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Dutch election news - Part I

In the lead-up to the November election, we will present a regular round-up of the main election news, starting with how many parties are to contest the election, fraud concerns over ballot computers and voting advice for the public. Aaron Gray-Block writes.



26 parties to do battle on 22 November

Some 26 political parties will take part in the 22 November Dutch national elections, seven more than the election in 2003.

The Electoral Council has said 14 parties will nominate candidates in all 19 electoral districts.

These include the Christian Democrat CDA, Labour PvdA, Liberal VVD, Socialist SP, populist Fortuyn (former LPF), green-left GroenLinks, Democrat D66, ChristenUnie and Christian SGP.



Rounding out that list are Nederland Transparent (anti-corruption), the right-wing Eén NL, independent Lijst Poortman and the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party).

Twelve parties will contest the election in selected areas of the Netherlands.

One of these includes the Party for the Netherlands (Partij voor Nederland) of MP and former LPF minister Hilbrand Nawijn. It will only contest 18 electoral districts because a bag full of necessary signatures of support was stolen in the district of Tilburg.

There are two electoral alliances, including one forged by the SP and GroenLinks and by the ChristenUnie and SGP. That means both parties stand a chance of winning preference seats.

Besides the established parties, there are several other smaller parties standing for election, such as the Party for Humankind and other Earthlings (Partij voor de Mens en alle overige Aardbewoners), Tamara's Open Party and the Ad Bos Collective (Ad Bos Collectief) of building fraud whistleblower Ad Bos.

However, it was recently confirmed that the PNDV, the so-called paedophile party, will not take part in the elections because it did not generate sufficient support.

And the Dutch whistleblowers party (NKP) has also indicated it will not contest the elections.

The NKP said it had decided against entering an "unequal battle" with the existing political parties, complaining of the formalities that needed to be met in order to participate in the elections.

The former husband of Princess Margarita, Edwin de Roy van Zuydewijn' was listed as the party's second top candidate.

Fraud concerns over ballot computers

Minister for Government Reform Atzo Nicolai said last week he has established a commission to investigate the reliability of ballot computers in the electoral process.

Additionally, ballot computers for the November elections will be equipped with new microchips and a "unique seal" to guarantee their reliability.

The Liberal VVD minister told MPs last week that he shared concerns about possible electoral fraud and that no doubt should exist about the reliability of the elections.

He added, however, that there was no evidence to suggest that fraud had been committed at previous elections.

Nicolai was responding to concerns sparked by the protest group 'We don't trust ballot computers' (Wij vertrouwen stemcomputers niet), which recently demonstrated that the software used by the ballot computers can be compromised.

The hackers showed that different software could be installed to distort the vote count. They also used a simple radio receiver to hear which party someone had voted for.

Manufacturer Nedap has since been instructed to replace the microchips in 8,100 ballot computers. They will also be sealed with an iron seal.

The 1,200 ballot computers from Sdu — which are not owned by the municipalities but the manufacturer, unlike the Nedap computers — will be subjected to random tests performed by research bureau TNO.

Nicolai also said he would inform MPs by the end of October how the 'bugging' problems could be fixed. The intelligence service AIVD

will carry out inquiries.

The government commission that will investigate the problems with the ballot computers will be made up of independent IT experts, but will not start work until next year. It will also investigate the possibility of voting via the internet.

But the anti-ballot computers protest group has said the government's measures were not enough. It will decide after a meeting with ministry staff whether it will take legal action in a bid to ban the use of ballot computers.

Voting advice again available online

The new Vote Indicator (StemWijzer) was launched by the Institute for Public and Politics in The Hague on 17 October.

The website gives members of the public advice on who they should vote for at the Lower House of Parliament elections on 22 November.

A computer programme compares the viewpoints of the website visitors over 30 important election themes such as public safety and integration with the policies of the nation's political parties.

It is the 16th time that voters are being assisted by the StemWijzer. The first StemWijzer was a list of questions on paper with a points system.

The StemWijzer has been improved this year. People will be able to compare their opinion with the political parties on each point and the language has been simplified, making it more accessible to more people.

In recent years, the StemWijzer has grown to become one of the country's most well visited websites.

At the last parliamentary elections in January 2003, some 2.3 million people sought voting advice. At the local council elections in March, a total of 1 million people used the site.

Most of the leaders of the nation's political parties completed the StemWijzer questionnaire at its launch in The Hague.

But internet service provider xs4all encountered a power failure, leading to technical problems.

Christian Democrat CDA Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende did not get any voting advice, while Liberal VVD leader Mark Rutte was given the advice to vote for the Democrat D66.

But Labour PvdA leader Wouter Bos suffered no such setback and was advised to vote for his own party.

The StemWijzer also recommended that he vote for the green-left GroenLinks and Socialist SP as second and third preferences respectively.

Bos said he was a little nervous beforehand. "But if you know your own election policies, it will come good," he said.

Balkenende said the StemWijzer provided good support for people in making a well-motivated choice.

The website can be found at www.stemwijzer.nl.

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