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The Dutch parliamentary elections of November 2023

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ABSTRACT

After the fall of the Rutte IV (2022–2024) government on 7 July 2023, new elections were held on 22 November 2023. The biggest shock of the election was the emergence of the radical right Freedom Party (PVV) as the largest party in Parliament (37 seats, out of 150). A new party, the New Social Contract (NSC), founded by former Christian Democrat MP Pieter Omtzigt, entered Parliament with 20 seats. Although unable to recreate its dramatic success at the Provincial elections in the spring, the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) nevertheless increased its representation from 1 to 7 seats. Although it had lost 10 seats, the Liberal Party (VVD) was seen as a logical choice to join these three winners in forming a new right-wing Cabinet. Formation was hampered by a distrust of the commitment of the PVV to democracy and the rule of law. Ultimately, a ‘program’ or ‘extra-parliamentary’ Cabinet was proposed. The leaders of the parliamentary parties would remain in Parliament rather than becoming ministers in the new Cabinet and half of the new cabinet ministers would be sought outside of politics. In the end, these goals were not fully achieved, although the new Prime Minister, Dick Schoof, had had a career in the civil service rather than politics. Most of the ministers came from the ranks of the four parliamentary parties. The new Cabinet was installed on 2 July 2024.

KEYWORDS Elections; Netherlands; cabinet formation

Background to the election

For at least four years, there had been rumblings that Mark Rutte’s time as Prime Minister (*Minister-president* in Dutch) had exceeded its expiration date.¹ On Friday, 7 July 2023, that date arrived (see e.g. Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024: 126–9). The Cabinet Rutte IV (2022–2024) had debated for days in a crisis atmosphere over how to regulate the influx of migrants to The Netherlands. There was a plan to divide the influx into

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two groups: Group A, those who could fear persecution in their homeland, and Group B, the group that was fleeing from some danger such as war. The Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD), i.e. the main coalition party (for the formation of this government, see e.g. Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2022), wanted to shorten the period that the latter group could remain in the country and, in particular, limit the right to family reunification.² These proposals were not acceptable to two of the three coalition partners, Christian Union (*ChristenUnie*, CU) and Democrats'66 (D66). The differences between the parties could not be overcome: the Cabinet Rutte IV, which for two years had stumbled from crisis to crisis (NRC, 8–9 July 2023), finally fell. No party withdrew from the Cabinet and ministers from all parties remained in their positions.

Dutch voters were not highly supportive of the break. In the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2023 (DPES 2023), a plurality of 42% indicated that it was not a good reason to force the fall; only 35% said it was a good reason. When presented with a list of those potentially most responsible for the break, 48% pointed the finger at Rutte and 40% pointed to his party, the VVD. In Dutch there is a saying, 'The breaker pays' and this could certainly apply to the events that ensued.

Two days after the fall, prior to a debate in the Second Chamber over the fall of his cabinet, Rutte announced that he would not serve as the party leader at the upcoming election and would be withdrawing from national politics.³ Rutte referred to a 'moment of epiphany' that resulted in this unexpected decision. This announcement to leave Dutch politics even surprised his own party (see Fresen and Borgman 2024: 218–9; Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024: 133–6). Rutte had been the leader of the VVD for 17 years and had led four Cabinets during the previous 13 years. Rather predictably but for good reason, national newspapers referred to 'the end of an era' (NRC, 11 July 2023; *Trouw*, 11 July 2024; see also Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024).

The resignation of Mark Rutte was only the first of a wave of changes in party leadership; the unexpected fall of the cabinet and unanticipated new elections created leadership problems for several parties (*de Volkskrant*, 10 July 2023). The Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) and GreenLeft (*GroenLinks*, GL) held a week-long online vote on the question whether the parties would present a single list of candidates at the election and would present a single election manifesto: 92% of the GreenLeft and 87% of the PvdA supported the proposal. The results were announced on 16 July 2023. Table 1 shows the previous (2021) leader and the new leader (2023) for each main political party as well as the date of the change.

Another major development was the announcement on 20 August by Pieter Omtzigt that he had formed a new political party, New Social Contract (*Nieuw Sociaal Contract*, NSC), which would participate in the election.

Table 1. Party leadership at general elections 2021 and 2023 (for parties elected in parliament in 2023).

Party	Party leader (gender)		Announced/decided on:
	2021	2023	
PVV	Geert Wilders (M)	Geert Wilders (M)	?
GL/PvdA		Frans Timmermans (M)	August 21
- GL	Jesse Klaver (M)		
- PvdA	Lilianne Ploumen (F)		
VVD	Mark Rutte (M)	Dilan Yesilgöz (F)	August 14
NSC	–	Pieter Omtzigt (M)	August 20
D66	Sigrid Kaag (F)	Rob Jetten (M)	August 12
BBB	Caroline van der Plas (F)	Caroline van der Plas (F)	July 18
CDA	Wopke Hoekstra (M)	Henri Bontebal (M)	August 11
SP	Lilian Marijnissen (F)	Lilian Marijnissen (F)	July 15
DENK	Farid Azarkan (M)	Stephan van Baarle (M)	August 2
PvdD	Esther Ouwehand (F)	Esther Ouwehand (F)	September 30
FvD	Thierry Baudet (M)	Thierry Baudet (M)	September 14
SGP	Kees van der Staaij (M)	Chris Stoffer (M)	August 25
CU	Gert-Jan Segers (M)	Mirjam Bikker (F)	July 17
Volt	Laurens Dassen (M)	Laurens Dassen (M)	July 31
JA21	Joost Eerdmans (M)	Joost Eerdmans (M)	August 9

Omtzigt had been a member of the Second Chamber for the CDA for many years and gained considerable attention and praise for his crucial role in exposing the childhood benefits scandal. He had been in the race to be the party leader of the CDA at the election of 2021, but was narrowly defeated by Hugo de Jonge, and when De Jonge stepped down was succeeded by Wopke Hoekstra, ‘to the unpleasant surprise of Omtzigt’ (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2022: 1496). On 15 September 2021, Omtzigt withdrew from the CDA caucus and continued as an independent member of Parliament. In the months prior to the elections, he was extremely popular: his 2021 book *Een Nieuw Sociaal Contract* (Omtzigt 2021) was number 1 on the Dutch bestsellers list in August 2023,⁴ and a month before its establishment his ‘party’ gained 46 seats in the polls (NRC, 24 July 2023).

New elections were scheduled for 22 November 2023. On 13 October, the Election Council announced that 26 political formations or parties had qualified to be listed on the ballot, with an overall number of 1,126 candidates for the available 150 seats of the Second Chamber, or the Dutch lower house.

The election campaign

The half year leading up to the fall of the Cabinet in July 2023 was tense and eventful. The war in Ukraine continued to rage. After years of intense debates about the exploitation of the Groningen gas fields and the impact of the earthquakes that were produced, a decision was reached to end production as of 1 October 2023. Another major crisis during this period had begun in 2019 when farmers began to complain about the

regulations to reduce the amount of nitrogen falling on protected nature areas. In a number of cases, farmers drove their tractors to protest in The Hague and to block roads. In 2019 a new party, the Farmer-Citizen-Movement (*BoerBurgerBeweging*, BBB), was formed and at the 2021 elections, the party won a single seat, which was held by party leader Caroline van der Plas. She had a direct and homey demeanour that appealed to many voters. At the Provincial elections in the spring of 2023, the BBB became the largest party in each of the provinces, and because the provincial legislatures elect the First Chamber of Dutch Parliament or Senate, with 16 out of 75 seats also the largest party in that body.

These events or crises, however, were arguably not the primary issues in the election campaign. They were certainly discussed at times, as was the issue of *bestaanszekerheid*, translated as livelihood security, but the election campaign seems to have been dominated by the issue of immigration – which also had led to the fall of the government. According to the respondents of the DPES 2023, ‘immigration’ was the biggest national problem in the Netherlands, with ‘asylum policy’ ranking number 4 of major national problems (Damstra and Van der Meer 2024: 162; see also Hendriks and Lubbers 2024). Moreover, about half of the Dutch electorate was of the opinion that many national problems could be solved by restricting the number of immigrants coming to the Netherlands (Hendriks and Lubbers 2024: 139–40).

A discussion that arises in any recent Dutch campaign concerns which parties will form a new coalition government after the election and who will serve as Prime Minister; the elections are hardly decisive in this regard (e.g. Andeweg *et al.* 2020: 120). Also, during the past few decades, the party leaders at the election are considered candidates for prime minister. The 2023 election campaign was no different in general but was different in some crucial details. In previous elections, the centrist and leftist parties had often announced that they would not enter a coalition with the radical right Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders. During the first Cabinet led by Mark Rutte (2010–2012), the PVV had been an official supporter of the Cabinet, without supplying ministers (on this unorthodox cabinet, see Otjes and Louwerse 2014). The VVD and CDA did not find this an experience worth repeating and had been very reluctant to again attempt to form a coalition with the PVV. However, on 19 August 2023, the new leader of the VVD, Dilan Yesilgöz, announced that she would *not* exclude the PVV from negotiations for a new cabinet. This was a major change in strategy that was supported by Mark Rutte (*De Telegraaf*, 19 August 2023). Moreover, this strategic move was in line with the observation that the VVD wanted to make a political

turn to the right (e.g. *De Telegraaf*, 2 September 2023; *de Volkskrant*, 2 September 2023).

The second break from recent tradition or convention came when Pieter Omtzigt refused to announce whether he would be willing to be Prime Minister if his party became the largest in the new Second Chamber. In late August 2023 Omtzigt had founded the NSC, which in the first week of its existence scored 31 seats in the polls (*de Volkskrant*, 26 August 2023). The beginning of the campaign was marked by confusion concerning what the party stood for; another eleven weeks passed before he announced the party platform. In it, he (i.e. the party) joined the call for reductions in immigration and called for more livelihood security (*bestaanszekerheid*), and for action to restore citizen trust in government and administration (NRC, 25 October 2023; *de Volkskrant*, 25 October 2023). Because he declined to say whether he was willing to be Prime Minister, the question of who would lead the country took on even more prominence in the campaign than was usual. Finally, only three days before the election, Omtzigt reluctantly consented to become Prime Minister in a cabinet of experts (Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024: 247–8).

In the meantime, the BBB had named not party leader Van der Plas but Mona Keijzer as their party candidate for Prime Minister (e.g. *Trouw*, 2 September 2023; Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024: 171–4). Keijzer was the number 2 on the list of candidates and former junior minister for the Christian Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*, CDA) in the Cabinet Rutte III. She had left the CDA after 34 years party membership in autumn 2023 (*De Telegraaf*, 9 September 2023).

The first media event in the campaign – which by the media was characterised by a relatively ‘mild atmosphere’ (*Trouw*, 7 October 2023) and according to the voters was not very aggressive or quarrelsome (Van Dijk *et al.* 2024: 52) – was a discussion of four party leaders (Omtzigt, Timmermans, Van der Plas and Yesilgöz) with students on 22 October. The first debate was held on 30 October between Omtzigt and Frans Timmermans, leader of the party combination GreenLeft/Labour Party. They wanted to have a serious debate without major attacks on each other’s party; the debate was aired *via* YouTube and their party channels (Vullings and Van der Wulp 2024: 202). A few days later, Omtzigt challenged the leader of the Liberal Party, Dilan Yesilgöz, to a one-on-one debate over livelihood security. Although this debate never took place, there followed a substantial number of debates with various combinations of leaders, including the conventional television debates on the eve of the elections. Due to the number of parties, there were two final debates, one among leaders of the smaller parties, and one with the leaders of the larger parties.⁵ DPES 2023 results indicate that approximately 30% of

respondents viewed at least one televised debate in its entirety, and another 40% had seen fragments of debates (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2024: 34).

Debates and other free media exposure are important components of a Dutch election campaign, as the parties do not have large funds available to purchase advertising. Complete and reliable figures on the total expenditures for 2023 are not available, but it was reported that the amounts were less than in 2021, in part because the parties had already had to run campaigns for the Provincial elections in March. In 2023, the total amount appears to have been approximately 2.5 million euros. The Liberal Party was rather successful in getting large donations (*de Volkskrant*, 19 & 30 September 2023; *NRC*, 11–12 November 2023) and had the greatest amount of funding available. Lacking the large donations that they had received in 2021, the CDA and D66 had to cut back on their advertising budget. In the period 24 October through to November, the parties spent roughly 2.4 million euros on internet advertising, led by Greenleft/PvdA with 688,000 euros. An indication that commercial advertising is not determinative in Dutch elections is the extremely small amounts spent by the winner of the election, PVV, who apparently spent between 1,600 and 4,500 euros, and the upstart newcomer, NSC, who had no budget for paid marketing.⁶

The election result

Public opinion polls are published regularly in the Netherlands (see e.g. Louwerse and Van Dijk 2021). They make it possible to track the ebb and flow of support for various parties as events develop. They become especially important during election campaigns as politicians, the media, and the voters are confronted with and react to the poll results. In 2023, almost 20% of respondents in the DPES 2023 reported that they had often seen results; another 40% said they had seen them several times. Only 13% said they almost never saw poll results (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2024: 34).

In 2023 several organisations regularly announced results of public opinion polls. The most reputable have been aggregated by Tom Louwerse of Leiden University in a ‘poll-of-polls’, i.e. the *Peilingwijzer*. This poll-of-polls receives considerable attention in the media, which consider the *Peilingwijzer* an authoritative source for polling results. And although Dutch polls generally have a good reputation for accuracy, in 2023 they were wide of the mark, at least if viewed as somehow a prediction of the eventual election results. In his final report of the *Peilingwijzer*, Louwerse noted a strong surge for the PVV and a drop-in support for the NSC. The actual results for the NSC were within the margin of error, but the

results for the PVV far exceeded even the last ‘predictions’ of 21 November (see Table 2). Rather than the 25 to 29 seats that were predicted for the PVV, on 22 November the party gained 37 seats, making it by far the largest party in Parliament. GL/PvdA followed with 25 seats, followed by the VVD with 24; NSC ‘fell’ to 20 seats. The shock of these results can hardly be overestimated. The media referred to ‘a political earthquake’ in general (*Trouw*, 23 November 2023) and ‘an unprecedented victory for the PVV’ in particular (*NRC*, 23 November 2023).

Full scale analysis to explain the rise of the PVV is not yet available, but some hypotheses can be offered (see for preliminary reports based on DPES 2023, in Dutch: Voogd *et al.* 2024). Louwerse noted a strong surge to the PVV, and part of the explanation is that this surge grew even larger. Electoral volatility in the Netherlands is high since the 1990s but was never as high as in 2023 (Voogd and Van der Meer 2024). In the pre-election wave of the DPES 2023, voters were asked for which party they intended to vote; after the election they were asked for which party they had cast their vote. About half of the respondents provided the same response. Ten percent of the respondents shifted from another party to the PVV and 5% voted for the PVV after indicating that they were not decided in the pre-election survey. These groups were larger than the 8% who twice named the PVV. Almost 40% of those who before the election indicated that they would vote for the BBB and 25% of those indicating

Table 2. Election to the second chamber of Dutch parliament 22 November 2023.

Party	Elections 22 November 2023			<i>Peilingwijzer</i> / Poll-of-Polls 21 November 2023		Elections 2021		Elections 2017	Elections 2012
	Seats	Votes	% Votes	% Votes	Seats	Seats	Votes	Seats	Seats
PVV	37	2,450,878	23.49	16–19%	25–29	17	1,124,482	20	15
GL/PvdA	25	1,643,073	15.75	15–17%	23–27				
- GL						8	537,308	14	4
- PvdA						9	597,192	9	38
VVD	24	1,589,519	15.24	17–19%	26–30	34	2,279,130	33	41
NSC	20	1,343,287	12.88	12–14%	19–23	–	–	–	–
D66	9	656,292	6.29	6–7%	8–11	24	1,565,861	19	12
BBB	7	485,551	4.65	3–4%	4–7	1	104,319	–	–
CDA	5	345,822	3.31	2–3%	3–5	15	990,601	19	13
SP	5	328,225	3.15	3–4%	4–6	9	623,371	14	15
DENK	3	246,765	2.37	2–3%	3–5	3	211,237	3	–
PvdD	3	235,148	2.25	3–4%	4–6	6	399,750	5	2
FvD	3	232,963	2.23	2–3%	3–5	8	523,083	2	–
SGP	3	217,270	2.08	2–2%	2–3	3	215,249	3	3
CU	3	212,532	2.04	2–3%	3–5	5	351,275	5	5
Volt	2	178,802	1.71	2–3%	2–4	3	252,480	–	–
JA21	1	71,345	0.68	1–1%	0–2	3	246,620	–	–
Other parties	0	195,254	1.87	–	0–3	2	400,894	4	2
Turnout	77.75%					78.71%		81.57%	74.57%
Total	150		100%			150		150	150

Source: Electoral Council (*Kiesraad*) for election results; *Peilingwijzer* for poll results. Only results for parties with at least 1 seat after the 2023 elections. Shaded cells refer to the most recent, 2023 election.

a vote for NSC ended up voting for the PVV. Important numbers from other centrist and rightist parties also shifted to the PVV (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2024: 36; see also Voogd and Van der Meer 2024: 26–7).

So, why did they shift? One factor that played a role was the announcement at the beginning of the campaign by Dilan Yesilgöz that her party would not necessarily shut the PVV out of negotiations to form a new cabinet. In doing so, she helped make the PVV *regierungsfähig* (fit for government) – the large number of Dutch voters who apply strategic considerations could include the PVV in their electoral calculus (see e.g. Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2008; 2012). Moreover, during the campaign, Wilders had toned down on his most extreme positions and presented himself as a rather ‘mild’ politician. And since the fall of the cabinet had been related to immigration and much of the campaign centred on this issue, why then not vote for the party that ‘owned’ the issue of immigration: the PVV (see Damstra and Van der Meer 2024). Obviously, mono-causal explanations never result in a comprehensive explanation of electoral behaviour, but in any explanation for the electoral success of the PVV in 2023 these components will likely play a major role.

The new government

Whereas in many political systems the election results determine who will have political power, in the Netherlands announcement of the results only *initiates* the struggle for power. In 2023, most political observers viewed a right-wing coalition of the winners PVV, NSC, and BBB, together with the VVD, as the ‘logical’ reaction to the results; a left-wing coalition was considered extremely unlikely (NRC, 24 November 2023). Yet before negotiations could even begin, Dilan Yesilgöz (VVD) announced that, as her party was a loser, it would not enter a new Cabinet and she did not want to serve under prime-minister Wilders. In a movement reminiscent of the formation of 2010, she stated only to be willing to ‘tolerate’ a rightist coalition.

In the Dutch coalition formation process, the largest party in Parliament assumes certain responsibilities. In 2012, the Second Chamber replaced the role of the Monarch in initiating the cabinet formation process with a new function of ‘scout’ (*Verkenner*).⁷ The scout is charged with seeking the advice of the leaders of all of the parliamentary parties and making a recommendation concerning which combination of parties could likely form a new coalition (Andeweg *et al.* 2020: 120–5). As the leader of the largest party, Wilders nominated Gomm van Striem, a member of his party’s caucus in the First Chamber, for this role on Friday, 24 November. This proved to be a false start: the media was filled with stories that accused Van Striem of financial

fraud in connection with his position at Utrecht University. Before negotiations could even begin, he resigned his position as scout on 27 November.

Wilders then turned to Ronald Plasterk, who had been a prominent member of the left-wing PvdA and had served twice as a minister for this party in the Balkenende IV and Rutte II Cabinet; since 2020 he had a column in the conservative newspaper *De Telegraaf*. As scout, it was up to Plasterk to explore possibilities for a right-wing cabinet. He received each of the leaders of all the parties in the Second Chamber and then focused on the leaders of the four aforementioned parties. This phase moved slowly, not only because of the reluctant position of Yesligöz that from the start met resistance within her own party, but mainly because Pieter Omtzigt was wrestling with his relationship with the PVV. He worried that statements and actions of the PVV were not in accordance with the Constitution. It was not until 11 December, after meetings between Wilders and Omtzigt that more or less cleared the air, that Plasterk presented his report to the Second Chamber with a proposal that talks begin with the four parties with the goal of forming a cabinet (NRC, 12 December 2023). Plasterk was then elevated from scout to *informateur* to lead these talks.

At this point, a central element in the discussions was the Constitution and the rule of law, as especially Omtzigt was still concerned about the position of the PVV. On 13 December, Wilders announced that he would not apologise for any of his remarks in the past but insisted that he would be a Prime Minister for all of the people. On 8 January, Wilders further attempted to assuage the concerns of the other parties by withdrawing three controversial legislative proposals (and political non-starters) that he had submitted (NRC, 9 January 2024, *Trouw*, 9 January 2024). After a Christmas break that the parties entered in an optimistic mood (*de Volkskrant*, 23 December 2023), the four negotiating parties met again on 9 January to continue their discussions, not only about the Constitution, but also concerning substantive issues, such as the economy, finances, and agricultural policy. These negotiations became more and more problematic and there was not much ‘chemistry’ among the main political actors (NRC, 3–4 February 2024). In particular Omtzigt continued to have reservations, and on 6 February, he suddenly withdrew from the negotiations. He was irritated because he felt that Plasterk had not provided information about government finances promptly (NRC, 7 February 2024). Although he did not envision a ‘normal’ majority coalition, Omtzigt wrote in a letter to the party members that the NSC remained open for a minority cabinet or an extra-parliamentary cabinet. In his final report to the Second Chamber, on 12 February 2024, Plasterk held open the

possibility of a four-party right-wing Cabinet (e.g. *NRC*, 13 February 2024, *de Volkskrant*, 13 February 2024).⁸

On 14 February, Kim Putters, another member of the Labour Party, was nominated by Wilders and selected by the Second Chamber as the next *informateur*. Putters met with the leaders of all the parties in Parliament to determine their views on such possibilities as a minority cabinet, a cabinet ‘tolerated’ by other parties, or an extra-parliamentary cabinet – although the exact meaning of this alternative was obscure (e.g. *de Volkskrant*, 16 February 2024, *Trouw*, 14 February 2024). During a recess in the negotiations, he also consulted political scientists and former political leaders concerning the various possibilities. In his final report, issued on 14 March, he proposed what he called a ‘program cabinet’. This included: a) cooperation agreements between the parliamentary caucuses; b) an accord over major issues, rather than a detailed agreement; c) an agreement on government policies to be left to the newly selected cabinet; d) half of the new ministers and junior ministers should consist of political figures, half from outside politics; and d) the leaders of the constituent parties should remain in Parliament, rather than assume roles in the cabinet.⁹

Omtzigt considered the proposal a breakthrough, and he was correct. On 20 March, two new *informateurs*, Richard van Zwol (a top civil servant adviser to the Council of State, and CDA party member) and Elbert Dijkgraaf (an economist and former MP for the orthodox-protestant SGP) were appointed and began their duties the following day. In the following weeks, they met with the party leaders, at times one-on-one, at times with the leaders and their seconds. These discussions were in secret, and little was leaked concerning their contents as part of the arrangement according to Omtzigt was going to be a ‘marriage of convenience, at best’ (*NRC*, 11 April 2024). A self-imposed deadline of midnight 15 May was set and almost achieved, as two hours after the deadline, the announcement was made that an agreement on the main points had been reached, titled ‘Hope, Courage and Pride’ (*Hoop, Lef en Trots*).¹⁰ The following day, the parliamentary caucuses of the parties voted in support of the accord and the four party leaders appeared together in a public presentation of the agreement. ‘The sun is going to shine again in the Netherlands’, according to Wilders at this presentation.¹¹

The next step in the formation process was to distribute the seats in the cabinet and find individuals to man them, including a new Prime Minister. In recent times, the tradition has been that the leader of the largest party in the coalition becomes what is called the *formateur* and subsequently assumes the position of Prime Minister. However, as one of his (major) concessions to achieve the new coalition, Wilders had agreed

to the proposition that the leaders of all the coalition parties would remain in Parliament. Nevertheless, he was looked to in making the choice of a new Prime Minister. And even before the official announcement of the accord, the name of his favourite candidate had been leaked – Ronald Plasterk (NRC, 15 May 2024, *de Volkskrant*, 15 May 2024). However, stories emerged in the media accusing Plasterk of improperly profiting from medical patents. While protesting his innocence, on 20 May he withdrew his name from consideration.

On 22 May, Richard van Zwol was elevated from his position of *informateur* to *formateur*. On 28 May, he announced that the four parties (not just Wilders!) were proposing Dick Schoof as Prime Minister.¹² This reinforced the concept of an extra-parliamentary cabinet. Schoof had previously (until 2021) been a member of the Labour Party but was currently without party affiliation. Schoof, currently the top civil servant in the Department of Justice and Security, had held top positions in the areas of intelligence, anti-terrorism, and immigration, but he did not have any political experience as an MP or minister (e.g. NRC, 29 May 2024, *Trouw*, 29 May 2024). As nominee for Prime Minister, he joined Van Zwol in the subsequent steps to form the cabinet.

On 11 June, an agreement was reached concerning the distribution of positions in the new government. In addition to the Prime Minister with no party affiliation, the PVV would supply 5 ministers (including a new Minister of Asylum and Migration),¹³ VVD and NSC each 4, and BBB 2 (including a Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature); there seemed to be something for everyone (NRC, 13 June 2024). Each of the parties would designate a vice-premier. In addition, the PVV could designate 4 junior ministers, VVD 3, NSC 3 and BBB 3.

All the candidate ministers met with Schoof and Van Zwol. This did not result in any changes. In a new step in the formation process, the Second Chamber had demanded that the candidates appear before a delegation of MPs and present themselves. As they were not yet in their proposed positions and could not answer questions concerning their ministry, the questioning concentrated on past statements that the candidates had made and their motivations for accepting the position. Also, because of the ambiguous status of these meetings and interviews, some parliamentary parties did not want to participate. The ‘interrogations’ did not have any impact, and the new Schoof cabinet that presented itself to the Dutch people on 2 July 2024, started an ‘uncertain experiment’ (*Trouw*, 2 July 2024). Two days earlier, Sunday, 30 June, Mark Rutte gave his farewell speech on television; on Tuesday, 2 July, he handed over the keys of *het Torentje* (The Little Tower), the office of the Minister of General

Affairs and Dutch Prime Minister, to Dick Schoof, stepped on his bike and waved goodbye...

Notes

1. For other recent articles in the elections in context series, see Arter (2024), Bernhard (2024), and Vall-Prat and Rodon (2024).
2. This latter aspect was crucial to the debate and decision, although it later turned out that the number of immigrants entering the country via this option was highly exaggerated.
3. Only to make his comeback on the international political stage as the Secretary General of NATO one year later.
4. Prior to the 2002 parliamentary elections, the then new kid on the block, Pim Fortuyn, also published a book that became a bestseller (see Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003).
5. For an overview of all debates, see <https://www.ewmagazine.nl/nederland/achtergrond/2023/10/alle-verkiezingsdebatten-op-een-rij-1050298/>.
6. For these figures, see <https://campagnemonitor.groene.nl/spending.html> and <https://campagnemonitor.groene.nl/posts/nsc-doet-online-niets.html>.
7. Dictionary.com defines a scout as 'a person sent out to obtain information' (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/scout>).
8. See Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2023–2024, 36 471, nr. 4.
9. See Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2023–2024, 36 471, nr. 33.
10. An agreement that was characterized by 'hope, courage and conflicting ambitions', according to an analyses of its content (NRC, 18–19 May 2024).
11. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2520673-wilders-bij-presentatie-akkoord-de-zon-gaat-weer-schijnen-in-nederland>.
12. Allegedly, Dick Schoof was not the most preferred candidate but only fourth of fifth choice as Prime Minister (*De Telegraaf*, 30 June 2024).
13. Part of the process of formation includes a screening by the government intelligence agency. Wilders' first choice for Minister of Asylum and Migration did not survive this screening, and Wilders was forced to withdraw the name and make a new selection.

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