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# THE IMPACT OF POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTIES ON IMMIGRATION POLICY AGENDAS: A LOOK AT THE NETHERLANDS

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By Tjitske Akkerman

# THE IMPACT OF POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTIES ON IMMIGRATION POLICY AGENDAS

## A Look at the Netherlands

By Tjitske Akkerman

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## Executive Summary

Following the more modest than expected results of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) in the 2017 Dutch parliamentary elections, officials around the world breathed a sigh of relief. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic had pinned their hopes on the Dutch election to turn the populist tide. But although the election result was lauded as a victory for mainstream liberal democratic values, the result obscures the more complex, subtle ways the PVV has exerted power. Keeping populists out of government does not keep them from effecting lasting change on immigration and integration policy.

From their initial electoral breakthroughs in the 1990s, populist radical-right parties have dramatically increased their political influence, electoral support, and visibility in Western Europe. Put simply, they have become important players on the political stages of several European countries. Although they vary in some respects, these parties unite around an ideology of exclusive nationalism that has three defining features: a desire to dramatically reduce immigration, a belief that national identity is under threat from foreign cultures, and a deep distrust of elites. Although it is still rare for such parties to win elections outright, they have nonetheless influenced public opinion, set the immigration and integration agenda, and forced mainstream parties to take a position on these issues—or even claim certain populist policies as their own.

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A closer look at the Netherlands, and specifically the impact of the PVV on immigration and integration policy, illustrates both the direct and indirect influence populist radical-right parties can have on migration policymaking. The significant influence of the PVV in setting the agenda and pressuring mainstream center-right parties to move further to the right on such issues is typical of the indirect influence electorally successful radical-right parties have had in Western Europe. Similarly, the difficulties the PVV has encountered when presented with the opportunity to directly influence policy as a formal support party of a minority cabinet mirror those other populist radical-right parties have faced upon entering government for the first time.

### A. Limited Direct Influence

While populist radical-right parties have rarely joined national governments in Western Europe, their access to executive power is increasing. All told, from 2000 to 2015, populist radical-right parties have been included in or supported 17 coalition governments across seven European countries. In most of these governments, they served as junior partners to mainstream parties on the right, receiving ministerial posts and policy commitments in the form of coalition agreements. The degree of their involvement has varied. For example, the Danish People's Party has supported governments almost continuously since 2001, while the Austrian Freedom Party was out of government from 2006 to 2017 despite a strong showing in the polls during this period.

Even when they have succeeded in becoming government partners, the recent record of populist radical-right parties has often been marred by minimal policy successes, in-fighting, and, ultimately, diminished public support. While the fundamental ethos at the heart of their existence—restrict immigration to protect the nation—affords them a strong brand while outside government, it is less amenable to the rough and tumble of realpolitik. Stark commitments may win supporters, but do not easily lend themselves to political



compromise and may contradict constitutional or European legal norms. For instance, as a support partner to the first Mark Rutte cabinet, the PVV pushed for a number of measures, including restrictions on family reunification, that would have required changes to EU law. While the PVV was able to achieve some limited success, it ultimately pulled the plug on the coalition following a decline in public support and internal dissent (thus estranging itself from potential future government allies).

The electoral business model of populist parties—at least when it comes to direct influence in government—is therefore somewhat flawed: they promise radical changes that are near impossible to realize once they enter government. Moreover, as junior partners they tend to have limited influence on policy agreements and often wrestle with internal tensions between their more fundamentalist and moderate wings while in office. Their limited impact in office then upsets their supporters, eager for a shake-up of traditional elite politics.

### **B. Greater Indirect Influence**

The real power of populist parties may lie outside government, through indirect influence. Of political parties, populists frequently make the most negative claims about the effects of immigration, and thus profit from any perceived loss of government control over migration flows. As the EU migration and refugee crisis reached its climax in late 2015, the PVV was predicted to win 25 percent of the vote in the Netherlands, which would have given it the most seats in parliament. While this would not have guaranteed it a role in government, the possibility pressured mainstream center-right parties to adopt more restrictive positions on immigration and Islam to compete. In the 2017 Dutch elections, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) proposed a ban on foreign governments financing mosques and Islamic organizations, while the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) proposed outlawing burqas in public and making it a crime to enable or engage in unauthorized residence in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, both mainstream parties employed a strategy of exclusion: they delegitimized the PVV as a serious government player by refusing to consider it as a coalition partner, even while borrowing some of the party's rhetoric on national identity and "ordinary people." In this fashion, populist radical-right parties such as the PVV can push their policy agenda into the mainstream even without winning office.

### **C. Mainstream Pushback**

Despite fluctuating electoral fortunes, populist radical-right parties may continue to set the immigration and integration agenda. As these parties mature and learn how to work in government, they may become smoother operatives, able to adapt to the demands of office and to work the system to their advantage. The PVV, for instance, appears to have learned from its predecessor, the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), that it takes time to build up an organization. Moreover, the spectrum of available coalition parties is widening in some countries, which may strengthen their bargaining power as they offer themselves as possible allies. Europe's increased political fragmentation leaves many mainstream parties facing the reality of having to govern alongside populist radical-right parties; in some cases, the best a coalition government can hope for is to moderate extremist views and promote compromise. Yet, including radical-right parties as coalition partners in office has only incidentally had moderating effects on their key positions in the long term.

An alternative strategy some mainstream parties have adopted with the aim of defeating populist radical-right parties and luring their voters away is to ostracize them. Here they need to tread carefully. Although it is important that mainstream parties reach out to radical-right voters and acknowledge their concerns, they should do so without pandering to them. The Dutch experience shows that when mainstream parties emulate the far right's negative sentiments on refugees and immigrants, this can compromise their ability to set out pragmatic policy proposals and effectively communicate the tradeoffs of immigration decisions. When Dutch center-right parties went out of their way to appeal to far-right voters, they missed the



opportunity to firmly delegitimize xenophobic messages and neglected the many voters in the middle who do not have outspoken negative views about immigration. By counting on winning (back) voters from the far right, the center-right parties widened the gap with mainstream public opinion and increased rather than diminished the polarization between the groups at the margins. As this case illustrates, exclusionary strategies that pander to radical-right voters can come at a high cost.

Although the PVV did not come out of the 2017 national election as the largest party, despite strong polling numbers during the campaign, this should not be viewed as a resounding success for its center-right rivals. The radical-right party is still a key player in shaping both the immigration policy agenda and public discourse about these issues.

## I. Introduction

Populist radical-right parties have been a driving force in the development of recent immigration policy in Western Europe. Over the past three decades, they have attracted growing electoral support in most countries in the region, and immigration issues have become increasingly politicized. While the electoral success of radical-right parties varies by nation, on average their vote share has increased, with the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Swiss People's Party (SVP), and French National Front (FN) all winning more than 20 percent of the vote in recent parliamentary or presidential elections.<sup>1</sup>

For many populist radical-right parties, immigration and integration are signature issues. What unites these parties is a core ideology of exclusive nationalism, coupled with a distrust of “elites” and a claim to represent “ordinary people.” This brand of nationalism translates into a policy platform that promises to protect so-called national culture by keeping out new immigrants and taking an anti-Islam stance.<sup>2</sup> At the height of the European Union's 2015–16 refugee and migration crisis, populist radical-right parties capitalized on public anxieties about immigration, especially from Muslim-majority nations such as Syria, capturing nearly one-third of the vote in some countries.

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The success of populist radical-right parties in Western Europe should not be overstated, however. Over the past decade, electoral support for some of these parties has declined (see recent election results for Belgium's Flemish Interest Party [VB] and the United Kingdom Independence Party [UKIP]), while others have disappeared altogether (e.g., the Pim Fortuyn List [LPF] in the Netherlands). And such parties are not electorally successful across the board. For example, there are no established populist radical-right parties in Spain.

1 The Danish People's Party (DF), the Finns Party (PS), the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), and the Progress Party in Norway (FRP) have also performed strongly in recent elections.

2 Based on existing studies, this study identifies 21 populist radical right-wing parties that have gained representation in national parliaments or the European Parliament. See Appendix B.



Behind the varying levels of support for these parties across Western Europe are an array of decisive factors. These include supply-side factors, such as mainstream party positions, the role of the media, and national restrictions on xenophobic or extremist groups, as well as the leadership and organization of the radical-right parties themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the recent media coverage of populist radical-right parties has focused on election results alone. But beyond their electoral performance, these parties are helping to shape the policy agenda on immigration and integration across much of Western Europe. Several have managed to enter national governments by joining coalitions with center-right parties (see Appendix B), and many more have affected immigration and integration policies despite never entering government.

This report looks beyond the electoral results of these parties to examine their broader impact on immigration policy, assessing to what extent, in what ways, and under which conditions they have been able to influence immigration policymaking in Western Europe. The Netherlands offers a particularly compelling case study in this regard as it illustrates the difficulties radical-right parties often have delivering on policy promises when they enter government for the first time, as well as their relative strengths in influencing immigration and integration policy agendas indirectly through electoral competition. This report thus takes an in-depth look at developments in the Netherlands since the early 2000s to explore the direct and indirect impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policymaking. It concludes with recommendations for mainstream policymakers in Europe seeking to better navigate this changing political landscape.

## II. How Do Populist Radical-Right Parties Influence Immigration Policymaking?

Accessing executive power is just one, direct way that populist radical-right parties may influence immigration policymaking. Their direct and indirect paths of influence may be summarized as follows:

- **Direct influence.** Populist radical-right parties can directly influence immigration policymaking by holding executive power. Thus far, in Western Europe these parties have only entered government in coalitions by gaining ministerial posts or formally supporting a minority government. As support parties or as governing parties they can wield direct influence through their input on coalition agreements and budgets.
- **Indirect influence.** Electoral success provides populist radical-right parties with indirect influence over the policies of more mainstream parties that may enter power. Center-right parties in particular have felt growing electoral pressure from populist radical-right parties in recent years. They have been seen to shift their agendas or policy programs closer to those of their populist radical-right competitors in order to win back voters or prevent more voters from defecting.

An analysis of the impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policymaking must take both types of influence into account. Although it is difficult to observe or measure indirect influence, it is possible to assess correlations between the electoral power of populist radical-right parties and mainstream parties' shifts in position on immigration and integration issues. Electoral support for populist radical-right parties and their policy platforms, and the accompanying media attention,

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007).





can make it difficult for other parties to ignore the immigration issues at the heart of many of their campaigns. When these electoral competitors, in turn, place greater emphasis on immigration issues, this can reflect the indirect influence of populist radical-right parties. Yet these shifts cannot be taken as evidence of causal relationships in and of themselves, since other motives may drive the actions of mainstream parties. Public opinion, in particular, is an important factor that should be taken into account when analyzing the evolution of mainstream parties' positions on immigration policy. This report will examine the direct and indirect influence of populist radical-right parties on immigration policymaking in Western Europe before focusing on a specific example from the Netherlands.

## A. Direct Influence on Immigration Policymaking

Since the early 2000s, various populist radical-right parties have entered governments, either by formally joining the governing coalition or by agreeing to support minority governments.<sup>4</sup> When the FPÖ first entered government in 2000, 14 EU Member States responded by imposing sanctions on the Austrian government. These sanctions, however, did not last long and soon more populist radical-right parties entered government elsewhere in Europe. In Italy,<sup>5</sup> Austria, and Switzerland, such parties became cabinet members, and in Denmark and the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party (DF) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) agreed to formally support minority governments without joining the cabinet. The trend of populist parties joining government has continued since then. For example, the Finns Party joined a government coalition in Finland in 2015, and the more moderate populist Progress Party (FrP) joined a coalition with the Conservative Party in Norway in 2013.<sup>6</sup> Many of these parties have participated in multiple coalitions. In all, 17 Western European governments included or were supported by populist radical-right parties between 2000 and 2015. In most countries in the region, however, their participation in national government has not yet been an option.

In a few cases, populist radical-right parties have participated in governments across multiple years, and as a result have played an influential role in setting immigration and integration policy. The DF supported minority cabinets continuously between 2001 and 2011, and again since 2015. During this period, Denmark has become a key proponent of immigration restrictions. As a support party, the DF agreed to back government policies included in the coalition agreement in return for the option of providing input on decisions that touched on party priorities, such as immigration. Avenues to provide input on immigration policies included participation in legislative agreements, the setting of state budgets, and the early stages of preparing legislation.<sup>7</sup> In Switzerland, the SVP has long been a part of federal government, although the party only became radical right around the turn of the millennium, as it turned its focus to immigration issues. The Swiss political system includes all major parties in the federal government, independent of election results, and allows referenda to be held on popular initiatives or proposed legislation (or amendments). The SVP has used such referenda to launch various initiatives, such as the automatic deportation of foreign criminals without appeal (rejected in 2016), a prohibition of the construction of minarets (accepted by a majority of the electorate in 2009), and curbs on EU immigration (passed in 2014).<sup>8</sup>

4 For details of these election outcomes, see Appendix A.

5 In Italy there had already been a short-lived coalition government that included a populist radical-right party, the Northern League, in 1994.

6 The Progress Party is a borderline case; Cas Mudde and others describe it as a neoliberal populist party. See Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. See also Anders Ravik Jupkås, "The Taming of the Shrew: How the Progress Party (Almost) Became Part of the Mainstream," in *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?* eds. Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange, and Matthijs Rooduijn (London: Routledge, 2016).

7 Flemming Juul Christiansen and Helene Helboe Pedersen, "Minority Coalition Governance in Denmark," *Party Politics* 20, no. 6 (2014): 940–49.

8 Agence France-Presse, "Swiss Vote 'No' to Automatic Expulsion of Foreign Criminals," *The Telegraph*, February 29, 2016, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/12177234/Swiss-vote-no-to-automatic-expulsion-of-foreign-criminals.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/12177234/Swiss-vote-no-to-automatic-expulsion-of-foreign-criminals.html); Nick Cumming-Bruce and Steven Erlanger, "Swiss Ban Building of Minarets on Mosques," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/world/europe/30swiss.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/world/europe/30swiss.html); Ian Traynor, "Switzerland Backs Immigration Quotas by Slim Margin," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2014, [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/09/swiss-referendum-immigration-quotas](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/09/swiss-referendum-immigration-quotas).



But most populist radical-right parties struggle to deliver when in office. They rarely remain in power for long and are often weakened by internal divisions. The PVV supported a minority government formed after the 2010 Dutch election, but internal divisions led it to leave this coalition in 2012—prompting the premature break-up of the cabinet. Its predecessor, the LPF, joined the government following the 2002 elections, but internal conflicts within the party led to the collapse of the government after three months. Similarly, the FPÖ entered government following the 1999 Austrian elections, but due to its internal divisions the cabinet formed with the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) did not last a full term. The FPÖ was plagued by problems due to a split between the party’s base and its more moderate federal ministers and leadership.<sup>9</sup> After three years, most of the FPÖ ministers resigned, and voters frustrated by the party’s poor performance in office abandoned it in the subsequent election, with the result that its vote share fell from 27 percent to 10 percent. As these examples show, it can be incredibly difficult for populist radical-right parties to transition from opposition to office.<sup>10</sup>

One reason for this may be their relatively weak bargaining position in coalition negotiations and in cabinet meetings. Since their radical-right stance on immigration issues gives them few coalition choices, without exception they have governed with center-right parties—almost always entering government as junior coalition partners. (Switzerland’s SVP remains the only populist radical-right party in Western Europe to be the senior party in government, since it became the largest party in Switzerland in 1999.) Populist radical-right parties have to compromise with mainstream coalition partners, and it can be difficult to translate an often highly radical position into policy. To gain—and remain in—office, they sometimes need to make significant concessions. In early 2017, the Finns Party split while in government following internal tensions about its moderate course, including the toning down of its anti-immigration rhetoric. Its radical wing left government, while the more moderate wing (“Blue Reform”) remained.

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Overall, the direct impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policymaking in Western Europe should not be overstated. Their relatively weak positions in government and difficulties adapting to office can contribute to a decline in electoral support. Their voters also tend to be more averse to compromise than supporters of mainstream parties. Populist radical-right parties are therefore more vulnerable than mainstream parties to the negative effects of incumbency.<sup>11</sup>

## **B. Indirect Influence on Immigration Policymaking**

While it is still exceptional for populist radical-right parties to enter government—and they tend to find it difficult to deliver when they do—their impact on policymaking is far from marginal. Even when populist radical-right parties are not in a position to enter a coalition, their electoral success can pressure governments or center-right parties to move to the right on immigration and integration issues. Mainstream parties, and particularly those on the center right, may seek to prevent electoral defection to populist radical-right parties by taking over as much of their electoral appeal as possible.

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9 Richard Heinisch, “Success in Opposition—Failure in Government: Explaining the Performance of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Public Office,” *West European Politics* 26, no. 3 (2003): 91–130.

10 Tjitske Akkerman and Sarah L. de Lange, “Radical Right Parties in Office: Incumbency Records and the Electoral Cost of Governing,” *Government and Opposition* 47, no. 4 (2012): 574–96.

11 Stijn Van Kessel, *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).



Public debates on immigration and integration in Western Europe have become increasingly negative in recent decades, but populist radical-right parties stand out for making the most negative claims: for example, linking poor integration and liberal border policies to the threat of crime and terrorism, and highlighting Muslim immigration as a threat to national culture and values.<sup>12</sup> At times of crisis, this approach can gain traction with voters. In the early 1990s, mainstream parties started to pay more attention to these claims, but this peaked following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The attacks incited intense public debates about immigration and integration in various countries, helping to pave the way for populist radical-right parties to push an anti-Islam message. In the Netherlands, for instance, this resulted in a stunning 2002 electoral breakthrough for the LPF, which had framed Islam as an anti-Western, illiberal political ideology. While the salience of these issues waned following the financial and economic crisis of 2008,<sup>13</sup> during the European refugee and migration crisis of 2015 and 2016 there was a surge in support for radical-right parties, who were well positioned to profit from the moment and to mobilize their anti-immigration message. Although crises do not always provide perfect storms, the 2015–16 crisis magnified already widespread fears of immigration from non-Western countries and enabled populist radical-right parties to further shape the narrative on this and related issues.

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*On several occasions, mainstream parties facing growing support for populist radical-right parties have adopted more restrictive positions.*

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There is a widely held consensus that populist radical-right parties have played a key role in both the politicization of immigration and in framing how immigration is perceived.<sup>14</sup> Many European governments and mainstream political parties are under pressure to take a harder line on these issues. Populist radical-right parties' increasing vote shares go hand in hand with center-right (and some center-left) parties adoption of more restrictive positions on immigration and integration.<sup>15</sup> On several occasions, mainstream parties facing growing support for populist radical-right parties have adopted more restrictive positions

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- 12 Sarah Meyer and Sieglinde Rosenberger, "Just a Shadow? The Role of Radical Right Parties in the Politicization of Immigration, 1995–2009," *Politics and Governance* 3, no. 2 (2015): 1–17; Michelle H. Williams, *The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties in West European Democracies* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Gabriella Lazaridis, ed., *Security, Insecurity and Migration in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011); Andrew Geddes and Peter Scholten, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe* (Washington, DC: Sage, 2016).
- 13 In contrast to the refugee crisis, the preceding financial and economic crisis did not result in a significant surge in support for populist radical-right parties. Among the hardest-hit countries, far-right parties profited in only Italy and Greece. See Enrique Hernandez and Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Electoral Consequences of the Financial and Economic Crisis in Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 2 (2016): 203–24.
- 14 Tjitske Akkerman, "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition in Western Europe: A Fine-Grained Analysis of Party Positions over the Past Two Decades," *Party Politics* 21, no. 1 (2015): 54–67; Gallya Lahav and Virginie Guiraudon, "Actors and Venues in Immigration Control: Closing the Gap between Political Demands and Policy Outcomes," *West European Politics* 29, no. 2 (2006): 201–23; Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "From the Euro to the Schengen Crises: European Integration Theories, Politicization, and Identity Politics," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 1 (2017): 83–108.
- 15 Parties of the left have felt less electoral pressure from the new anti-immigration parties, but social-democratic parties are not immune to native working-class voters defecting to populist radical-right parties. However, as social-democratic parties also profit from their electoral appeal to immigrants, they tend to prefer inertia with respect to immigration policy. When center-left parties govern, their immigration policymaking most often tends to deviate from that of right-wing parties. Center-left cabinets or "grand coalitions" of center-left and center-right parties tend to follow a relatively open and cosmopolitan approach to immigration and integration. See Akkerman, "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition in Western Europe"; Bonnie M. Meguid, "Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 347–59; Joost Van Spanje, "Contagious Parties: Anti-Immigration Parties and their Impact on Other Parties' Immigration Stances in Contemporary Western Europe," *Party Politics* 16, no. 5 (2010): 563–86; Martin A. Schain, "Commentary: Why Political Parties Matter," *Journal of European Public Policy* 15, no. 3 (2008): 465–70.



on immigration.<sup>16</sup> For example, in the United Kingdom both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party recently tried to win back UKIP voters (and prevent further defections) by supporting more controls on immigration.

Populist radical-right parties arguably have influenced immigration policymaking indirectly through electoral pressure on center-right parties. Since the early 2000s, center-right government coalitions have pursued restrictive immigration policies comparable to those of coalitions including populist radical-right parties.<sup>17</sup> But attributing causation remains difficult. While there is a positive correlation between the electoral growth of populist radical-right parties and center-right parties taking more restrictive positions on immigration, another possibility is that center-right parties may be reacting independently to voter concerns.<sup>18</sup> The Conservative Party in the United Kingdom and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Netherlands, for example, took a tough line on immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively—that is, before populist radical-right parties gained electoral success in these countries. And center-right parties have sometimes continued this stance at times when they face little competition from the radical right. Changes in the positions of center-right parties thus cannot consistently be chalked up to the influence of populist radical-right parties, even indirectly.

### III. Populist Radical-Right Parties and Immigration Policymaking in the Netherlands

The case of the Netherlands offers a typical example of the difficulties Western European populist radical-right parties have had when seeking to directly influence policies in office, and of the opportunities for indirect influence they have when in opposition. Since the early 2000s, two such parties, the LPF and the PVV, have played an important role in shaping the immigration and integration policy agenda in the Netherlands, from both inside and outside government. During the 1980s, the Netherlands still championed a multiculturalist approach that emphasized cultural diversity, but starting in the mid-1990s, an emphasis on integration and adaptation to Dutch norms and values increased.<sup>19</sup> As noted above, concerns about integration and the (in)compatibility of Islam and Western culture had already been voiced by the VVD in the early 1990s. But as the VVD moved to the center again in the late 1990s, this opened up electoral space on the far-right side of the political spectrum, which the LPF capitalized on.

In the 2002 national election, the three-month-old LPF entered the Dutch political scene with 17 percent of the vote, becoming the second largest party of the country. Its leader, Pim Fortuyn, advocated the view that immigration—and, particularly, immigration from Muslim-majority countries—threatened the cohesion of Dutch society. The LPF entered into a coalition government with the center-right VVD and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), with a coalition agreement calling for a more restrictive immigration policy and for permanent residence to be made contingent on successful integration. However, internal conflicts following the murder of Pim Fortuyn just before the election led the coalition government to fall apart after just three months, and the LPF quickly lost support. But even though the cabinet had little time to enact its policy platform, the dominant view in the Netherlands came to be that integration policies had fundamentally failed—a key LPF contention.

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16 Joost Van Spanje and Nan Dirk de Graaf, "How Established Parties Reduce Other Parties' Electoral Support: The Strategy of Parroting the Pariah," *West European Politics* 41, no. 1 (2017): 1–27.

17 Tjitske Akkerman, "Comparing Radical Right Parties in Government: Immigration and Integration Policies in Nine Countries (1996–2010)," *West European Politics* 35, no. 3 (2012): 511–29

18 Ibid.; Tim Bale, "Turning Round the Telescope: Centre-Right Parties and Immigration and Integration Policy in Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* 15, no. 3 (2008): 315–30; Kyung Joon Han, "The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties on the Positions of Mainstream Parties Regarding Multiculturalism," *West European Politics* 38, no. 3 (2015): 557–76.

19 María Bruquetas-Callejo, Blanca Garcés-Mascreñas, Rinus Penninx, and Peter Scholten, "Policymaking Related to Immigration and Integration: The Dutch Case" (working paper 15, IMISCOE, Rotterdam, January 2007).



When the LPF subsequently lost support in the 2003 election, and was dissolved in 2008, new populist radical-right parties were eager to fill its shoes. The center-right VVD had already moved right on immigration and integration issues during the 2002 election to prevent the defection of its voters to the LPF, but the VVD once again faced serious competition when Geert Wilders, a former VVD member of parliament, established the radical-right PVV in 2006.

The PVV soon became an electoral force that could not be ignored. In the 2006 elections, Geert Wilders managed to gain an unexpected 5.9 percent of the vote and nine seats in parliament in the Lower House (Tweede Kamer). The party soon began to build its profile by adopting stances on immigration, integration, and Islam that were more radical than the positions of the LPF. In its election manifesto of 2010, the party proposed a ban on the Koran, a halt on the building of mosques, a tax on headscarves, and a ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries.<sup>20</sup> Analysis of PVV parliamentary members' voting patterns makes clear that the party was also tough on immigration in practice; the PVV consistently defended the most restrictive positions on this issue.<sup>21</sup> In the 2010 national election, the PVV became the third-largest party (with 15.5 percent of the vote). While its vote share fell in the next national election, in September 2012, it partly recovered this loss in March 2017 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. PVV Performance in Local, National, and European Elections, 2006–17**

Year	Provincial Council Results	National Parliament Results	European Parliament Results
2006		5.9%	
2009			17.0%
2010		15.5%	
2011	12.4%		
2012		10.1%	
2014			13.3%
2017		13.1%	

Source: Nationale Kiesraad, "Databank Verkiezingsuitslagen," accessed September 1, 2017, [www.kiesraad.nl](http://www.kiesraad.nl).

The PVV has had a significant and enduring impact on interparty competition and immigration policy almost from the beginning. It exerted direct influence on immigration policy between 2010 and 2012, when it was a formal support party of the first Mark Rutte cabinet. Before and after this period, the PVV has also indirectly influenced immigration policymaking through its electoral competition with the center-right parties VVD and CDA. In the buildup to the March 2017 national election, the PVV's electoral pressure on the center-right parties was extraordinarily high, with polls suggesting that for the first time, the PVV had a chance of becoming the largest party in the Netherlands. The January–March 2017 campaign period can thus be viewed as a litmus test of the party's indirect influence on the immigration and integration agendas of the country's center-right parties.

### A. The Direct Influence of the PVV in Government, 2010–12

After the PVV came third in the 2010 election, the CDA and VVD were unsure what to do. While the VVD supported forming a coalition with the PVV, members of the CDA were deeply divided, particularly over the PVV's lack of support for freedom of religion, and it almost split the party. After tumultuous and complex negotiations, the CDA finally agreed to enter into a coalition with the VVD and PVV.

20 Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), *De agenda van hoop en optimisme. Een tijd om te kiezen: PVV 2010–2015* (The Hague: PVV, 2010), [www.parlement.com/9291000/d/2010\\_pvv\\_verkiezingsprogramma.pdf](http://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/2010_pvv_verkiezingsprogramma.pdf).

21 Simon Pieter Otjes, "Imitating the Newcomer: How, When and Why Established Political Parties Imitate the Policy Positions and Issue Attention of New Political Parties in the Electoral and Parliamentary Arena: The Case of the Netherlands" (doctoral dissertation, Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Leiden University, October 2012), 216.



Thus, the PVV became a semi-coalition partner to the CDA and VVD, and a “support party” to the first Rutte cabinet. It was formally tied to the governing coalition parties through a special policy agreement (*Gedoogakkoord*), which set out policy objectives and the areas in which the PVV would support the government.<sup>22</sup> The PVV committed itself to voting in favor of cabinet proposals in four domains (immigration and integration, crime and security, elder care, and finance) and to abstaining from supporting motions of no confidence proposed by opposition parties.<sup>23</sup> The agreement included a paragraph in which the parties agreed to disagree about Islam, enabling the PVV to continue advertising its radical anti-Islam message.

Under this arrangement, the PVV gained access to executive power and could directly influence immigration and integration policies. The agreement promised a considerable tightening of these policies, including:

- A reduction in immigration by pursuing reforms to a number of EU Directives. Proposed reforms included placing a greater burden of proof on asylum seekers;<sup>24</sup> imposing restrictions on family reunification (limiting the sponsorship of partners to those age 24 or above, increasing education qualifications, and raising income requirements to 120 percent of the minimum wage);<sup>25</sup> raising integration requirements to obtain a permanent residence permit;<sup>26</sup> ending Member States’ ability to enact mass regularizations of irregular immigrants; and revoking the Dutch citizenship of naturalized citizens who have held a Dutch passport for fewer than five years and are convicted of a crime punishable by a jail sentence of 12 years or more.<sup>27</sup>
- Heightened integration requirements for immigrants.
- A general ban on wearing a burqa or other face veils.
- Restrictions on dual nationalities, with the intention that holding only one nationality would become the norm and a limited number of exceptions would be granted in cases where choosing one nationality would be legally impossible.<sup>28</sup>

The PVV’s position as a semi-coalition partner lasted until April 2012, when it pulled the plug on its support for the coalition and the government fell. One reason the party decided to withdraw from the agreement was that it was losing electoral support, partly due to the austerity measures the cabinet had undertaken. The primary reason for the break-up, however, was that Geert Wilders was struggling with internal dissent.<sup>29</sup> With the fate of the LPF (whose weak organization had left room for internal conflicts when it entered government) on his mind, Wilders had reluctantly accepted a support role in government

22 The PVV’s contributions to the immigration and integration paragraphs in this agreement were inspired by the successful example of the DF in Denmark. Geert Wilders saw the DF’s semi-government role as a model worth following and got help from the DF in the negotiations on the *Gedoogakkoord*.

23 Sarah L. De Lange and David Art, “Fortuyn versus Wilders: An Agency-Based Approach to Radical Right Party Building,” *West European Politics* 34, no. 6 (2011): 1229–49.

24 This would require adjustments to European Commission, “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Minimum Standards on Procedures in Member States for Granting and Withdrawing International Protection (Recast)” (COM [2009] 554 final, October 21, 2009), [www.europarl.europa.eu/registre/docs\\_autres\\_institutions/commission\\_europeenne/com/2009/0554/COM\\_COM%282009%290554\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/registre/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2009/0554/COM_COM%282009%290554_EN.pdf).

25 This would require a reform of “Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the Right to Family Reunification,” *Official Journal of the European Union* 2003 L251/12, October 3, 2003, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2003/86/oj>.

26 This would require a reform of “Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 Concerning the Status of Third-Country Nationals Who Are Long-Term Residents,” *Official Journal of the European Union* 2004 L16/44, January 23, 2004, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2003/109/oj>.

27 This would require a reform of the Council of Europe, “European Convention on Nationality,” Article 7(1)(d), November 6, 1997, [www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007f2c8](http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007f2c8).

28 Some countries do not allow citizens to revoke their nationality. The relatively large number of Dutch immigrants from Morocco, for instance, do not have the choice to give up their Moroccan nationality.

29 Tjitske Akkerman, “The Party for Freedom: Balancing between Mission, Votes and Office,” in *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?* eds. Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange, and Matthijs Rooduijn (London: Routledge, 2016), 144–69.



in 2010. When internal divisions led the PVV to lose one seat in parliament in 2012, the coalition's majority was jeopardized and Wilders' position to negotiate was weakened. With less power to push for further restrictions on immigration in return for support on additional budget cuts, Wilders decided to withdraw the PVV from the coalition.<sup>30</sup>

Over this period, the government delivered only part of its agenda on immigration and integration. The problem was not only the cabinet's short life span, but also that some of the proposals set out in the agreement with the PVV had little prospect of becoming law to begin with. For example, it was clear from the beginning that most of the proposals to tighten family reunification were unrealistic, as they would have required amending EU laws. Other proposals in the agreement were concessions that the CDA and VVD had supported only reluctantly. The PVV's proposal to tighten dual nationality rules was unpopular; for example, the VVD had reservations about it after being confronted with protests from Dutch expats. After the cabinet fell in 2012, the VVD and CDA made clear that they did not want to apply the rule of one passport to Dutch expats, and the next cabinet (a VVD coalition with the Labor Party, PvdA) dropped the proposal entirely. The PVV's proposal to introduce a general ban on the burqa met a similar fate. While the ban was supported by the VVD, the CDA dropped its support as soon as the cabinet fell, and in the next cabinet, the VVD narrowed the proposed ban to public institutions as a concession to the PvdA.

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*Some of the proposals set out in the agreement with the PVV  
had little prospect of becoming law to begin with.*

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But despite these failures, the coalition introduced some important changes to immigration and integration policies. One such change was the modification of the *Civic Integration Act of 2007*.<sup>31</sup> This law had been initiated by a VVD minister in 2005, and its emphasis was on individual responsibility for learning the Dutch language and Dutch civic values. It required immigrant adults to find and complete courses without help from local government, paying for the courses and the exams using loans that replaced the old system of free courses and grants. The negative effects of the law on the number of immigrants passing the integration exams induced a Labor minister to amend the law in 2008 by reintroducing a stronger role for local government. However, these amendments were annulled by the first Rutte cabinet.<sup>32</sup> The re-establishment of full individual responsibility, as intended in the 2007 law, made it more difficult for immigrants to gain residence permits and passports, and thus indirectly furthered the aim formulated in the *Gedooagkoord* of lowering immigration levels.

But despite some movement on key issue areas, the PVV's influence while in government was limited. When Wilders ended his support for the coalition following internal tensions, much of the draft legislation was shelved. The VVD's and CDA's concessions to the PVV on restricting dual nationality and introducing a burqa ban were later dropped, and the reintroduction of the principle of full individual responsibility into the *Civic Integration Act* was in fact a VVD principle.

This illustrates the difficulties populist radical-right parties encounter in attempting to deliver their policies when in government. Like many other junior coalition partners, electoral support for the PVV declined during the life span of the coalition. While the party avoided major compromises on immigration issues, it had to make concessions on socioeconomic policies, such as raising the retirement age and introducing austerity measures. The PVV struggled to compensate for

30 Akkerman, "The Party for Freedom."

31 Government of the Netherlands, "Wet Inburgering," Wet- en regelgeving, Law BWBR0020611, November 30, 2006, <http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0020611/2010-07-01>.

32 Jaco Dagevos and Mérove Gijsberts, "Eigen verantwoordelijkheid in de inburgering," in *Een beroep op de burger: Minder verzorgingsstaat, meer eigen verantwoordelijkheid? Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport 2012*, eds. Vic Veldheer, Jedid-Jah Jonker, Lonneke van Noije, and Cok Vrooman (The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2012).



these concessions by delivering on immigration, partly because its goal of amending EU laws was unrealistic. Most importantly, however, the PVV's success in government was impeded by organizational weakness that ended its power-sharing experiment with the VVD and CDA prematurely. These challenges mirror those of several other populist radical-right parties upon entering government for the first time.

## **B. The PVV's Indirect Influence during the 2017 Election Campaign**

While the PVV lost its opportunity to directly influence immigration policymaking from within government in 2012, it has since wielded significant indirect influence on mainstream parties, and thus helped set the agenda on immigration and integration issues. After the PVV left the coalition, Wilders claimed that the party's influence while in opposition would be considerable. "At the moment, the PVV has zero power, but a lot of influence. You do not need power to have a lot of influence," he said in an interview.<sup>33</sup>

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*The idea that immigration threatens the cultural cohesion of the Netherlands was a major theme in the televised election debates.*

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After 2012, the PVV became further radicalized and increasingly isolated. Even among other populist radical-right parties in Western Europe, the party stood out as one of the most radical;<sup>34</sup> for example, in March 2014, Wilders made a controversial statement about Moroccan immigrants for which he was roundly condemned by other parties and the media, and was subsequently tried and convicted for hate speech. (The trial took place against the backdrop of the 2017 electoral campaign and, as had been anticipated, Wilders made good use of the associated publicity, with PVV climbing back to first position in the polls.) Throughout the 2017 electoral campaign, the PVV and the VVD remained in fierce competition for undecided voters.<sup>35</sup>

In the run-up to the 2017 national election, immigration and integration were key campaign issues.<sup>36</sup> Although surveys indicated that public concerns about these issues had declined somewhat in 2016, they remained important, along with related concerns about social cohesion and cultural values, and received considerable media coverage.<sup>37</sup> The idea that immigration threatens the cultural cohesion of the Netherlands was a major theme in the televised election debates. And the U.S. presidential election of 2016 prompted Dutch journalists to step up their efforts to reach out to "ordinary people" and especially to PVV voters (see Box 1 for a profile), who ended up receiving more media attention than supporters of other parties.<sup>38</sup>

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33 NOS, "Wilders: politieke revolutie na 22 mei," NOS, May 11, 2014, <https://nos.nl/video/646673-wilders-politieke-revolutie-na-22-mei.html>.

34 Akkerman, "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition."

35 NOS, "Indicator: PVV to Unprecedented Height," NOS, October 28, 2015, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2065480-peilingwijzer-pvv-naar-ongekende-hoogte.html>.

36 Josje Den Ridder, Paul Dekker, Pepijn Van Houwelingen, and Andries Van den Broek, "Burgerperspectieven," in *Kwartaalbericht van het Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven* 4 (2016): 1-56, [www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2016/Burgerperspectieven\\_2016\\_4](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2016/Burgerperspectieven_2016_4); Ipsos, "Het Radiodebat-Onderzoek: Opinieonderzoek onder Nederlandse Stemgerechtigden in Opdracht van de NOS Ten Behoeve van het Lijsttrekkersdebat op 24 Februari op Radio 1" (Ipsos Rapport, February 21, 2017).

37 Den Ridder, Dekker, Van Houwelingen, and Van den Broek, "Burgerperspectieven," 16.

38 Reinier Kist, "Zo 'Bevoordeeld' is de Nederlandse Pers," *NRC Handelsblad*, March 14, 2017, [www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/03/14/vvd-is-grootste-op-papier-pvda-en-denk-relatief-in-trek-7378287-a1550295](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/03/14/vvd-is-grootste-op-papier-pvda-en-denk-relatief-in-trek-7378287-a1550295).





### Box 1. Who Votes for the Party for Freedom (PVV)?

Studies suggest that Party for Freedom (PVV) voters fit the common profile of people voting for populist radical-right parties across countries. PVV voters tend to have lower levels of education and income, and most hold more negative views about immigration.

Apart from the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), whose voters largely shifted to the PVV after the earlier party's decline, the PVV attracts most of its voters from the center-right parties, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). It also draws a smaller number of voters from the Labor Party (PvdA) and from the radical-left Socialist Party. In general, Dutch voters are volatile, but mainly switch between the VVD, CDA, and PVV on the one hand or between parties on the left on the other. The PVV has reached out to voters across the political spectrum. It has adopted a centrist socioeconomic platform that combines right-wing preferences for less government and lower taxes with left-wing stances such as opposing an increase in the retirement age and defending job security.

Sources: Matthijs Rooduijn, "Closing the Gap? A Comparison of Voters for Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties and Mainstream Parties over Time," in *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?* eds. Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange, and Matthijs Rooduijn (London: Routledge, 2016), 53–71; Tom Van der Meer et al., "Bounded Volatility in the Dutch Electoral Battlefield: A Panel Study on the Structure of Changing Vote Intentions in the Netherlands during 2006–2010," *Acta Politica* 47, no. 4 (2012): 333–55; Paul Lucardie, "PVV Partijgeschiedenis," University of Groningen, January 17, 2013, <http://dnpp.ub.rug.nl/dnpp/pp/pvv/geschied>.

The PVV succeeded in politicizing the refugee crisis, while Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States—two stunning and unexpected populist victories—stoked the narrative of a populist, anti-globalization surge, with the Dutch national election viewed by many as a key test of momentum. But this analysis in many ways misread the PVV's popularity, which had a ceiling of about 20 percent to 25 percent of the electorate (its peak in 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis) in a politically fragmented political system where no party has gained more than 30 percent of the vote since 1994.<sup>39</sup>

The PVV's focus on immigration and integration after 2006 came as other parties struggled to take a stance on these issues. Years of internal rivalry and disagreements on the issues left VVD without an official party line. And the CDA had long occupied a centrist position that allowed for flexibility on immigration issues but not an outspoken profile.<sup>40</sup> This gap allowed the PVV to appeal to voters as the "owner" of issues related to immigration and integration.

But the primacy of immigration issues in 2015–16 prompted the CDA and VVD to challenge the PVV's dominance. They adopted a strategy of excluding the PVV as a coalition partner, while partly taking over its positions. The CDA's leader, Sybrand Buma, ruled out the option of governing alongside the PVV in 2015, and repeatedly confirmed this position. In January 2017, Mark Rutte stated that the VVD, too, would not enter into a coalition with the PVV. This move was partly motivated by the PVV's radicalization and especially Wilders' indictment for hate speech, but it was also a strategic move. It made clear to the public that the PVV had lost any chance of governing, potentially deterring some prospective PVV voters. The party began to fall slightly in the polls but held on to its lead until late February 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Like most other countries in Western Europe, Dutch elections are based on proportional representation. A "winner takes all" system like that of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France is exceptional in Western Europe. Moreover, the electoral ceiling for PVV falls in line with other Western European countries, where populist radical-right parties generally have a ceiling of between 15 and 30 percent.

<sup>40</sup> Kees Van Kersbergen and André Krouwel, "A Double-Edged Sword! The Dutch Centre-Right and the 'Foreigners Issue'" *Journal of European Public Policy* 15, no. 3 (2008): 398–414.



The two center-right parties combined this strategy of “exclusion” with efforts to address the concerns of PVV voters by shifting to the right on immigration and integration issues and emphasizing national identity. They mentioned the worries of “ordinary people” about integration and adapted a more brash rhetorical style that was sometimes reminiscent of Wilders’. The VVD had previously shifted to the right in reaction to the success of the LPF in 2002, and it accelerated this movement in the 2017 election to prevent voters from defecting to the PVV. For example, Prime Minister Rutte published an open letter in major newspapers that spoke to the worries of voters about cultural cohesion, calling on immigrants to adapt to Dutch values or leave.<sup>41</sup> Competition with the PVV also fueled an escalating diplomatic feud with Turkey. Shortly before the election, Rutte barred the Turkish Foreign Minister from entering the Netherlands, and Dutch authorities subsequently detained and expelled the Turkish Family Affairs Minister to prevent her from addressing a rally in support of the April 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum in Rotterdam, citing security concerns. The VVD apparently aimed to demonstrate that it could be as tough as the PVV when Turkey was suspected of trying to influence Dutch citizens with a Turkish background. While the VVD stepped up the competition with the PVV, the CDA moved from a more centrist position to highlight cultural issues—topics on which it could compete with both the VVD and the PVV. This included emphasizing the party’s Christian identity and focusing its message on family values and cultural traditions,<sup>42</sup> emphasizing the Christian-Jewish roots of the Dutch nation.<sup>43</sup>

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*The VVD had previously shifted to the right ... and it accelerated this movement in the 2017 election to prevent voters from defecting to the PVV.*

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Not only did VVD and CDA compete rhetorically with the PVV by emphasizing national identity issues, they also moved closer to some of the PVV’s policy positions. The VVD proposed, for instance, extending the conditional period an immigrant must wait to naturalize to ten years, introducing a general ban on the burqa, penalizing unauthorized migrants for remaining in the country illegally, tightening conditions for family reunification, and banning radical religious organizations such as the Salafi movement. Both VVD and CDA even proposed policies that were in tension with or, at times, in contravention of the Dutch constitution. The CDA proposed, for instance, making the financing of mosques and Islamic organizations by governments abroad illegal, which by targeting only Islam, risked flouting the equality principle embedded in the constitution. Meanwhile, the VVD proposed withdrawing Dutch citizenship from persons who joined a terrorist organization, even if there was no criminal conviction; this was to be applied to all Dutch citizens (not just dual nationals), which in some cases would make people stateless.<sup>44</sup>

The two parties’ dual strategy of excluding PVV while in some ways imitating it contributed to the PVV’s loss of steam, with the party coming second in the national election. The VVD became the largest party

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41 While the letter partly addressed anti-social behavior and other social issues, it also painted immigrants as a potential threat to Dutch society’s cohesion. In the letter, Prime Minister Rutte said that “the silent majority” would no longer tolerate immigrants who “abuse our freedom” by harassing gay people, intimidating women in short skirts, or calling ordinary Dutch people racists, calling on immigrants to “act normal or leave.” See Ceylan Yeginsu, “Dutch Leader Takes Trump-Like Turn in Face of Hard-Right Challenge,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/world/europe/mark-rutte-netherlands-muslim-immigrants-trump.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/world/europe/mark-rutte-netherlands-muslim-immigrants-trump.html).

42 Tom Van der Meer and Manfred te Grotenhuis, “Waarom het CDA z’n Zetels Verloor,” *NRC Handelsblad*, October 26, 2012, [www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2012/10/26/waarom-het-cda-zn-zetels-verloor-12569441-a559774](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2012/10/26/waarom-het-cda-zn-zetels-verloor-12569441-a559774).

43 However, the CDA leader remained vague about the policy implications of going back to Christian-Jewish roots, with the only concrete proposal being a requirement for all school children to stand up and sing the national anthem.

44 Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten, *Rapport van de Commissie Rechtsstatelijkheid in Verkiezingsprogramma’s 2017* (The Hague: Nederlandse Order van Advocaten, 2017), [www.advocatenorde.nl/document/rapport-rechtsstatelijkheid-in-verkiezingsprogramma’s-2017](http://www.advocatenorde.nl/document/rapport-rechtsstatelijkheid-in-verkiezingsprogramma’s-2017).



(although it lost votes, with its share falling from 26.5 percent to 21.2 percent), while the CDA came third (with its vote share increasing from 8.5 percent to 12.4 percent). While the PVV gained votes (its share rose from 10.1 percent to 13.0 percent), the party had been expected to do much better. Along with the strategies employed by VVD and CDA, other factors played a role in the PVV's disappointing results. Wilders' own campaign did not go well, impeded by a combination of sparse campaign funds, a small staff, and security measures. Moreover, he had restricted his media appearances to those he felt he could control and did not participate in the first series of television debates, allowing the leaders of other small- and medium-sized parties to receive more attention.<sup>45</sup>

Rutte, the leader of the VVD, claimed after the election that “the wrong kind of populism” had been defeated in the Netherlands. This was far from the truth, however. First, the PVV had increased its support since the previous national election in 2012. Second, the fact that the PVV had not secured first place was only partly due to VVD and CDA strategy. And finally, a number of the stances championed by the “wrong kind of populism” had been partly adopted by the VVD and CDA. The seeming success of the strategy of excluding the PVV had come at a price. The increasingly nationalist rhetoric of the VVD and CDA risked exacerbating feelings of alienation among Dutch people with immigrant backgrounds, and the parties missed the opportunity to delegitimize the PVV by attacking its disdain for the rule of law and the unconstitutionality of some of its proposals.

Moreover, by taking up some of the PVV's policy positions and rhetoric, the CDA and VVD moved away from representing a large segment of the electorate that fell in the center of the political spectrum. Research shows that in the Netherlands public opinion, on the whole, has been rather stable with respect to immigration concerns during the past decade. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Dutch public has even become more positive about the multicultural society.<sup>46</sup> Although concerns about refugees rank high on the public agenda, and polarization at the margins has increased, there appears to be a large middle group that is more or less neutral. By shifting to the right on immigration policy, it would seem the mainstream parties on the right have viewed responding to the electoral successes of first the LPF and then the PVV as more important than aligning themselves with public opinion.

## IV. Conclusion

This analysis of recent political developments in the Netherlands shows how the PVV has been able to shape immigration policy from both inside and outside government. While its direct influence on immigration policymaking through government participation appears to be limited so far, it has been influential nonetheless in setting the policy agenda and narrative around immigration and integration issues from outside government.

Like the PVV, many populist radical-right parties struggle to deliver their policy agendas when they join governments, and they can lose electoral support as a result. One barrier is their struggle to adapt their organization to meet the demands of office. But such parties have demonstrated that they are able to learn from their own experiences and from those of similar parties across Europe, and they are

45 Naomi O'Leary, “Mark Rutte's ‘Right Kind of Populism,’” Politico, March 20, 2017, [www.politico.eu/article/mark-ruttes-right-kind-of-populism/](http://www.politico.eu/article/mark-ruttes-right-kind-of-populism/).

46 Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, *Integratie in zicht? De integratie van migranten in Nederland op acht terreinen nader bekeken* (The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2016), [www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2016/Integratie\\_in\\_zicht](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2016/Integratie_in_zicht). See also NOS, “Minder zorgen over immigratie: gevoel van onbehagen blijft,” NOS, December 15, 2016, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2148495-minder-zorgen-over-immigratie-gevoel-van-onbehagen-blijft.html>. This trend with regard to public opinion of immigration and the multicultural society is not restricted to the Netherlands; it can also be observed in other Western European countries, such as Belgium, Norway, and the United Kingdom. See Matthijs Rooduijn, “Overall ruk naar rechts?” Stuk Rood Vlees, November 27, 2017, <http://stukroodvlees.nl/overall-ruk-naar-rechts/>.



likely to organize more effectively over time. The PVV learned, for instance, from the LPF's disastrous experience that it is important to take time to build up an organization.<sup>47</sup> Another barrier, when such parties do join governments, is their common position as junior coalition partners, which is associated with declining electoral support. But this disadvantage may not always be a given, considering the PVV was in the lead for much of the run-up to the March 2017 election. Meanwhile, though they most often depend on center-right parties to form a coalition government, the spectrum of available coalition partners seems to be widening in some countries, which may strengthen their negotiating position.

The difficulty of forming coalition governments is growing in Western Europe. Although the fragmentation of the political landscape in the Netherlands is particularly pronounced, this splintering trend can also be observed in other countries, making it harder for any party to gain an absolute majority. Populist radical-right parties will need to bridge the (growing) distances on immigration policy with their coalition partners, often by making compromises. But increased fragmentation also means that it will become more difficult to exclude populist radical-right parties from coalitions. The exclusion of the PVV by the center-right parties in the Netherlands, for instance, resulted in months-long, complex negotiations to form the next coalition government, with early attempts falling apart over widely diverging positions on immigration and integration.

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*In pursuing these tactics of exclusion and imitation, both the VVD and CDA focused on denying the PVV political space, instead of challenging its radical-right positions.*

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But while the PVV, like other populist radical-right parties, has struggled to join and remain in government, it has wielded considerable influence on immigration policymaking while in opposition. Its strong polling position (coupled with the perceived surge in populism in Europe and the United States) in the run-up to the March 2017 national election enabled it to shape the agenda on immigration and integration issues, prompting the VVD and CDA to move further right on these issues. The possibility that the PVV might win an election not only attracted a disproportionate amount of media attention, it may also have had a “bandwagon” effect on undecided voters.

The center-right parties sought to compete with the PVV more directly by moving to the right on immigration and integration issues. They signaled their anti-immigration positions loud and clear (and without differentiating these clearly from the PVV's positions) to appeal to potential PVV voters. They also stated they would not enter into a coalition with the PVV, excluding the party from joining government. But in pursuing these tactics of exclusion and imitation, both the VVD and CDA focused on denying the PVV political space, instead of challenging its radical-right positions. For example, when stating they would exclude the PVV, the two parties cited a lack of trust in it as a coalition partner, rather than emphasizing the illegitimacy of PVV proposals and Wilders' conviction in court, or their parties' legal and normative distance from the PVV. In turn, the decision by the VVD and CDA to move to the right on immigration issues led them to propose hardline anti-terrorism and anti-immigration measures that were in tension or squarely in conflict with the Dutch constitution. By scrambling to lure voters away from the PVV, the center-right parties also missed the opportunity to expropriate the central theme of the election campaign from the PVV. In an election campaign focusing on national values, the VVD and CDA could have emphasized their mainstream status and their respect for

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<sup>47</sup> See De Lange and Art, “Fortuyn versus Wilders.”



constitutional values—and crucially, a goal of unifying rather than dividing the country.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, by moving away from the more moderate opinion of a large segment of the Dutch electorate, the VVD and CDA took the risk of alienating mainstream voters.

Political fragmentation, coupled with growing support for populist radical-right parties, has left other parties in the Netherlands and other Western European countries facing hard questions about how to govern alongside these parties and address the concerns of their voters. The experiences of the Netherlands offer some perspectives for mainstream policymakers as they navigate this changing political landscape.

### A. Including Populist Radical-Right Parties in Government

In some cases, governing with populist radical-right parties may be inevitable. In 2010–12, PVV's strong electoral performance meant that the VVD and CDA had to rely on the party's support to form a coalition government, for example. This inclusion strategy can carry some advantages for mainstream parties:

- **Electoral competition.** The inclusion of the PVV in government, and its inability to deliver on many of its promises, resulted in its losing support in the next election. However, over time, the PVV and most other populist radical-right parties have managed to rebound from the negative electoral effects of incumbency.
- **Moderating immigration policies.** Inclusion in government can moderate the immigration policies of populist radical-right parties, at least temporarily, as coalition parties negotiate a common policy platform for the government. For example, the Finns Party toned down its rhetoric on immigration issues significantly while in office, resulting in a split between its more moderate and radical wings. However, in the case of the PVV, this effect was less pronounced because the negotiations between the coalition partners centered on granting some concessions to the PVV on immigration issues in exchange for their cooperation on socioeconomic issues, rather than on negotiating a common position.

### B. Excluding Populist Radical-Right Parties from Government

As has been outlined, in the run-up to the March 2017 election, the center-right parties in the Netherlands excluded their populist radical-right competitor, all but ruling out the PVV's participation in government. This strategy can be electorally damaging to the excluded party. Ostracized parties generally tend to lose electoral support, as some voters defect to other parties with a chance of joining government.<sup>49</sup> But exclusion can only be successful when mainstream parties also reach out to these voters and try to address their concerns. The example of the Flemish Interest Party (VB) stands out in this respect. The VB was ostracized in 1989, but its electoral base kept growing until 2004. Voters only started to defect in significant numbers after 2007, when the rise of the New Flemish Alliance (NVA)

48 The Finnish Minister Petteri Orpo, leader of the center-right National Coalition Party, reacted more aptly to the election of Jussi Halla-aho as leader of the populist radical-right party (and coalition partner) PS in 2017. Halla-aho had been convicted of ethnic incitement, and Orpo's response to the election underlined the difference between the two parties: "Human rights can't be given up as they are the foundation of a constitutional state." See Tony Öhberg, "Halla-aho Became the Finns Party Chair, Then the Government Almost Collapsed but the Finns Party Broke," *Finland Today*, June 13, 2017, <https://finlandtoday.fi/jussi-halla-aho-became-the-finns-party-chair-then-the-government-almost-collapsed-but-the-finns-party-broke/>.

49 Joost van Spanje, "Pariah Parties: On the Origins and Electoral Consequences of the Ostracism of Political Parties in Established Democracies" (doctoral dissertation, Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Florence, May 2009).



offered them a nationalist alternative.<sup>50</sup> Systematic research confirms that ostracization negatively affects a populist radical-right party as long as its core policy issue is adopted by mainstream parties.<sup>51</sup> Exclusion can be electorally successful in the long run under these conditions. However, analysis of the Dutch election campaign of 2017 makes clear that this strategy tends to come at a high cost. Reaching out to PVV voters meant the VVD and CDA moved away from the opinion of more moderate voters, potentially alienating immigrant communities and increasing polarization. It is doubtful whether the gains of this strategy were high enough to offset its costs; it was only partially responsible for ousting the PVV from first place.

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*It is doubtful whether the gains of this strategy were high enough to offset its costs.*

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### C. Addressing the Concerns of People Voting for Populist Radical-Right Parties

The key question facing policymakers remains how to address the concerns of people voting for populist radical-right parties effectively, without pandering to these parties. The Dutch experience offers several lessons:

- **Do not overestimate the electoral support for populist radical-right parties.** During the 2017 Dutch election campaign, policymakers tended to go along with the media hype around a perceived populist “surge” in Western Europe and the United States. This led to a disproportionate focus on PVV voters and the discussion of immigration issues through an exclusively negative lens. In reality, this hype was overblown. The Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election were “winner takes all” events, while national elections in the Netherlands and most other Western European countries are based on proportionate electoral systems. While the refugee crisis greatly enhanced the electoral prospects of many populist radical-right parties who campaigned on an anti-immigration platform, their support even at the height of the crisis peaked at 30 percent in Switzerland (and 25 percent in the Netherlands), suggesting that there is a ceiling to their support that prevents them from gaining supermajorities.
- **Communicate the nuances of immigration policy.** During the election campaign, Dutch media helped to steer the public narrative on immigration by paying more attention to PVV voters and focusing on negative news items about immigration and integration. For example, local protests against refugee centers received far more attention than voluntary initiatives to help refugees. This one-sided media coverage is difficult to counter.<sup>52</sup> Yet, electoral competition with populist radical-right parties should not encourage mainstream parties to follow the same logic. The CDA and VVD, for instance, sometimes responded by alluding to negative sentiments about refugees or immigrants and their descendants, which compromised their ability to make objective and realistic policy proposals and communicate the nuances of these issues.
- **Don’t compromise on core values.** Excluding a populist radical-right party as a coalition partner can be a credible move if mainstream parties can demonstrate that the ostracized

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50 Teun Pauwels, “Explaining the Strange Decline of the Populist Radical Right Vlaams Belang in Belgium: The Impact of Permanent Opposition,” *Acta Politica* 46, no. 1 (2011): 60–82.

51 On several occasions established parties have managed to substantially decrease the electoral support of populist radical-right parties by simultaneously adopting policy issues of that party and ostracizing it. Between 2007 and 2010, for instance, the major French and Flemish parties adopted tough immigration stances. As predicted, the French National Front (FN) vote and the Flemish Interest Party (VB) vote plummeted. See Van Spanje and de Graaf, “How Established Parties Reduce Other Parties’ Electoral Support.”

52 Jan-Williem Wits, “Vluchtelingen bedanken Amsterdammers in tv-spotje,” *Communicatie Online*, December 23, 2015, [www.communicatieonline.nl/nieuws/case-vluchtelingen-bedanken-amsterdammers-tv-spotje](http://www.communicatieonline.nl/nieuws/case-vluchtelingen-bedanken-amsterdammers-tv-spotje).



party has failed to respect the rule of law. However, when this is followed by proposals that similarly flout the constitution, this reflects poorly on the mainstream parties themselves. During the 2017 election, the CDA and VVD did not emphasize that Wilders had been convicted of a hate crime or that his immigration policies conflicted in various respects with fundamental rights; indeed, they included similar proposals in their own election manifestos. This may have been a missed opportunity to offer voters a coherent and legally viable values-based alternative.

- ***Remain responsive to centrist voters.*** Addressing the concerns of radical-right voters should not become the predominant goal, particularly if it comes at the cost of neglecting a large segment of the electorate with more moderate views. Since the beginning of the 2000s, mainstream right-of-center parties in the Netherlands have shifted further to the right, while overall public opinion of immigration has been stable and views of multiculturalism have even become more positive. Representing this middle group will likely prove important not only for the future electoral success of mainstream parties, but also more generally for democratic stability.

In sum, the continued strength of the PVV, despite efforts to stem its growth, offers a warning to mainstream parties. While the radical-right party did not come out on top in 2017, this cannot be viewed as a resounding victory for the strategies adopted by the center-right parties. Going forward, mainstream parties on the right may find more success in a balanced and nuanced approach to immigration issues.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Average Vote Share of Populist Radical-Right Parties in National Elections in Western Europe, 1990–2017\*

Country	Party	1990–99	2000–09	2010–17
Austria	Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)		7.4	3.5
	Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	22.0	12.8	20.5
Belgium	New Belgian Front (FNB)	1.6	2.0	
	Flemish Interest Party (VB)	8.1	11.8	5.8
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF)	7.4	13.2	16.7
	Progress Party (FrP)	5.1	0.6	
Finland	Finns Party (PS)	2.4	2.9	18.3
France	National Front (FN)	13.7	7.8	13.4
	National Republican Movement (MNR)**		1.1	
Germany	The Republicans (REP)*	1.9	0.6	
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)		3.9	1.8
Italy	Northern League (LN)	9.1	5.6	4.1
Netherlands	Center Democrats (CD)	1.6		
	Pim Fortuyn List (LPF)		11.4	
	Party for Freedom (PVV)		5.9	12.9
Norway	Progress Party (FrP)	10.8	19.9	16.3
Sweden	New Democracy (ND)	4.0		
	Sweden Democrats (SD)		2.1	9.3
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	16.4	27.8	28.9
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP)*		1.9	
	United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)*		1.9	5.8
<b>Average</b>		<b>8.0</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>12.1</b>

\* Data for 2017 run to September 1, 2017.

\*\* Party only elected to European Parliament.

Source: ParlGov, "Parliaments and Governments Database," accessed September 1, 2017, [www.parl.gov.org](http://www.parl.gov.org).





## Appendix B. Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Office, 2000–15

Country	Party	Cabinet	Coalition Composition	Period
<b>Austria</b>	FPÖ	Schüssel I	ÖVP-FPÖ	2000–05
	BZÖ	Schüssel I	ÖVP-BZÖ	2005–06
<b>Denmark</b>	DF	A.F.Rasmussen I	V-KF-(DF)	2001–05
	DF	A.F.Rasmussen II	V-KF-(DF)	2005–07
	DF	A.F.Rasmussen III	V-KF-(DF)	2007–09
	DF	L.L.Rasmussen I	V-KF-(DF)	2009–11
	DF	L.L.Rasmussen II	V-(DF)	2015–
<b>Finland</b>	PS	Sipila II	KESK-KOK-PS	2015–
<b>Italy</b>	LN	Berlusconi I	FI-AN-LN-CCD-UCD	1994–94
	LN	Berlusconi II/III	FI-AN-LN	2001–06
	LN	Berlusconi IV	PdL-LN-MpA	2008–11
<b>Netherlands</b>	LPF	Balkenende I	CDA-LPF-VVD	2003–03
	PVV	Rutte I	VVD-CDA-(PVV)	2010–12
<b>Norway</b>	FrP	Solberg I	H-FrP	2013–
<b>Switzerland</b>	SVP	-	-	2003–07
	SVP	-	-	2007–11
	SVP	-	-	2011–15
	SVP	-	-	2015–

AN = National Alliance; BZÖ = Alliance for the Future of Austria; CCD = Christian Democratic Center; CDA = Christian Democratic Appeal; DF = Danish People's Party; FI = Go Italy; FPÖ = Austrian Freedom Party; FrP = Norwegian Progress Party; H = Right, the Norwegian Conservative Party; KESK = Center Party of Finland; KF = Conservative People's Party; KOK = National Coalition Party; LN = Northern League; LPF = Lijst Pim Fortuyn; MpA = Movement for the Autonomies; ÖVP = Austrian People's Party; PdL = People of Freedom; PS = Finns Party; PVV = Party for Freedom; SVP = Swiss People's Party; UCD = Union of the Center; V = Left, the Danish Liberal Party; VVD = People's Party for Freedom and Democracy.

Notes: Parenthesis around a party in the composition column denotes a party acting in a support role, rather than as a full coalition partner. The “-” in the cabinet and coalition columns for Switzerland denotes the fact that the country has a unique system in which the functions of government leader and head of state are performed by all members of government, negating the need to form either cabinets or coalitions.

Source: Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. De Lange, and Matthijs Rooduijn, eds., *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?* (London: Routledge, 2016), 3.



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## About the Author



**Tjitske Akkerman** is a researcher affiliated with the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, where she specializes in political comparative research. The main focus of her research is on comparative analyses of the ideologies, electoral successes, strategies, and policy impacts of radical populist parties in Western Europe.

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