

# Prime Minister Mark Rutte set to carry Dutch general elections by default

Harm Zonderland  
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Tomorrow, general elections will take place in the Netherlands for the general public. The elections are spread out over three days to reduce social contacts, and voting is currently proceeding for voters diagnosed as vulnerable to COVID-19. The elderly above 70 years old have been encouraged to vote by mail, and voting began yesterday for voters diagnosed as vulnerable to COVID-19.

Internal Affairs Minister Kajsa Ollongren, of the Liberal D66 party, told the news media that should the curfew be extended, it would not be enforced on election days. Ballot offices are open until 9:00 p.m.

The elections are marked by one central contradiction. On the one hand, it is unfolding as the COVID-19 pandemic spins out of control, triggering the deepest social and economic crisis the Netherlands and Europe have seen in decades. Prime Minister Mark Rutte's government is moving aggressively to lift the limited social distancing measures that are in place, even as new, more contagious variants of the virus spread rapidly.

The super-rich have profited immensely from mass deaths as Rutte implemented the European Union's (EU) ruthless "herd immunity" policy. Over 1.1 million have fallen ill, and 16,087 have died, yet primary schools reopened on February 8, and now middle schools are opening their doors one day a week. Rutte said, "We should be prepared to take a little bit more risk." And so corporate profits have kept pouring in. According to business magazine *Quote*, the net worth of the 500 richest Dutch was €186 billion in 2020, up €6 billion from 2019.

On the other hand, Rutte's right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) nevertheless enjoys a massive lead and is set to emerge strengthened from the election.

I&O Research and Ipsos-EenVandaag polls forecast the VVD winning 38 seats (gaining five) and the runner-up, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders 19 (losing one). Rutte's coalition partners would all lose ground: the Christian-Democratic Appeal would win 17 seats (down two), D66 15 seats (down four) and the

Christian Union six votes, up one. The projected fall in the far-right PVV's vote is more than counterbalanced by the far-right Forum for Democracy's (FvD) projected two-seat gain, to four.

Rutte has ruled out a coalition government with Wilders' PVV, and it is expected that he will need to organize a coalition with multiple parties, as in the previous government, in order to obtain a parliamentary majority to form a government.

Examining the Dutch elections, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper wrote that the COVID-19 pandemic had "taken the wind out of Dutch politics" and asked admiringly about Rutte: "What is his secret?"

Rutte's "secret," if it is correct to call it so, is that what the ruling elite has falsely passed off as the "left" is discredited and utterly rotten. Mounting social anger in the Netherlands reflected in mass strikes by health care and education workers in recent years has found no expression in rising support for the Labour Party (PvdA) or the petty-bourgeois ex-Maoist Socialist Party (SP). The SP is set to lose four seats, taking only 10; the PvdA, once a major party of government for the Dutch bourgeoisie, is set to take just 12 seats, up three. GreenLeft is projected to take 12 seats, down two.

In recent decades, they have moved so far to the right that their policies are difficult for working class voters to distinguish between the VVD or even Wilders' PVV. The entire political establishment would have the public believe that immigrants and war refugees are to blame for all social ills.

The SP calls in their election programme for a halt on immigration, an expansion of the police forces and, overall, an utterly nationalist agenda. Wilders, who is somewhat more overt about his intentions, rabidly calls for expelling Muslims and sending the military to quell social unrest.

The SP's reaction is in line with the reactionary response of the entire petty-bourgeois pseudo-left milieu in the Netherlands to the COVID-19 pandemic. No trade union has called for the closure of nonessential businesses and schools,

nor have the unions organised any strike actions against Rutte's murderous herd immunity policy.

Instead, they have ceded the terrain of political opposition to Rutte to the far-right parties, who organised riots demanding an end to social distancing policies. Under these conditions, Rutte has been able to maintain himself, despite deep working class opposition to his reactionary record.

Over the past 10 years, he has led three coalitions, imposing draconian austerity measures on the working class. Housing prices soared, taxes on food and medicine rose and health care was stripped to the bone—as were education, public transport and other social services.

Social security and unemployment benefits were cut, and pensions were not corrected for inflation, even as the retirement age was incrementally increased to 67. Corporate taxes were slashed, while jobs became increasingly insecure due to the proliferation of “flexible” jobs through temp agencies, such as Randstad or Adecco.

Meanwhile, the Rutte government turned the Netherlands into a police surveillance state. *Amnesty International* published a report last year, describing his government's “predictive policing” projects based on camera surveillance and ethnic profiling. Legislation regulating operations of the AIVD and MIVD intelligence agencies was updated in 2017, making it possible for AIVD to collect telecom and internet data on a broad scale—including from innocent people—to find “terrorists.”

This legislation was pushed through in the face of broad popular opposition. An online petition to demand a referendum on the legislation was signed more than 300,000 times, and the referendum produced a large majority against the law. Nevertheless, the new law was adopted. The referendum law was repealed shortly afterwards.

Rutte's coalition officially resigned in January following the exposure of the state's witchhunt of childcare benefits recipients. Parliamentary hearings exposed a ruthless, vindictive state apparatus, that keeps its operations obscure while sharing as little information as possible. This became known as the “Rutte doctrine.”

The social democratic labour party PvdA was also discredited in the child care benefits scandal, as former party leader Lodewijk Asscher was deeply implicated in it. He was minister for social affairs and deputy prime minister between 2012 and 2017, when around 20,000 parents incorrectly had child benefit payments stopped or were ordered to repay benefits after being targeted for bogus fraud investigations.

This “symbolic” resignation has no practical consequences for the Rutte government's ability to ram through right-wing policies. While he now leads a “caretaker” government until a new coalition is formed, parliament gave the coalition a

green light to devise and implement a new policy to “combat the crisis.” The Ministry of Justice also felt free to raise the maximum penalty for manslaughter from 15 years imprisonment to 25.

The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing the decay and rot of the bourgeois political establishment in every country. The United States, the centre of world capitalism, has seen nearly 30 million confirmed cases and suffered over half a million casualties. Across Europe, over 36 million people have been infected during the pandemic—more than double the Dutch population. Over 850,000 lives were lost, more than the population of the city of Amsterdam.

The callous indifference to human suffering of the ruling elites is expressed by their prioritising of private profit over saving lives, and their denunciations of scientific evidence and medical advice.

French President Emmanuel Macron declared at a National Security Council meeting, “I've had enough of scientists who answer my questions about the variants with just one scenario: a new lockdown.” German Bundestag president Wolfgang Schäuble declared that Germany's Constitution “does not exclude us from having to die.” British Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered workers to “accept that there will be more infections, more hospitalisations and therefore, sadly, more deaths.”

The media, trade union apparatus and pseudo-left outfits like *Socialistisch Alternatief* keep the working class tied to the political establishment by peddling illusions that workers can obtain something by working through this corrupt establishment. *Socialistisch Alternatief* recently published “voting advice” on its website, where they urge readers to vote SP “because there is still a part of this party that believes in socialism and is willing to take action for it.”

The policies adopted by the SP throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in fact prove the contrary.

Nothing will be solved by this entirely artificial election, in which every expression of mass social opposition has been strangled or suppressed. The way forward for the working class is to build its own independent organisations of struggle and its own party, a Dutch section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to lead opposition to whatever reactionary government emerges from this election.



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