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LOCAL ELECTION
SPECIAL

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Turnout down

Some 53% of people eligible to vote in Wednesday's local elections actually bothered to do so, down from 58% four years ago. The Wadden Sea island of Schiermonnikoog had the highest turnout at 82.5%. The lowest score was recorded in Eindhoven, where just 43.5% of voters cast their ballot.

First past the post

The tiny local authority area of Rozendaal was again the first to declare its result in Wednesday's local election, completing the count in 23 minutes. Nearly 78% of the village's 1,172 voters cast their ballot.

Animal rights

The animal rights party PvdD won one seat in all six local authority areas where it took part: Amsterdam, Leiden, Groningen, Apeldoorn and Buren. The party is to focus on a ban on circuses with wild animals.

Local parties win

Independent local parties have taken over 20% of the vote in the local elections, according to calculations by news agency ANP. This makes them the biggest party overall. Local issue parties are particularly popular in rural areas.

Nos election poll

An Nos opinion poll on the day of the local elections puts the PVV in third place in the national vote with 24 seats. The poll gives the CDA 29 seats, down 12 on their total seats at the 2006 general election. Labour, which pulled out of the cabinet two weeks ago, would be in second place on 27 seats, down six on their 2006 total.

Liberal parties, Wilders dominate in local vote

The two Liberal parties VVD and D66 emerged as the big winners in the local elections on Wednesday, making gains in district, town and city councils nationwide. And Geert Wilders' anti-Islam PVV became the biggest party in Almere and number two in the Hague, the only two cities where it took part. The ruling Christian Democrats, and the Labour party lost seats, as did the Socialist Party, although Labour's losses were not as heavy as forecast earlier. The party appears to have benefitted from its decision to pull out of the national government over Afghanistan.

Wilders said in a speech to supporters that the national election campaign has begun. 'What has happened in Almere and the Hague can happen all over the country,' he said. 'We are going to conquer the entire country... we are going to be the biggest party in the country after the June 9 vote.' CDA leader and prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende said the result had been influenced by the recent cabinet collapse. And party officials pointed out that the CDA is still the biggest party in the country. Nevertheless, the poor showing is bound to weaken the prime minister as he prepares to take the CDA into his fourth election campaign. Labour leader Wouter Bos said the results showed 'the PvdA is back' from its very poor showing in the polls a few weeks ago. 'We had been declared dead and buried', he said. The Labour party was the biggest loser overall, shedding 639 seats but pundits said this was to be expected given the party's massive support in 2006.



Wilders' Almere win below forecast

Geert Wilders' anti-Islam PVV party became the biggest party in the polder city of Almere in Wednesday night's elections, but support was not as high as forecast. The PVV took 21% of the vote and 10 seats on the 39-seat city council. However opinion polls before the vote had given the PVV 30% support and in the European elections last June, the PVV took 27% of the vote.

Local Labour leader Alphons Muurlink said his party would not form a coalition with the PVV. 'The party wants to make enormous spending cuts in Almere which will lead to bankruptcy,' he said. 'I do not understand that people vote for a party which wants to exclude others.' Party leader Geert Wilders has said a headscarf ban in public buildings will be central to coalition negotiations. Almere is a new city in the Flevoland polder, largely populated by former Amsterdammers.

MAIN RESULTS

Amsterdam

The current Labour GroenLinks coalition in Amsterdam lost its majority in Wednesday's election, falling one seat short of the 23 necessary to form a governing coalition. With all the votes counted, Labour lost six seats but remains the biggest party with 14 out of 45.

Rotterdam

Local populist party Leefbaar Rotterdam is calling for a recount in the port city after it and the Labour party tied on 14 seats each. Labour lost some 8% of its support and Leefbaar Rotterdam was virtually unchanged.

The Hague

The Labour party clung on to first place in the Hague although its support fell sharply and the social democrats lost five of their 15 seats. Geert Wilders' anti-Islam PVV emerged as the second biggest party with eight seats and 17.1% of the vote.

Utrecht

Left wing green party GroenLinks emerged as the biggest party in Utrecht with 10 of the 45 city council seats. 'This is a dream result,' local party leader Marry Mos told reporters. GroenLinks is also the biggest party in Nijmegen.

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Wilders Watch

The results of Wednesday's local elections are pretty much as had been expected, with Geert Wilders' PVV emerging as the big winner. But before we get too carried away about the Netherlands swing to the far right, perhaps we should put it all into perspective. After all, it became very clear before the vote that Wilders has no intention of actually getting involved in local government. He has made a ban on headscarves a central part of any coalition negotiations, something he knows no other party supports. So he has already effectively ruled the PVV out of any active role in local government anyway. Wilders can continue to rant about left-wing multiculturalism whatever from the sidelines and focus all his attention on the national elections. At the same time, the PVV vote in both the Hague and Almere is not as strong as opinion polls had predicted. And Rotterdam is also an interesting case in point. Wilders urged his supporters to back Pim Fortuyn's old party Leefbaar Rotterdam - but without any effect. Support for Leefbaar is unchanged from 2006. Of course it is hard to translate local results into a national poll - more people vote at a national level and everyone will have a chance to vote for the PVV. But the likelihood of Wilders emerging as the next prime minister is zero. After all, in Almere and the Hague an overwhelming majority did not vote in favour of ending non-western immigration (whatever that is) and putting 'commandos' in the streets. And that is reason enough for optimism. Nevertheless, Wilders' constant emphasis on 'our culture' and 'our values' is having an insidious effect, slowly chipping away at the acceptance of all foreigners, where ever they come from. And it is that hardening of attitudes which will be most damaging to the Netherlands in the long run.

Political landscape changed for good

Most newspapers seem to be in agreement about one thing this morning: The PVV's win in Almere has changed the Dutch political landscape for good. The Volkskrant wonders if the PVV will look on from the sidelines or put its money where its mouth is and become part of a local government coalition.

'Wilders will then experience the practical problems of making his policies stick and his decisions will have to be pragmatic'.

Trouw thinks the break-up between Labour and the Christian Democrats had created a stalemate between left and right. The PVV win is radicalising the traditional right-wing parties while the big loss of the Socialist Party means left-wing parties are toning down their policies. The CDA and Labour have only themselves to blame, the paper says.

They have shown themselves to be incapable of setting out a course for the country from the middle ground.

The PVV's triumphant win in Almere and The Hague clearly demonstrates voters' feelings of dissatisfaction and unrest, *Algemeen Dagblad* writes. They are exactly the kind of feelings that have proved vote-winners for Geert Wilders. According to the *Telegraaf* the political landscape has not only changed but has been blown to smithereens. It says that parties will still have to campaign but that, based on Wednesday's poll, it is more than likely that the next government will be a four-party coalition. The formation will be a difficult one, the paper predicts, not a good thing in the current economic climate when the country needs a strong cabinet.



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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Coalition

When the votes have been counted, the number of seats on the council (varying from nine to 45) are divided up between the parties. The leader of the biggest party is then asked to form a coalition to run the town or city.

Executives

Once a coalition has been put together, the parties involved appoint aldermen or council executives who will make up the governing board or *college van burgemeester en wethouders (B&W)* - which is similar to the national government's cabinet of ministers.

Mayor

Meetings of the elected local councillors are public, meetings of the executive board are private. Both are chaired by the mayor, who is appointed by the queen. Together, the councillors and the board operate as a system of checks and balances.