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## The Dutch Parliamentary elections of September 2012



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### 1. Introduction

On September 12, 2012, Dutch voters trudged to the polls for the fifth time in the still young 21st century in order to elect the 150 members of the Second Chamber of Parliament. The fact that the formal electoral cycle is four years demonstrates that since the meteoric rise of Pim Fortuyn prior to the elections in 2002, electoral calm has not yet returned to the Netherlands. None of the four coalitions of varied composition under the leadership of Jan Peter Balkenende (Christian Democratic Appeal/*Christen Democratisch Appèl*, CDA) during the first decade of the century managed to stay the full course of four years. In 2003, 2006, and 2010, early elections were called.

By emerging as the largest party at the June 2010 elections, the Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD) obtained the initiative in the difficult task of forming a new Cabinet. The party's leader, Mark Rutte, eventually became the first Liberal Minister-President since 1918. However, Rutte was unable to break the pattern set by Balkenende and in the early spring of 2012 his Cabinet fell after only 558 turbulent days in office.

That the first Rutte Cabinet did not manage to complete its full four years hardly came as a surprise. Or maybe the surprise was that it had it had lasted as long as it did. In

2010 the highly volatile Dutch electorate (e.g., Mair, 2008) had produced a political landscape that was so fragmented that piecing together a Cabinet that could count on a majority of the seats in Parliament was extremely complicated. The final result of a trying and frustrating process of exploration, information gathering, negotiation, and formation was unique for the Netherlands (e.g., Van Holsteyn, 2011). The Cabinet consisted of ministers from the VVD and CDA, even though these parties did not hold majority support in the Parliament. The new, unique construction was that, although not a full formal partner, this Cabinet would be 'supported' (or 'tolerated', as a more literal translation from the Dutch word *gedogen*) by the Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders. Thus arose a variation of contract parliamentarism (e.g., Bale and Bergman, 2006), which by its very nature can be termed relatively unstable. Moreover, even with PVV support the three parties could only count on the smallest possible majority (76 of the 150 seats) in the Second Chamber. Making matters worse, there was considerable resistance particularly within the CDA against collaboration with the rightist-populist, strongly anti-Islam PVV.

That the Rutte Cabinet began its tenure in a period of recurring economic and financial problems certainly did not increase its chances of survival. In the end it was the problems arising from the fiscal crisis that proved insurmountable. Beginning in early March 2012 the VVD, CDA,

and PVV initiated negotiations concerning the substantial reduction of the government budget that would be necessary for 2013. These negotiations progressed jerkily and with difficulty – and were aggravated on March 20, 2012 by the departure of PVV MP Hero Brinkman from the PVV, which meant that the coalition had lost its majority – but toward the end of April it appeared that an agreement was in sight. Until on Saturday, April 21, Wilders surprised both his friends and enemies with the news that he could not accept the budget agreement. The fact that the purchasing power of those on government pensions would be reduced and that this according to Wilders was the direct result of pressure from the European Union out of Brussels, was for him unacceptable. Wilders departed from the negotiations and withdrew his ‘support’ for the Cabinet. Thus any illusion of majority support for the Rutte Cabinet had definitely evaporated. “Wilders throws country into crisis” read the headline plastered across the entire page of the largest newspaper in the Netherlands (*De Telegraaf*, April 23, 2012). Such a conclusion was perhaps a bit melodramatic, but it had become certain that new elections would be necessary. After considering whether elections could be held on June 27, 2012 before the summer vacation period, it was decided that a better date would be after vacations on September 12, 2012.

The decision to have the elections after the summer vacations gave political parties some extra preparation time. This is relevant, since the extremely proportional electoral system facilitates participation for many parties, old and new. There is no formal electoral threshold, i.e., the electoral quotient is the total number of valid votes divided by the number of (150) seats in the Second Chamber of Parliament. In absolute numbers this means that the ‘threshold’ lies at approximately 60,000 valid votes for the country as a whole. Since the establishment of new parties is neither difficult nor expensive, time and again new parties are tempted to join the electoral game, and more often than not one or two new parties do succeed in getting represented in Parliament (see [Andeweg and Irwin, 2009](#)). The election of 2012 proved to be no exception to this rule.

## 2. Party leaders, party manifestos, and the election campaign

That the PvdA (Labor Party/*Partij van de Arbeid*), a party together with the VVD and Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP) that initially would rather have held the elections before the summer, agreed to the September date was due mainly to the practical difficulties that new parties in particular had in completing preparations for new elections. However, this did not mean that the established parties were at all prepared and ready. Not only did the parties have to prepare new election manifestos, some had to deal with the question of who would lead the party during the election campaign. For some parties it was evident that the leader from the elections in 2010 would again be pulling the car in 2012; this was the case for Rutte (VVD), Wilders (PVV), Emile Roemer (SP) Alexander Pechtold (Democrats 66/*Democraten 66*, D66), and Marianne Thieme (Party for the Animals/*Partij voor de Dieren*, PvdD). On the other hand, for five of the parties that would

eventually gain seats at the upcoming elections, decisions had to be taken concerning the choice of a leader. The party for older people, 50Plus, was new and had a leader in Henk Krol who also in electoral terms began with a fresh slate.

Among the larger, established parties, both the PvdA and CDA entered the elections with a new leader. During the run-up to the previous elections in 2010 the PvdA had placed its confidence in the former mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, as party leader and potential Minister-President. However, the PvdA failed to enter the Cabinet and Cohen never seemed in his element as a leader of the opposition. On February 2012, he announced his resignation as the party leader, both in the Second Chamber and in general. Between March 7 and 14, the party organized an internal election among its 52,000 members for the parliamentary party (and party leader). Five persons submitted their candidacy. In order to guarantee a wide basis of support a system of the alternative vote was employed, but this proved unnecessary as in the first count Diederik Samsom achieved a majority of 54 per cent of the votes of the 68 per cent turnout among the party membership.

For the CDA, the relatively unknown Sybrand van Haersma Buma assumed the leadership of the parliamentary party in October 2010 when his predecessor Maxime Verhagen became Minister of Economic Affairs. Buma became a candidate for the leadership of the party and first on the list of candidates for the 2012 elections, but was not unopposed. For the first time the CDA had decided to choose the party leadership by a vote of the membership. The CDA thereby joined a broader trend among (Dutch) political parties in providing greater democracy within the party (e.g., [Scarrow, 2000](#); [Voerman, 2006](#)). The CDA procedure provided that if none of the candidates received a majority of the votes in the first round, the top two candidates would participate in a run-off. However, it did not come to that, as Buma achieved 51 per cent of the vote in the first round and thus ended the race. Turnout among the membership was 55 per cent. Buma defeated a surprising new face in the party, Mona Keizer, who had been active in local politics and was a media favorite. Her rather surprising 26 per cent of the vote of the party membership was eventually rewarded with the second place on the list of candidates.

Another party that selected its new leader by a democratic vote was GreenLeft (*GroenLinks*, GL) In December 2010, Jolande Sap had assumed the leadership of the parliamentary party when the popular Femke Halsema retired from politics. It could have been an advantage for the party to unite around the new leader for the elections, but Sap was challenged by fellow MP Tofik Dibi. Despite the opposition of the party executive and the conclusion of the candidate commission that he was not qualified, he persisted in his candidacy. In the vote by 56 per cent of the members, he was soundly rejected as Sap received 84 per cent of the vote. The impression of internal disagreement, sloppy procedures, and lack of party unity within GreenLeft was only strengthened by these developments and dogged the party throughout the campaign. Both of the orthodox protestant parties chose new leaders without direct involvement of the party membership: Arie Slob for the Christian Union (*ChristenUnie*, CU) and Kees van der Staaij for the SGP (Dutch Reformed Party/*Staatkundig*

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