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The Netherlands

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Table 1. Elections for the Tweede Kamer (lower chamber)

Date of elections:	12 September 2012			
Total number of seats:	150			
Electorate:	12,689,810			
Total votes cast:	9,462,223 (74.6%)			
Total valid votes:	9,424,235 (99.6%)			
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Percentage change since 2010	Number and percentage of seats	Number and percentage change since 2010
<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i> – Liberal Party (VVD)	2,504,948 (26.6)	6.1	41 (27.3)	+10 (+6.7)
<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i> – Labour Party (PvdA)	2,340,750 (24.8)	5.2	38 (25.3)	+8 (+5.3)
<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> – Freedom Party (PVV)	950,263 (10.1)	–5.4	15 (10)	–9 (–6.0)
<i>Socialistische Partij</i> – Socialist Party (SP)	909,853 (9.7)	–0.1	15 (10)	0 (0.0)
<i>Christen Democratisch Appèl</i> – Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	801,620 (8.5)	–5.1	13 (8.7)	–8 (–5.3)
<i>Democraten 66</i> – Democrats 66 (D66)	757,091 (8.0)	1.0	12 (8.0)	+2 (+1.3)
<i>ChristenUnie</i> – Christian Union	294,586 (3.1)	–0.1	5 (3.3)	0 (0.0)
<i>GroenLinks</i> – Green Left	219,896 (2.3)	–4.4	4 (2.7)	–6 (–4.0)
<i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i> – Political Reformed Party (SGP)	196,780 (2.1)	0.4	3 (2.0)	+1 (+0.7)
<i>Partij voor de Dieren</i> – Party for the Animals (PvdD)	182,162 (1.9)	0.6	2 (1.3)	0 (0.0)
<i>50Plus</i> – 50Plus	177,631 (1.9)	1.9	2 (1.3)	+2 (+1.3)
Others	88,655 (0.9)	–	0 (0)	–

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Rutte I

For the composition of Rutte I, see Voerman & Lucardie (2011: 1071, 2012: 216) .

Changes in 2012:

There were no changes in the composition of the Rutte I Government between 1 January 2012 and its conclusion on 5 November 2012

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Rutte II

A. The party composition of Rutte II:

Date of investiture: 5 November 2012¹

Party	Number and percentage of cabinet posts	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats
<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – Liberal Party (VVD)</i>	41 (27.3)	10 (50.0)
<i>Partij van de Arbeid – Labour Party (PvdA)</i>	38 (25.3)	10 (50.0)

B. Cabinet members of Rutte II:

Prime Minister, Minister of General Affairs/*Minister-President, Minister van Algemene Zaken*: Mark Rutte (1967 male, VVD)

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Social Affairs and Employment/*Vice-Minister-President, Minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*: Lodewijk Asscher (1974 male, PvdA)

Minister of Foreign Affairs/*Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken*: Frans Timmermans (1961 male, PvdA)
Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation/*Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking*: Lilianne Ploumen (1962 female, PvdA)

Minister of Security and Justice/*Minister van Veiligheid en Justitie*: Ivo Opstelten (1944 male, VVD)

Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations/*Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties*: Ronald Plasterk (1957 male, PvdA)

Minister for Housing and the Central Government Sector/*Minister voor Wonen en Rijksdienst*: Stef Blok (1964 male, VVD)

Minister of Education, Culture and Science/*Minister van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*: Jet Bussemaker (1961 female, PvdA)

Minister of Finance/*Minister van Financiën*: Jeroen Dijsselbloem (1966 male, PvdA)

Minister of Defence/*Minister van Defensie*: Jeannine Hennis-Plasschaert (1973 female, VVD)

Minister of Infrastructure and the Environment/*Minister van Infrastructuur en Milieu*: Melanie Schultz van Haegen (1970 female, VVD)

Minister of Economic Affairs/*Minister van Economische Zaken*: Henk Kamp (1952 male, VVD)

Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport/*Minister van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport*: Edith Schippers (1964 female, VVD)

Notes: ¹ There is no parliamentary investiture vote. The cabinet is installed by the Queen.

Party finance law

In April, the lower chamber of the parliament accepted a revised version of the party finance law. After a critical report of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) of

the Council of Europe in 2010, the government proposed to sanction parties for not following the party finance law – so far there had been no sanctions. The new legislation includes more transparency requirements about donations and a fine (with a maximum of €25,000) if parties do not meet those conditions. The parliamentary spokesperson of the Freedom Party (Party voor de Vrijheid, PVV) announced that his party would rather accept the fine than publish a list of its donors. Because of the formation of the new cabinet, the discussion in the upper chamber was postponed until 2013.

Cabinet crisis

Early in 2012, economic forecasts made clear that the Dutch budget deficit for 2013 would exceed 3 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) – the maximum mandated by the European Stability and Growth Pact. This led to budget talks between the parties that formed the minority cabinet, the Liberal Party (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) and the Christian Democrats (Christen Democratisch Appèl, CDA), and their parliamentary support party, the right-wing populist Freedom Party (Party voor de Vrijheid, PVV). The size of the expected budget cuts required a re-negotiation of major points of the agreement between the three parties. The negotiations started on 5 March. Before the talks began it was clear that it would be difficult to reach an agreement because of widely varied views regarding social-economic policies – the government parties, VVD and the CDA were committed to a budget that would meet European requirements, while the PVV opposed further cuts to welfare state benefits.

On 20 March, Hero Brinkman left the PVV parliamentary group. The reason was a website the PVV had launched where citizens could register complaints about Central and Eastern European immigrants. Brinkman felt that this initiative unduly treated benevolent migrants as criminals. Because of the breakaway of Brinkman, the CDA, VVD and PVV no longer had a majority in the lower chamber. Brinkman promised, however, to support the cabinet. Moreover, the Political Reformed Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, SGP) – an orthodox Protestant party with two seats in the lower chamber – almost always voted with the coalition, ensuring a continued majority. Neither Brinkman nor the SGP were involved in the budget negotiations, but the SGP's leader was regularly informed unofficially by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD).

By 21 April, the PVV was no longer willing to continue negotiations. Party leader Geert Wilders did not agree with the lack of compensation to pensioners for the effect of the budget cuts. According to him, pensioners should not have to pay the bill for a nonsensical dictate from Brussels. On 23 April, Prime Minister Rutte formally asked the Queen to discharge the cabinet. New elections were scheduled, for the fifth time since 2002.

The government, however, still had to present a new budget to the European Commission by 1 May. In the week after the cabinet fell, Minister of Finance Jan Kees de Jager met with a number of chairs of parliamentary groups to discuss the possibility of an agreement over the 2013 budget. The Christian Union (ChristenUnie) coordinated an initiative in which Democrats 66 (Democraten 66, D66) and Green Left (GroenLinks) were involved. Several meetings were held between these three parties and the government parties, CDA and VVD and/or Minister De Jager. By the end of the week, the five parties had come to a

compromise regarding the outline of a new budget, which consisted of budget cuts and tax increases, including an increase in the value-added tax (VAT) and environmental taxes. The new budget was expected to meet European requirements. On the insistence of Green Left, the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA) was offered the opportunity to join the budget coalition but it refused. At the time this was seen as a strategic error of the newly elected chair of the PvdA parliamentary party Diederik Samsom. Together, the five parties involved had a one-seat majority in the lower chamber.

This so-called ‘five-party agreement’ was unprecedented. The parties involved had quite different ideological colours, but did share a commitment to long-term welfare state reforms. The willingness of opposition parties to co-operate with the cabinet in the national interest was commended by the press. The largest labour union – the Federation Dutch Labour Movement (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, FNV) – opposed the agreement because it diminished social protection and limited the purchasing power of citizens by increasing individual payments for health care and abolishing the tax-exempt status of employer-reimbursed travel expenses. Over the course of May, the parties continued to negotiate on the details of the budget.

Election report

In the run-up to the elections, four of the ten parties represented in the lower chamber appointed a different top candidate than they had in the previous election two years before.

On 20 February, before new elections were scheduled, Labour Party leader Job Cohen resigned. When Cohen took office in spring 2010, the party had high hopes (Lucardie & Voerman 2011). Cohen, however, had been unsuccessful in the 2010 parliamentary election campaign. Instead of becoming prime minister, he became leader of the opposition, but his political style did not fit that role. Discontent grew in the ranks of the Labour parliamentary party group about Cohen’s indecisiveness and poor performance as parliamentary opposition leader. On 20 March, the members of the Labour Party elected Diederik Samsom to succeed Cohen as chair of the parliamentary group and political leader of the PvdA. He got 54 per cent of the vote and he defeated four other MPs. After the cabinet fell, he was appointed top candidate without contestation.

While the Labour Party had held such internal elections since 2002, the CDA organised these for the first time in its history. On 18 May, the chairman of the CDA parliamentary group, Sybrand van Haersma Buma, was elected top candidate for the elections out of six candidates. He was elected with 51 per cent of the vote. Van Haersma Buma was also recognised as party leader, a position that had been vacant for two years, ever since the resignation of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende in June 2010.

On 12 May, Arie Slob, who had been chair of the Christian Union’s parliamentary party since 2011, was elected as the party’s top candidate by the party congress. The leader of the Green Left parliamentary party group, Jolande Sap, was challenged for the first place on the party list by fellow MP Tofik Dibi. The national executive had not anticipated a challenger and only two weeks after Dibi’s candidacy had become public, it decided to organise an election among party members, which Sap won with 85 per cent of the vote.

In May, before the start of the election campaign, the VVD and the Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij, SP) vied for first place in the polls. The two centre parties that traditionally competed for the top spot, PvdA and CDA, were hemorrhaging votes. The media framed the elections in terms of a duel between sitting Prime Minister Rutte, the leader of the VVD, and his challenger, Emile Roemer, the leader of the SP.

Major issues among voters were health care, the economy and social security. In their election manifestos, most parties proposed cuts in government expenditure in order to decrease the budget deficit. The VVD proposed the largest cuts (€22 billion), and the PVV the smallest cuts (€11 billion). The 'five-party agreement' was debated vividly. During the campaign many of the participating parties withdrew their support for parts of the agreement. Four of the five parties that signed the budget agreement, for instance, announced during the campaign their intention to overturn (at least partially) the proposed increase in the tax on the employer-reimbursed travel expenses after the election.

One issue that was discussed intensively during the campaign was health care – one of the largest chapters of the Dutch national budget. Many parties proposed cuts and reforms. The debate on this issue illustrates that party positions on socioeconomic issues did not just follow left/right lines but that the PVVi, took a conservative, anti-reformist position. An important topic was whether to continue to pay for health care collectively or increase individual payments to control costs. The VVD wanted to increase the personal health care payments that individuals have to make before the insurance policy kicks in. Moreover, the Liberals favoured limiting the government-mandated insurance policy. CDA, D66 and SGP mostly agreed with the VVD, although they wanted to compensate people with a smaller income or with chronic diseases for these cutbacks. The Christian Union favoured a limited mandatory insurance policy, but also favoured an income-dependent payment. The Labour Party, the Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren, PvdD) and Green Left went even further; in addition to supporting an income-dependent payment they also wanted an income-dependent health care insurance premium. The SP also supported such a premium, but wanted to minimise personal payments. The PVV, finally, opposed these changes and sought to reduce costs by reducing bureaucracy.

Despite a lack of public interest in Europe, the issue was debated during the campaign (Van Kessel & Hollander 2012). The PVV was the only party to campaign on this issue. Hoping to capitalise on unease about the European bail-out of Greece, they sought to make the elections a referendum on the European Union. The PVV wanted the Netherlands to leave the EU and the euro. All other parties favoured continued membership of both. Most voters did not support the Netherlands exiting the EU or the eurozone either.

In the first televised debate in which Roemer and Rutte participated, on 26 August, Roemer asked Rutte about his plans to raise the personal healthcare payment. Rutte flatly denied that his party had any such intentions, which left Roemer bewildered. In the ensuing debate on 30 August, Samsom attacked Rutte for distorting the truth a second time, saying 'there you go again'. During the debates, Samsom emphasised honesty by stating that in a country of coalition governments no party can guarantee that any one of its proposals would be implemented.

The performance of Samsom in the debates gave the PvdA momentum. Between 22 August and 11 September, support for the Labour Party went from 11–13 per cent to 22–24 per cent in the poll of polls carried out by Leiden University and the Dutch Broadcasting

Foundation. Meanwhile the SP fell from 21–23 per cent to 12–14 per cent. The duel over who would become prime minister shifted from Rutte/Roemer to Rutte/Samsom.

The election campaign strongly focused on facts, transparency and telling the truth. This was, in part, caused by the emphasis Samsom put on honesty, but printed and televised media also regularly featured fact-checking. A common feature of elections since the early 2000s, voting advice applications were used a great deal: the *Stemwijzer* of the civic education centre ProDemos was used 4.9 million times and the *KiesKompas* of the VU University Amsterdam was used 1.3 million times.

As in 2010, during election night the race between VVD and PvdA remained tight until the end. Early in the morning of 13 September it became clear that the Liberal Party had maintained its position as the largest party and got 41 seats (see Table 1) – an all-time high. Throughout the campaign the Liberals had positioned themselves as the centre-right government party and Rutte as the prime minister asking the voters for a second term. The PvdA made an impressive comeback: the Labour Party got almost twice as many seats in the elections as polls had suggested a month before the elections were held. In the debates, Samsom positioned himself as the leader of the left: reasonable, responsible and honest. The PvdA also benefited from not signing the ‘five-party agreement’ and could claim to bear no responsibility for controversial measures such as taxing employer-reimbursed travel expenses.

The VVD mainly attracted voters from the PVV and CDA, which were among the losers of the election.¹ The PVV lost nine seats. Wilders’ strategy of using the same extreme positioning on Europe as he had on Islam did not work. The CDA lost eight seats and went down to 13 – an all-time low. While this in part may be explained through strategic voting for the VVD, the decline of the CDA must be understood also in terms of increasing secularism and declining religiosity, which the party had been able to overcome briefly during the 2000s.

The PvdA won votes on the left, especially from SP, Green Left and from voters who had not voted in 2010. The SP had been sky-high in the polls, but ended up with exactly as many seats as it had before the elections. In the debates, Roemer was unable to establish himself as a prospective prime minister, whereas his party had moderated its left-wing populist rhetoric in order to become an acceptable coalition partner. Green Left lost six out of ten seats, mostly to the PvdA. Strategic voting certainly played a role in this, but also the internal conflict over the leadership position of Sap.

D66 won two seats, which was quite a feat considering that its electorate overlaps with both the Labour Party and the Liberals. D66 profited from the decline of the CDA and Green Left. The Christian Union lost a small number of votes and maintained its five seats in parliament. The SGP won enough votes from the Christian Union, the VVD and the CDA to gain a third seat in parliament. The PvdD maintained its two seats.

One new party, 50Plus, obtained two seats in the lower chamber, though it had not participated in most televised debates. The party had already won enough provincial councillors in 2011 to elect a seat in the indirectly elected Senate or upper chamber (Voerman & Lucardie 2012). The party defended the rights of those over the age of 50 against austerity measures. Its voters had a diverse background, including citizens who in previous elections had voted for the PVV, SP and CDA. (The SP and PVV had reneged on their promise not to raise the retirement age).

Cabinet formation

Half a year before the elections, the lower chamber altered its own rules of procedure: instead of the Queen, parliament would appoint the so-called ‘informateur’ and formateur of a new cabinet. The new procedure was put into practice after the elections. The day after the election the leaders of the parliamentary groups represented in parliament met with the incumbent speaker of the lower chamber (who did not stand for re-election to parliament) to talk about the formation. They agreed to appoint a so-called ‘explorer’ who would talk with the party leaders to determine which combination of parties should be discussed first. The incumbent Liberal Minister of Social Affairs, Henk Kamp, was appointed as such. After five days, he sent his report to the lower chamber. He proposed to investigate a coalition of VVD and PvdA and to appoint himself and former Labour leader Wouter Bos as informateurs. While the elections had been a race between both parties, the election result was such that a cabinet combining these two poles appeared the most likely combination. During the 1990s, the two parties had governed for nearly two full and consecutive parliamentary terms together with D66. VVD and PvdA did not have a majority in the upper chamber, however.

On 20 September, a parliamentary majority supported the proposal of Kamp, after which the cabinet negotiations started. The formation lasted 50 days – the shortest formation since 1971. For 43 days the parties negotiated the government agreement. In the first week they came to terms about the budget for 2013, in which the unpopular taxation of travel expenses was deleted. In contrast to earlier negotiations where parties attempted to reach a compromise on each issue, PvdA and VVD divided the major political issues between them and allowed one party to outline policy on ‘their’ issues. Therefore, the government agreement included a relative mix of left-wing and right-wing policies; on the insistence of the Liberals, budgets would continue to meet the European 3 per cent budget deficit requirement. Labour’s plans for income redistribution, such as the proposal to make health care premiums income-dependent, were part of the agreement. On 29 October both parliamentary parties voted in favour of cabinet participation and on 3 November the PvdA party convention did the same.

During the last seven days of the formation, Rutte, as formateur and prospective prime minister (as he led the largest party), met the prospective ministers. Both parties got an equal number of cabinet members, but the VVD had a majority in the Council of Ministers (see Table 2). The Queen installed the second Rutte cabinet on 5 November. In another first, the installation of new ministers was televised.

After the government’s installation, the composition and the proposals came under debate. A few days after the installation of the new cabinet the government agreement was already renegotiated. Prominent VVD members and *De Telegraaf*, the largest Dutch newspaper, with a right-wing orientation, criticised the income-dependent health care premium. After this proposal was made public, support for the VVD dropped sharply. In return for withdrawing this plan, the PvdA was granted a number of new proposals, including a more progressive tax code.

Barely one month after the installation of the cabinet, one of its members had to resign. On 6 December, Co Verdaas, the Labour junior minister for Economic Affairs, stepped down. His position had become untenable because as a member of the provincial executive

(the function he held before he became junior minister) he had billed the provincial government for incorrectly administered travel expenses.

Note

1. All discussions of vote movements in this section are based on Synovate (2012).

Sources and further information

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