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Elections in the Netherlands

2017 General Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Eurasia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Disclosure:

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Dutch elections authorities as of March 14, 2017, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

Who are citizens voting for on Election Day?

On March 15, voters will elect all 150 members of the *Tweede Kamer*, or the Lower House of the Dutch parliament. Each representative is elected to a four-year term.

All eligible voters over age 18 can run for election. Any person over the age of 16 at the time of the election is also able to run. Each party registered a list of candidates with the electoral commission by January 30. To register a list of candidates, a party must gather at least 30 signatures from each electoral district where the party intends to field candidates. Parties with 15 seats or more in the outgoing parliament can include up to 80 candidates on that party's candidate list. Parties with fewer than 15 seats in the outgoing parliament can include up to 50 candidates on that party's candidate list. Candidates can run for election without affiliating with any party. These candidates will compete on so-called "blank lists."

What election system will be used?

Members of the Lower House are elected through a proportional system via preferential voting. Before the election, those parties that have qualified for inclusion on the ballot produce a list of candidates for members of parliament. Voters must first select the party that they are voting for, and can then choose a specific candidate from that party's list. The country has 20 electoral districts, broken into several regions. Each party can have its own candidate list in each region. Following the elections, seats are distributed according to a natural electoral quota. There is no legal threshold for obtaining representation. Candidates who receive preference votes amounting to at least 25 percent of the electoral quota are automatically elected; remaining seats are awarded to candidates by list order.

Who administers elections in the Netherlands?

The Dutch national and local governments, as well as electoral commissions play a role in administering the general elections. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations oversees the administration of elections at the national level and issues regulations related to the electoral process. Municipal governments are responsible for overseeing the elections in their jurisdictions, as well as for registering voters, distributing voting cards, and staffing polling stations. The electoral commissions register the names of political parties and candidate lists, number the lists of candidates, and authorize the final election results. The electoral commission is a permanent independent body of seven members. The government appoints these seven members through open recruitment. They serve on the commission for up to two six-year terms.

What is the structure of the Dutch government?

The Dutch government is both a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. King Willem-Alexander van Oranje-Nassau is the nominal head of the state. He is responsible for nominating mayors, forming the government after general elections, and signing all laws approved by parliament. The prime

minister is the head of the government, and usually comes from the party that wins the most seats in general elections. S/he is responsible for coordinating policy and relaying information regarding policy to the King. The current prime minister is Mark Rutte, the leader of the People's Party for Democracy and Freedom.

The parliament consists of two chambers, the Lower House, or *Tweede Kamer*, and the First Chamber, or *Eerste Kamer*. Consisting of 150 members, the Lower House is responsible for approving the budget and initiating legislation. The First Chamber, consisting of 75 members, is responsible for approving or rejecting all legislation. Currently, the dominant party in parliament is the People's Party for Democracy and Freedom.

Who is competing in these elections?

Twenty-eight parties are running candidates in the March 15 election. These parties range from center-right and leftist parties to special interest parties. The three largest parties are the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, whose leading candidate is Mark Rutte, the Labour Party, whose leading candidate is Lodewijk Asscher, and the Party for Freedom, whose leading candidate is Geert Wilders. In the 2012 general election, the top three parties received about 60 percent of the vote, with the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the Labour Party taking more than half of the seats. However, recent elections have been marked by a decline in support for the three main parties coupled with the rise and proliferation of special interest parties.

How are voters registered?

Voter registration in the Netherlands is passive, meaning that voters are not required to take any specific action of their own to be included on voter lists. Every resident of the Netherlands is required to register with the municipality in which they live (see section below for out-of-country voters). The data from this registration process, including nationality and date of birth, is used to create the electoral register. All citizens over the age of 18, except for those who have been convicted of certain crimes, have the right to vote. There are no restrictions on voting for persons with mental disabilities. There are currently 12.9 million registered voters.

How will out-of-country voting be managed?

Voters residing abroad are not passively registered to vote. Instead, out-of-country voters must have actively registered with the municipality of The Hague before February 1, 2017. Voters residing outside of the country could register by mail or online. Out-of-country voters who registered by February 1, 2017 will be permanently registered as out-of-country voters for future elections. If the voter returns to the Netherlands, they will be registered to vote in-country upon registering with the municipality in which they live.

Citizens residing abroad can vote using a proxy who lives in the Netherlands or by using a postal ballot. Proxies cast a vote on behalf of the Dutch citizen residing abroad. In order to do so, the out-of-country voter must designate the proxy upon registration. When casting the vote, the proxy must present a copy of the identity card of the person they are voting on behalf of. Voters can either have a ballot delivered to them by mail, or can download the postal ballot electronically. Voters return their ballots by mail to The Hague, or to a Dutch Embassy designated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ballots must be received by 15:00 local time on Election Day.

Who will be observing on Election Day?

The government of the Netherlands has invited the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) to observe the March 15 elections. OSCE/ODIHR conducted a Needs Assessment Mission from January 23-25, 2017 to assess the pre-election environment and the preparations for the elections. Members held meetings with officials from state institutions and the election administration, as well as representatives of political parties, media and civil society.

The OSCE/ODIHR team will not carry out systematic or comprehensive observation of the voting, counting and tabulation on Election Day, however, members will visit a small number of polling stations on Election Day.

What is the political climate and why is this election important?

This election could have major implications for upcoming elections across Europe, including in France, Norway, and Germany. The Dutch campaign period thus far has been marked by a competition between the far-right Freedom Party and the center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy. Geert Wilders, the head of the Freedom Party, has campaigned on a populist, anti-Islam platform. If the Freedom Party wins, Wilders may be able to form a government – likely as part of a wider coalition – that would see crackdowns on the domestic Muslim population, and a foreign policy largely defined by Euroscepticism. A Freedom Party victory could signal that the rise of populist sentiments across Europe may have tangible policy implications. Further, the outcome of this election will be a litmus test for the success of far-right parties in the other European countries.