

Netherlands: A Timmermans (*Spitzenkandidaten*) effect?

ARJAN H. SCHAKEL

INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands and the United Kingdom were the first member states to hold European elections on Thursday May 23rd 2019, ahead of other European Union (EU) member states which followed on May 24th or later. One may have expected that the Netherlands and the UK would cast a ‘Eurosceptic’ cloud over the EP elections to be held in the remaining 26 EU member states, but this was not the case for the Netherlands. In fact, what happened was quite the opposite. The big winner was the pro-EU Labour Party (PvdA) which won the largest vote share (19.0 per cent), up 9.6 per cent compared with the 2014 EP elections. Newcomer and staunch anti-EU party Forum for Democracy (FvD) won 11.0 per cent of the votes, although its support was mirrored by a significant vote share loss of 9.8 per cent by the equally standfast anti-EU Party for Freedom (PVV) (Table 1). Frans Timmermans – First Vice President of the European Commission – was the lead candidate for the PvdA and was the *Spitzenkandidat* for the EP party group Socialist and Democrats (S&D). *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates for the position of President of the European Commission) are a novelty in the European electoral arena, and were introduced with the 2014 European elections in an effort to increase interest and participation in European elections (Braun and Popa, 2018; Hobolt, 2014). In this chapter, I will explore in how far the Dutch 2019 European election result can be explained by a ‘Timmermans’ or *Spitzenkandidaten* effect.

In the next section I will briefly discuss the European party manifestos of the parties and the campaign. In the third section I will compare the outcomes of the 2019 EP elections with previously held national (2012 and 2017), provincial (2015 and 2019), as well as European (2014) elections, enabling me to analyse to what extent the 2019 EP election results can be explained by increasing EU salience (vote share swings from pro- to anti-EU parties), ‘second-orderness’ of EU elections (vote share swings from parties in national government to opposition parties), or, indeed, a ‘Timmermans effect’. The final section offers a short discussion.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections: the Netherlands

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	
Labour Party (PvdA)	S&D	1,045,274	
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	ALDE	805,100	
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	EPP	669,555	
Forum for Democracy (FvD)	ECR	602,507	
Green Left (GL)	G-EFA	599,283	
Democrats 66 (D66)	ALDE	389,692	
Christian Union (CU) -Reformed Political Party (SGP)	ECR	375,660	
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	GUE-NGL	220,938	
50 Plus (50+)		215,199	
Party for Freedom (PVV)	NI	194,178	
Socialist Party (SP)	GUE-NGL	185,224	
Volt Netherlands (VN)		106,004	
Think (DENK)		60,669	
Others		28,530	
Total		5,497,813	
Turnout (%)			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			

Sources: European Parliament (2019), Kiesraad (2019), NOS (2019).

	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	19.0	6	9.6	+3	+1
	14.6	4	2.6	-1	
	12.2	4	-3.0	+1	
	11.0	3	11.0	+3	
	10.9	3	3.9	+1	
	7.1	2	-8.4	-2	
	6.8	2	-0.9		
	4.0	1	-0.2		
	3.9	1	0.2	+1	
	3.5		-9.8		
	3.4		-6.3		
	1.9		1.9		
	1.1		1.1		
	0.5		-1.8		
	100	26			+1
	41.9				
	<i>none (effective threshold of 3.85%)</i>				

THE CAMPAIGN

Except for the PVV and the pan-European list VN, all parties produced lengthy party manifestoes for the European elections. The PVV is downright Eurosceptic, which is mentioned in one sentence on their one-page election manifesto: ‘The Netherlands independent again. So out of the EU.’ (*Nederland weer onafhankelijk. Dus uit de EU*) (PVV, 2019). Although FvD is similarly anti-EU, the party wishes to hold a referendum on EU membership (FvD, 2019). On the other side of the spectrum stands D66, which campaigned with the slogan ‘In Europe we make our future’ (*In Europa maken we de toekomst*) (D66, 2019), GL, which started its election manifesto with the sentence ‘The European Union is indispensable’ (*De Europese Unie is onmisbaar*) (GL, 2019), and the pan-European party VN (VN, 2019). All other parties can be placed in between these two extremes as they take a ‘Euro-realist’ approach (Vollaard et al., 2016). These parties are in favour of collaboration between EU member states on issues such as immigration, single market, and security (CDA, 2019; PvdA, 2019), although some of them are clearly against a widening and deepening of the EU (CUGP, 2019; SP, 2019; VVD, 2019). Other smaller parties are not anti-EU either, but would like to significantly reform the EU and for the EU to take action in particular policies such as animal welfare, the elderly, the environment, or the multicultural society (50Plus, 2019; DENK, 2019; PvdD, 2019).

It is not customary for Dutch political parties to choose key political figures to head their European election party lists (Vollaard et al., 2016). The 2019 EP elections were no exception, bar the PvdA whose list was headed by Frans Timmermans who, as a long-serving member of parliament and former state secretary and minister for foreign affairs (Parlement.com, 2019a), is a well-known politician in the Netherlands. Despite his political stature in the Netherlands and some attention paid to his participation in the *Spitzenkandidaten* debate held in Maastricht (NRC, 2019a; Trouw, 2019a; Volkskrant, 2019a), Timmermans did not receive much media coverage during the campaign. For example, one of the main daily newspapers featured interviews with the list-leaders for FvD and D66 in the final week of the campaign (De Volkskrant, 2019b, 2019c). Another example is the ‘head-to-head’ debate between minister-president Mark Rutte (VVD) and Thierry Baudet (FvD) which was broadcasted on TV on the evening before election day and which attracted 1.5 million viewers (AD, 2019; NU.nl, 2019). Despite receiving limited media attention, the PvdA became the clear winner of the 2019 EP elections (Table 1), which also makes the election outcome quite remarkable because this was not at all predicted in the public opinion polls (Ipsos, 2019a; NRC, 2019b; Volkskrant, 2019d; Trouw, 2019b).

THE ELECTION OUTCOME: INCREASING EU SALIENCE,
AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT SWING, OR A TIMMERMANS EFFECT?

Table 2 compares the 2019 European election results with the outcomes of the 2015 and 2019 provincial elections, the 2012 and 2017 national, and the 2014 EP elections. The comparison reveals the extent to which the 2019 European elections con-

trast with other types of elections and with overall electoral trends. The success of the PvdA in the 2019 EP elections puts the party close to the level of vote share it won in the 2012 national elections. It is too early to tell whether this is the start of a recuperation, the effective number of parties (ENP) – a measurement that indicates the extent to which the vote is fragmented across parties, taking the number and received vote shares of parties into account (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) – indicates that the vote has not become more splintered across parties. Instead, one needs to look at aggregate movements in voter preferences across elections to gain insight into the 2019 EP election outcome.

Table 2 - Election results since 2012

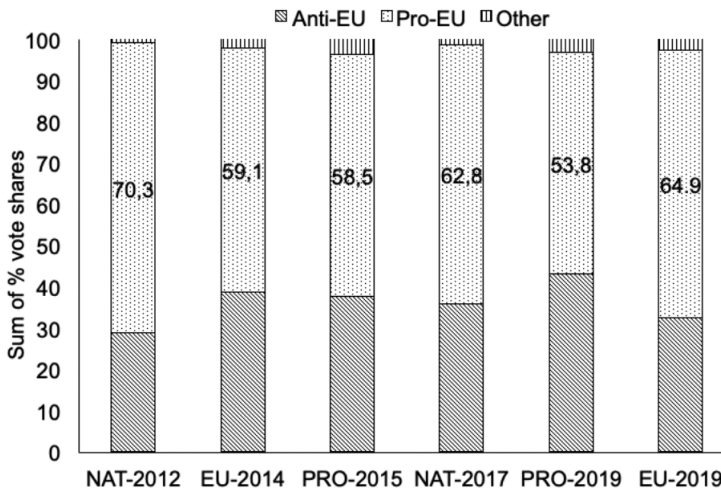
	NATIONAL 12-SEP-12	EUROPEAN 22-MAY-14	PROVINCIAL 18-MAR-15	NATIONAL 15-MAR-17	PROVINCIAL 20-MAR-19	EUROPEAN 23-MAY-19
PVV	10.1	13.3	11.7	13.1	6.9	3.5
FvD				1.8	14.5	11.0
CU-SGP	5.2	7.8	7.5	5.5	7.6	6.8
VVD	26.6	12.0	15.9	21.3	14.0	14.6
CDA	8.5	15.2	14.7	12.4	11.1	12.2
D66	8.0	15.5	12.5	12.2	7.8	7.1
PvdA	24.8	9.4	10.1	5.7	8.5	19.0
GL	2.3	7.0	5.4	9.1	10.8	10.9
SP	9.7	9.6	11.7	9.1	5.9	3.4
PvdD	1.9	4.2	3.5	3.2	4.4	4.0
50Plus	1.9	3.7	3.4	3.1	3.6	3.9
DENK				2.1	1.7	1.1
Other	1.0	2.3	3.7	1.5	3.2	2.5
Turnout	74.6	37.3	47.8	81.6	56.2	41.9
ENEP	5.9	8.9	8.9	8.4	10.4	8.9

Notes: ENEP = effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera (1979)). NAT = national; EP = European Parliament; PRO = provincial. Sources: European Parliament (2019), Kiesraad (2019), NOS (2019).

EU SALIENCE

EU salience theory would predict that vote share swings can be attributed to an increase in EU saliency, resulting in higher turnout and triggering a move from pro-EU to anti-EU parties except for Green parties, which should also win vote share (Viola, 2016). Figure 1 displays combined vote shares for anti-EU and pro-EU parties across national, provincial and European elections since 2012. In the 2019 EP elections, anti-EU parties won a combined vote share of 32.6%, which is rather similar – within six per cent deviation – to the combined vote shares these parties received in previous European, national, and provincial elections, except for the 2019 provincial elections. Another indication that an increase in EU salience is not a likely explanatory factor is given by the turnout rates displayed in Table 2. The 2019 EP elections were marked by the highest turnout in European elections over the past twenty years; however, in the Netherlands higher turnout is part of a general trend rather than an indication of increased EU salience. Turnout in the 2017 national election was 7.0 per cent higher than for the 2012 national election and turnout in the 2019 provincial election was 8.4 per cent higher compared to the 2015 provincial election. If anything, the mere 4.6 percentage points increased turnout for the 2019 EP election compared with the 2014 European election is an indication of low salience. Finally, the Green parties (GL and PvdD) did not significantly increase their 2019 European and provincial vote shares compared to the 2017 national election (Table 2).

Figure 1. Vote share for anti-EU and pro-EU parties since 2012.



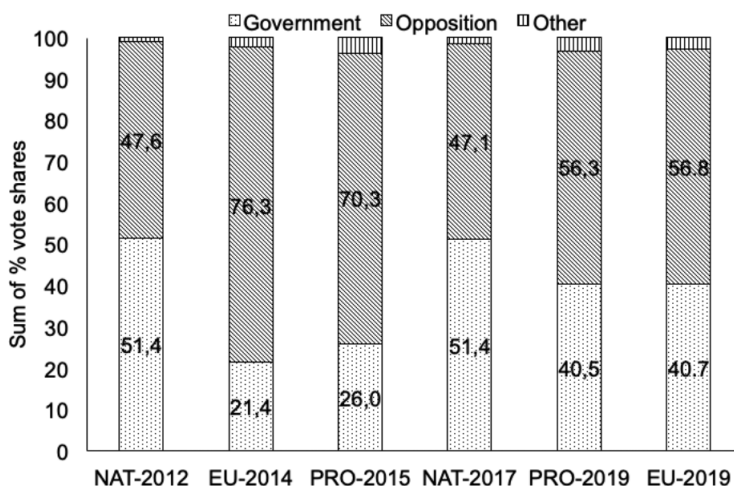
Notes: Anti-/pro-EU parties are classified according to expert ratings of the positions taken by party leaders in 2014 regarding whether the Netherlands had benefited from being a member of the EU (1 = benefited; 2 = neither benefited nor lost; 3 = not benefited). *Anti-EU parties* (average expert score above 2.5): CU-SGP, FvD, PVV, PvdD, SP, 50Plus. *Pro-EU parties* (average expert score below 1.1): CDA, D66, GL, PvdA, VVD, DENK. FvD and DENK are classified by the author. *Other parties*: same as for Table 1.

Source: CHES (2019).

ANTI-GOVERNMENT SWING

The vote share swings could result from an anti-incumbency swing, considering that the PvdA was in national government after the 2012 national election but in opposition after the 2017 national election. The ‘punishment vote’ for government parties in European and subnational elections is attributed to the second-order nature of these elections (Viola, 2016). First-order national elections are perceived by voters, parties, and the media as more important contests than European and subnational elections because more is ‘at stake’, given that national governments take decisions on essential issues such as taxes, the welfare state, and foreign policy (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Figure 2 displays combined vote shares for parties in national government and opposition parties across national, provincial and European elections since 2012. Government parties received only half of their 2012 national vote shares in the 2014 European and 2015 provincial elections, indicating that European and provincial elections are both perceived to be second-order elections. In this light, the 10 per cent vote share loss for government parties in the 2019 European and provincial elections compared with 2017 national election can be considered quite modest.

Figure 2. Vote share for government and opposition parties since 2012.



Notes: *Government parties* are parties that form the executive at the national level: VVD and PvdA in 2012 and VVD, D66, CDA, and ChristenUnie in 2017. *Opposition parties* won seats in the national parliament (*Tweede Kamer*) but did not participate in or provide support to the national government. *Other parties*: same as for Table 1.

Source: Parlement.com (2019b).

TIMMERMANS (SPITZENKANDIDATEN) EFFECT

Despite the close timing of the 2019 provincial and European elections, Table 2 reveals significant aggregate vote share swings between parties. The big winner of the 2019 provincial election was FvD, which won 12.8 per cent compared to the 2012 national election. Most likely, voters moved from the VVD which lost 7.3 per cent and the PVV which lost 6.1 per cent vote share compared to the 2012 national election. The 2019 provincial and European elections display quite comparable results except for the tremendous gain for the PvdA, from 8.5 to 19.0 per cent of the vote share. The main losers were FvD (-3.5%), PVV (-3.4%), and the SP (-2.5%), whose combined vote share loss of -9.5 percentage points comes close to PvdA's vote share gain of 10.5 percentage points. Are these vote share swings an indication of a *Spitzenkandidaten* effect whereby Timmermans was able to attract voters from across the whole political spectrum?

Table 3 presents vote shares for elections held since 2012 for the eight largest parties in the province of Limburg. This province is interesting because it is considered to be 'the home' of Timmermans. Frans Timmermans was born in Maastricht, the provincial capital of Limburg, went through secondary education in Heerlen (a city in Limburg) where he still has a house, and was an (unsuccessful) candidate to become Commissioner of the King of the Limburg province in 2011 (Parlement.com, 2019a). Frans Timmermans is known to be a polyglot and, apart from mastering Dutch and the *Limburgs* dialect, he also speaks English, French, German, Italian and Russian. He is an outspoken 'pro-European Unionist' and launched his campaign as the S&D *Spitzenkandidat* for the 2019 EP elections in Heerlen in the province of Limburg. Frans Timmermans clearly gave his campaign a Limburg-twist, this being a border province where numerous cross-border interactions with Belgium and Germany have historically taken place. For example, Timmermans started his acceptance speech as lead candidate with references to his grandfather and his great-grandfather who moved from Germany to Heerlen to work in the mines (Timmermans, 2019).

Table 3 shows that although the eight major parties were able to attract almost 95% of the vote during national elections, during European and provincial elections they collectively lose up to almost 7% vote share. This highlights the second-order nature of these contests whereby voters are inclined to support small and new parties because they move from strategic to sincere voting (Marsh and Mihaylov, 2010). As observed in Table 2, the 2019 European elections are remarkable because of the tremendous vote share gain for the PvdA compared to earlier elections. Voters in Limburg behaved similarly to other Dutch voters, but the aggregate vote share swings are larger in magnitude. What stands out in Table 3 is that when the 2019 provincial and European elections are compared to each other, vote share losses for the PVV (-7.1%), FvD (-2.4%), VVD (-0.8%), CDA (-2.5%), D66 (-1.4%), GL (-1.3%), and SP (-4.6%) total up to -20.1 percentage points which is very close to the 23.2% vote share gain for the PvdA. Despite the similar second-order election nature of both the European and provincial 2019 elections, a clear Timmermans (*Spitzenkandidaten*) effect can be observed. In response to the question to what extent the head of the party list was important for their vote choice, no less than 48% of PvdA voters in-

Table 3 - Election results (per cent vote share) for eight major parties in *Limburg*

PARTY	NAT-2012	EP-2014	PRO-2015	NAT-2017	PRO-2019	EP-2019
PVV	17.7	20.8	17.8	19.6	13.6	6.5
FvD				2.0	14.6	12.1
VVD	22.7	20.8	11.5	17.9	10.2	9.4
CDA	9.7	12.2	22.9	14.9	18.7	16.1
PvdA	21.8	7.7	7.3	4.0	6.5	29.7
D66	6.3	12.2	9.4	10.6	5.8	4.4
GL	1.8	0.9	3.9	10.6	8.4	7.2
SP	14.4	12.7	15.5	13.7	8.7	4.1
Total	94.4	87.2	88.4	93.3	86.4	89.5

Notes: NAT = national; EP = European Parliament; PRO = provincial.

Sources: Kiesraad (2019); nlverkiezingen.com (2019); NOS (2019).

icated that this was important, whereas the second highest percentage was a mere 18% recorded for PVV-voters (Ipsos, 2019b). Timmermans seems to have been able to attract voters from the whole left-right political spectrum, and his voters seemed less concerned about punishing parties in national government or to vote according to their opinion on EU issues (see also Ipsos, 2019b).

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this chapter clearly suggests that a Timmermans (*Spitzenkandidaten*) effect may underlie the outcomes of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament in the Netherlands. Table 3 reveals significant vote share swings in Limburg which are not observed for nationally aggregated data (Table 2). For example, the PvdA lost 14.1 percentage points vote share when the 2014 EP election is compared with the 2012 national election. The beneficiaries were D66 (5.8%) and the PVV (3.1%). Significant voter movements are also detectable when the 2015 provincial

election is compared with the 2014 European election. In this comparison the CDA is the clear winner (10.8%), whereas the VVD was the significant loser (9.2%). It seems that voters in Limburg (and in the Netherlands as a whole, see Table 2) from both the left and right of the political spectrum are floating, and that they can be attracted by an appealing candidate who reaches out to the voters by campaigning locally (see also Gatterman et al., 2016 and Schmitt et al., 2015). This would be an interesting hypothesis to explore further through election survey analysis, which would make it possible to tap into voter motivations underlying party vote choice.

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