

University of Groningen

The Netherlands

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Published in:
European Journal of Political Research

DOI:
[10.1111/2047-8852.12261](https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-8852.12261)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Otjes, S., & Voerman, G. (2019). The Netherlands: political developments and data in 2018. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(1), 198-204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-8852.12261>

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The Netherlands: Political developments and data in 2018

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Introduction

The year 2018 was the first full year of the Cabinet Rutte-III. The centre-right coalition of the Liberal Party/*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), Christian-Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA), Democrats 66/*Democraten 66* (D66) and ChristianUnion/*ChristenUnie* (CU) faced several upsets: the departure of its minister of foreign affairs, a referendum rejecting one of its bills and growing dissatisfaction with its tax policies.

Election report

On 21 March, a referendum was held on the Dutch Intelligence and Security Services Act. It was an advisory referendum held at citizens' initiative. The referendum was held under the referendum bill that the *Tweede Kamer* at that point already had voted to abolish (see Institutional changes below). The Act was an update of the existing law for the internet age. The key issue in the new bill was the extension of government surveillance powers, in particular whether the General Intelligence and Security Service would be allowed to collect data on the internet activity of Dutch residents in an untargeted fashion. The petition to hold the referendum was organized by a group of students without ties to political parties or civil society organizations (Otjes & Voerman 2018). The campaign was relatively modest. The coalition parties were in favour of the bill, as were the Labour Party/*Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA), the Political Reformed Party/*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP), the Freedom Party/*Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) and 50PLUS/*50PLUS*. These parties did not actively campaign in favour. D66 had switched positions on the bill: when it was voted on during the Rutte-II Cabinet, it had opposed the bill, but in the coalition agreement it accepted the legislation. The GreenLeft/*GroenLinks* (GL), the Socialist Party/*Socialistische Partij* (SP), the Party for the Animals/*Partij voor de Dieren* (PvdD) and the Forum for Democracy/*Forum voor Democratie* (FvD) campaigned against it.

A majority of eligible voters turned out (Table 1). The fact that the referendum coincided with municipal elections in most of the country helped to achieve this. A majority of the voters did not vote in favour of the bill. In reaction to the vote, the Cabinet announced changes to the bill, including requiring more specific justification to allow for 'untargeted' surveillance of citizens.

Table 1. Results of the referendum on the Dutch Intelligence and Security Services Act

Date of referendum	21 March 2018			
Electorate	13,064,932			
Total votes cast	6,734,225	Votes cast as share of electorate	51.5%	
Total valid votes		Valid votes as share of votes cast	99.6%	
Referendum question	Valid answers	N	%	Outcome
Are you in favour or against the law to approve Dutch Intelligence and Security Services Act?/ <i>Bent u voor of tegen de Wet op de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten 2017?</i>	In favour	3,122,628	46.5%	Fail, support below 50%
	Against	3,317,496	49.4%	
	Blank	270,288	4.0%	

Source: kiesraad.nl.

Cabinet report

The Cabinet lost its first minister in the spring of 2018: Halbe Zijlstra, the Liberal Minister of Foreign Affairs. In a speech at the 2016 VVD conference, he had claimed that he had attended a meeting in 2006 with Russian President Vladimir Putin. He reported that Putin had said he wanted to reunite ‘Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, the Baltic States. And that Kazakhstan was nice to have’ (Righton 2018). The meeting was cited to bolster his foreign policy experience, when Zijlstra, who been leader of the VVD in the Second Chamber and Junior Education Minister, became Minister of Foreign Affairs. On 12 February, he acknowledged that he had never attended such a meeting and stepped down the next day, the day that Zijlstra had planned to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

On 7 March, Stef Blok, who had been Minister of Housing and the Government Sector in the Cabinet Rutte-II, was appointed as a replacement for Zijlstra. Months after being appointed, Blok came under heavy criticism for statements he made during a closed-door conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June. Blok had said: ‘I do not know an example of a multi-ethnic or multicultural society where the original population still lives [...] and where there is peaceful community’ (*De Volkskrant* 2018). When Surinam was proposed as an example, he called the former Dutch colony ‘a failed state’. Blok apologized for the statements, which he had meant to stir up an internal debate within the ministry.

Political party report

On 9 October, Alexander Pechtold resigned as leader of D66. He had been leader since 2006. In his first election as party leader, D66 received only 2 per cent of the vote. When he stepped down, D66 was six times larger in Parliament and was (back) in government.

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Rutte III in the Netherlands in 2018

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	26 October 2017		Dissolution	Still in office at the end of 2018		
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2018		Until	31 December 2018		
Type of Cabinet	Minimum winning coalition (MWC)						
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2018	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament		
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	% of party	<i>N</i>	%
	Liberal Party/ <i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i> (VVD)	6	37.5%	1	16.7%	33	22.0%
	Christian-Democratic Appeal/ <i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i> (CDA)	4	25.0%	1	25.0%	19	12.7%
	Democrats 66/ <i>Democraten 66</i> (D66)	4	25.0%	3	75.0%	19	12.7%
	Christian Union/ <i>ChristenUnie</i> (CU)	2	12.5%	1	50.0%	5	3.3%
	Totals	16	100%	6	37.5%	76	50.7%
B. Composition of Rutte III Cabinet on 1 January 2018							
Ministerial title			Minister				
See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for the Netherlands (Otjes & Voerman 2018) or http://politicaldatayearbook.com							
C. Changes in composition of Rutte III Cabinet during 2018							
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments			
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Halbe Zijlstra	13 February 2018	Stef Blok	Resigned over lying about him meeting Vladimir Putin. Between 13 February and 7 March, Sigrid Kaag, Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, served as interim Minister of Foreign Affairs			
D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2018							
Same as on 1 January							

Table 3. Party and gender composition of the lower house of Parliament (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) in the Netherlands in 2018

Party	1 January 2018				31 December 2018			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	33	22.0%	10	30.3%	33	22.0%	9	27.3%
Freedom Party/ <i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> (PVV)	20	13.3%	6	30.0%	20	13.3%	5	25.0%
Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA)	19	12.7%	6	31.6%	19	12.7%	6	31.6%
Democrats 66 (D66)	19	12.7%	6	31.6%	19	12.7%	6	31.6%
GreenLeft/ <i>GroenLinks</i> (GL)	14	9.3%	8	57.1%	14	9.3%	7	50.0%
Socialist Party/ <i>Socialistische Partij</i> (SP)	14	9.3%	5	35.7%	14	9.3%	4	28.6%
Labour Party/ <i>Partij van de Arbeid</i> (PvdA)	9	6.0%	5	55.6%	9	6.0%	4	44.4%
ChristianUnion (CU)	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%
Party for the Animals/ <i>Partij voor de Dieren</i> (PvdD)	5	3.3%	3	60.0%	5	3.3%	3	60.0%
50PLUS/ <i>50PLUS</i>	4	2.7%	2	50.0%	4	2.7%	1	25.0%
Political Reformed Party/ <i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i> (SGP)	3	2.0%	0	0%	3	2.0%	0	0%
Denk ^a	3	2.0%	0	0%	3	2.0%	0	0%
Forum for Democracy/ <i>Forum voor Democratie</i> (FvD)	2	1.3%	0	0%	2	1.3%	0	0%
Totals	150	100%	53	35.3%	150	100%	47	31.3%

Note: ^aDenk means 'Think' in Dutch and 'Equal' in Turkish.

Source: Tweede Kamer 2018.

Table 4. Party and gender composition of the upper house of Parliament (*Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal*) in the Netherlands in 2018^b

Party	1 January 2018				31 December 2018			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Liberal Party (VVD)	13	17.3%	6	46.2%	13	17.3%	6	46.2%
Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA)	12	16.0%	5	41.7%	12	16.0%	5	41.7%
Democrats 66 (D66)	10	13.3%	3	30.0%	10	13.3%	4	40.0%
Party for Freedom (PVV)	9	12.0%	1	11.1%	9	12.0%	1	11.1%
Socialist Party (SP)	9	12.0%	3	33.3%	9	12.0%	3	33.3%
Labour Party (PvdA)	8	10.7%	5	62.5%	8	10.7%	4	50.0%
GreenLeft (GL)	4	5.3%	2	50.0%	4	5.3%	1	25.0%
ChristianUnion (CU)	3	4.0%	1	33.3%	3	4.0%	1	33.3%
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	2	2.7%	1	50.0%	2	2.7%	1	50.0%
Political Reformed Party (SGP)	2	2.7%	0	0%	2	2.7%	0	0%
50PLUS	2	2.7%	1	0%	2	2.7%	1	50.0%
Independent Senate Parliamentary Party/ <i>Onafhankelijke Senaatsfractie</i>	1	1.3%	0	0%	1	1.3%	0	0%
Totals	75	100%	28	37.3%	75	100%	27	36.0%

Note: ^aMembers of the upper chamber are elected by the members of the 12 provincial councils (*Provinciale Staten*) every four years in proportion to their population size.

Table 5. Changes in political parties in the Netherlands in 2018

A. Party institutional changes in 2018
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B. Party leadership changes in 2018
Democrats 66 (D66) Parliamentary leader Alexander Pechtold (1965, male, D66) stepped down on 9 October. He was replaced by Rob Jetten (1987, male, D66). Pechtold had led the party since 2006

Pechtold was replaced as chair of the parliamentary group by the 31-year-old Rob Jetten.

Institutional change report

A large number of institutional changes to the Dutch political system were considered, implemented and retracted in 2018. On 1 February, an evaluation committee presented its report about party finance law. It advised the government to amend the law, among other changes to allow for public financing of independent local parties and to ban foreign gifts to parties. On 10 June, the Senate voted to abolish the citizen initiated advisory corrective referendum. Two referendums held been held under the bill: the 2018 referendum on the Dutch Intelligence and Security Services Act and the 2016 referendum on the European Union–Ukraine Advisory Agreement. The government coalition had agreed on abolishing the bill, despite the fact that D66 had been one of the three parties to introduce the measure.

On 20 November, the First Chamber voted to remove the procedure of appointment of mayors and king's commissioners from the constitution. Currently the government formally appoints individuals to these positions; in practice, the government follows the advice of a committee of the municipal council or states provincial. Jetten, the new leader of D66 (see Political party report above) undertook this last step in the revision of the constitution. This would allow a parliamentary majority to decide on a new procedure, which may include a direct or indirect election of the mayor and king's commissioner. In November, Sander Dekker, Liberal Minister for Legal Protection, announced a bill that would bar judges from serving as MPs.

On 13 December, the state committee on the parliamentary system led by former VVD Minister of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations, Johan Remkes, presented an encompassing advisory report on the Dutch political system. It included a large number of proposals, including the introduction of a binding referendum, ironically in the same year that Parliament abolished the advisory corrective referendum. It also proposed to allow voters to elect the *formateur* of a new government directly. The committee was instituted to consider the powers of the Senate in particular: it advised giving the First Chamber the opportunity to send legislation back to the Second Chamber for revision instead of rejecting it outright. It also proposed the creation of a constitutional court with the power of judicial review. The committee also considered changed to the election law, which would give greater weight to preference votes. Finally, it proposed an upper limit to

individual donations to political parties. A response for the government was anticipated in early 2019.

Issues in national politics

During most of the year, the government's plan to abolish the dividend tax was top of the agenda. The proposal was part of the tax reform plan that the new coalition had agreed on in 2017. The plan was favoured by the VVD and backed by the CDA. For D66 and the CU, the corporate tax cut had been something they had had to accept as part of the package deal of the coalition agreement. A CU MP, Eppo Bruins, had characterized the tax cut as a 'melon' his party had to swallow whole during the negotiations (*Trouw* 2018).

An important issue for Parliament was the lack of evidence for abolishing the tax. During the first parliamentary debates about the tax cut in 2017, Prime Minister Mark Rutte had argued that he felt deeply that keeping the tax would be bad for the business climate of the Netherlands, but that he had no evidence for it. He had denied knowing about memos from the coalition negotiations outlining the evidence in favour of abolishing the tax. On 24 April, a public information request revealed that the then Junior Minister of Finance, Eric Wiebes, had written such a memo. The memo pointed to the benefit of abolishing the tax for the business climate and that it would make it more attractive for multinational companies to locate their headquarters in the Netherlands, which Unilever in particular was considering. In September, it became clear that abolishing the tax would not just cost €1.4 billion but €1.9 billion, something the coalition planned to pay for by raising taxes that affect small and medium-sized businesses. On 5 October, Unilever announced that it would not relocate its headquarters to Rotterdam. At that point, the support for the tax cut crumbled. The coalition agreed to replace the proposal for the dividend tax cut with a new package of cuts to business taxes.

Another theme in the headlines was energy transition. On 10 October, the Court of Appeal denied the government's appeal on the 'Urgenda case', where the civil society organization Urgenda had asked a judge to force the government to keep to its own goals for CO₂ reduction. The government announced it would appeal this decision at the Supreme Court, while also taking measures to limit CO₂ emissions. On 20 December, the Second Chamber voted in favour of a Climate Bill. This law would commit the Netherlands to specific climate targets. The bill was a private member bill, which was signed by MPs from seven parties, including three chairs of parliamentary parties. The bill represents a broad cooperation between the coalition (all four coalition parties signed on) and the left-wing opposition parties. On 21 December, the Climate Council, a broad coalition of interest groups, was asked by the government to come up with proposals to lower CO₂ emissions presented its agreement. The largest trade union confederation, the Federation Dutch Trade Union Movement/*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging* (FNV), and major environmental organizations, including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth/*Milieudefensie* did not sign the agreement, however.

On 1 November, Thom de Graaf was appointed vice-president of the Council of State. This is the most important advisory position of the government. De Graaf was the first D66 member to be appointed to the position.

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