

THE NETHERLANDS



Waking the Sleeping Populist Giant: The 2024 European Elections and Populism in the Netherlands

*Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove**

Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Abstract

The results of the 2024 European elections for populist parties in the Netherlands are intimately related to the events in national Dutch politics since 2021. The relative success of the Party for Freedom (VVD) since 2023 has been related to its more moderate position on European integration and Islam. This change of tone was part of increasing the party's credibility at home and abroad. The European elections were presented as a litmus test for the proposed centre-right government in the Netherlands, and they testified to the increased room for the populist vote in general and the increased competition for that vote between various populist parties in particular. The European elections also proved a defeat for populist contenders such as JA21, Forum for Democracy and the left-wing populist Socialist Party. The impact of Dutch populists on European policies is most likely to be felt via the newly formed government, which contains two populist parties. At the level of the European Parliament, its impact will depend on the success of the newly formed Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group.

Keywords: *populism; populist radical right; European elections; Dutch national elections; the Netherlands*

* andrej.zaslove@ru.nl

Verbeek, Bertjan & Zaslove, Andrej. (2024). "Waking the Sleeping Populist Giant: The 2024 European Elections and Populism in the Netherlands." In: *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). October 22, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0086>



On 6 June 2024, the elections for the 31 Dutch seats in the European Parliament were held. The total number of Dutch seats had been expanded first from 26 to 29 in 2020 (because of Brexit) and again in 2023 to 31 (because of a redistribution of the total number of seats based on demographic changes [European Parliament, 2023]). Turnout was slightly higher in 2024 at 46%, which was under the European average of 51% but up from the 2019 Dutch turnout of 42%. The 2024 outcome witnessed the resurgence of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) while the centre-left held its ground. In this contribution, we argue that the Dutch results must be understood in the context of the political drama that has been unfolding since the provincial and national elections in 2023 and the subsequent formation of a new government coalition in 2024. In what follows, we first describe the landscape of populist parties in the Netherlands and then compare the 2024 results with the previous European, provincial and national elections. We conclude with a brief discussion of the future role of Dutch populists in Brussels.

Varieties of Dutch populism: Between continuity and fragmentation

The Netherlands has long been a breeding ground for populism (especially the right-wing variety) since the appearance of Pim Fortuyn and his party List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in 2002. Over the years, there has been a succession of populist parties competing for populist voters, tapping into different constituencies, ranging from right-wing nativist and left-wing populist to agrarian–populist. Elsewhere, we refer to such a situation as 'mutating populism' (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2016). Mutating populism refers to a party system in which new populist parties enter a system where a populist party is already present, thus potentially ushering in a change in outlook. The entry of these additional populist parties forces all populist parties to distinguish themselves not only from the mainstream parties but also from the other populist parties in the system.

Currently, the Netherlands boasts three types of populist parties (see De Jonge et al., forthcoming 2024). The first type is the populist radical right, consisting of the PVV, Forum for Democracy (FvD), and the Right Answer 2021 (JA21). The second is the populist–agrarian Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB). Third is the left-wing Socialist Party (SP), which is, however, often considered a borderline case of populism (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021). Irrespective of their individual orientations, all populist parties adopt a rather Eurosceptic position.

A crowded landscape: three populist radical-right parties in the Netherlands

The PVV is a populist radical-right party, much like other populist radical-right parties in Europe, such as the National Rally (RN) in France, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and Lega in Italy. Much like these parties, the PVV combines populism with nativism. The core of its ideology pits the ‘good’ people versus the ‘corrupt’ elite in both The Hague and Brussels. The party is critical of excessive immigration, in particular from non-Western countries. Traditionally, opposing Islam and favouring the Netherlands exiting the European Union (EU) – a so-called ‘Nexit’ – have been part and parcel of the PVV program. However, during the 2023 Dutch and 2024 European elections, the PVV moderated its opposition to Islam and its demands for Nexit. This moderation resulted from the VVD’s opening up to a coalition with the PVV in the Summer of 2023 (see also below). Economically, the PVV takes a more protectionist and welfare state chauvinist position aimed at protecting its voters in specific economic and social sectors, such as voters with lower incomes and those who, for example, suffer from high energy prices.

FvD is also considered to be a populist and nativist party. However, FvD has more radical stances regarding opposition to EU integration and relations with Russia; it favours Nexit and propagates a more pro-Russia and pro-Putin line. FvD is also more free-market oriented than the PVV and most other populist radical right parties in Europe. JA21 is also regarded as a populist radical-right party. JA21 is slightly less populist than the other populist radical-right parties, while it is nativist and more market oriented than the PVV and most other populist radical-right parties in Europe. In a way, JA21 and its leader, Joost Eerdmans, can be seen as the heirs to Pim Fortuyn’s legacy as a populist with some liberal tendencies, especially regarding the economy.

Beyond the populist radical right: agrarian and left-wing populism

Much to the surprise of political pundits, a new type of Dutch populism entered the national parliament in 2021 – the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB). The BBB can be considered a populist party insofar as it posits the good people versus the corrupt elite, tapping into the latent centre–periphery cleavage in the Netherlands. The BBB pits the ordinary citizen and farmer against ‘oat milk cappuccino drinking city dwellers’ and the unresponsive politicians from the major cities in the country’s west (the so-called *Randstad*). BBB’s core issues centre on support for farmers and opposition to radical climate policies (in particular, policies to control nitrogen output), while the party also campaigns for the dignity of the regions in the hinterland.



The SP is often considered among the first populist parties in the Netherlands, constituting the only left-wing populist party in the country, albeit less populist than the other populist parties. Although it identifies a clash between the working people and the economic and political elites, it has a less pronounced homogenous view of the people. Over the years, its leaders have strongly varied in their anti-elitist rhetoric. Jan Marijnissen (party leader between 1988 and 2015) was considered the most populist SP leader. Economic issues dominate the party's ideology, while it always contains a critical stand towards the unequal distribution of wealth due to globalization and neoliberal policies, targeting large corporations, financial institutions and the EU.

The electoral fortunes of populism in the Netherlands

In order to understand the outcome of the 2024 European elections, we need to understand the political space for populism in the Netherlands. Figure 1 shows the electoral results at the national level of the Dutch populist parties since the formation of the PVV in 2006.

Several observations are in order. First, apart from the 2006 elections, the PVV has consistently been the leading populist voice, reaching a peak of 23.5% of the vote in the 2023 national elections, six months before the European elections. Second, due to the increased fragmentation of the Dutch party system, the total space for populism increased to some 38% of the vote in 2023. Third, support for left-wing populism has consistently diminished. Finally, since 2017, a growing number of parties have been competing for the populist vote, forcing them to profile themselves not only vis-à-vis mainstream parties but also each other. The inability of the SP to attract economically left-wing and welfare chauvinist voters is particularly interesting, speaking, perhaps, to what voters may see as the party's lack of true commitment to an anti-immigrant stance and because the populist radical right's (i.e., the PVV) focus on creating an economic safety net – as opposed to calling for economic redistribution to combat inequality – is more appealing to populist voters.

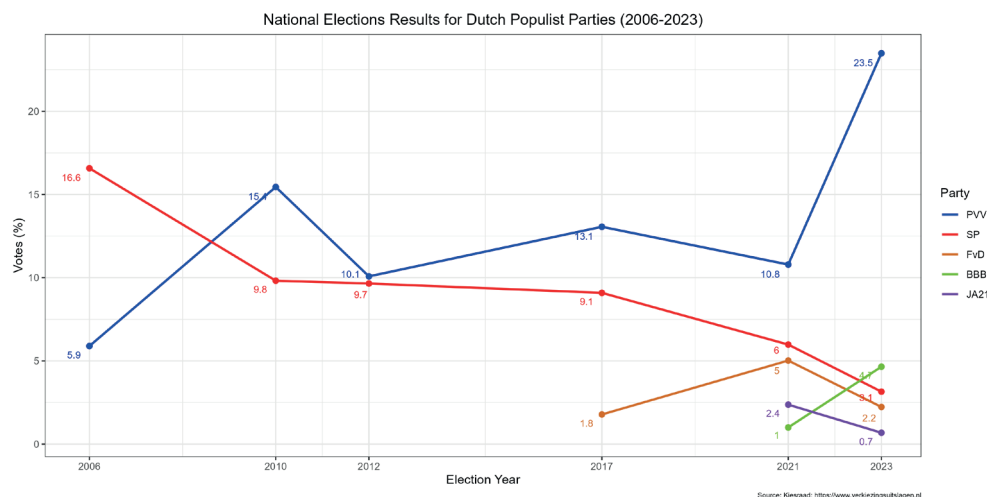
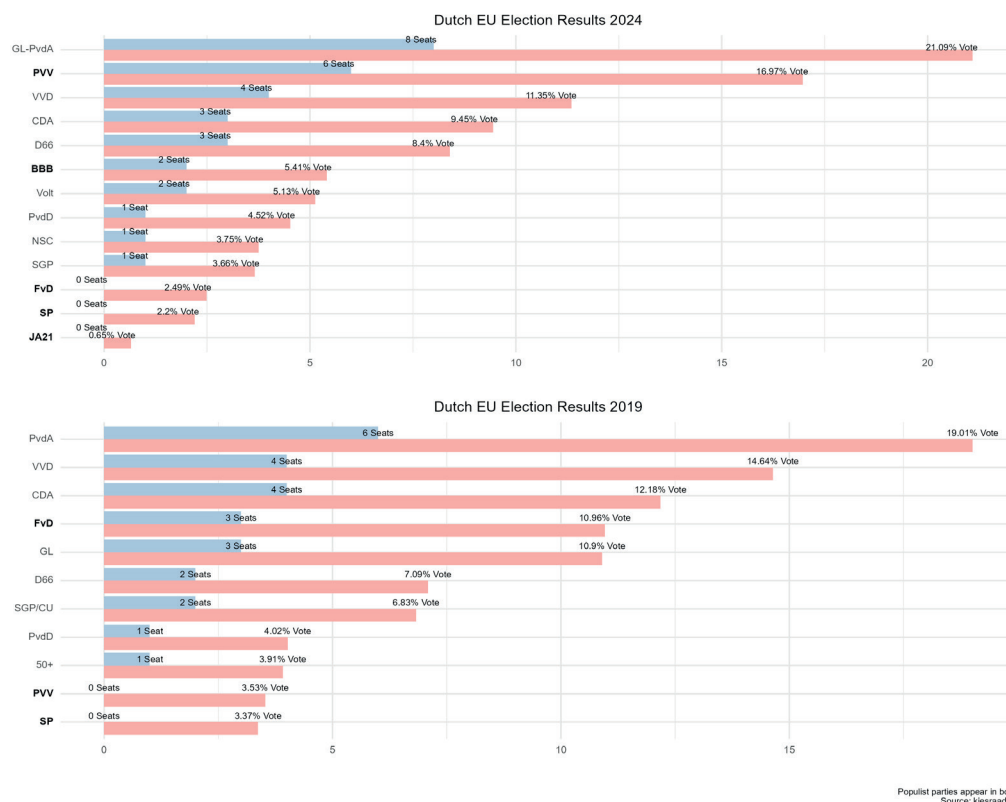


Figure 2 draws our attention to the European elections. It describes not only the results of those parties that succeeded in obtaining at least one seat but also the percentage of votes for all populist parties. A caveat is in order: the increase in Dutch seats from 26 to 31 complicates comparisons with previous European elections.



In the 2024 elections all populist parties combined earned some 28% of the Dutch vote, compared to 18% in 2019 – a considerable gain. Right-wing populists scored 20.1% of the vote in 2024 compared to 14.5% in 2019, again showing a substantial increase. Figure 2 shows that the PVV and the BBB were the only two populist parties that could turn these votes into seats in the 2024 elections, while FvD was the only populist party to obtain seats in the 2019 elections. These figures represent the



volatility of the populist vote: between the two European elections, we have seen the rise and fall of FvD, the comet-like rise of the BBB, and the resurgence of the PVV, which failed to win a single seat in the European Parliament in 2019. On the left of the political spectrum, the SP has shown a decline since its success in 2014, when it obtained almost 10% of the vote. At the same time, Dutch mainstream parties succeeded in holding the fort, gaining 51% in 2024 compared to 54% in 2019.

The main question, therefore, is how to explain the extreme volatility in the (right-wing) populist vote and the eventual comeback of the PVV on the European scene. In other words, how do we account for the awakening of the sleeping populist giant? Here, we argue that in order to understand the results of the European elections, we have to take political developments within the Netherlands into account, in particular, the fall of the Rutte IV government in the summer of 2023, the subsequent national elections on 22 November 2023 and the following government formation negotiations, which only formally ended after the European elections with the appointment of the Schoof I government on 2 July 2024. In that sense, the European elections were part and parcel of the political drama that had characterized Dutch politics effectively since the 2021 national elections.

A second-order election? The crucial domestic context of the 2024 EP elections

In Dutch politics, European elections are part of a five-year cycle encompassing municipal, provincial, national and European elections. Since the European elections of 2019, the Netherlands has witnessed national elections in 2021 and 2023, municipal elections in 2022, provincial elections in 2023 and European elections again in 2024.

Our story begins with the 2023 provincial elections, which saw the unexpected emergence of the newest kid on the populist block, the agrarian–populist BBB. Its success, at the time, came at the behest of both the populist PVV and the mainstream Christian democratic party, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). The BBB's rise was partly the result of the politicization of climate policies in compliance with the European Green Deal of 2019. The Green Deal was particularly important for farmers and fishermen who mobilized against EU climate policies. In addition, the BBB succeeded in exploiting the latent centre–periphery tensions in the Netherlands.

The provincial elections and the rise of the BBB bring us to the second part of our story. In previous years the reputation of governments led by Mark Rutte had been tarnished by political scandal, in particular the tax office's treatment of socially vulnerable groups and the government's reluctance to act decisively after reports that gas exploitation in the northern province of Groningen had provoked earthquakes causing severe damage to houses. In 2023 the fourth coalition under Mark Rutte (composed of CDA, CU, D66, VVD) was made vulnerable by the farmers' protests, the rise of BBB and the troubles these events caused for the CDA. Anticipating a potential deadlock within the government over climate policies, Prime Minister Rutte and his VVD sought to profile themselves by politicizing the issue of asylum and migration, exploiting images of overburdened asylum registration centres and the suggestion that family unification of migrants had accelerated migration. The Rutte IV government eventually fell in July 2023 over intra-coalition conflicts over family unification, leading to new elections in November. It also ushered in a leadership change within the VVD. Importantly, two EU-related themes were explicitly selected to dominate the national elections campaign and would also affect the 2024 European elections campaign: EU asylum and migration policies and EU climate policies.

This brings us to the third part of our story: the 2023 Dutch national elections. These elections coincided with several significant developments. First, the change in VVD party leadership produced a change of strategy towards the PVV. Rutte had consistently excluded the PVV as a coalition partner since 2012. The new VVD party leader, Dilan Yeşilgöz, openly suggested that her party would no longer exclude forming a government with Wilders. Second, the mainstream parties suffered from the rise of a new maverick party, New Social Contract (NSC), founded by former CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt. The NSC positioned itself in the centre-right with a major emphasis on good governance, migration and economic security, polling some 20% in the summer of 2023. The NSC drew voters from a broad range of parties, particularly the CDA and VVD. This situation made a future coalition of mainstream parties look increasingly difficult.

Taking advantage of the new situation, Wilders presented himself as a more moderate candidate: he claimed to no longer favour a Brexit, promised to reform the EU from within, and toned down his opposition to Islam. This shift changed the overall political landscape and the nature of party competition, and Wilders profited from the politicization of migration and his ostensible moderation regarding the EU and Islam. No longer perceived as a pariah by former opponents



and an increasing number of voters, Wilders' PVV succeeded in becoming the largest political party, increasing the number of seats in parliament from 17 to 37.

The November 2023 elections were just the beginning of a lengthy government formation process, which would last until July 2024, encompassing the June European elections. This brings us to the fourth part of our story. Initially, the government formation process was characterized by a long-drawn-out testing of the PVV's democratic credentials. In the end, the four negotiating right-wing parties (the BBB, the NSC, the PVV, and the VVD) were able to find each other on policies aimed at curtailing migration and slowing down EU-required climate policies. This brings us to the fifth and final part of the story: the European elections. These occurred after the four negotiating parties had reached a formal but tentative agreement for a possible government coalition in May 2024. In that sense, the European elections were a litmus test of the legitimacy of the newly proposed coalition.

Indeed, the European election campaign was framed by the centre-left (the GreenLeft–Labour party, GL–PvdA) as an opportunity for voters to express their discontent with the likely government that, in their words, consisted of anti-EU populists and extremists (GroenLinksPvdA, 2024). The actual electoral outcome witnessed a poor performance for the incoming coalition (some 38% of the vote, compared to 56% at the 2023 national elections). It confirmed, however, the PVV's leading position in that coalition despite the drop in support for the PVV between the general and the European elections. At the same time, the centre-left did not emerge as strong enough to challenge the newly formed coalition despite GL–PvdA's success in becoming the largest party at the European elections.

The populist campaign for the European elections

The campaign for the European elections was relatively short, even by Dutch standards, lasting about five weeks but never inviting excitement. The PVV canvassed only rarely. Only FvD toured the entire country extensively with their 'Freedom Touring Bus', which was, however, ignored by most media outlets. Observers complained that the campaign hardly touched upon party programs and instead focused, for example, on the European friends of Geert Wilders who would profit from a PVV victory (Mudde, 2024). Although Wilders himself did not extensively campaign in the Netherlands, he proved visible at the European level, where he

appeared with the likes of Marine le Pen and Matteo Salvini (France 24, 2024).

In this section we first describe those populist parties that were the only two to receive seats in the EU parliament (BBB and PVV). Next, we discuss the party programs of the other relevant populist parties (FvD, JA21 and SP).

In line with its more moderate campaign during the 2023 national elections, the PVV's European electoral program emphasized the need to reform the EU from within rather than to leave the Union. Within that context, focusing on safeguarding sovereignty, it vehemently called for opt-out possibilities for the Netherlands regarding asylum seekers and migration and for relaxing obligations concerning climate change, especially nitrogen. Importantly, the PVV supported strengthening defence, albeit without singling out Russia as the main threat. In its populist rhetoric the PVV targeted power-seeking Eurocrats who spend money at the expense of ordinary citizens (PVV, 2024).

The BBB's program reflected its roots in the agrarian sector and its attention to regional interests. It proposed a 'European Senate' based on the European Committee of the Regions. At the same time, the BBB campaigned for curbs on the European Commission's power and to protect member states' veto rights. It focused on reducing the European Green Deal policies, arguing for a "Real Deal" instead. Notably, it presented itself as the champion of Dutch fishermen, who, according to the BBB, suffer from European fishing policies. Like the PVV regarding asylum and migration policies, the BBB favoured a toughening of asylum policies and an increase of national competences regarding labour migration (BBB, 2024). There are signs that the BBB is moving in the direction of a populist radical-right party. However, at this moment, the party's core issues concern the rural–urban divide, while it is too early to tell if the party and its voters are as nativist as other populist radical-right parties.

This discussion warrants several important observations. First, the PVV has moderated its position regarding EU integration. Second, the rise of the BBB has broadened the range of populist issues to be represented in Brussels, particularly climate change policies. Despite the moderation of the PVV, both parties remain decidedly Eurosceptic, lambasting Eurocrats as 'enemies of the people'.

FvD, JA21 and the SP are the three other populist parties that competed in the European elections. FvD was in favour of a, opposed sending troops to Ukraine,



and remained critical of sanctions against Russia. It demanded the protection of Europeans from mass immigration from non-Western countries, while it also opposed 'wokeism' and climate policies (FvD, 2024). JA21 presented itself as a party of free trade that seeks to reform the EU on the basis of subsidiarity. It called for an immigration policy that resembles the Australian model, implying the regional accommodation of asylum seekers, more robust return policies, and limited access to social programs (JA21, 2024). In short, JA21 presents itself as more market oriented and less Eurosceptic than the other populist radical-right parties. In its electoral program, the left-wing populist SP pleaded for a Europe that does not work at the behest of capital. The party sees the current EU as an entity under the tutelage of international economic elites. Despite the party's criticism of the current EU model, it is less Eurosceptic than the other populist radical-right parties (SP, 2024). Unlike in other European countries, such as France, where parties such as *La France insoumise* (LFI) are able to mobilize left-wing opposition to EU integration, there appears to be less room for a left-wing Eurosceptic party among left-wing voters in the Netherlands. At the same time, the populist radical right has solidified the Eurosceptic vote among right-wing voters.

The EU elections were important for Dutch politics for several reasons. First, the elections tentatively confirmed the nascent government coalition. The fact that the PVV was the second-largest party in the EU elections confirmed its credibility among a sizeable number of Dutch voters. Historically, voter turnout among PVV voters at European elections tends to be relatively low. Actually, 56% of those who voted PVV in the 2023 national elections did not vote in the EU elections (NOS, 2024). Despite this lower turnout among PVV voters in comparison with the 2023 national elections, the party emerged as the second-largest party in the European elections. The BBB, a relatively new party, obtained two seats. The populist members of the nascent coalition thus appeared to have passed the litmus test of the European elections.

The populists go to Brussels

What do these election results imply for the positions of the Dutch populists within the EU and, more specifically, within the EP? First, the combination of results of the Dutch national elections and the European elections positions the Netherlands as a more Eurosceptic country than under previous Dutch governments. The incoming Schoof I government has not called for *Nexit*. However, at the same time, the incoming government has set its mind on demanding special considerations

from Brussels, particularly regarding asylum and migration policies, climate policies and the plight of Dutch fishermen.

The role that the Dutch populists will play in Brussels is less clear. The BBB, although a small party, intends to sit with the European People's Party (EPP). Even though the BBB is an agrarian–populist party, its roots are in the Christian democratic tradition. The degree to which the party will be able to influence the more conservative and more climate-sceptical forces within the EPP remains uncertain.

The influence of the PVV depends in part on the degree to which the populist radical right can form a cohesive group within the EP. Geert Wilders has long had a compelling international reputation among other radical-right populists in Europe, ranging from Orbán in Hungary and Salvini in Italy to Le Pen in France. At the time of writing, the most recent developments have seen the PVV joining Orbán's newly formed EP group, Patriots for Europe (Pfe), whereas, in the last parliament, it belonged to the Identity and Democracy group.

At this moment, the extent to which the Pfe will be able to have a tangible impact is uncertain: It does appear that the newly formed group has been able to attract the most important populist radical-right parties, holding 84 seats (at the time of writing this chapter) in the EU parliament. However, the question is: will the Pfe group have enough influence to strike deals with, for example, the EPP and thus contribute to the PVV's domestic success? Moreover, will this group continue to hold together, despite differences on issues such as relations with Russia? The PVV may find it difficult to walk the tightrope between an EU group that has pro-Russian tendencies within the group and forces within the Netherlands that are clearly pro-Ukraine, especially given the PVV's allies in the new Schoof I government.

In general, the future impact of the Dutch populists in Europe, in particular that of the PVV, is likely to be felt via the intergovernmental route: because of its weight in the new, more Eurosceptic, government coalition, its impact will resonate through meetings within the institutions where member states dominate. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the PVV will play a decisive role within the Pfe group in the EP. The PVV is one of the leading actors within the current Dutch government, despite its playing a typical populist strategy by placing one foot in the cabinet and one foot in the parliament (Zaslove, 2012). Nevertheless, the strength and influence that the PVV has within the current Dutch government may strengthen its influence within the Pfe in Europe.



References

- BBB (2024). BBBeter Nederland. Er staat veel op het spel. Verkiezingsprogramma Europees Parlement 2024–2029. <https://boerbürgerbeweging.nl/europese-verkiezingen/#verkiezingsprogramma-ep-2024>
- De Jonge, Léonie, Matthijs Rooduijn, & Andrej Zaslove (forthcoming 2024). The Evolution of Populism in Dutch Politics. In Sarah De Lange, Tom Louwerse, Paul ‘t Hart, and Carolien van Ham (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Dutch Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Parliament (2023). 2024 European elections: 15 additional seats divided between 22 countries (13 September 2023). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230911IPR04910/2024-european-elections-15-additional-seats-divided-between-12-countries>
- FvD (2024). *Verkiezingsprogramma Europese Verkiezingen 2024* <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/87863/1/FVD%20Verkiezingsprogramma%20EP%202024.pdf>
- France 24 (2024). Far-right party leaders meet in Prague ahead of EU vote (25 April 2024). <https://www.france24.com/en/20190425-far-right-party-leaders-meet-prague-ahead-eu-vote>
- GroenLinksPvdA (2024). *Ons Europese Verkiezingsprogramma*. <https://groenlinkspvda.nl/verkiezingsprogramma-europa/>
- JA21 (2024). *Vrijheid door Vrijhandel Voor een EU die werkt voor Nederland*. https://stem.ja21.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Verkiezingsprogramma-EP24_A4_final-klein.pdf
- Meijers, Maurits J., and Andrej Zaslove (2021). Measuring populism in political parties: Appraisal of a new approach. *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(2), 372–407.
- Mudde, Cas (2024). “De Vrienden van Wilders”; een hypocriete en gevaarlijke campagne’, StukRoodVlees (21 May 2024). <https://stukroodvlees.nl/de-vrienden-van-wilders-een-hypocriete-en-gevaarlijke-campagne/>
- NOS (2024). Groot deel kiezers coalitiepartijen bleef thuis bij Europese verkiezingen (7 June 2024). <https://nos.nl/collectie/13972/artikel/2523459-groot-deel-kiezers-coalitiepartijen-bleef-thuis-bij-europese-verkiezingen>
- PVV (2024). *Nederland op 1*, <https://www.pvv.nl/images/2024/EP/PVV-Verkiezingsprogramma-EP-2024.pdf>
- SP (2024). *Mensen voorop, niet het kapitaal. Verkiezingsprogramma SP Europese verkiezingen 2024* https://www.sp.nl/sites/default/files/verkiezingsprogramma_sp_ep2024.pdf
- Verbeek, Bertjan, and Andrej Zaslove (2016). Italy: a case of mutating populism? *Democratization*, 23(2), 304–323.

