

Netherlands vote: Have we reached Peak Populism?

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The result of last week's Dutch general election has been dubbed Europe's equivalent of the Arab Spring. It comes after voters delivered a clear pro-EU mainstream majority in the Dutch Parliament. Turnout in the 15 March poll was 82 per cent, higher than the 74.6 per cent in the last parliamentary vote five years ago. Prime Minister Mark Rutte's ruling People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) won fewer seats than at the last election in 2012 but was still well ahead of Geert Wilders' anti-Islam Party for Freedom (PVV). The Christian Democrats and the liberal D66 party both made gains. The big losers were Eurogroup chief Jeroen Dijsselbloem's Labour Party (PvdA), which lost three-quarters of its voters, its biggest electoral defeat in its history.

It was a campaign said to have been one of the nastiest in recent Dutch history, ranging from the diplomatic row with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and to what some saw as a media obsession with Wilders. Wilders' party had been leading in opinion polls but support for the party appeared to slip in the run up to the election.

The big question being asked now is: Have we reached Peak Populism? Many had been watching the vote in the Netherlands closely, as an indication for how populist parties may fare in other elections in EU countries. France goes to the polls next month to elect a new president, while Germany is due to hold a general election



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in September.

With the dust now settled – and attention now rapidly turning to the crunch French election – MEPs have reacted to the Dutch result. Some have argued that, despite the EU referendum in the UK and ongoing concerns about the still-high popularity of far-right candidate Marine Le Pen ahead of French elections later this year, a positive pro-European message can still prevail. ALDE group Chair Guy Verhofstadt said that Rutte had shown that a "positive pro-European message wins."

For Dutch Liberal MEP Sophie in 't Veld, the election marks something of a rebirth for the EU – a message that will sound loud and clear at the upcoming Rome summit marking the 60th anniversary of the treaty of Rome, which paved the way for the modern-day EU.

She said, "D66 has shown once again that a pro-European message is a vote winner. That message of hope and optimism appeals to young people, those who will shape Europe

in the future. We see first signs of a European spring: pro-European, progressive liberal forces winning in Austria, now in the Netherlands and hopefully next month in France."

Another Dutch MEP, Lambert van Nistelrooij, said he was "happy" with the result. The EPP group deputy said, "Dutch voters have vowed to stop populism. After Brexit and Trump, the Dutch voters have made clear that a populist government and Nexit is no option. That's a good message for Europe ahead of the French and German parliamentary elections later this year."

Further comment came from EPP group leader Manfred Weber, who noted that one of the founding members of the EU (the Netherlands) had "rejected a bid for power by far-right populists." The German member also said this is a "perfect start" for an election year in Europe, showing that voters want a "constructive approach in Europe and to work together." ★