

HANS KEMAN

## National focus on Dutch politics 2025

*The disappointing electoral performance of the social democrat/Green GL-PvdA party merger needs to be reviewed in relation to the changing party system dynamics in the Netherlands. The majority of their voters is moving to the centre and right and away from GL-PvdA. Despite a solid campaign and a suitable policy programme confronting a failed far-right government, the party lost five seats. Conversely, the 'centrist' D66 and CDA gained 30 seats altogether in a situation where trust in politics fell to a record low. The campaigning style and policy programme appeared insufficiently attractive to voters. Furthermore, the changing followership of GL-PvdA tends to represent higher-educated professionals instead of blue-collar workers. A gap between political promises and societal performance is growing, as expressed by a loss of trust driving electoral volatility. GL-PvdA should choose to regain a broader following by developing a programme to target wider representation. This requires vertical and horizontal integration of the new party to organise a solid constituency.*

The recent results of Dutch parliamentary elections have been disappointing for the GreenLeft/Labour Party (GL-PvdA), and not expected. In opinion polls, the party hovered consistently around 24-26 seats. Yet, the result turned out to be only 20 seats. This signified that the combination did not enhance its position, despite its progressive-leftish profile and a campaign that continually and severely blamed parties in government for their misconduct during the past 11 months of incompetent governance.

In fact, this outcome demonstrates that the *median* voter appears to have moved incrementally towards a centre-right (or conservative) position within the Dutch party system. It signifies that the new party's constituency is shrinking below the vote share of the populist parties. Table 1 shows that the parties in the centre of the Dutch party system have regained their vote share compared to the results in 2023.<sup>1</sup>

1 Huis in 't Veld, T. (2025) "We need to stop apologising for who we are". *The Progressive Post*, 6 November.

Table 1. Parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, 2017-2021.

Year	GreenLeft/ PvdA	Mainstream parties	Populist parties	Voter turnout	Electoral volatility
2017	14.8% (9.1/5.7)	45.9%	14.9%	81.6%	23.3%
Seats	23	71	22		
2021	10.9 (5.7/5.2)	46.5	15.8	78.7	18.1
Seats	17	73	25		
2023	15.8	24.8	25.8	77.8	35.7
Seats	25	38	41		
2025	12.8	42.9	27.1	78.4	27.6
Seats	20	66	42		
Average	13.6	40.0	24.8	79.1	26.2

Explanation: Mainstream parties: CDA (Christian democrats), D66 ('centrist' liberals), VVD (right-wing liberals); populist parties: PVV, FvD, JA21; voter turnout: participation of the total electorate; electoral volatility: percentage of voters switching party since the election before (e.g., on average, 26.4%, i.e., 1 in 4 voters has switched party).

Source: Kiesraad.

What do these outcomes imply for the left in the Netherlands? Is there still a future for left-wing-cum-progressive politics? To answer such questions, one needs to investigate the electoral campaign and explore the fundamental factors to understand the role and position of GL-PvdA. The first focus needs to be on the blatant mismanagement of the previous right-wing government. Secondly, the campaign conducted will be discussed. The remainder is devoted to the underlying factors concerning the 'road' chosen by GL-PvdA.

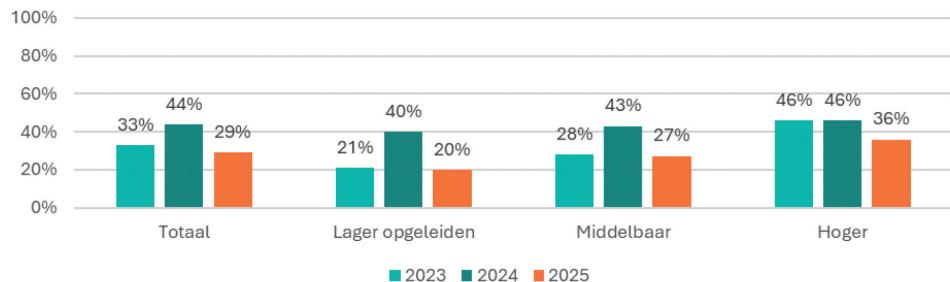
## A fresh government and trust in politics

In the 2023 election, the radical right-wing PVV became the largest party in parliament, and two new parties, the centre-right New Social Contract (NSC) and the Farmers Movement (BBB) gained, respectively, 20 and seven seats in the Second Chamber of the parliament. Together with the conservative-liberal VVD and the populist PVV, these parties formed a majority coalition, proudly promising a fresh start and, above all, the development of the "severest policy on asylum & immigration ever". Apart from the VVD, none of these parties had ever participated in a coalition government, nor did the government include persons with political experience to direct a ministry. In addition, the coalition was led by a bureaucrat as prime minister (PM) without any party affiliation.

This government was short-lived (11 months) and characterised by sheer incompetence to govern, causing a policy standstill on most issues considered to be crucial by the population (like the provision of healthcare, building houses, reforming the agricultural sector and climate issues). The first party to leave was the populist PVV, followed soon afterwards by NSC, leaving the Dutch public with a minority government with clipped wings. Not

surprisingly, trust in politics dwindled to a level never seen before: opinion polls found that no more than around 25% of the population trusted politicians, parliamentary politics and national governance. Figure 1 demonstrates this downward development of ‘political trust’, specifying the level of education.

Figure 1. Political trust in government (2023-2025).



Explanation: *Totaal* = the total number of people surveyed; *Lager opgeleiden* = lower level of education (often technical); *Middelbaar* = medium level (professional); *Hoger* = higher educated (tertiary level).

Source: Ipsos – *Prinsjesdagonderzoek 2025: politiek vertrouwen daalt naar niveau van voor kabinet-Schoof* (Opinion Research September 2025: Official opening of the parliamentary year by the King).

Under these circumstances, one could expect that any party in opposition would have a ‘field day’ in campaigning under such conditions. And indeed, two parties – D66 and CDA – did (together they gained 30 seats in the Second Chamber). The former became the largest party (for the first time ever), and the Christian Democrats recovered from their loss in 2023. However, GL-PvdA lost five seats, and all other smaller progressive parties – left, Green or progressive – lost too. But why?

## Campaigning for change and against populism

Various explanations regarding the GL-PvdA campaign circulate and some of these are valid. Yet, most of them are ‘short-term’ explanations, ignoring the underlying factors that impact social democracy in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Among these instant explanations are the campaign itself, the role of the party leader (former EU Commissioner Frans Timmermans), insufficiently tackling populism and blaming mismanagement by the government inadequately. These criticisms are to some extent true, but the party’s manifesto and its financial basis were intrinsically sound<sup>3</sup> and safe on ‘welfare statism’; yet, the message was, apparently, not convincing.

2 See: Keman, H. (2022) “The continued decline of Dutch social democracy”, in G. Menz (ed.) *The Resistible Corrosion of Europe’s Center-Left after 2008* (London: Routledge), pp. 148-169.

3 In the Netherlands, most (relevant) parties have their policy programme verified by the Central Bureau of Statistics in terms of its fiscal soundness and potential effects on purchase power parity, economic growth and living conditions. In addition, there are several websites where voters can check their preferences with regard to party programmes. This latter option is used by many, particularly ‘floating’ voters.

Other parties in opposition conducted more or less similar campaigns. The mainstream parties also all excluded PVV from future coalitions. Yet, their campaigns showed (in retrospect) one difference: they represented a younger generation using hopeful language ('Yes, we can') and stressed 'new' politics aimed at a responsible and stable form of centrist governance. They have been more convincing to different publics. Yet, one difference ought to be noted. Both the conservative VVD and the populist PVV demonised Timmermans and accused GL-PvdA, through social media and in debates, of being 'radical': unreliable and unfit to govern in a coalition. This mode of polarised campaigning had an effect on the popularity of GL-PvdA and its leader, who was presented as the next PM by the party.

Altogether, in the 2025 campaign, all mainstream parties denounced governing with Wilders' party and claimed a more centrist attitude to solve urgent problems in a responsive and reliable fashion. In this respect, there was no difference between the mainstream parties: they *all* addressed the diverse electorate in a similar fashion. This development leads to a paradox: considering the high level of electoral volatility (27.6%) and the relatively low degree of issue differences across the mainstream parties, it implies that campaigning meant fishing in the same pond without knowing where to catch which voter. One of the problems with the party combination of GL-PvdA was (and is) establishing a stable constituency across the population.

Secondly, excluding a party from joining the government means the growth of 'strategic voting': selecting the next best option, namely, preventing PVV from remaining the largest party. According to research, it appears that this option has benefitted parties closer to the centre of the left-right and conservative-progressive axes, but not the 'left'.<sup>4</sup> Altogether, GL-PvdA conducted a decent but also traditional electoral campaign, insufficiently convincing to 'catch' floating (undecided) and swing (non-aligned) voters with respect to the populist barrage. Hence, the urgent question for GL-PvdA is how to *re-align* with lost voters and build a *solid* constituency to gain an electoral position in the near future to carry out its policy programme in a *stable* coalition.

## Long-term factors affecting the 'left' in the Netherlands

### 1. Dutch party system dynamics

Since the political earthquake of Pim Fortuyn's assassination in 2002, government formation has slowly shifted from socioeconomic to sociocultural topics: identity (nationalism versus multiculturalism); universalism (climate control and equality); and distributional concerns (globalism and solidarity). However, these progressive themes remain 'abstract' and do not appear to be connected to the daily concerns of 'ordinary people'. An example of an 'abstract' is the 'Green Deal' developed and pursued by the EU under Timmermans'

<sup>4</sup> Keep in mind that among the electoral losers were not only the populist PVV but also the right-wing VVD. The party lost (only) two seats but, at the same time, recorded its worst electoral performance since 1972!

leadership. Another contested issue is the treatment of refugees with respect to the concerns of Dutch citizens like housing, healthcare and welfare subsistence.

Both examples are important for progressive politicians and their followers but seem insufficient to convince many blue- and white-collar workers. On the contrary, it is unclear where GL-PvdA stands. And for *whom* it stands. For all citizens or for specific groups in society? *Who is represented* by the left? There are also other questions to ponder: social democratic parties have emerged over time as a movement uniting the working people to improve their labour and living conditions and to enhance opportunities in society. Its success has been amazing in the past, *why?* The essence of this performance has been the capability to recruit large parts of working people around *material* issues, building coalitions with the ‘centrist’ forces within a party system. Examples include the Scandinavian parties and the postwar Benelux countries up to 2002. Yet, this type of party cooperation and policy concertation in a coalition government has disappeared in recent years in the Netherlands.

Political polarisation and populist politics have changed the Dutch party system dynamics. Instead of cooperation resulting from convergent policy agendas, the apparent trend is mutual *exclusion* and *trench warfare*. The result has been fragmented policy formation based on minimalist compromises. This development creates ‘waterbed’ effects and negatively affects ‘trust’ in politics, parliament and government (see Figure 1). The ‘confidence’ of the average citizen in the management of the ‘state’ to carry out policies is waning. The Rutte IV government and the recent right-wing coalition are sad illustrations of a reduced degree of ‘stateness’.

Altogether, it appears that social democracy is in dire straits, given the evolution of the Dutch party system – especially after 2017. In addition, issue formation has shifted from *common* concerns across parties to issues that are either ‘populist’ driven or ‘universal’ and patronising in the view of the electorate. For example, the ‘immigration’ or ‘climate’ are defined as existential problems for society (Nimby effect), whilst at the same time ‘material’ concerns are higher on citizens’ urgency agenda. Yet, *all* parties address these problems, but due to a fragmented and polarised party system, most parties agree to disagree on *how* to solve them!

## **2. The micro-macro paradox: Representation and stateness**

The fissure between electoral pledges and actual policy performance widened in the public eye in the 21st century. In addition, the gap between politics at the political centre and society at large widened further due to the *micro-macro paradox*: public policies neither meet the expectations nor experiences of all citizens. For a social democratic party, the level of stateness is crucial to deliver, if and when it is in government *and* reducing the paradox.

This is one of the reasons for the dramatic electoral loss in 2017: the macro arguments at the time may have been valid; the micro experiences were, however, ignored for many voters, and gave a reason to switch to another party (as the rate of electoral volatility

indicates; see Table 1). The level of ‘stateness’ correlates with the *effectiveness* of public policies affecting trust in society.<sup>5</sup> The slow decline in electoral support of the PvdA (and GL) in the 21st century, accelerating since 2017, has been below par in representing the ‘material’ concerns of the lower and middle classes: the ‘caring state’ seems to have faded away. This is not only due to the micro-macro paradox but is also affected by demographic factors (age and education) and geographic distribution (rural versus urban) in the electorate. This meant a growing gap between the higher-educated ‘universalists’ (meritocracy) and the traditional core of social democracy: blue- and white-collar workers.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, representation of the traditional social democratic constituency has evaporated and has, to a certain extent, been replaced by the urban, well-educated and higher-salaried professionals. Additionally, the *experienced* level of stateness has disappointed its usual followership. This shift within the social democratic *membership* makes the fusion and eventual merger with the GL doubtful. The questions that cry out for an answer are, therefore, who is represented, and *which* policy agenda can create a solid constituency?

### 3. Choices for social democracy: Searching the constituency

Although, on one hand, the mission of the ‘left’ remained more or less the same (representing blue- and white-collar workers); on the other hand, the middle- and lower-salaried workers, pensioners, and precariat are experiencing a party that does not respond to their day-to-day concerns (like housing, healthcare, work and income). They feel underrepresented and less recognised by the policy agenda of the fused GL-PvdA. Admittedly, it is a complex challenge, considering, for example, the demographic change and fragmented complexion of the labour market nowadays. Nevertheless, a choice of redirection is inevitable for the new party of the left to regain a solid and lasting following.

Electoral research has shown that recently left-leaning common voters have switched their vote to the (radical and moderate) right. This shift urges us to take up ‘hot’ issues like immigration,<sup>7</sup> as well as a clear policy stance regarding sustainable ‘welfare statism’, supported by the *efficient and effective* operation of public services and their performance (stateness). An important asset in this respect is to organise the ‘new’ party *bottom-up*. Remarkably, at the local and provincial levels, GL-PvdA is capable of developing effective and responsive policy coordination with contrasting parties where there is a standstill on the national level. The GL-PvdA parliamentary party needs to support such practices and reinforce ‘grass roots’ politics.

Finally, the *internal* procedures within the party ought to be focused upon. On one hand, there is the matter of leadership and the *horizontal* relationship between the party (board)

5 Møller, J. and S.-E. Skaaning (2011) “Stateness first?” *Democratization*, 1(18): 1-24. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2011.532607

6 Bovens, M. and A. Wille (2017) *Diploma Democracy. The Rise of Political Meritocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

7 It ought to be understood that the political debate on immigration is simplified by discussing refugees/asylum seekers only, whereas their proportion makes up only 10% of the total.

and the parliamentary party. The current process of merging GL and PvdA is characterised by confusion among the leadership, public perception and membership. On the other hand, there is room for improving the *vertical* integration of members and the diverse publics on the decentralised levels of institutional representation. Leadership is, in this context, an important feature of a *party-cum-movement*. Integrating the members and voters is equally important in view of consolidating, if not developing, a broader and loyal constituency.

Altogether it can be concluded that the PvdA (but not only) has underestimated the changing complexion of society: the shift in society to conservatist and culture-driven issues and populist rhetoric, on one hand; and the waning of ‘stateness’, that is, a trusted and effective public authority carrying out public policies, on the other hand. The issue at hand for a resilient social democracy and the left in the Netherlands is, therefore, to make a choice: either develop a broad Green and left following, or realign and integrate its original support from blue- and white-collar workers in society.

## Routes to the future: Dilemmas to ponder

In summary,<sup>8</sup> Dutch social democracy needs to ponder whether or not the future indeed lies *within* a broad progressive movement containing diverse leftish and Greenish publics, or to reinforce its future by means of its original *mission*: the social democratisation of society for the sake of the ‘ordinary people’ by providing solidarity, welfare and a caring state. This programmatic choice regarding left *and* green issues signifies a recalibration of the mission of *both* the GL and social democracy.

The ongoing process of merging the two parties, therefore, requires a careful definition of which publics are to be represented and targeted as its ‘constituency’. Secondly, the chosen direction needs to be implemented in conjunction with a policy agenda that incorporates the various *levels of stateness* in the Netherlands. This requires *both* vertical and horizontal integration of members, followers *and* voters in particular, to build a lasting constituency nationwide that is able to promote its mission effectively.

<sup>8</sup> See also: Keman, H. (2024) “Social democracy in the Netherlands”. Next Left Country Case Studies. FEPS, pp. 81-89.