win power?

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12/12/2016

The Netherlands will hold its next general election on 15 March 2017. As [Tjitske Akkerman](#) outlines, there has been speculation that Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) could emerge as the largest party, with the PVV currently leading in opinion polls. Nevertheless, Wilders' status as a political outsider is likely to make it extremely difficult for the PVV to gain power as even at the top end of polling predictions it would remain a long way from a majority of seats.



Geert Wilders' chances to win the upcoming Dutch national election are looking good at the moment. His Party for Freedom (PVV) is [heading the polls](#) again, with a potential 'Trump effect' and a court case turning around what had been a downward trend in support until recently. Of course, the election, scheduled for 15 March, is still several months away and this picture could change significantly before then.

Leaders of radical right-wing populist parties were quick to hold up the victory of Donald Trump as the forerunner of their own impending triumphs in national elections scheduled for the Netherlands, France and Germany during 2017. Geert Wilders will be the first to be put to the test, and Trump's election indirectly provides a chance for the PVV to capitalise on shifting sentiments. Wilders is likely to profit if there is widespread belief that radical right-wing populism is a compelling undercurrent and that the PVV is therefore an inevitable winner when placed in this wider context. This narrative is not only propagated by Wilders himself, but is also widespread in the media. A resulting bandwagon effect may help the PVV to win the election.

The PVV is winning a tight race in the polls against the conservative-liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) at the moment. Although it is probably doubtful that this increased support for the PVV is an after effect of the American presidential election, newspapers have nevertheless tended to make this case, as illustrated by at least one [controversial source](#).

But the Dutch media have also been influenced by the victory of Trump in another sense. Journalists have speculated that the media generally shows as little sympathy toward dissatisfied Dutch voters as their colleagues in the American media displayed toward Trump supporters. The head of the main public broadcaster (NPO) recently suggested that higher educated, cosmopolitan men and women dominate newsrooms and talk-shows, while the people on the street are being neglected. This self-castigation of the media as a vehicle for elitism has been a recurring theme since the stunning electoral success of the Pim Fortuyn List in 2002. If this is again the main lesson that the media will take to heart from recent events, then the PVV – as the party that claims to represent the people on the street – will surely profit.

On 9 December, Wilders was found guilty at a trial over a statement he made in March 2014 when he asked his audience whether they wanted '*minder, minder Marokkanen*' (fewer, fewer Moroccans). The trial took place against the backdrop of the electoral campaign and, as had been anticipated, Wilders made good use of the entailing publicity. The polls show a positive trend after his public defence at the end of the trial on 23 November. An earlier trial in 2011 also resulted in increased electoral support. Moreover, the example of an American president-elect calling Mexicans 'rapists and criminals' has increased the credibility of Wilders' self-styled image as a whistle-blower and victim to an elite that conspires to silence him.

Wilders has a good chance to dominate the campaign in other respects as well. He will try to make the election a horserace between himself and Mark Rutte, the leader of the VVD. The polls during the past year have consistently indicated a close contest between the two parties and the media have tended to frame their coverage around this

scenario. The Dutch public broadcaster NPO has already planned a final debate between Wilders and Rutte, even though under normal circumstances four parties or more take part in the main election debates on television. Presenting the campaign as a race between two parties will be profitable for both the PVV and the VVD, as it encourages strategic voting at the cost of other parties.

Not all is so rosy for the PVV, however. One major disadvantage Wilders must deal with is his political isolation. Gaining national office in the Netherlands is now more than ever dependent on a multiparty coalition in what is an increasingly fragmented party system. A majority in the Senate, for instance, will require a combination of more than three parties. Wilders, however, has committed himself firmly to the role of outsider. In 2010, when the PVV gained national office as a formal support party of the first cabinet led by Rutte, Wilders was still willing to make important concessions on his socioeconomic programme. But since Wilders broke up the coalition in 2012, he has chosen political isolation rather than cooperation.

His election programme for 2017 is a further step away from the mainstream parties, with proposals that conflict with international law and the Dutch constitution. The PVV will no longer grant asylum to anyone, is promising to close the borders for immigrants from Muslim countries, and intends to close all mosques as well as ban Islamic schools and the Koran. Wilders claims that other parties will turn around to him once he has the power of a majority position, but only the VVD has left the door even slightly open for a coalition with the PVV.

This isolation will be a serious hurdle as Wilders tries to secure executive power. Stunning election results happen, as the victory of Trump has demonstrated, but the PVV is a well-established party that has already explored the limits of its electorate in the past. At the height of the refugee crisis at the end of 2015 and at the beginning of this year, the PVV scored higher than ever in the polls, with a predicted share of 35 seats. Yet even if the PVV manages to increase its support from this level in the upcoming elections, the party is still far from a majority of 76 seats. It would perhaps be surprising enough that a politician lacking coalition potential has a chance to win an election in the Netherlands' fragmented multiparty system.

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About the author

Tjitske Akkerman – *University of Amsterdam*

Tjitske Akkerman is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

