Shifting Dikes: The Dutch Political Transformation Under Geert Wilders

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The political landscape of the Netherlands underwent a drastic change in 2023. After 11 years, the longest-standing prime minister, Mark Rutte, left a power vacuum that would reshape Dutch politics. Geert Wilders, long considered a political outsider, emerged as the winner of the elections held in 2023. But how did this controversial political figure manage to win the elections and become such a popular politician in the country?

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In the early 2000s, Pim Fortuyn rose to prominence as a popular right-wing leader in the Netherlands. He started as the political leader of “Leefbaar Nederland” (LN) but was dismissed after a couple of months due to his

controversial opinions and statements, including the abolishment of the constitutional law on discrimination. According to him, this law restricted freedom of speech. Despite his dismissal, Fortuyn gained a lot of popularity, which led him to found his own political party: “Lijst Pim Fortuyn” (LPF).

He was regarded as an influential figure, who positioned himself as the underdog that challenged the established political elite. Fortuyn developed into a radical right-wing populist contesting mainstream elites and opposing Muslim immigration in the Netherlands, arguing that multiculturalism was a failed experiment. His messages resonated with a large part of the Dutch population, who were let down and frustrated by the established elite due to the failed integration process of the so-called “guest workers” and their children (Ornestein, 2023).

Geert Wilders and the Legacy of Populism

Events took a tragic turn when Fortuyn was murdered on the 6th of May 2002, just two weeks before the elections. The LPF won the elections that year, however, without a leader. LPF’s party members could not agree on how to proceed and this caused the party to collapse.

Geert Wilders was then able to fill Fortuyn’s political vacuum, while distancing himself from the “Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie” (VVD) in 2004. Wilders split from the party that, according to him, had become too politically central and failed to address topics such as integration, migration, and ordinary citizens’ problems (Fennema, 2016). Wilders then proceeded to found his own party, “Partij Voor de Vrijheid” (PVV), the “Freedom Party.”

Although inspired by Fortuyn, Wilders would take a slightly different approach. Rather than focusing solely on the anti-Islam argument, he would fixate on problematizing immigration. Additionally, Wilders deliberately created a one-member system in the party (Fennema, 2016), meaning that the party leader (himself) would be the party’s only member, he argued to prevent internal conflicts.

Partij Voor de Vrijheid’s Popularity

The “Partij Voor de Vrijheid” has been a dominant force in Dutch politics for over two decades. Throughout the years, it has survived multiple political crises, scandals, and lawsuits. Wilders was, for example, sued for his statements advocating for a reduction in the number of Moroccans in the Netherlands. He was ultimately convicted of collectively insulting a group of people, however, the rest of the charges were dismissed. Despite these challenges, the PVV remained a relatively popular party in the Netherlands. While other radical right-wing parties have emerged since the PVV’s establishment, such as the “Forum voor Democratie “(FVD) and “JA21,” none of them seem to have achieved PVV’s popularity.

The organization of the party is distinctly hierarchical, with Wilders exercising almost absolute power and making most of the decisions. This cult of the leader is something that populist radical right parties seem to have often in common. Wilders’ management style, characterized by fear tactics and

authoritarian leadership, has transformed the PVV into what experts describe as a cult-like organization. Wilders dominates as the central figure in the party, and everybody's opinion and actions are subject to his own. This dynamic explains why no other "Partij Voor de Vrijheid" figures have achieved comparable popularity.

Wilders has been receiving death threats since 2004, and therefore requires round-the-clock protection for his safety. Consequently, he has become more and more paranoid presenting himself as a martyr for the Dutch cause. During a trial that took place against him in 2020 due to alleged racist remarks, Wilders defended himself by claiming he had been therefore "suffering for freedom in the Netherlands."

Wilders in the Driver's Seat

The last elections of 2023 shifted the role of the PVV party from vocal opposition to head of a coalition in power. Traditionally, Dutch politics has been marked by the well-known "polder model," a system emphasizing consensus-building. In practice, this model requires extensive compromise and negotiation among coalition partners. While the PVV has supported the cabinet in the past by contributing to a coalition agreement in 2010, experts contend that this time things might develop a little differently. In fact, the PVV had a stunning win during the elections, which put the party in the driver's seat of power.

Despite having an autocratic style in leading the party, during the coalition negotiations, Wilders was forced to refuse the position of prime minister to keep the rest of the coalition in the fold. This decision turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it allowed him to maintain his standing as a populist politician. Geert Wilders managed to become part of the government, and in doing so, is able to oppose any decision or policy whenever he gets a chance, even against his party's interests.

This dichotomy is evident on his social media accounts, where we can see he has been criticizing his own cabinet members. This includes the prime minister, while fiercely defending some of his party's ministers more in line with his ideological views, such as supporting the Minister of Immigration Marjolein Faber's (PVV) decision to implement stricter immigration policies (Leijnse, 2024).

Such behavior has been perceived as a conflict of interest by many, but did not pose a problem to Wilders himself. He seemed to have found a way to take credit for all the merits of this newly elected government while being able to distance himself from any failures, and still give lip service to his supporters. Although he had maintained his non-conformist political views by opposing contemporary Dutch politics, he decided to withdraw the PVV from the coalition government after 11 months in power. The political differences were simply too great among cabinet members.

The Cost of Protest Politics

As in many other instances in European Union member states, voting for the "Partij Voor de Vrijheid" seems to have been a protest vote against

contemporary Dutch politics. Wilders was able to make people feel understood and cared for while at the same time strengthening his party's popularity and reducing the likelihood of conflict. Consequently, he has managed to present the party as one with strong opinions as well as clear and straight responses to current problems in Dutch society.

With the PVV's withdrawal from the government coalition and its close-call defeat in the 2025 elections, two questions remain open: How much influence will Wilders continue to have on his party? Will he still be able to sit in the driver's seat after having delegated power to other people within the party? The Netherlands is already facing the consequences of this populist radical right party's influence, shown by the heavy cuts to its pioneering higher education system and implementation of stricter asylum policies. Whether Wilders' strategy will succeed, and how damaging its consequences will be for a country that has always considered itself a leader in progressive governance remains to be seen.

Note: This contribution stems from a blog post which is part of a series on the rising populist radical right. It has been edited and updated by Robin Stähli.

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Picture: Wikimedia