

Provincial Elections in the Netherlands

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1. The Provincial Political System of the Netherlands

The Netherlands is divided into 12 provinces that have deep historical roots. The country originated as a confederation of provinces, aptly called the United Provinces, and the present provinces still partly correspond with those original members of the confederation. However, after the French occupation and the 1813 restauration of independence, the competences of the provinces were largely reduced. Their role is now mainly executive and administrative, as they apply and adapt governmental policies to their respective territories, by coordinating their intervention with both local and national authorities. Their responsibilities, generally shared with other levels of governance, concern for example spatial planning, water management, environment protection, transport and infrastructure, but they are also supposed to stimulate provincial economic development.

Each province has a directly elected provincial council. The members of this council (in Dutch the *Provinciale Statenleden*) are the electors of the provincial executive (the *Gedeputeerde Staten*, whose members cannot be provincial councilors), the executive is chaired by the Commissioner of the King, nominated by national authorities. In line with the strongly fragmented Dutch party landscape, the provincial executives tend to reproduce multi-party coalitions (the cabinets between 2019 and 2023 comprised at least 4 parties).

The newly elected members of the provincial councils also vote (within a period of three months after the provincial elections) for all the 75 members of the First Chamber (the Dutch equivalent of a Senate). The First Chamber traditionally has an oversight function, for example by verifying the constitutionality of legislation introduced by the Second Chamber (the directly elected House of Representatives) but it can only approve or reject such pieces of legislation. Recently, government coalitions have encountered more and more difficulties in obtaining a majority in both houses: the absence of such a majority in the First Chamber has tended to politicize its interventions, and hence also to increase the national dimension of provincial elections (Brueren and Tadema 2019).

Due to a change of the constitution in 2017, besides the provincial councilors, also the elected officials of three Caribbean islands (Bonaire, Saba, and Sint-Eustatius, who have the official status of Dutch municipalities) participate in the election of the members of the First Chamber (the other three Caribbean islands under Dutch authority, Curaçao, Saint Martin and Aruba, have a different status and do not participate in these elections). Since 2022, also Dutch non-resident citizens can vote for a specific electoral college for the election of the First Chamber. All elected members of the provincial councils, as well as the 25 elected members of the college of non-residents, the 9 councilors from Bonaire, and the 5 councilors of Saba and Sint-Eustatius participate to the election of the members of the First Chamber. Their votes, however, are weighed in order to be proportionate to the demographic weight of each province (or island) (see table 1).

Table 1. Weighed voting for First Chamber

Electoral college	Inhabitants	Eligible to vote	Councilors	Weight of vote
South Holland	3.804.737	2.747.402	55	692
North Holland	2.956.223	2.102.298	55	537
North Brabant	2.626.368	1.987.470	55	478
Gelderland	2.133.751	1.618.965	55	388
Utrecht	1.387.657	1.033.686	49	283
Overijssel	1.184.551	913.363	47	252
Limburg	1.128.334	873.557	47	240

Friesland	659.612	519.118	43	153
Groningen	596.163	462.817	43	139
Drenthe	502.120	399.405	43	117
Flevoland	444.850	313.632	41	109
Zeeland	391.142	294.064	39	100
Bonaire	24.090	14.620	9	27
Non-residents	Non applicable	37.455	25	20
Sint Eustasius	3.293	1.941	5	7
Saba	2.035	917	5	4

Source: Kiesraad 2023c

2. The Regional Electoral System

Elections for the provincial councils in the Netherlands are held every four years and take place on the same day in March in all provinces. They concur with the elections of the island councils (the councils of the Caribbean islands Bonaire, Saba, and Sint-Eustatius) as well as with those for the college of non-residents, but never with municipal, national, or European election (Binnema and Vollaard 2021). Since 2015, the elections for the provincial councils also concur with the elections for the *Waterschappen* (regional water authorities), a unique Dutch institution responsible for water management. These water authorities have territorial delimitations determined by the catchment areas of rivers, and rarely correspond with provincial borders. In order to increase electoral participation, these elections are scheduled together with the provincial elections.

The number of seats to be contested in each province depends on its population, hence, the size of councils ranges from 39 seats for provinces with less than 400.000 inhabitants, to 55 seats for those with more than 2.000.000 inhabitants. The seats are allocated according to an open-list based strict proportional system (in which people can vote for only one candidate) without an electoral threshold.¹ Within a list, seats are attributed according

¹ Seats are firstly divided according to the number of times a party reaches the electoral

to the number of preference votes of the respective candidates, although a candidate can only pass candidates placed higher on the list if he/she obtains the so-called preferential threshold, which is 25% of the electoral quota, (i.e. the total number of votes in the province divided by the number of seats attributed to the province). All persons of Dutch nationality aged 18 and above are eligible to vote.

3. Regional Political Competition and Campaign

Provincial elections tend to be second-order elections. They are in the first place considered a test for the national government coalition and determined by national issues, such an effect is reinforced by the fact that the elected provincial councilors are responsible for electing the members of the First Chamber. As a consequence, during the electoral campaign local and provincial issues tend to be overshadowed by national ones, and the members of the provincial estates voted for their national affiliation, not on the basis of local or provincial issues. Therefore, provincial elections often display a vote against the national governing coalition by the electorate. The 2019 elections were thus a victory for a new radical right-wing party, the Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy, FvD), that had no previous provincial representation whatsoever (Brueren and Tadema 2019).

While in municipal elections in the Netherlands local lists often play an important role, this is less the case in provincial elections. Provincial lists nevertheless are present in practically all provinces, generally presenting themselves as representatives of provincial interests. An exception to this rule is the Frisian ethno-regionalist party, the Fryske Nasjonale Partij (Frisian National Party, FNP). The FNP is in the first place focused on the defence of the Frisian language and strives for increased provincial autonomy. It is also a member of the European Free Alliance, the organization of European ethno-regionalist parties. On the contrary, when it comes to the elections for the island councils on the three Caribbean islands, local lists are predominant.

The provincial elections of 2023 are no exception to the predominance of national political dynamics. Since the January 2022 national elections, the Netherlands was governed by the Rutte IV cabinet. This mainly centrist coalition consisting – exactly like the previous Rutte III cabinet – of four parties: the liberal VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), the left-liberal D66 (Democraten 66/

quota, i.e., the number of votes divided by the number of seats available (the so-called full seats). Parties who do not reach the electoral quota can nevertheless obtain rest seats, attributed according to the principle of the highest average.

Democrats 66), the Christen-democrat CDA (Christen Democratisch Appèl/ Christian Democratic Appeal) and the more conservative CU (ChristenUnie/ Christian Union). This coalition, with a narrow majority in the second chamber (77 out of 150 seats), was headed by Marc Rutte from the VVD, Prime Minister since 2010.

Having survived the Covid-crisis and its aftermath, including violent anti-lockdown protests, the cabinet was confronted with the economic consequences of the Ukraine war, as well as with controversies around the excuses it offered for the Dutch colonial past – concerning crimes committed during the wars for Indonesian independence, slavery and Dutch participation in the slave trade. The main topic of contention for the Rutte IV coalition, however, was the so-called nitrogen crisis. This crisis was caused by the inadequate application of the 1992 EU Habitat directive for the protection of nature reserves. The Netherlands is confronted, because of its important industry of cattle breeding, with a vast problem of excessive nitrogen compounds. Environmental organizations have regularly taken the government to court on this issue, and in 2019 a court ruled that the government's regulations (known as the PAS, "Programma Aanpak Stikstof", the Nitrogen Management Programme) were illegal. Since then, the government has rather half-heartedly tried to introduce more stringent regulations of these compounds, most importantly a drastic reduction of livestock, causing important protests of farmers. These protests have intermittently been going on since 2019, and have blocked in most provinces, particularly in the North-East, any execution of such measures. Protests, while disruptive, were mostly peaceful. The protests concerned the new government applications of the PAS, but certainly also expressed a more general distrust of government bureaucracy, colliding with other protest movements such as those against Covid restrictions. They also expressed a hostility towards environmental regulations, and as such reflect the division between industrial farmers (and especially livestock farmers) touched by those measures and environmentalists and a minority of biological farmers.

This context explains why opinion polls predicted an increase in votes for a recently (2019) founded political party, the BoerBurgerBeweging (Farmer-Citizen Movement, BBB). Its main programmatic point was a critique of the plans to diminish the livestock staple and other environmental measures. The party has in fact been founded by a communications firm and it is led by Caroline van der Plas (its only elected member in the Second Chamber), formerly a journalist working for the meat industry. As MP, she has been a constant media presence in recent years. The party itself is subsidized by the agro-industrial sector (Engelen 2023a). The BBB, however, also profiled itself as the voice of the periphery against urban elites. Such profile addressed the

fact that recent governments have been mostly focused on investing in the more affluent and heavily urbanized western part of the Netherlands (the Randstad), leading to a diminished quality of public services in the rest of the country (Engelen 2023a). The BBB is as such yet another example of Dutch right-wing populism that has gained momentum since the success of the List Pim Fortuyn in 2002 (Kešić and Duyvendak 2019). It distinguishes itself, however, from other Dutch populist parties by being less nativist or focused on immigration, more critical of Dutch elites.

The elections for the regional water authorities were also politicized, since the criteria of water management have equally become a topic of controversy, with livestock farmers preferring low water levels especially in peat soils, whereas environmentalists push for a higher water level which lowers CO₂ emissions. However, not all political parties participate as such to those elections. The traditional parties, VVD, CDA, and PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid/Labour Party, social democrat) participate, as well as the two minor Christian parties CU and SGP (the Calvinist Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij/Reformed Political Party), while the BBB also presented lists for each water authority. From the radical right, only JA21 (Juiste Antwoord 2021/Correct Answer 2021) and BVNL (Belang van Nederland/The Interest of the Netherlands), two conservative liberal splinter party from FvD, proposed lists, while from the left the PvdD (Partij voor de Dieren/Party for the animals) also participated. Many local lists also participate to those elections, as well as nation-wide lists that only participate to water authority elections, in particular the progressive ecologist oriented WN (Water Natuurlijk/Water Natural), and the AWB (Algemene Waterschapspartij/ General Water Authority Party), apolitical but also ecological.

4. Turnout and Electoral Results of the March 15th, 2023 Election

Table 2. Participation in 2023 provincial elections, per province

Province	Voters	Total votes	Valid	Blank	Invalid	Participation %
Drenthe	399405	265037	263882	601	554	66,4
Flevoland	313632	164245	163200	588	457	52,4
Friesland	519118	340654	339080	844	730	65,6

Gelderland	1618953	1041952	1036640	3192	2120	64,4
Groningen	462817	289149	287760	792	597	62,5
Limburg	873557	471098	467727	2078	1293	53,4
North Brabant	1987470	1102476	1095904	3977	2595	55,5
North Holland	2102298	1194644	1186512	4448	3684	56,8
Overijssel	913363	594192	591124	1649	1419	65,1
Utrecht	1033686	655813	652494	1894	1425	63,4
Zeeland	294064	183541	182707	434	400	62,4
South Holland	2747402	1497994	1487914	5398	4682	54,5
Total	13265765	7800795	7754944	25895	19956	58,8

Source: Kiesraad 2023a

Participation at the provincial elections of 2023 (58,8%) was slightly higher than in 2019 (56,2%) and much higher than in 2015 (47,8%). The number of blank and invalid votes was negligible (respectively 0,33% and 0,26%). Participation was particularly high in the North-eastern provinces (Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe and Overijssel), somewhat lower in the economically dominant provinces of North and South Holland.

The elections witnessed the expected, but astonishing in its scale, victory of the BBB. With until now only one MP in the Second Chamber and none in the First Chamber, the party managed not only to become the strongest party nation-wide, but also in each of the twelve provinces. While the progress of the party was expected, the scale of its victory nevertheless came as a surprise to all commentators. The results were interpreted as a revolt from the countryside against the city and/or the Randstad, the economically, socially, and culturally dominant conurbation in the Western part of the country. The BBB did particularly well in the North-eastern provinces (also the ones with the highest participation rate), but it even came out as the largest party in the Western provinces, albeit with less advantage.

Most of the other parties did not fare well. Amongst the government parties, the Christian democrat CDA, with traditionally an important countryside electorate, lost more than a third of its seats. The losses of the other coalition partners in terms of seats were more modest (although the losses of VVD

Table 3. Results provincial elections 2023: votes per party (%).

Province	% per party															
	BBB	VVD	GL	PvdA	CDA	PVV	D66	PvdD	SP	JA21	CU	SGP	FVD	VOLT	Local	Other
Groningen	23,5	5,7	9,6	10	4,1	4,7	5,4	5	5,5	1,7	6,3	1,1	2,4	3,8	8,9	2,2
Friesland	27,9	6,7	6,5	10,6	8,7	4,5	3,3	3,4	3,5	2,7	5,3	-	3,6	-	10,1	3,2
Drenthe	33,4	7,7	5,6	9,4	5,9	5,2	3,8	4,2	4,7	2,4	4,9	1	3	2,9	2,8	3
Overijssel	31,5	8	7,4	6,7	8,2	4,9	3,6	3,6	3	3,6	5,9	3,7	2,7	3	1,5	2,9
Flevoland	20,8	10	6,9	7,6	5,1	7,6	5,7	4,5	4,2	4,6	5,9	4,2	4,5	-	4,5	3,8
Gelderland	23,6	10	8,1	8,9	7	4,1	5,3	4,5	3,5	3,5	5,5	5,1	2,6	3,7	2	2,6
Utrecht	13,2	11,9	12,9	6,8	8	4,1	9,3	5,7	2,6	4,3	5,5	3,8	2,1	4,6	1,2	4,2
North Holland	13,6	12,8	11,4	11,1	4	4,7	7,4	7,3	3,4	5,4	2,1	--	3,5	4,5	1,2	7,5
South Holland	13,7	13,1	9,8	7	6,2	6,4	7,5	4,9	3,4	6,1	4,1	4,1	3,6	2,9	-	7,2
Zeeland	19,8	8,9	13,4		11,4	4,8	3,9	3,4	3,3	3,4	4,3	12,4	3	-	4,6	3,2
North Brabant	18,2	14,1	7,7	7,6	6,6	6,8	6,7	3,9	7,6	4,2	1,6		2,8	2,9	4,6	4,6
Limburg	18,5	9,6	8,7	7	9,3	12,7	6,1	3,8	6,7	4,1	0,7		3,4		5,2	4,4
Total	19,2	11,2	9	8,1	6,6	5,8	6,3	4,8	4,2	4,4	3,7	2,5	3,1	3	2,7	4,8
				0,3								0,2				

Source: Kiesraad 2023a

Table 4. Number of seats per party, provincial elections 2023.

Province	Number of seats per party															total	
	BBB	VVD	GL	PvdA	CDA	PVV	D66	PvdD	SP	JA21	CU	SGP	FVD	VOLT	Local		other
Groningen	12	2	5	5	2	2	2	2	2	0	3	0	1	1	4	0	43
Friesland	14	3	3	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	2	-	1	-	5	0	43
Drenthe	17	4	2	4	3	2	1	2	2	1	2	0	1	1	1	0	43
Overijssel	17	4	4	3	4	2	2	1	1	2	3	2	1	1	-	0	47
Flevoland	10	4	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	-	1	1	41
Gelderland	14	6	5	5	4	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	1	2	-	1	55
Utrecht	7	6	7	3	4	2	5	3	1	2	3	2	1	2	0	1	49
North Holland	8	8	7	7	2	3	4	4	2	3	1	-	2	2	0	2	55
South Holland	8	8	6	4	4	4	4	3	2	4	2	2	2	1	0	1	55
Zeeland	9	4	6	5	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	1	-	2	-	39
North Brabant	11	9	5	4	4	4	4	2	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	55	
Limburg	10	5	4	3	5	6	3	2	3	2	0	-	1	-	2	1	47
Total	137	63	51	46	43	34	32	25	23	22	22	16	15	11	17	8	572
			6								1						
Seats lost/won	+ 137	- 17	- 10	- 7	- 29	- 6	- 9	+ 5	- 12	+ 22	- 9	+ 2	- 71	+ 11	+ 2	- 13	572
			+6								=						

Source: Kiesraad 2023a

and D66 in terms of votes compared with the 2022 national elections were important). The largest drop was for the far-right opposition party Forum voor Democratie (FvD), the winner of the 2019 provincial elections, which only kept 15 out of the 86 seats won in 2019, a loss only very partially compensated by the 22 seats won by its more moderate splinter party, JA21. The other radical right-wing party, the PVV (Partij voor De Vrijheid/Party for Freedom), also lost 6 seats. The left-wing opposition parties did not fare well either, with losses in seats for the SP (Socialistische Partij/Socialist Party, radical left and Eurosceptic) and in a lesser measure for the PvdA and GL (GroenLinks/GreenLeft); the two latter parties, however, recuperated votes compared to the 2022 national elections. These losses were somewhat compensated by the gains of two other leftist parties, the PvdD and the new pro-European progressive Volt. Local lists obtained results very similar to those of 2019. The Frisian FNP, the only list with an ethno-regional profile, obtained 27.298 votes (8,1% of the provincial vote), preserving its four seats.

Results were different in the college for non-residents, a college to which the BBB did not participate (Den Haag 2023). The leftist-ecological GL came out as the largest party (18,5%), before the progressive liberals of D66 (16,3%) and the VVD (14,3%). Overall, the left opposition parties performed well here, obtaining 12 of the 25 seats, before the parties of the governmental coalition (9 seats) and the populist right (4 seats). Local lists dominated the elections in the three Caribbean islands. The elections for the regional water authorities equally saw a success for the BBB, which obtained 118 of the 518 seats, followed by the ecological list (Water Natuurlijk, WN) with 97 seats. Compared with the provincial elections, the other participating right-wing populist parties obtained paltry results (a total of 10 seats nationwide), while moderate, local, and ecological lists fared better (Kiesraad 2023b).²

The success of the BBB can be read as in continuity with previous successes of populist right-wing parties that present themselves as anti-establishment. The BBB, however, is definitely more moderate on a number of topics emphasized by PVV and FvD, lacking their hard anti-immigrant focus. In the 2023 provincial elections it seems that overall more moderate right-wing movements, besides BBB also JA21, fared better than the more hard-core PVV and particularly FvD, clearly damaged by the overtly fascist, homophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric of some of its representatives.

² The Dutch electoral authorities do not give a comprehensive overview of the number of seats obtained by each party, the data given here come from Wikipedia (Wikipedia 2023).

Conclusion

After the initial shock over the electoral results petered out, politics initially seemed to return to business as usual, and speculations on a crisis of the national government quickly subsided. Coalition formation at the provincial level was a protracted business. The electoral predominance of the BBB was translated in its participation in all provincial executives except in Utrecht and North Brabant, allied according to the province with both parties from the centre, the left and the right. The BBB also participates in most (but not all) newly formed coalitions to manage water authorities.

Table 5. Election of the members of the First Chamber

Party	Seats	Gains/losses
BBB	16	+ 16
VVD	10	-2
GL	7	-1
PvdA	7	+1
CDA	6	-3
D66	5	-2
PVV	4	-1
PvdD	3	-
JA21	3	+ 3
SP	3	-1
CU	3	-1
FvD	2	-10
Volt	2	+ 2
SGP	2	-
50+ (pensioners' party)	1	-1
OPNL (alliance of local parties)	1	1
Total	75	

Source: Parlement 2023

The elections for the First Chamber proved to be less of a challenge for the parties of the government coalition, which were able by means of strategic voting to save a maximum of seats. With 24 seats in total, they nevertheless lost 8 seats, but they could hope to obtain majorities in the First Chamber either by allying themselves with the BBB, or with GL and PvdA. Theoretically, the latter alliance would allow the government to pass ecological measures, in particular applications of the PAS. The post-electoral months nevertheless have proved that the provincial elections did destabilize the national government. It already looked doubtful that the government coalition (and a reluctant CDA in the first place) would have invested political capital in applying the PAS. The government crisis finally took place in the summer of 2023, around the migration issue. Under pressure from his rank-and-file and perhaps with the hope of recuperating right-wing voters, the PM Rutte (from the VVD) proposed tougher measures on this issue, which were unpalatable to some of his coalition partners. As a consequence, the government fell on July 7th, and new elections for the Second Chamber will be held on November 22, 2023.

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