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published in

Europeanisation and Renationalisation
2019

document version

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Crum, B. (2019). Living with anti-pluralist populism in Europe: Insights from the Dutch 2017 elections. In U. Liebert, & A. Jenichen (Eds.), *Europeanisation and Renationalisation: Learning from Crisis for Innovation and Development* (pp. 37-47). Verlag Barbara Budrich.

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Living with anti-pluralist populism in Europe: Insights from the Dutch 2017 elections*

Ben Crum

1. Introduction

Never before did a Dutch election attract as much attention from foreign media as the one on 15 March 2017. Journalists swarmed to the Netherlands, driven by one big question: Will Geert Wilders win? Wilders became a topic of particular interest thanks to the dramatic votes of 2016: the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. The prospect thus lured that the Netherlands would see a similar dramatic turn-around, one that would be indicative of a transnational ‘rise of populism’. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte qualified – and dismissed – such expectations as a ‘domino theory’ which suggests that with one or two countries falling prey to populist movements, the rest will follow automatically (Jonker 2017).

Eventually, Wilders was not the big victor of 15 March. He got 13.3 percent of the vote-share, corresponding to 20 of the 150 seats in the Dutch Lower House, which is five seats more than he got at the previous elections in 2012 but four less than his best result to date in 2010. What is more, the Freedom Party certainly did not become the biggest party, and it was effectively side-lined from the government to be formed. Ironically, soon, commentators started to float a reverse domino theory, in which the relative loss of Wilders was prefigured by the win of Alexander Van der Bellen of the presidential elections in Austria and followed in May 2017 by the victory of Emanuel Macron over Marine Le Pen in the French presidential elections.

However, if anything, the experience of the Dutch elections signals *the normalization of anti-pluralist populism*, even if they do not come out victorious. While for a long time, anti-pluralist populist parties could still be treated as an aberration and a rather marginal phenomenon, recent elections indicate that they are there to stay as a significant political force in many political systems. Considerable attention has been devoted to those EU member states, Hungary and Poland, in which we witness actual backsliding

* The main argument of this paper was first presented as a talk at the Danish Institute for International Studies. I thank Cecilie Stokholm Banke and Marlene Wind for hosting me and for their feedback on that occasion.

in terms of political pluralism and the rule of law (Bánkuti/Halmai/Scheppele, 2012; Müller 2015a; Clossa/Kochenov 2016; Schipplak/Treib 2017). However, the normalization of anti-pluralist populism and the potential threat it poses to democratic pluralism in Europe is a phenomenon that applies to a much wider range of European countries, including for instance France, Germany, Austria, Finland, and Denmark.

In this paper, I use the Dutch case to discuss this development and its broader implications for Europe at large. After characterising anti-pluralist populism, I turn to the Dutch 2017 elections and analyse their outcome as well as their historical context. While the Dutch case obviously has some particular features of its own, there are clear parallels with anti-pluralist movements in other European countries and it certainly raises fundamental questions for Europe as a whole.

2. What is anti-pluralist populism?

Too often the term populism remains rather intuitive and fuzzy. It is used in a pejorative way to refer to political movements that are considered as distorting the way ‘democratic politics as we know it’ works. Calling politicians ‘populists’ is often a way to disqualify them. Hence it is important to be precise. For that, I propose to depart from two basic understandings of populism.

In the first way, it is only natural for politicians to be populists: they should listen to the people at large and appeal to them. That is exactly what we expect politicians to do in a democracy. In this sense, all politicians should be populists; the only respect in which they are likely to vary is that some have less ideological spine and thus cater more openly for the popular vote compared to politicians who more insist on particular ideological principles. This is probably what the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte (Jonker 2017) referred to on election night when he distinguished “the wrong kind of populism” from, what is supposedly, the “the right kind”.

However, when we today talk about populist politicians, we are often not just referring to opportunist politicians but to something more specific. Importantly, populism is not inherently related to a particular ideological view. In general, we recognize that there can be both left-wing and right-wing populists. Drawing on the work of Margaret Canovan (1999) and Jan-Werner Müller (2015b; 2016), we can say that populism is rather about a certain style of politics and the underlying understanding of the nature of democratic politics in pluralist societies. Populists distinguish themselves because they rely on a moral notion of a homogenous and pure people that is united by a single common identity and interest, and it is them – the populist politicians – who represent, articulate or even embody, this single united

interest.

By implication, populists challenge a pluralist understanding of modern societies in which it is natural that multiple competing interests and identities co-exist. Instead, you are either with or against the people. As Jan-Werner Müller (2015b: 86) puts it: “populists consistently and continuously deny the very legitimacy of their opponents (as opposed to just saying that some of their policies are misguided)”. What is more, and indeed fundamental, is that Müller adds that in their denial of the legitimacy of political alternatives, populists are ultimately “willing to risk a crisis of liberal democracy [i.e. the basic political structure/constitution] itself”.

Thus, to complete the argument, why do we care so much about the rise of populism in the UK, the US and the Netherlands? It is basically because of the threat that if they would take effective control, liberal democracy itself may be at risk.

The anti-pluralism that characterizes populism in this interpretation also logically positions it against European integration or indeed any internationalist political engagement, as their inter-national character inherently brandishes these arrangements as pluralist. Populists perceive such international pluralism as an encroachment on the ‘pure’ national identity they claim to represent, and hence are bound to oppose international political arrangements. Thus, it is no coincidence that all national political parties that we can characterize as anti-pluralist populists tend to oppose European integration and to advocate the departure of the country from it.

Now, as said, the anti-pluralist populists have not taken control in the Netherlands. Importantly, however, they have not gone away either and it does not look like they will. Instead, they seem to become a permanent force in the Dutch parliament with a vote share of, depending on how you count, between 20 per cent to up to one third of the parliament. What is more, the presence and continuous political competition of the sizable minority is felt throughout the party landscape. Many mainstream parties have felt the need to pick up on the kind of issues – like migration, nationalism, Euroscepticism – that these parties highlight and to adjust their positions in their direction. It are these circumstances that reflect what I characterize as “the normalisation of populism”.

3. The 2017 Dutch elections

Even if the Freedom Party had to leave the position of the biggest party in the Dutch Lower House to the Liberal-Conservatives of the VVD, the outcome of the 2017 Dutch elections was quite spectacular in several respects. 38 of the 150 seats in parliament (i.e. more than 25%) changed party. Notably, 29 of the seats that changed party came from the biggest loser of the elections,

the Labour Party (PvdA), which after having served a difficult 4-year terms as junior partner in the government, saw its seat share crumble from 38 to a mere 9 seats. Notably, the other major loser was its senior partner, Mark Rutte's VVD, which lost 8 seats but nevertheless remained the biggest party with 33 seats in parliament – indeed, the smallest biggest party the Netherlands has ever seen

As said, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party was among the winners and ended second with 20 seats coming from 15. The Christian-Democrats even won one seat more, which got them to 19 seats, the same number that the progressive liberals of D66 secured coming from 12 seats in 2012. The biggest gains were however secured by the Greens of GroenLinks who revenged their pitiful 4 seats result in 2012 by moving up to a, for them, unprecedented number of 14 seats, the same number as their more left-wing brethren from the Socialist Party who got to 14 seats by losing one. While the Christian-conservative parties, Christian-Union and the Calvinists of the SGP remained stable at 5 and, respectively, 3 seats, there was more turmoil among the other smaller parties. Notably, the Party for the Animals and the Party for the Pensioners (50+) both went up from the two seats they held previously, the Animal Party to 5 and 50+ to 4 seats. Finally, two parties succeeded in entering parliament for the first time: the migrants-oriented party DenK with three seats and the conservative anti-establishment and anti-Europe party, Forum for Democracy with two.

With this outcome, the formation of the new Dutch government was bound to take considerable time. By all indications, the core of the government coalition would need to be formed by the VVD, the CDA and D66. Geert Wilders' Freedom Party has been ruled out as a credible coalition partners by all parties, including Wilders' former party, the VVD. In turn, its major losses also ruled the PvdA out as a credible partner.

Still, the combination VVD-CDA-D66 falls 5 seats short of the absolute majority of 76 seats that is usually needed for a stable government in the Netherlands. Hence, a fourth partner was needed. While attempts to involve GroenLinks, as the major election winner, into the coalition failed, negotiations turned to the Christian-Union. Negotiations lasted over the summer of 2017, but on 26 October a new majority government was inaugurated with the support of the four parties: VVD, CDA, D66 and the Christian-Union.

Table 1: After election seat share of parties in Dutch Lower House

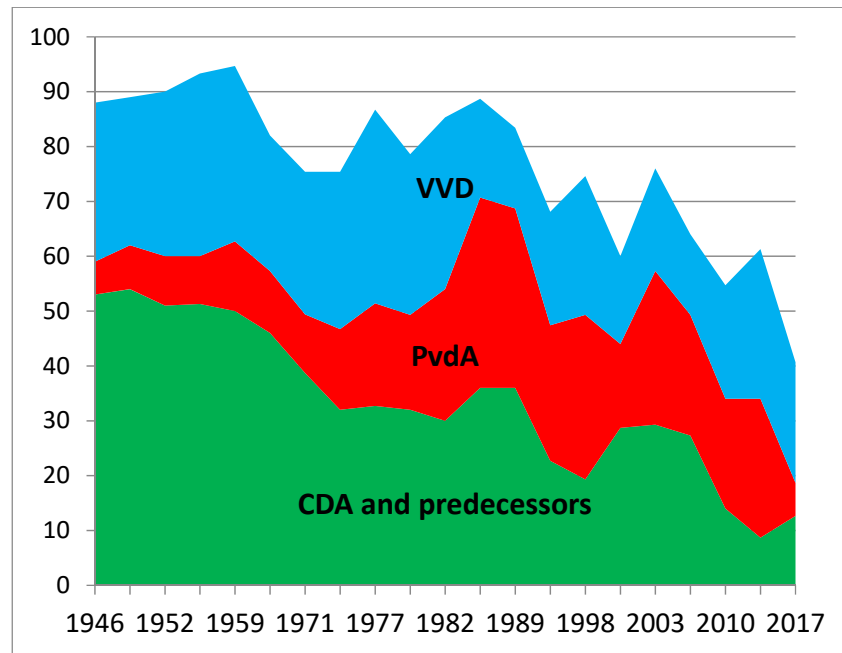
Parties	2010	2012	2017
VVD (Conservative Liberals)	31	41	33
PvdA (Labour Party)	30	38	9
CDA (Christian-Democrats)	21	13	19
PVV (Freedom Party)	24	15	20
D66 (Progressive Liberals)	10	12	19
SP (Socialist Party)	15	15	14
GroenLinks (Greens)	10	4	14
ChristenUnie (Christian-Union)	5	5	5
SGP (Calvinist Party)	2	3	3
PvdD (Party for the Animals)	2	2	5
50PLUS (pensioners party)		2	4
DenK (Diversity Movement)			3
Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy)			2
Total seats	150	150	150
Number of parties	10	11	13

4. The evolving structure of Dutch politics

If we position the 2017 elections in the Netherlands in its broader historical context, it underlines the overarching trend of the demise of the big parties. This is a trend that of course has its parallels elsewhere; the absence of the classical big parties in the latest presidential run-off in France is a major example. Still, the trend in Dutch politics is particularly pronounced and steady. If we look at the three big parties that have been central to Dutch politics – CDA, PvdA and VVD – we see that they would take well over 80% or even over 90% of the parliamentary seats in the 1950s. Since then their share has gone down, even if one or the other of them would sometimes bounce back at the cost of the others. Actually, until the mid-1970s there were three mainstream Christian-Democratic parties, with the Catholic KVP the most prominent one. As they saw their vote share decline, they merged into the CDA.

The party landscape that emerged from the mid-1970s onwards basically had the newly merged CDA in a pivotal position in the middle. Depending on the election outcome, it would either form a coalition on its left-hand side with the Labour Party or on its right-hand side with the liberal-conservative VVD.

Figure 1: Evolution of the seat share of the three main parties in the Dutch parliament



This straightforward left-right logic was however brutally disturbed when in 1994 the CDA had a disastrous election result dropping from 54 seats to 34. For the first time since 1917 no Christian parties were involved in the government coalition. Instead, Prime Minister Wim Kok formed a so-called “purple” coalition that joined his Labour Party with the liberal conservative VVD and the progressive liberals of D66.

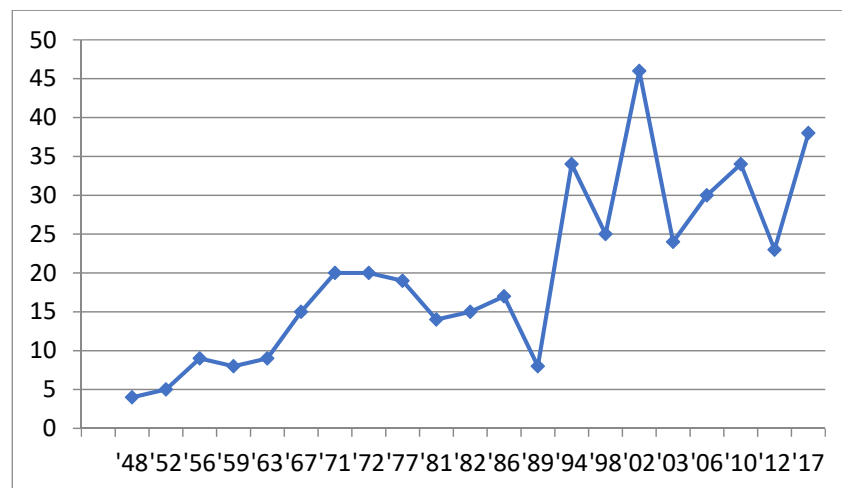
While the purple coalition thus broke the hegemony of the Christian-Democrats, it also indicated that the ideological differences between the main Dutch parties had become very small, leaving little to choose for the average voter.

It is on this sense of a lack of electoral choice and a sense of closed-up elite politics that Pim Fortuijn successfully mobilized in the 2002 election campaign. As is well-known, Pim Fortuijn was shot by an animal activist in the week before the 2002 elections. But it is on the same kind of sentiments that Geert Wilders has been campaigning ever since he left the VVD-party in 2004: a disgust of the establishment and resentment against migrants

(especially Muslim migrants) and against internationalism (especially European integration).

While the governing parties thus demonstrated that all combinations were possible and thus that all party differences were surmountable, voters – like in most Western countries – became ever less loyal to them. In the Netherlands, such loss of loyalty becomes easily visible as there is no threshold for new parties to enter the parliament and there is hence a considerable number of parties competing for the vote. Figure 2 demonstrates how voter volatility has shot up ever since the mid-1990s, with the 2017 elections coming second with 38 of the 150 seats transferred after 2002 when this was 46.

Figure 2: Seat transfers between parties per elections



Presumably the increase of voter volatility also reflects a trend of ideological preferences becoming more diverse and less coherent (cf. Blumenstiel 2014). Voters vary on ever more dimensions. Ideological preferences in terms of left and right have become detached from preferences on ethical issues, on international cooperation, on the environment and on migration. In other words, we find a greater number of ideological combinations and, hence, voters inevitably have to compromise on some issues once they cast their vote on one party rather than another.

5. Populism and identity politics in the 2017 election campaign

The fragmentation of the ideological space in Dutch politics was also clearly apparent in the terms on which parties waged the election campaign towards the 2017 elections. While socio-economic (left-right) differences certainly played a role, parties invoked a wide range of themes to distinguish themselves from the others. Notably, for instance the Socialist Party put the issue of health care in the spotlight and campaigned for rolling back the previous privatization policies in the sector. Similarly, the Greens highlighted climate change-related issues.

Nevertheless, the key issue that overshadowed all others in the 2017 election campaign was the issue of Dutch identity, what it involves and how to demarcate good Dutch citizens from the others. Obviously, this is an issue that reflects above all Geert Wilders' agenda, in which the Dutch identity is systematically opposed to the others of Muslim immigrants and European integration. Wilders' prominence on the Dutch political scene and his high standing in the polls forced most of the other parties to clearly position themselves on the identity issue as well. Most notably, Prime Minister Mark Rutte decided early in the campaign to put out an advertisement in the main Dutch newspapers with a letter to all Dutchmen. Key message of this letter was a call to behave "normally". Notably, this call was not directed against any one misbehaving, but particularly pointed the finger at migrants. Thus, Rutte wrote: "We feel a growing unease when people abuse our freedom to mess things up around here, while they have actually come to our country because of that freedom. People who do not want to adjust, and who reject our habits and values. [...] Behave normally or go away" (Rutte 2017). Clearly, with this message, Rutte sought to appeal directly to voters who potentially would be attracted by Wilders' rhetoric.

But Rutte was not alone in adopting the identity issue. Christian-Democrat leader Sybrand Buma also adopted a harsh tone on migration and went public arguing that Dutch school children should learn the national anthem and sing it while standing. In turn, newly elected Labour leader Lodewijk Asscher gave his own spin to the identity focus by claiming his own kind of "progressive patriotism". Thus, Wilders was extremely successful in ensuring that identity politics, and the question who belongs to the right Dutch people and who does not, became centre stage in the campaign.

The identity focus of the campaign was reinforced when in the week before the elections the Turkish government decided to send Turkish ministers to the Netherlands to hold campaign meetings for the upcoming constitutional referendum in Turkey. While there have been some candidates of Dutch parties who have made a particular effort to get the vote of Dutch

expats, the public campaigning of Turkish AK politicians on Dutch soil came as direct provocation in the midst of the Dutch election campaign. The government and Prime Minister Rutte in particular were clear that this could not be tolerated and when the Turkish ministers did not withdraw voluntarily, they were eventually physically prevented from meeting in the Netherlands.

In the light of the general evolution of Dutch politics, it is important to observe that the identity issue is not just another issue but that it has the potential to become deeply divisive. The reason for this is that the emphasis on particular identities undermines the recognition that modern democratic societies are inherently plural and that politics under those conditions is exactly about creating conditions under which people with competing interests and competing values can live peacefully together nevertheless. In that sense, the identity issue fits perfectly the populist agenda, but it risks undermining the essential ability of political parties to reach out across deep societal differences.

In one of the first academic reflections of the Dutch 2017 elections, Catherine de Vries (2017) demonstrates that identity-related concerns about European integration, migration and national control in international affairs have indeed come to play a prominent role in Dutch voter decisions. Notably, however, De Vries adds that these new concerns “should not necessarily be understood as a cultural backlash, but rather seem a reflection of increased economic insecurity”. The people who are more likely to adopt, what de Vries calls, ‘parochial’ positions tend to be those with lower levels of education and with structural concerns about making ends meet. While these findings underline that cultural and economic concerns are often difficult to unravel in empirically, I would even add disillusionment with the established political order as a third, logically related, feature.

6. Conclusion

In the end, the Dutch elections of 15 March 2017 underline that Dutch politics tends to become ever more fragmented, with the traditional big parties becoming medium-sized, and the need for no less than four parties to form any majority coalition. This tendency is reinforced by the way in which Wilders has led many of the mainstream parties to define themselves in identity terms, and to disassociate themselves from specific groups in Dutch society. One implication of this combination of political fragmentation and the prominence of identity politics is that building a stable government coalition becomes an ever-greater challenge. This is certainly underlined by the rather drawn out process of government formation that followed after the 2017 elections in the Netherlands.

The second implication of the mix of political fragmentation and identity

politics, which is of broader significance for European politics at large, is that even if anti-pluralist populist parties do not prevail, this does not mean they go away. On the contrary, anti-pluralist voices remain prominent in Dutch politics and are essentially waiting in the wings for the established parties to fail. This concerns of course above all Geert Wilders' PVV whose ideal prospect towards the next election might well be a broad-based coalition that leaves him as the main voice of the opposition. However, Wilders is not alone. The Forum voor Democratie is now the second party in parliament that consistently exploits the disillusionment with democratic politics as we know it.

Even if the case of the Netherlands is rather typical and distinct, it thus also raises fundamental questions about the place of anti-pluralist populism across the European continent. The first question is how European democracies can live with the continued presence of anti-pluralist populism in its midst. Although the support for anti-pluralist populists varies from country to country, this is also an urgent question in France, Germany, Austria, Finland, Hungary, Poland and Denmark. Here it is an open question whether populist parties can effectively be socialized into the pluralistic democratic process or whether once they are handed the power they are destined to undermine political pluralism. The only viable strategy here seems an empirical one that continuously monitors these parties on their words and actions: those parties that stand strong for pluralist democracy cannot leave unexposed any move to undermine the essentials of pluralist democracy: basic rights for all, a free and open press, the inviolability of the constitution and the rule of law, and no use of physical intimidation. Anti-pluralist parties often enough play by the game, and at times they may even be accommodated within pluralist institutions. However, their continuous presence should not make it possible for them to move the boundaries on the democratic essentials over time.

Continuous vigilance is no guarantee that anti-pluralist parties will not, sometimes, in some countries, get the upper hand, as they already have in Hungary and Poland. That raises the fundamental question what other European states can and should do when this happens (cf. Clossa and Kochenov 2016). We cannot claim the right to interfere directly in domestic democratic process. However, it is hard to escape the impression that individual EU states as well as the EU as a whole has so far been rather unsuccessful in responding to the developments in Hungary and Poland. In any case, if countries are sliding into anti-pluralism, any turn-around eventually will have to come from within these countries themselves. Hence, an approach that focusses on compliance and insistence on the normative correctness of the European majority is likely to be unproductive. Instead, European responses are best guided by the question what kind of response is likely to be most helpful for pluralist movements in the countries concerned

and to facilitate their return to ascendancy.

In any case, events over the last few years have removed any illusions that the future of Europe will be decided in Brussels. Instead the fate of Europe will be decided in the member states. That is why national elections, and referendums, are of key importance. Europe cannot save individual states – that is something that they can only do themselves. Still, the Europe that is built on societal pluralism and international diversity should not become hostage to the courses adopted by individual member states. Hence, rather than responding to anti-pluralist movements in this or the other country, governments committed to pluralism and diversity are well-advised to form a European core that gathers around a positive agenda in which the basic values of pluralism, freedom and diversity are underlined and actively strengthened.

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