

Religion and Identity at the 2017 Dutch Elections

Written by Nicholas Morieson

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NICHOLAS MORIESON, MAR 26 2017

The 2017 Dutch elections were often framed as a 'test' of the strength of right-wing populism in Europe. If Geert Wilders' anti-Islam and anti-EU Party For Freedom (PVV) emerged victorious, some commentators mused, then there was an excellent chance that Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right French National Front, would herself win the first round of Presidential voting at the coming French elections – and maybe win the Presidency as well. And from there, well, who knew how far right-wing populism might spread?

As the results of the Dutch election came in, it quickly became clear that Wilders' PVV had failed to achieve anything close to the highest number of votes. Instead, the incumbent centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) achieved by far the largest share, winning 33 seats (at the most recent count) – 13 more than its nearest rival.

In his victory speech, VVD leader and current Prime Minister Mark Rutte described his party's win as a defeat for Wilders, and for the kind of populism he espouses. Much of the media's reporting of the elections has echoed Rutte's interpretation, and has focused on the PVV's collapse in support from 2016, when the party seemed on track to win the elections.

But is this the best way of understanding what happened? The fact of the matter is that the PVV received the second largest share of the vote and have gained an extra five seats in parliament. The VVD, on the other hand, lost 8 seats. But perhaps most significantly, and due in part to Wilders' influence, Dutch politics has moved significantly to the right.

The 2017 Dutch election was largely fought on cultural and religious identity issues, reflecting both Wilders' influence but also a general unease with religious immigrants, particularly in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis which saw more than a million mostly Muslim immigrants arrive in Europe.

Wilders is of course famous for his anti-Muslim stance. He claims that Europe is being taken over by the "totalitarian" political doctrine of Islam, and that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with "Judeo-Christian and Humanist" Western values. One of his campaign slogans, pasted across his Twitter page, is "Stop Islam!"

The popularity of the PVV throughout 2015 and 2016 forced a response from other right-wing parties. Rutte, for example, began to change his style and rhetoric to match Wilders' aggressively anti-immigrant stance. He began to talk more about protecting Dutch values – liberalism, secularism, and democracy – from religious extremists. Rutte began his campaign for re-election by telling pro-Erdogan Turkish protesters in Rotterdam to go back to Turkey if they weren't willing to embrace Dutch values. Immigrants, he later remarked, must "act normal or go away."

The centre-right Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) too began to focus more on defending Dutch identity. For example, CDA leader Sybrand Buma called for all school children to sing the national anthem each morning. When asked if Muslims were a threat to Dutch identity Buma remarked that while not a threat Islam provided no cultural "enrichment". In a TV debate with the leaders of other Dutch parties Buma spoke of the beauty of the Dutch national anthem, the need for a new approach to immigration, and called for the Muslim community to do more to fight extremism in their midst.

Wilders himself has described the VVD's and CDA's increasing focus on Dutch identity as an attempt to copy his own

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style. There is certainly some truth to this. Yet while we can safely say that Wilders has moved Dutch politics rightward, there remains a great deal of difference between his party and the parties of the centre-right.

While Wilders, Rutte, and Buma have all emphasised the importance of preserving Dutch identity, Wilders party defines this identity in a markedly different and narrower fashion than the others. Wilders' conceives of Dutch identity as being based upon 'Judeo-Christian and Humanist' values. He believes that Islam is at heart a political system which – unlike Christianity – can never be reconciled with secular humanism. Therefore he claims that Muslims must be excluded from the Netherlands so as to protect the religion derived values most dear to Dutch people.

For all their assertions about the need for immigrants to conform to Dutch norms, neither Rutte nor Buma argue that Muslims cannot become, in some sense, Dutch. Nor do they link Judeo-Christian values with the secular liberal present, or claim Islam is wholly antithetical to the Western cultural and religious tradition, in quite the way Wilders does.

While Wilders has had a significant influence over Dutch politics, he has failed to convince most voters that Muslims are incompatible with the Netherlands' post-Christian liberal culture. Be this as it may, the results of the 2017 Dutch election show that issues of identity – religious and cultural – brought about by Muslim immigration to Europe continue to profoundly affect European politics. Indeed, the focus of European political attention now moves to France, where elections are due to be held in April, and where Front National leader Marine Le Pen and *les Républicains* candidate François Fillon have made religious identity foremost among election issues.

About the author:

Nicholas Morieson is a Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of numerous journal articles and three books, most recently *Weaponizing Civilizationalism for Authoritarianism: How Turkey, India, Russia, and China Challenge Liberal Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).