

A Systemic Meltdown?

Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy in the Netherlands

Hans Anker, René Cuperus & Pim Paulusma April 2011

The “Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy” series of papers is a joint project organized under the auspices of the Global Progress and Progressive Studies programs and the Center for American Progress. The research project was launched following the inaugural Global Progress conference held in October 2009 in Madrid, Spain.

The preparatory paper for that conference, “[The European Paradox](#),” sought to analyze why the fortunes of European progressive parties had declined following the previous autumn’s sudden financial collapse and the global economic recession that ensued. The starting premise was that progressives should, in principle, have had two strengths going for them:

- Modernizing trends were shifting the demographic terrain in their political favor.
- The intellectual and policy bankruptcy of conservatism, which had now proven itself devoid of creative ideas of how to shape the global economic system for the common good.

Despite these latent advantages, we surmised that progressives in Europe were struggling for three primary reasons. First, it was increasingly hard to differentiate themselves from conservative opponents who seemed to be wholeheartedly adopting social democratic policies and language in response to the economic crisis. Second, the nominally progressive majority within their electorate was being split between competing progressive movements. Third, their traditional working-class base was increasingly being seduced by a politics of identity rather than economic arguments.

In response, we argued that if progressives could define their long-term economic agenda more clearly—and thus differentiate themselves from conservatives—as well as establish broader and more inclusive electoral coalitions, and organize more effectively among their core constituencies to convey their message, then they should be able to resolve this paradox.

The research papers in this series each evaluate these demographic and ideological trends in greater national detail and present ideas for how progressives might shape a more effective political strategy.

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Introduction and summary

June 9, 2010. Election night. It's 9:00 p.m. The polls close. Within seconds, television screens all over the country light up with the bar charts of an exit poll. The results are astonishing. The race between the main parties on the right and the left—between the liberal-conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy of Mark Rutte and the social-democratic Labour Party of Job Cohen—has turned into a cliffhanger. Both parties are projected to receive 31 seats, with a small edge for the social democrats. The race will go down to the wire.

Politically, the results of the exit poll can be summarized in two words: “systemic meltdown.” The three right-wing parties—the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or VVD; the Christian Democratic Appeal Party, or CDA; and the Party for Freedom, or PVV—are projected to be one seat shy of a majority in parliament. The left-wing parties are at 68 seats, eight seats short of a majority. Resurrection of the so-called “purple coalition”—comprised of the Labour Party, or PvdA; the centrist VVD; and progressive liberal Democrats 66, which governed the country from 1994 through 2002 under social-democratic Prime Minister Wim Kok—also failed to reach a majority (72 seats, four seats shy of the magic 76).

The only feasible options were an unprecedented Grand Coalition of so-called “system parties” CDA, VVD, and PvdA (82 seats) or a “purple-plus” coalition formed by PvdA, VVD, D66, and the Greens (83 seats), neither of which seemed particularly attractive. An alternative option was a cabinet composed of so-called “wise men and women” (*zakenkabinet*), with ministers with weaker links to the political parties in parliament.

Just a few months before the election, the very idea of becoming the largest party would have been unimaginable for both PvdA and VVD. In the polls, the social democrats, led by Minister of Finance Wouter Bos, had paid a huge electoral price for their participation in an unpopular and unloved coalition government with the CDA and a small orthodox Protestant party, the Christian Union, or CU. Relationships within the government were tense. Prime Minister Jan Peter

Balkenende's job approval was very low. Two out of three voters felt the country was headed in the wrong direction. An overwhelming majority of voters felt it was time for change. At its lowest point in the polls, the PvdA held on to just 13 seats, a measly 8 percent of the vote. Compare that with the spring of 2006 when electoral support for the party reached its high-water mark of 60 seats (40 percent) after successfully turning the municipal elections into a referendum on the embarrassing proliferation of food banks.

Then, on February 20, in the face of municipal elections in March, the unpopular coalition government collapsed over a plan to extend the Dutch military mission in the Afghan province of Uruzgan. The PvdA ministers offered their resignation; the remaining ministers stayed on to prepare early elections for June 9. Three weeks after the collapse of the cabinet, Wouter Bos unexpectedly stepped down as PvdA party leader.

That very same day, Job Cohen, the popular mayor of Amsterdam, announced his candidacy through a riveting speech drenched in social democratic values. The sudden move triggered a kind of "Dutch Obama" effect ("Yes we Cohen"), propelling the PvdA to 35 seats virtually overnight. These gains, however, would not last. Unable to manage expectations, the new party leader lost momentum during the election campaign, due to personal mistakes, awkward errors in the party manifesto, and questionable strategic decisions. The likable Cohen thus became a modern-day Icarus, the Greek mythical figure who flew too close to the sun and had his wings burned.

For the VVD and its leader Rutte, the 2010 parliamentary elections represented nothing less than a miraculous comeback. Rutte's leadership had been severely contested by two populist MPs who ultimately left the VVD to start their own movements: Rita Verdonk with the Proud of the Netherlands Party, or TON, and Geert Wilders with his PVV. Verdonk's adventure was short-lived due to internal strife but Wilders' party turned out to be a successful enterprise, posing a huge electoral challenge to the VVD. Rutte, though, kept his cool; his excellent debate performances helped him a great deal in outperforming his rivals. With 38 seats in the polls on the eve of the election, the VVD was poised to become the largest party for the very first time in Dutch history.

It was not until the morning after Election Day, when the overseas votes had come in and the dust had settled, that it became clear that the VVD, not the PvdA, had become the largest party with 31 seats. The PvdA ended the race with 30 seats.

This meant the VVD had the initiative to form a majority coalition. In addition to the Grand Coalition and “purple-plus” coalition, the three-party right-wing coalition also reached a one-seat majority. A long and difficult formation period ultimately produced a right-wing minority coalition government of the VVD and CDA, led by Rutte, and supported in parliament by the PVV.

Rutte thus became the first conservative-liberal prime minister in 93 years, after Pieter Cort van der Linden, whose minority government in 1913-1918 passed universal suffrage and brokered the “pacification,” the landmark legislation that ended the bitter fight about the funding of religious and public schools. This is a stark reminder that minority governments can be very productive in terms of new legislation.

But which underlying forces led to this extraordinary election outcome? Why did traditional *Volkspartijen* (people’s parties) like the PvdA and CDA receive so little support? Will it remain so difficult to form coalitions or was this an exception? And most importantly, what does all of this mean for the future of progressives in the Netherlands? What are the strategies to could lead to a progressive comeback?

Over the last decades, we’ve witnessed a sometimes abrupt transformation from a very stable party system where group identity determined voting toward a fluid party system in which voters really started to choose based on their own individual preferences. This has made it more and more difficult to form a stable coalition government. At the same time the differences within the electorate have also become fiercer, especially on the left. It seems that traditional political parties are unable to accommodate the preferences of the electorate within the current political system. The political landscape is fractured.

To understand where this situation is coming from, it is important to understand the history of the Dutch political system. Therefore, this paper will highlight the major changes and developments within both the Dutch political system and Dutch society, as it has been transformed by demographic and structural change. We will focus less on specific parties than on the dynamics between right-wing parties and left-wing parties. This will not only shed light on the peculiar position of progressives in the Netherlands, which, in spite of our tolerant and liberal image abroad, never obtained a majority, but will also give new insights into the special dynamics between left-wing parties.

The aim is to find ways to get out of the current cul-de-sac. Which way should the PvdA go in this divided political landscape? Should the party make a clear-cut choice in favor of the “enlightened” professional middle classes as our most important constituency, leaving the working class behind? Or should the choice be what has been labeled a “social democracy of fear” by historian Tony Judt, centered around workers’ lack of economic security? Or are there still chances to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from our current restrictions and restore the broad coalition of working class and middle class, flexible workers in the personal services sector and professionals in the new knowledge sectors, and enlightened entrepreneurs and unionized industrial workers? Finally, if none of these strategies are deemed feasible or desirable, another option could be considered: the formation of a progressive alliance uniting the fragmented left against the threat of an increasingly aggressive and populist right.

Evolution of the Dutch party system

Patterns of electoral behavior: From census to real choice

This unprecedented electoral outcome in 2010, close to a meltdown of the postwar party system, did not come out of the blue. Over the past several decades, the dynamics of the Dutch political system have changed severely—from a stable and rigid system with only a few significant *Volkspartijen* to a swirling arena with a high turnover rate of new parties in the new millennium. But what are the causes of these changes? Are they only caused by changes in society? Or do specific characteristics of the political system play an important role as well?

To answer these questions, we will take a closer look at the developments after the 1950s. The Netherlands has a well-developed multiparty system. In the period after World War II, 7 to 14 different parties were typically represented in the parliament. The relatively large number of parties is due to a system of proportional representation with a low electoral threshold (just 0.67 percent of the popular vote). None of the parties in parliament has ever come close to reaching a majority in parliament, which means that a coalition government has always been necessary in postwar Dutch coalition building.¹

The large number of parties and the low electoral threshold has the potential to produce great volatility in the electoral fortunes of political parties. A good index for measuring electoral shifts is the Pedersen index.² This index is the net percentage of voters who changed their votes between parties. If all parties remain at the same level of support, the index score is zero. If new parties wipe out all existing parties, the score is 100. There is one caveat. The index measures *aggregate* movements between parties, not the volatility of individual voters. This means that when equal numbers of voters switch from party A to party B and vice versa, there will be no net electoral change, and the index score will be zero.

Figure 1 shows the Pedersen index for the Dutch parliamentary elections between 1959 and 2010. Two clear periods can be distinguished: a period of relative stability from 1959 through 1989 and a more volatile period that started in 1994 and continues until this very day.

From the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919 through 1967, the Netherlands were an archetypical example of what political scientist Stein Rokkan has called a “frozen party system.”³ Elections essentially functioned as a glorified census, mirroring the division of power between the different “pillars” (*zuilen*), which formed the so-called “pillarized society.”⁴ Group membership and thus voting behavior could be predicted with high accuracy on the basis of two characteristics: religion and class. There was no clear competition between the Catholic, Protestant, liberal, or socialist “pillar” parties: Volatility was mainly due to compositional change. Party support was therefore stable and volatility low, with Pedersen scores around 5.

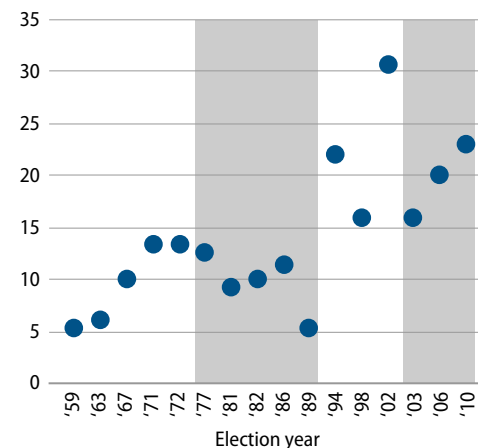
The first crack in the icy surface of the Dutch party system became visible in 1967. “New Dutch Party Rises in Parliamentary Election” was the front-page headline of *The New York Times* on February 17, 1967. It was the first time that newcomer party D66 (Democrats ’66) participated in the elections, resulting in almost 5 percent of the vote. The Pedersen scores from then on are also slightly higher, around 10, indicating that a net 10 percent of seats would shift between parties each election. While these changes left a big imprint at the time, they are still mild compared with the level of change we have witnessed in the more modern electoral period starting in 1994.

As of 1967, electoral outcomes show two clear trends. First, religious-affiliated parties lose a significant share of their support due to the secularization of society.⁵ Second, the liberal party gains more structural support. But the balance between support for left- and right-wing parties remains remarkably stable and slightly in favor of right-wing parties. Political scientists Cees van der Eijk and Kees Niemoller have demonstrated convincingly that voters shift mainly within these blocks, not between them, which makes their size relatively stable.⁶

What’s more, voters in the Netherlands started to vote based on their own political preferences, “rather than merely express with their vote that they are part of a particular segment of society,” according to Eijk and Niemoller. In the famous

FIGURE 1
After 1989, voters were more likely to move between parties

Pedersen index, 1959-2010



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election data.

words of political scientists Richard Rose and Ian McAllister: Voters begin to choose.⁷ The result: decreasing core electorates for the system parties.

This change, however, fully manifested itself during the 1994 elections, when large electoral shifts took place after a period of severe welfare state austerity politics. The Pedersen index for the 1989 election was 5; in 1994 the index score was 22, meaning that a net 22 percent of the seats changed. Both governing parties were beaten badly. The Christian Democrats lost an unprecedented 20 seats (out of 54); the Labour Party lost 12 (out of 49). From then on, election after election produced major shifts in the vote. During the nineties, these shifts occurred, mainly within the traditional party system and within the left or the right. Voters would move from CDA (Christian democrats) to VVD (conservative-liberal) or D66 (social-liberal) or from the PvdA (social democrats) to the SP (the Socialist Party, old-style socialists with populist leanings, comparable to Die Linke in Germany) or the Greens or D66.

As of 2002 it has been the new political entrepreneurs of “populism” that have benefited from footloose voters looking for a home. In 2002 it was Pim Fortuyn’s party (List Pim Fortuyn, or LPF), which obtained a remarkable 17 percent of the vote, just nine days after its leader Pim Fortuyn was murdered by a political activist. In 2006 it was the Socialist Party, which got 16 percent. In 2010 it was the PVV of Geert Wilders that grew from 6 percent to 16 percent. But which factors explain this electoral earthquake?

The volatility of the electorate shows that party loyalty has become quite weak. From 1994 until now volatility on the aggregate level has been high, with Pedersen scores between 15 and 30. The difference, however, between the 1990s and now is that the shifts in the 1990s were accommodated within the party system, but that the shifts of last elections broke out of the traditional party system toward new parties like the LPF, Rita Verdonk’s TON, and Geert Wilders’s PVV. The party system with the traditional center parties PvdA, CDA, and VVD as pillars does seemingly not accommodate the preferences of voters as new parties and movements enter the electoral arena.

Electoral shifts

1946-1967	No shifts, only marginal changes
1967-1998	Shifts within the party system
1998-now	New parties, traditional party system challenged

Decline of the Volkspartei

The volatility of the Dutch electorate has produced what appears to be the structural decline of the two main postwar “Volksparteien,” or people’s parties: the Christian democrats and the social democrats. Sure, there are reversals of electoral

fortunes now and then (notably 2003 for Labour), but the structural picture is that the support for the *Volkspartijen* is declining. As we can see in Figure 2, the PvdA has lost considerable ground since the era of Labour Party leader Joop Den Uyl (1977: 35.3 percent; 1986: 34.7 percent): The peaks are less high, the troughs are lower, and the trend is downward. The party is leaking in all directions: to the liberal left (D66), to the populist left (SP), and to the right-wing populists (PVV). A similar, even steeper, pattern exists for the CDA and its predecessors (not shown).

Not only is support for the social democrats declining, but it is declining for the three traditional parties (PvdA, CDA, VVD) combined as well. Where these three parties could count on more than 90 percent of the vote in the 1950s, their overall support now has declined to just above 50 percent. This is what could be diagnosed as a systemic meltdown of the postwar Dutch party system.

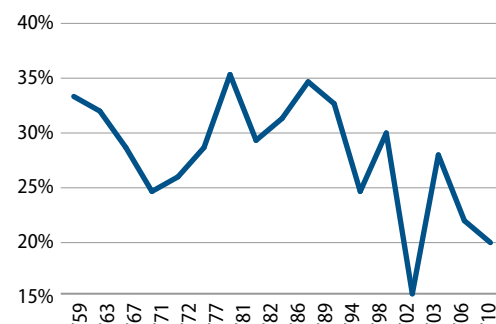
There is a continuing process of fragmentation across the political spectrum. The largest party in Dutch politics has never been so small. All great traditional political ideologies with their traditional focus on making compromises with their political opposites, their internationalist attitude, their defense of the open society, and their traditional attempt to be true people's parties, attempting to bind both the elite and the masses, have problems. Smaller parties that focused on particular interests or particular voter groups benefit.

In general, there is now no single dominant party in the Dutch political landscape. The best two performers carry a mere 20 percent of the vote, the two next best between 14 percent and 16 percent, and the three runners-up between 7 percent and 10 percent. This trend represents the Balkanization of Dutch politics—a nightmare for anyone tasked with the formation of a new coalition government. It is politics married to a Sudoku puzzle.

So today what the Netherlands needs is an increased number of parties to form a governing coalition with majority support. Traditionally, two parties once were enough for a majority. From 1994 onwards, three-party governments have become the standard. In 2010 there even have been serious talks about a four- or five-party coalition, comparable to situations in Scandinavia, Flanders, and probably in the near future in Germany.

FIGURE 2
Voter support for PvdA has declined over time

Percentage of votes received by the Labour Party, 1958-2010



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election data.

The electoral position of progressive parties

An important characteristic of the Dutch proportional political system is that parties always are dependent on other parties to form a majority coalition and get to power. This means the electoral position of the social democratic party by itself is not enough—to get into power, it is necessary to form a coalition with other parties.

So is there a possibility to form a majority coalition with only progressive parties? In Figure 3 we have accumulated all progressive parties and all right-wing parties to compare the results over the past several decades. The result is not very promising. Indeed, they may surprise foreign observers of the permissive-libertarian Dutch society because right-wing parties have always had a majority share of the vote, except for 1998. There is no natural progressive majority in the Netherlands, in spite of its progressive image.

The 1998 campaign is a positive outlier. Although no majority was won, both sides were in balance. The incumbent social democrats won significantly. The campaign was characterized by a strong socioeconomic profile (*'Sterk en sociaal'*) and an identifiable leader, Wim Kok. The party was in touch with the middle class. From then on, support for progressive parties declined, with an all-time low in 2002 during the rise of populist maverick Pim Fortuyn.

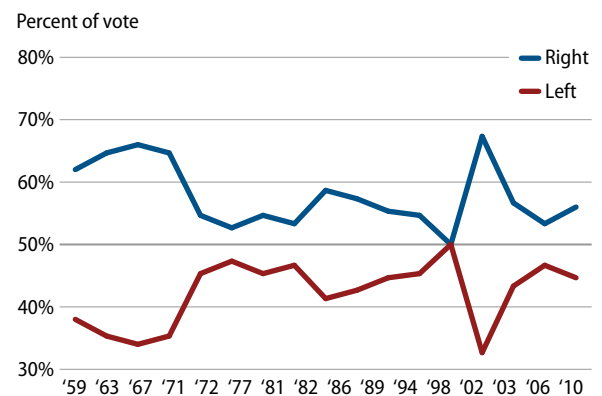
This means that in order to get into power, progressives traditionally always have needed the support of a right-wing party (CDA or VVD), even when small social-liberal center party D66 is included in the leftist block.

Then there is the problem of internal frictions within the progressive family. Figure 4 shows the strong differences and tensions among all progressive parties by detailing the relative size of all parties within the progressive block. The PvdA has lost the hegemonic position it had on the left for decades.

FIGURE 3

Support for the right-wing block has generally been higher than for the left-wing block

Division of votes between left and right, 1956-2010



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election data.

Basically, the left is divided between, on the one side, a more liberal, cosmopolitan progressivism, directed toward change and reform and with a strong emphasis on labor-market reforms and appreciation of the advantages of migration and globalization. This side comprises the Greens and D66. They unite well-educated professionals, the urban middle classes, and the student population, scoring high in university cities.

On the other side, there is the more “conservative” or traditional left, which cherishes the achievements of the welfare state, fights the introduction of market forces in the public sector, and represents the interests of workers in the health care sector and industrial areas. This side is represented by the SP.

Where is the PvdA, the voice of Dutch social democracy, in this picture? Hasn’t its ambivalence and at times its strength always been its ability to combine blue-collar workers with the professional elite? The aim and ideal of the party have always been to connect these two groups, which are now increasingly represented by the SP and the Green/D66 alliance, and work together for a shared project, the welfare state, and a progressive society. At this moment, however, there seems no such clear shared project, or clear common interest.

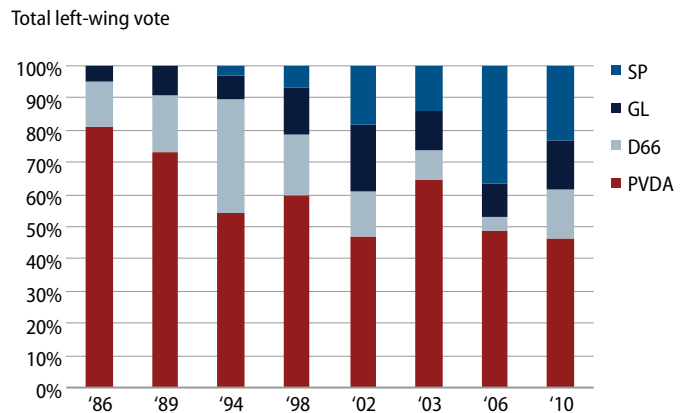
The differences within the left are thus considerable—one of the reasons closer cooperation between these competitors “on the electoral market” has not yet materialized. Besides that, the left as a whole has been relatively stable, with around 40 percent to 45 percent of the vote, except for the dip in 2002, but always lacking a majority.

Summarizing, there are a couple of structural trends and characteristics of the Dutch electorate that are important for any design of a progressive political strategy in the Netherlands. First of all, as a result of the proportional representation system with a low threshold, a coalition government is always necessary. Secondly, there is no natural left-wing majority. Combining these two means the left is dependent on a right-wing coalition partner.

FIGURE 4

The PvdA’s share of the left vote has been declining

Division of votes on the left, 1986-2010



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election data.

Furthermore, the volatility of the electorate has increased significantly since 1994. Voters began to choose. Party loyalty has become weaker, which has resulted in a decreased core electorate for the traditional emancipation or people's parties. Party competition has become fiercer, mainly within the left-wing and right-wing blocks, which makes close cooperation between parties on the left more difficult.

The fast rise and fall of new parties and the absence of clear winners (the biggest parties recently received only 20 percent of the vote) indicate that the current political system has serious problems in accommodating the changing preferences of voters. In this respect, we can speak of a systemic meltdown of the postwar party system, built around intermediating people's parties.

Dutch society in flux

Social and cultural trends

The slow but steady decline of the traditional *Volkspartei* did not lead to a decline of the left-wing block. As can be seen in Figure 3 on page 9, the support for both blocks has remained similar, although 2002 shows an all-time low for the left. As the elections in 2006 and 2010 show, however, left support returned to levels similar to the years before 2002. The changes between years have only become larger. This means the decline of the *Volkspartei* has no direct effects on the division of votes between left- and right-wing parties, but it makes the coalition process more difficult.

The other major development, the development that voters began to choose, is more interesting for this paper because it also implies that voters might be choosing between the left- and right-wing blocks. These developments are definitely interesting for the composition of the progressive electorate because it might lead to shifts in size of these blocks and thus tell us something about which groups are essential for a progressive coalition. Combined with predictions of demographic changes, this could give us indications of how the electoral outlook for the left might evolve.

The 1998 and 2002 elections are most interesting to look at from this perspective because they show major shifts between the left and right, with 1998 being a positive outlier for the left, and with 2002 for the right. Both elections can tell us something about groups in the electorate, which are switching between blocks and thus are essential.

Against this background of a lack of a left-wing majority, declining support for *Volksparteien*, and ever-increasing difficulties to form majority coalitions, we will now look at trends within certain demographic groups of the Dutch electorate to draw a picture of the electoral outlook for the left. These trends can affect electoral outcomes in two ways. First of all, the relationship between certain demographic characteristics and voting behavior can change.

Secondly, these groups which support particular parties can change in relative size, affecting the overall support for the parties they vote for.⁸

The relative size of groups will be looked at based on data from the Dutch government's Central Bureau for Statistics. To look for changes in the connection between groups and voting behavior, the division between left- and right-wing votes within the groups will be looked at. The left-right divide is a simplification that definitely has some disadvantages, such as the position of D66, which takes sometimes a right-wing position, but it enables us to focus on shifts between blocks instead of all the shifts between parties, which are most of the time of less significance.

This comparison will be made on the basis of graphs showing the difference between left-wing and right-wing support per group. To clarify our methodology, a fictional example of this way of visualization is provided in Figure 5. This figure shows the gap between left- and right-wing support among smokers and nonsmokers. The left-right gap is constructed as the first order difference, meaning the support for left-wing parties within the group minus the support for right-wing parties. The left-right gap among smokers of 15 percent in 1971 means the support for left-wing parties is 15 percent higher among nonsmokers than the support for right-wing parties.

This way of visualizing differences makes it possible to see differences across groups at a glance. From this fictional graph, it can easily be deduced that nonsmokers are more likely to vote left wing than smokers, but that this difference has steadily been declining over the last decades. Figure 5 does, however, not tell us anything about the relative size of both groups.

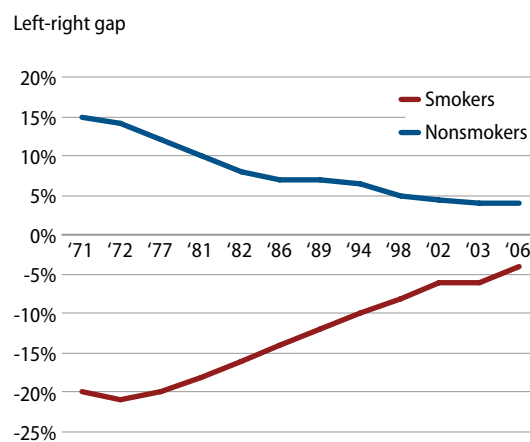
Therefore, each category will be introduced by a look at trends in group size.

This paper will use two main sources. Most of the data on demographic change will come from the Statline database from the Central Bureau for Statistics. The electoral data used for the comparisons come from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, or DPES. Unfortunately, the latter data are currently available only through 2006 so our demographic voting analyses do not include the 2010 election.

FIGURE 5

Fictional demonstration of changing left-right support within a social group

Hypothetical example of left-right gap among smokers and nonsmokers, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election data.

Class

Subjective social class (self-image of respondent) was established as a very important determinant of voting during the period of pillarization until the 1970s. Society was divided in pillars based on class and religion, and these pillars determined voting behavior to a large extent. The working class would vote more left wing; the upper class more right wing. This connection between social class and voting behavior has remained steady between 1971 and 1998.⁹

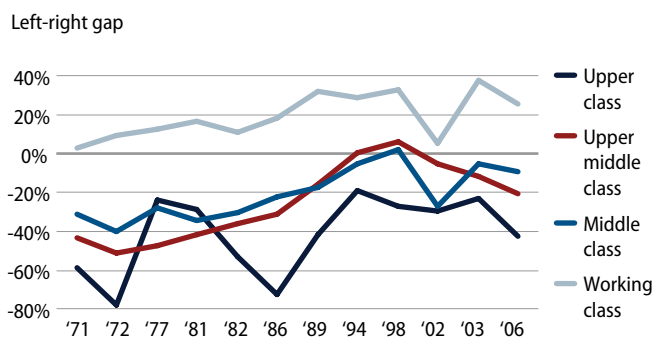
Figure 6 shows the left-right gap among the different classes between 1971 and 2006. It is clear that the working class is more likely to vote left wing than right wing.¹⁰ Looking at 2002, however, the working class did, more than the higher classes, switch from the left to the right. The same shift is visible in the middle class.

Looking at the 1998 victory, it stands out that the left scored especially well among both middle-class and upper-middle-class voters compared to other elections, but lost votes among the upper class. Another development is that the left-right gap amongst upper-class and middle-class voters has been declining over the last decades, favoring left-wing parties.

The relative size of the groups has changed significantly, too. The working class has shrunk to a mere 15 percent of the electorate while the middle classes have grown to more than 60 percent. This means the natural support for left-wing parties has declined over time as well, as we demonstrate in Figure 7.

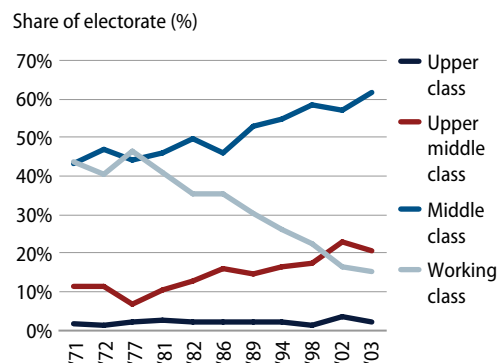
Another key trend is the composition of the secular middle classes. These groups are increasingly heterogeneous and not bound to a specific party or ideology. Given the decreasing size of the working class, the increasing size of the middle classes, and the possible shifts of the middle classes between left and right (as in 1998), the importance of the middle class to the left will only increase in the near future.

FIGURE 6
Workers historically are more likely to vote for the left
Left-right vote by social class, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

FIGURE 7
The working class is declining sharply; the middle class is increasing
Class self-image, 1971-2003



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

Education

Higher-educated voters have a higher turnout and are more politically interested. Besides that, they are more susceptible to left-right orientation. This means they are more aware of where they position themselves on a left-right axis, which affects their vote. The higher the level of education, the bigger the role of this ideological stance is, and thus the smaller the influence of other factors such as class. The combination of these influences means higher-educated voters are less bound to a certain party.¹¹

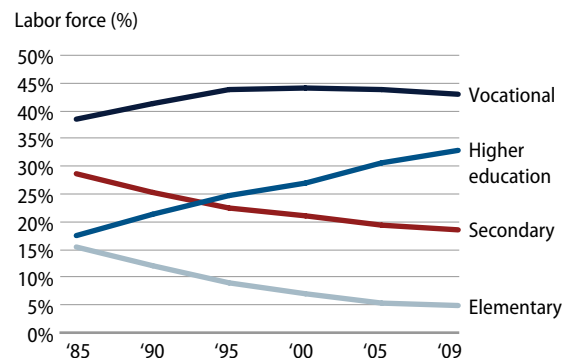
Figure 8 shows the relative size of each education group over the last 25 years. The average level of education has steadily increased. The share of higher-educated people has almost doubled from 17 percent in 1985 to 33 percent in 2009. Figure 9 shows the difference in left- and right-wing support among the different levels of education.

These trends point to several conclusions. First of all, left-wing support is traditionally highest among the lower educated. The higher educated were traditionally right wing but have become more left wing over the years. Indeed, from 1994 to 2002 support was even higher among highly educated voters than among lower-educated voters. The increasing numbers of the higher educated does thus offer possibilities for left-wing parties.

Yet this education gap was relatively small in 2006. In all five categories, the difference between left- and right-wing support is lower or just slightly higher than 10 percent. This means education level was less important in determining the left-right vote in that election.

FIGURE 8
Education levels are rising rapidly

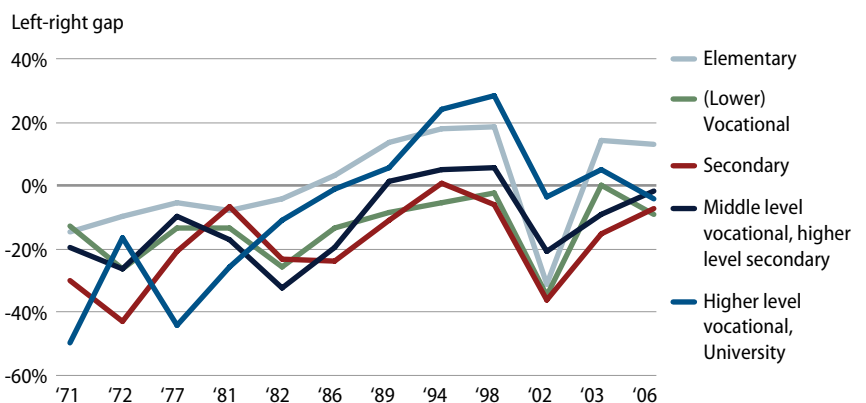
Trends in education levels, 1985-2009



Source: Statline database, CBS.

FIGURE 9
The highly educated are increasingly likely to vote for the left

Education and the left-right divide, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES

What is striking, though, is the increased division in stances on certain topics like the European Union, politics, and migration. In these areas there is a clear cleavage along the lines of education, with the highly educated being more in favor of labor migration and EU-integration, while the less educated strongly oppose many of these policies. This cleavage also shows the limits of our left-right dichotomy—tensions like these within the left and right blocks are invisible.

Age

As in almost every Western European society, the Netherlands is facing a rapidly aging population. Back in 1950, only 7.7 percent of the population was above 65 years of age, and 37.3 percent younger than 20. In 2008, more than 14 percent was above 65, and only 24 percent below 20 years of age. Figure 10 shows this trend. Reflecting these changes was a recent press release by the Bureau for Statistics, noting that there was a new record of 40th wedding anniversaries last year.

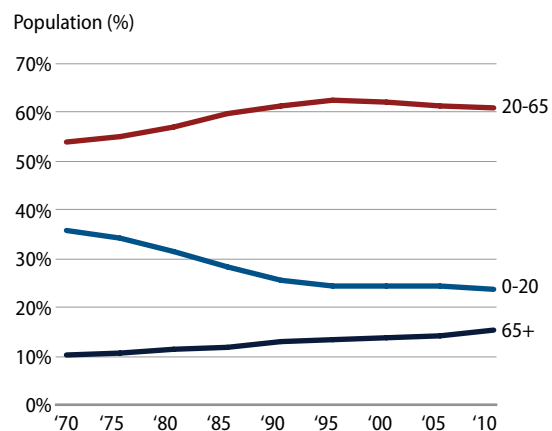
This process of aging will continue over the next few decades, resulting in an estimated 26.5 percent of the population being above 65 in 2040. The importance of the “grey vote” will thus only keep increasing. Specific issues of the elderly are expected to become more important in the political debate, a development from which a just-established new 50+ party hopes to benefit.

It is difficult to assess the importance of the Millennial generation (those born between 1978 and 2000). Their relative size in the electorate will never be very large due to the aging of the Dutch population, and their turnout is lower. Interesting, however, is the moment of their definite voting decision. This has steadily become later and later, resulting in more than 70 percent deciding during the last weeks of the campaign.

Another noteworthy development is the role of electronic voter guides such as *StemWijzer* and *Kieskompas*: Almost 70 percent of the Millennials used such a guide in the 2006 elections. The direct effect of these guides on voting behavior is questionable but it does show that voters are willing to look around.

FIGURE 10
Seniors gain in numbers; those under 21 are decreasing

Trends in the size of age groups, 1970-2010



Source: Statline database, CBS.

The differences in left-right support between generations are especially strong within the left and within the right. Looking closely at support for the Labor Party in the 2010 elections paints a gloomy picture: 50 percent of the voters are over 50 years old, while only 17 percent are between the ages of 18 and 34. Only CDA voters have a higher average age.

Of course, the Greens and D66 are also part of the left-wing vote. But their voters are relatively young, with almost 30 percent between 18 and 34 years of age. Both parties are extremely popular among university students. Yet the support of the Millennial generation is almost equally divided between left and right. What is remarkable, though, is the difference in education between these groups. Young voters on the left have a significantly higher level of education than young voters on the right.

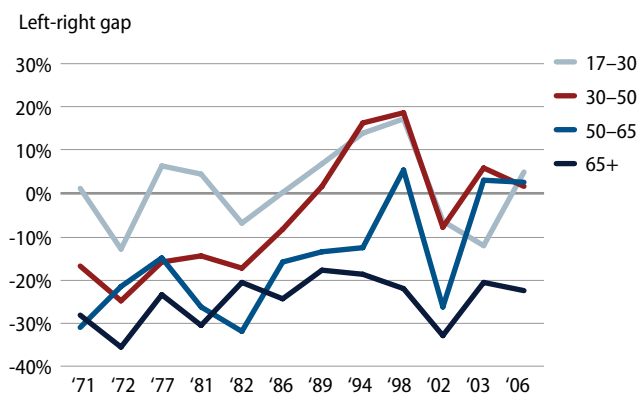
Figure 11 shows differences in left-wing and right-wing support by age category. Between 1988 and 1998, left-wing parties scored better among voters between the ages of 17 and 50. Especially in the “good year” of 1998, the lead among voters in the 17-to-50 age category showed the willingness of relatively young voters to switch between the left- and right-wing blocks. In 2006, however, there was almost no difference between left-wing and right-wing support in the age groups up to 65 years old.

In contrast to younger voters, the leanings of voters above 65 years of age are very stable. Voters in this age category tend to vote significantly more right wing. This age group will only gain in relative influence. This is not a favorable development for the center-left.

FIGURE 11

The left generally does best among younger voters, worst among the oldest voters

Left-right support by age group, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

Gender and marital status

Traditionally, there has been a gap between the political behavior of men and women. The figure below shows for both men and women the difference between left-wing and right-wing support. From 1971 to 1989, the left-right differences among both genders were relatively small and do not point in a clear direction.

But from 1994 onwards (when voters began to choose), women show more left-wing voting behavior than men, especially in 1998. But as we have seen with other characteristics, in 2006 the difference between genders almost disappeared (see Figure 12).

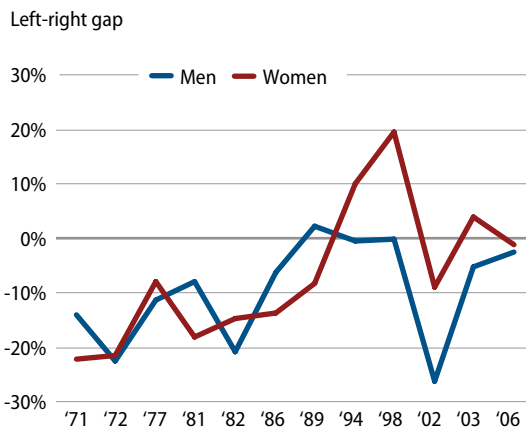
Data on subgroups are scarce. Two gender-based developments are, however, noteworthy. First, the full increase of support for the Greens in 2010 (2.2 percent, three seats compared to the previous election) is due to an increase in support among women, especially young women. Second, not only do the Greens boast an overrepresentation of young, higher educated women, but the Labor Party does as well.

The number of unmarried voters in the ages between 20 and 65 is rapidly increasing. Between 1998 and 2010, the percentage of the total population in this category increased from 26 percent to 36 percent. Unmarried voters are thus becoming more and more a factor of importance. In the same time span, the percentage of married voters decreased by 13 percent to 53 percent (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 shows the differences in support within the different statuses. Married voters vote more right wing, whereas voters who have never been married are on average more left leaning. The strongest left-wing supporters are to be found amongst divorced people. In spite of the fact that this is only a small percentage of the electorate, it is a growing group as well.

FIGURE 12
In recent elections, women are more likely to vote for the left than men

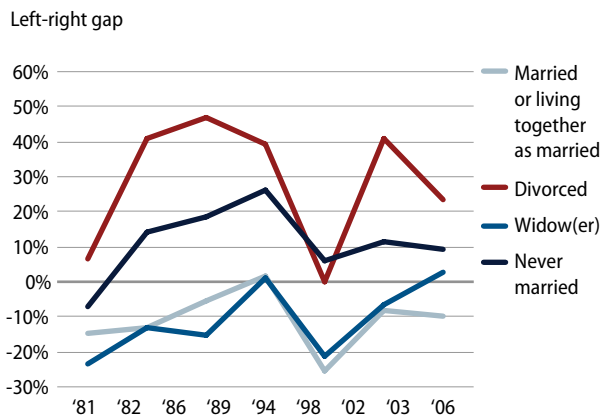
Left-right support by gender, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

FIGURE 13
The left receives more support among single than married voters

Left-right support by marital status, 1981 to 2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

Ethnicity

Migrants form a relatively modest part of the Dutch population. Figure 14 shows the composition of the Dutch population in 2010, based on ethnic background.

Approximately half of the migrant population is of Western origin, with the rest from around the globe. According to recent predictions, the share of migrants within the Dutch population will increase to 26 percent in 2040.

There are no data available on the aggregate voting behavior of migrants. But researchers have conducted significant research on the voting behavior of migrants in big cities between 1986 and now.¹² They found that migrants tend to vote left wing and show significantly lower turnout rates (almost half of the average). Voting decisions are primarily based on ideology of the party but ethnicity does play a big role in the voting process of migrants. They prefer to vote for a candidate with the same ethnicity. This is possible due to the preferential vote system. This has especially led, within the PvdA, to the election of migrant candidates who were placed at the lower end of the party lists.

Urban areas

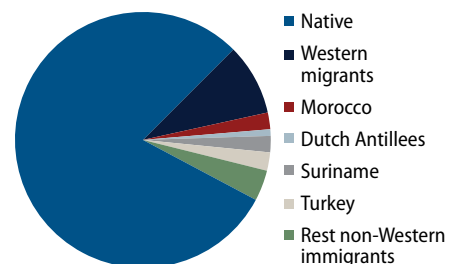
In 2007 55 percent of the Dutch population lived in cities. This percentage will keep growing over the next several decades, although the rate of growth is unknown. Traditionally, left-wing support is high in urban areas, which means this should be beneficial.

Figure 16 confirms this. The left block does better the more urbanized the area. Yet in 2006 differences in support for the left between the different levels of urbanization were relatively small.

FIGURE 14

The overwhelming proportion of the Dutch population is native

Ethnic groups in the Netherlands, 2010

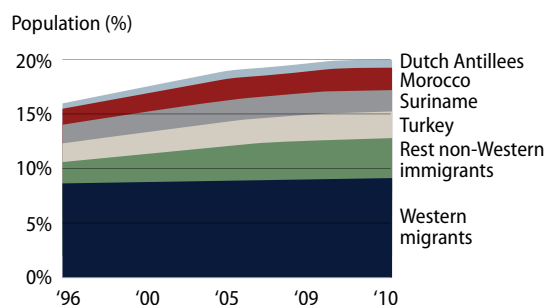


Source: Statline database, CBS.

FIGURE 15

About half the migrant population is of Western origin

Trends in migrant population origins in the Netherlands, 1996-2010

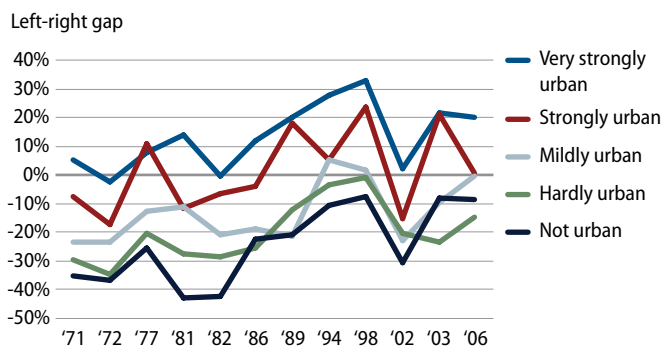


Source: Statline database, CBS.

FIGURE 16

Voters in urban areas are more likely to support the left

Left-right support by degree of urbanization



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

There is another interesting development in the urban areas that cannot be deduced directly from the data due to the aggregation of the left-wing parties in our left block. Traditionally, the Labour Party received strong support in big cities among working-class voters, but they've lost many of these voters over the past several decades. Most of these voters stopped voting or are now voting for populist parties, both on the right and left side of the political spectrum. This decline of support in the cities has partly been compensated for by increasing numbers of the highly educated, who mainly vote for the Greens and D66.

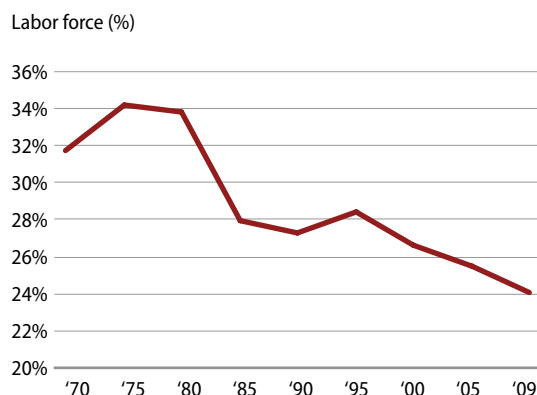
Union membership

Figure 17 shows the share of the labor force which belongs to a union. Over the last 30 years, the level of union organization has decreased from 34 percent to 24 percent. This is not a positive development because it decreases the legitimacy of unions when they negotiate wage agreements. They claim to represent all Dutch laborers but that claim becomes harder to sustain when union membership keeps dropping.

FIGURE 17

Union membership is declining over time

Union membership in the Netherlands, 1970-2009



Source: Statline database, CBS.

Figure 18 shows the difference in left-wing and right-wing support between members and nonmembers of unions. The figure is pretty clear: Union members are more likely to vote left wing than nonmembers. The difference over years seems constant. This is on the one hand good news because it shows a very stable left-wing inclination on the part of union members. On the other hand, it is also negative: Union membership is declining, so this group of voters will get smaller.

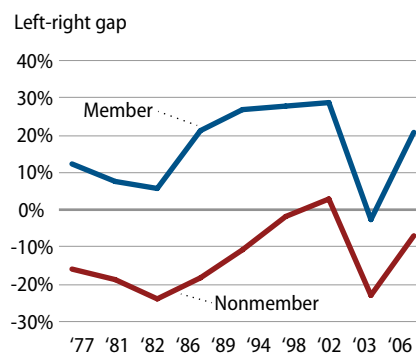
Religion

Two main developments in the religious area should be highlighted. First of all, the importance of religion to vote decisions has significantly decreased. This is caused partly by the decline of the influence of social groups on voting. Voters increasingly base their vote on their own political preferences rather than expressing with their vote that they are part of a particular segment of society.¹³

FIGURE 18

Union members consistently vote more left wing than nonmembers

Left-right support by union membership, 1977-2006



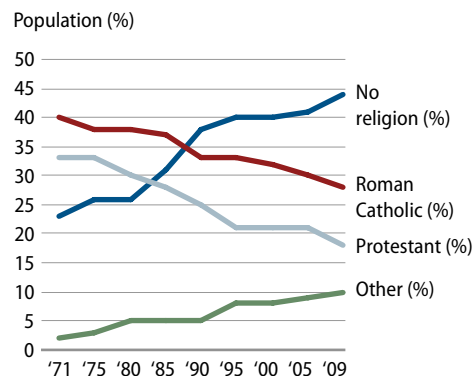
Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

Figure 19 shows the trends in religious affiliation within Dutch society. The secular share of the population has increased significantly, whereas the share of Catholics and Protestants appears to be in freefall. But the “other religions” category has increased. This is mainly caused by the rise of Islam in the Netherlands (nearly 1 million Muslims currently live in the country).

Figure 20 shows the support for left-wing and right-wing parties by religious affiliation. Left-wing parties get more support from secular Dutch and voters with another religion (including Islam). Another interesting development is that there are still major differences in party support between the different religious groups. While the left-right gaps in other graphs tended to converge over time, especially in 2006, suggesting declining group influence on voting, this figure still shows a lot of variance in 2006.

FIGURE 19
Secular Dutch and those with non-Christian religious faiths are increasing

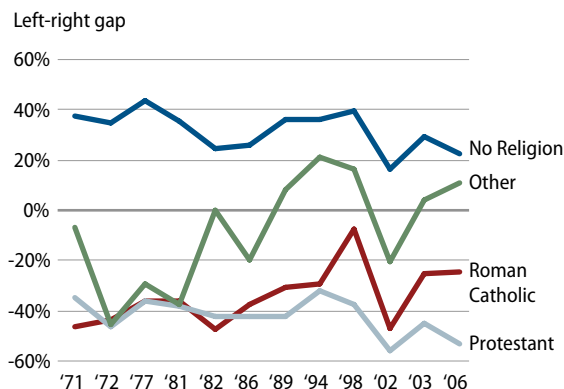
Trends in religious affiliation in the Netherlands, 1971-2009



Source: Statline database, CBS.

FIGURE 20
The left does best among seculars and those with a non-Christian faith

Left-right support by religious affiliation in the Netherlands, 1971-2006



Source: Authors' analysis of DPES.

A new progressive coalition?

The Labour Party has been fairly successful in terms of government participation since 1989, but rather unsuccessful electorally—the trade-off between vote-seeking and office-seeking strategies. The party has been part of different coalitions in government, all sharing the mainstream views of this period, such as the “Third Way” approach to welfare state reform, liberalization and privatization of the public sector, and promoting a larger and deeper European Union, combined with a rather pragmatic style of governance. Since 1990 (locally) and 1994 (nationally), Dutch politics has been confronted with an extreme volatility among voters, a decline of core electorates, a more polarized and fragmented electorate, and an erosion particularly of the two classical *Volkspartijen*, the Christian democrats and the social democrats.

Cultural and economic cleavages and new political issues such as immigration, crime and antisocial behavior, and European integration divide social-democratic constituencies, leading to the erosion of the leftist working class, with many turning instead to right-wing populist anti-EU and antimigration parties. And a new meritocracy is arising, splitting the electorate into a higher-educated part that is optimistic about the future and embraces change and internationalization, and a less-educated part, which feels it has more to lose from internationalization and modernization of society.

At the same time we have witnessed a rise in support for parties on both extremes of the political spectrum, with a hitherto unknown populist appeal. They benefit from antiestablishment attitudes. And they accelerate a sense of distrust of political parties and politicians and mobilize antimigration sentiments.

As a result of all this, the Dutch social-democratic party, PvdA, has lost its monopoly on the left. While the left as a whole remains fairly stable, the PvdA is losing its quantitative and political hegemony within the progressive camp: 30 seats in the 2010 elections compared to 15 seats for the more radical Socialist

Party, 10 seats for the GreenLeft, and 10 for the progressive liberals of D66. The fragmentation of the left is cause and consequence of the erosion and fragmentation of the postwar *Volkspartijen*.

Both in terms of ideology and in terms of constituency, Dutch social democracy is faced with tough challenges and inevitable choices. Will it remain *Volkspartei*, bridging the social gaps that give rise to the modernizing D66 and Greens and to the Socialist Party on the left? More specifically, can it restore the grand postwar coalition between the working and the middle classes?

Since the meteoric ascent of the List Pim Fortuyn in 2002 in the Netherlands, new attempts have been made by progressives to get back in touch with the (presumably) lost electorate. Former Labour Party leader Wouter Bos critically evaluated the “Third Way” accommodation-type politics of the PvdA in 2010. Earlier, the PvdA had published a new party document on immigration and integration, proposing a much stricter approach. This document, however, proved to be divisive within the constituency of the Labour Party. The party has been left in limbo: Neither the social-liberal Third Way adaptation to the economy nor the integrationist adaptation to anti-immigrant populism have united and inspired the party with a new self-confidence or a new common sense of direction.

What are the strategic choices for progressives today? Are we trying to reanimate an atavistic political movement (a workers’ party in a postindustrial society), or does social democracy still contain hidden potential capable of reuniting fragmenting and polarizing societies? Although trends are challenging, we think there is enough room to maneuver to allow innovation and the redefinition of the social-democratic project under new circumstances.

Basically, three options are open for social democracy. The first would be to make a clear-cut choice in favor of the “enlightened” professional middle classes as our most important constituency. They represent the future of the knowledge economy and are a growing segment of society, concentrated in the metropolitan areas. They are the carriers of optimistic, liberal, and cosmopolitan views on internationalization, multicultural integration, and European unification. Such a choice would facilitate a coalition or even close cooperation with two other left parties, the D66 and the Greens, around a common project of further flexibility in the labor market, European political integration, green innovation, individual autonomy, and stimulating talents. It would represent a cultural follow-up to the

primarily social and economic Third Way, Dutch-style. As a side effect, this option might attract specific support from the new career and “power” feminists and migrant groups.

The second option would be to choose what, against all the laws of marketing and PR, has been labeled a “social democracy of fear” by historian Tony Judt. This would be aimed at regaining the support of the traditional as well as the new, flexible working classes and the lower middle class, and those dependent on public services, social security, and welfare. It would defend the protection and security that the classical welfare state used to offer. It would be extremely critical of market forces, especially in the public sector, and of the European Union, at least of the market fundamentalist way in which it currently functions. It would be more activist, with strong local roots. This choice would entail closer cooperation with the Socialist Party. It would also restore a close coalition with the trade unions.

Then there is a third option. This option would involve freeing ourselves, Houdini-like, from the limiting conditions in which we currently find ourselves and restoring the broad coalition of working class and middle class, flexible workers in the personal services sector and professionals in the new knowledge sectors, enlightened entrepreneurs, and unionized industrial workers. This option would unite the aims of protection and emancipation with the aspirations and commitments of those who are succeeding in contemporary society. It would address the responsibility, commitment, participation, and citizenship of both those who have a lot to gain and those who have already gained a lot. It would entail a broad coalition of the left, bridging the gap between the conservative and liberal left, and new alliances with the third sector and civic initiatives.

As the 2010 Dutch national elections have shown once again, social democracy is losing electoral support to the conservative left, the SP, and the progressive-liberal left, the Greens and social-liberal D66.¹⁴ It is even losing votes to Wilders’s PVV party, not directly at these elections but certainly in the long term indirectly, because the Labour Party is being bypassed by abstentions or a vote shift to the SP, illustrating the farewell of the leftist working class.

The Labour Party is still the main force on the left (with 30 seats, compared to 10 for the Greens and D66 and 15 for the SP) but it is having trouble defining an authentic position vis-à-vis its progressive competitors. It can survive, whether as an independent force of the left or as part of a larger progressive alliance, only if it comes up with a project of its own.

In order to restore a coalition of the different constituencies of social democracy, a program is needed that connects the materialist perspective of fair pay, decent work, opportunities to move forward, and social and physical security with a postmaterialistic or cultural perspective involving a sustainable environment, an open outlook on the world around us, and, up to a point, an acceptance of cultural diversity. Such a program would counterbalance the strong centrifugal forces in the economic, cultural, and political realms: growing inequality, ossifying cultural cleavages, and division lines of distrust and abstention in our democracies.

Moreover, it would halt the commercialization of public infrastructure and services, instead strengthening *res publica* by introducing a public ethic and orientation in government as well as the private and nonprofit sectors. It would also produce an agenda characterized by modesty, self-restraint, and moderation, built around notions of ecological, social, and cultural “sustainability,” counteracting the hyper-consumerist rat race. This could be seen as a restoration of the concept of quality of life but in an unprecedented fashion.

A fourth and final option, however, could be the formation of a progressive alliance to counter fragmentation within the left and to fight the center-right/right-wing populist majority. This option of close cooperation between the Greens, social liberals, socialist populists, and social democrats may be the best hope to restore the progressive, tolerant, and culturally libertarian world image of the Netherlands.

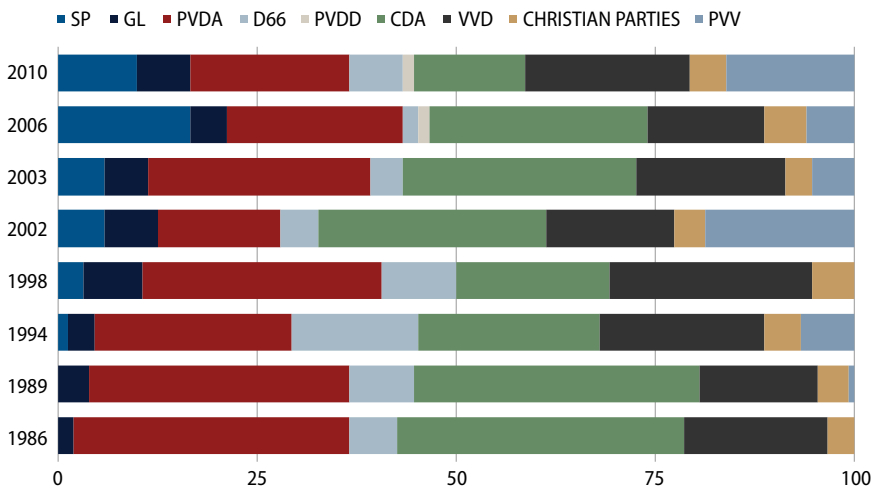
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Appendix

This chart shows the distribution of seats in Dutch parliaments back to 1988. It illustrates how the division of seats between left and right parties creates the need for increasingly complicated coalitions to reach 50 percent of parliamentary seats.

Distribution of seats in parliament in % (1986 - 2010)



Source: Authors' analysis of Dutch election results.

Endnotes

- 1 Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?*
- 2 Pedersen, "The Dynamics of European Party Systems."
- 3 Rokkan and Lipset, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*.
- 4 Thomassen, Aarts, and Kolk, "Politieke veranderingen in Nederland."
- 5 Ibid., Eijk and Niemöller, "The Netherlands."
- 6 Eijk and Niemöller, "The Netherlands."
- 7 Rose and McAllister, *Voters begin to choose*.
- 8 Eijk and Niemöller, "The Netherlands."
- 9 Thomassen, Aarts, and Kolk, "Politieke veranderingen in Nederland."
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Michon, Tillie, and Heelsum, "Political participation of migrants in the Netherlands since 1986."
- 13 Eijk and Niemöller, "The Netherlands."
- 14 Becker and Cuperus, "Politics in a fragmented society"; Becker and Cuperus, "Social democracy in the Netherlands."

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