

2021 General Elections

in the Netherlands



What to expect based on recent polls and party manifestos?



Introduction

The Netherlands goes to the ballot box on 17 March 2021, for regular elections for the House of representatives. In the run up to this election, Dutch politics has been far from dull. On 15 January 2021, the Dutch government stepped down because of the so-called “day-care allowance affair”, in which the government unjustly treated thousands of households as fraudulent. This involved the resignation of Eric Wiebes (member of VVD), the ruling Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate, and was preceded by the resignation of Lodewijk Asscher, a house of representatives member in the PvdA leadership, who was the responsible undersecretary and minister in earlier governments.

The early end of the Rutte-III government is expected to have few consequences for urgent policies and the economy. The government is continuing as a caretaking government, as expected anyway in light of the regular elections. Even though it is custom for a caretaking government to put the most controversial policies on hold, several opposition parties have stated that they would allow the government ample room to continue to manage the Covid-19 crisis.

In this publication, we discuss what to expect from this election and outline the political positions of the most relevant political parties on economic topics that are of most relevance to an audience outside the Netherlands for the next four-year term.

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Summary

Political landscape remains scattered

In the run up to general elections for the House of Representatives on 17 March 2021 in the Netherlands, the leading Dutch Polling Indicator suggests no dramatic change in Dutch politics. Based on various polls, the Dutch political landscape is likely to remain scattered, with 14 parties polling for at least one seat in the lower house and six parties with a medium number of seats.

Much support for VVD and its current coalition

Prime Minister Mark Rutte's VVD remains the party with by far the most support of the electorate, polling between 41 and 45 of a total 150 seats. It might actually grow substantially compared to its current 32 seats. This combined with a small loss of support for coalition partners D66 and CDA and a minor gain for ChristenUnie provides ample room for the current government to win another term.

Change of leadership could have effect close to the elections

Since CDA, D66 and PvdA all recently chose new political leaders with no experience in election debates, large last minute swings in polls cannot be excluded. While the ruling government just fell due to the so-called "day-care allowance affair", it continues as a caretaker government and the polls show no significant shift in support for coalition parties as a consequence so far.

VVD could form centre-right or centre-left coalition

As it stands, it is expected that the VVD will take the new initiative to form a new coalition government with at least three parties. Besides the current centre-right VVD-CDA-D66-ChristenUnie coalition, a similar VVD-CDA-D66 coalition and centre-left government of VVD-CDA-GroenLinks-PvdA are among the most evident options. The current lack of a Senate majority for all these options is not likely to be seen as an insurmountable hurdle.

No huge policy shifts expected, but austerity less likely

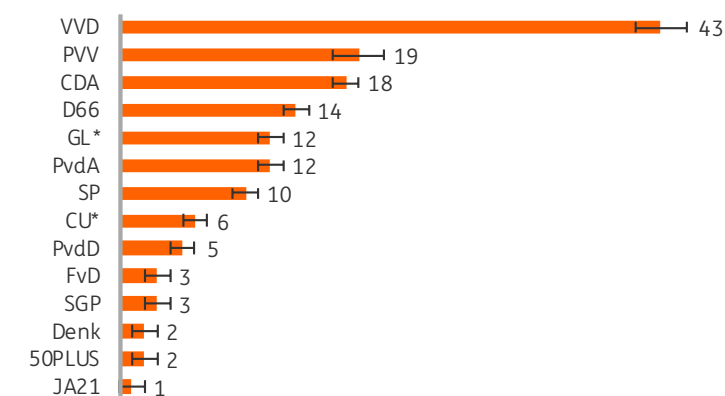
A government of such traditional parties would not imply a huge regime change. Nevertheless, the Dutch mood specifically regarding quick domestic austerity seems to have changed compare to the previous crisis period: a focus on long-run sustainability seems more likely than a push for short-term debt reduction. Meanwhile, there is also a lot of support for more public investment.

Definitely no break with Europe, but no unconditional solidarity

With regards to European fiscal policies, the next government is expected to remain in favour of conditionality and sanction capabilities in return for solidarity. Opinions about the necessity to change the European Stability and Growth Pact differ among the coalition candidates. The election manifestos of the parties that are most likely to join the government suggest that radical steps away from European projects such as leaving the European Monetary Union or the European Union seem very unlikely.

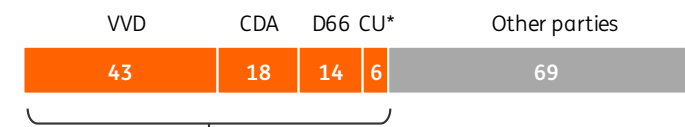
VVD by far the party with most support in the polls...

Estimated polled number of seats for the House of Representative**, point estimates with 5% error margins



...contributing to substantial majority for current coalition

Estimated polled number of seats for the House of Representative**



Current coalition partners: 81 of 150 seats - 76 required for absolute majority (between 76 and seats 86 at 95% confidence level)

*CU=ChristenUnie, GL=GroenLinks

**Estimates based on polls of I&O Research, Ipsos/EenVandaag and Kantar, taking into account variance and so called "house effects"

Source: Peilingwijzer of 28 January 2021

Chapter 1



Dutch political system

The basics of the Dutch political system

1.1 The basics of the Dutch political system

The Dutch parliament

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy with a Parliament consisting of two bodies:

- Senate (upper house or First Chamber) with 75 seats
- House of Representatives (lower house or Second Chamber) with 150 seats

The House of Representatives is generally considered more important and more political than the Senate. Only the former has the right to submit amendments to legislation. To pass any legislation, the government needs the support of the majority of both houses of Parliament. In recent years the ruling governments often did not have a majority in the upper house, meaning they needed the support of opposition parties to pass legislation.



While the Senate traditionally only checked legislative quality, it has become more political in recent years, with opposition parties initially opposing legislation for reasons other than the quality of legislation.

The Dutch elections

The Dutch vote every four years for a new Parliament. In the upcoming elections on 17 March the Dutch will vote on the House of Representatives. Voting is not compulsory (since 1970). Everyone 18 years or older is allowed to vote. The elections are based on proportional representation, where the entire country constitutes a single constituency. There is no formal electoral threshold. Hence, the Dutch political system is said to be one of the most proportional in the world. The Senate is chosen indirectly, via elections of the Provincial Council. The next provincial elections will be in 2023. The members of a new House of Representatives are chosen directly.

The Dutch Cabinet

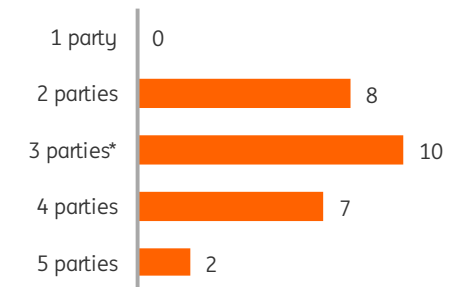
The Dutch cabinet consists of Ministers and State Secretaries. They propose laws under the control of the Parliament. The Dutch Prime Minister is the chairman of the Council of Ministers, the weekly meeting where policy decisions are taken. The Prime Minister coordinates and is the face of the Dutch government. He is *primus inter pares* and thus has no discretionary power unlike, for example, the US President. Together with the King, the Cabinet constitutes the government. The King has formal obligations in the legislative process, but de facto plays a minor political role.

Creating a new cabinet: always a coalition

The process of creating a new cabinet begins shortly after the final election result. In the meantime, the current coalition parties continue to govern. Because of the proportional representation system, there are usually a lot of parties in the lower chamber (15 at present). Interpretation of the election result can therefore be quite difficult. No party in the Netherlands has ever had an absolute majority (76 seats). Traditionally the biggest party is the first to try to form a coalition. On average forming a coalition takes 94 days, but due to the increased scattering of the votes the last election brought about a much longer (225 days) formation process. This ultimately led to a four-party government, consisting of VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie.

Post-war Dutch governments always a coalition of several parties

Number of Dutch governments since 1945 that consisted of...



*This includes the 2010-2012 minority government of VVD and CDA which PVV supported
Source: Rijksoverheid.nl, calculations ING Research

Chapter 2



What to expect from the Dutch election vote

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2.1 Political landscape likely to remain scattered

Political landscape remains scattered

Polls are being held almost weekly in the Netherlands. As of 28 January 2021, the leading [Dutch Polling Indicator](#) based on those polls was estimating sufficient support for a total of 14 parties in the lower house, one fewer than the current composition of the house. As such, the political landscape remains quite scattered.

Many parties with medium number of seats

Based on point estimates of this Dutch Polling Indicator, as many as six parties are projected to get 10 to 19 seats. This shows that few parties will be able to exert dominance in negotiations and that many parties may matter in the construction of the next coalition.

Why the Dutch Polling Indicator?

The composite [Dutch Polling Indicator](#) is often preferred above a single poll. Single polling companies might structurally over- or underestimate the support for some parties. A single poll may also be subject to random variance, since it is only a sample of the population. The Dutch Polling Indicator statistically corrects for these so-called “house effects” and “noise”, based on data since the previous elections in 2017.

Poll show sufficient support for 14 political parties in House of Representatives

Number of seats*

VVD (led by M. Rutte)
Liberal conservatives



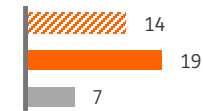
PVV (led by G. Wilders)
Populist conservative party



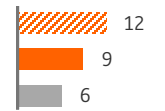
CDA (led by W. Hoekstra)
Christian democrats, centre-right



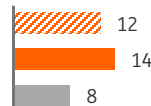
D66 (led by S. Kaag)
Liberal democrats, centre



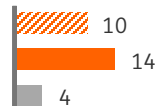
PvdA (led by L. Ploumen)
Social democrats



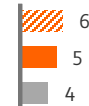
Groenlinks (led by J. Klaver)
Green party, progressive left



SP (led by L. Marijnissen)
Socialist party



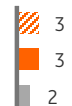
CU (led by G.-J. Segers)
Christian-social party



PvdD (led by E. Ouwehand)
Party for the Animals, progressive left



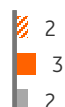
FvD (led by T. Baudet)
Populist conservative liberals



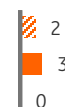
SGP (led by K. van der Staaij)
Conservative Christian party



50PLUS (led by L. den Haan)
Party for elderly, social-conservative



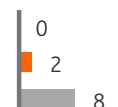
DENK (led by F. Azarkan)
Diversity-minded, focus on inclusion



JA21 (led by J. Eerdmans)
Conservative liberals



Other (Van Kooten-Arissen +Krol+OSF+Ottens+Van Pareren)



- Polled number of seats for the House of Representative
- Number of seats in the House of Representatives (out of 150)
- Number of seats in the Senate (out of 75)

*Point estimates of polled number of seats for the House of Representative are based on polls of I&O Research, Ipsos/EenVandaag en Kantar, taking into account variance and so called “house effects”
Source: [Peilingwijzer](#) of 28 January 2021, [Tweede Kamer](#) and [Eerste Kamer](#), calculations ING Research

2.2 Gains in support result in majority for current coalition, for now

Current coalition gaining due to VVD tailwind

The expected distribution of seats, especially among the largest political parties, is not massively different from the current composition of the House of Representatives, according to the Dutch Polling Indicator (28 January 2021). That said, some significant shifts could be expected. VVD looks to be gaining the most (11) seats. Among the parties expected to gain additional seats are PvdA, ChristenUnie, PvdD and newcomer JA21. These shifts are predicted to come mostly at the expense of D66 and SP. The current caretaking government is expected to gain substantially (6 seats) in comparison to its current 75 seats.

Majority in House of Representatives for traditional parties

Prime Minister Mark Rutte's VVD is still by far the most popular party, polling between 41 and 45 of the 150 seats. The expected seats of the four parties currently governing add up to 81, a clear majority. This means that all populist parties combined will remain without a majority, even though Geert Wilders' PVV would be the second largest party with 19 seats.

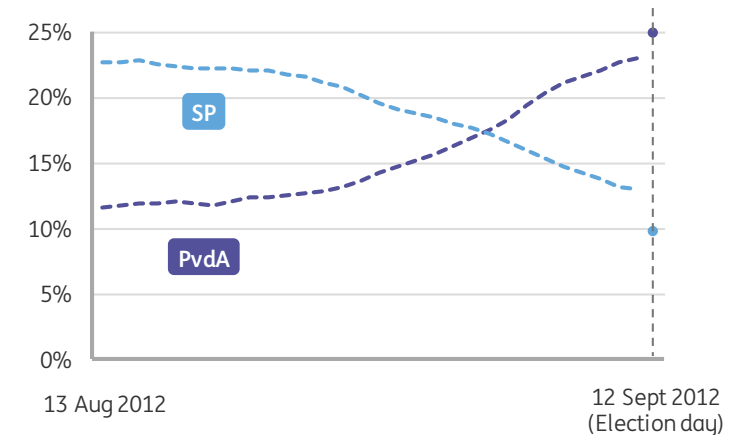
Uncertainty in election estimates: influence of change of leadership

While VVD continues to campaign with Prime Minister Mark Rutte as its leader, CDA (Wopke Hoekstra), PvdA (Lilianne Ploumen) and D66 (Sigrid Kaag) all recently chose new political leaders for the elections of 2021. It is uncertain how the electorate will respond to these leaders and how this will translate into the final results. For

example, the PvdA saw a massive increase in support under the new leadership of Diederik Samson in the run-up to the election of 2012, showing that exceptional campaigning can potentially swing a lot of votes in the Netherlands. Political experts attributed that swing to the strong performance of Samson in televised election debates, which are usually scheduled in the last month before the election. It is certainly possible that new party leaders erode support for the VVD by blaming its leader, Rutte, for the day-care allowance affair, or, in case of disappointing performance, create a loss for their own potential coalition party. So far, this scandal has not come at the expense of support for the VVD or the coalition. Some political experts have said it was a collective failure rather than the sole responsibility of the government, but others suggest that the topic has been overshadowed by the coronavirus crisis.

Large swing in support for two leftist parties in the final days of 2012 election for the Dutch House of Representatives

Estimated support* per party and actual election result, as share of the voting population in the Netherlands



*Point estimates based on polls of I&O Research, Ipsos/EenVandaag en Kantar, taking into account variance and so called "house effects"
Source: Tom Louwerse's Peilingwijzer Harvard Dataverse 2010-2012 and Kiesraad, calculations by ING Research

2.3 Coalition most likely centre-left or centre-right

VVD expected to take the initiative for a government with at least three parties

Based on the Dutch Polling Indicator, one would currently expect the VVD to start the negotiations for a new government. The newly elected lower house will have to decide who can start the initial negotiations on a new coalition. Traditionally, this is the party with most votes, but the change in the number of votes might also be taken into consideration. The polls predict that at least three parties will be necessary to form a majority government in the lower house, while a four or five party government also seems reasonably likely.

Exclusions and collaborations limit options

The options for possible coalitions are limited by preferences voiced by a number of parties. The leaders of the CDA, D66 and GroenLinks have implicitly or explicitly stated they will not form a coalition with both Thierry Baudet's FvD and the PVV. Other traditional parties also show little enthusiasm to govern with the parties of Baudet or Wilders. Furthermore, preferred cooperation could be taken into account: PvdA considers it unthinkable to govern without GroenLinks and/or SP, while GroenLinks also stated that it only wants to join the coalition if the PvdA does so as well.

Senate matters, but might not be an insurmountable hurdle

The composition of the Senate could also be taken into account during the formation. The current Senate, consisting of 15 parties, is even more fragmented than the House of Representatives. The share of populist seats is also high, much higher than in the current House of Representatives. If this were weighted considerably during

the coalition formation process, a government with at least four parties would be the most likely outcome. For an absolute majority, no fewer than five parties are required. Not reaching the threshold of 38 seats in the Senate is possible, but will make any legislation harder to get through Parliament without extra compromises. However, by reaching out to opposition parties, the ruling government has been relatively successful in dealing with a Senate minority, which illustrates the pragmatic nature of Dutch politics and of its current prime minister.

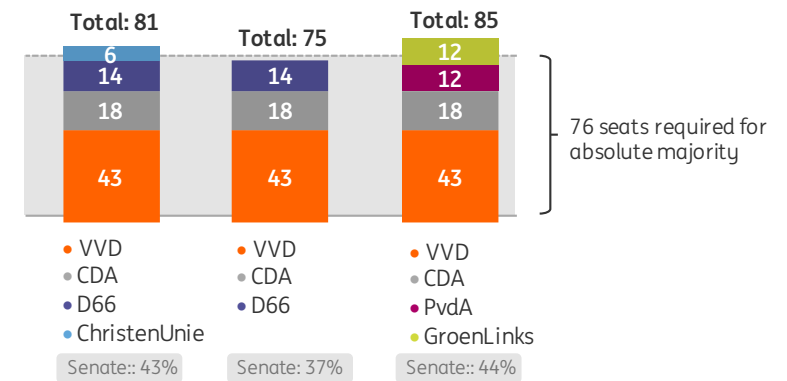
Centre-left or centre-right of traditional parties most likely coalitions

With many parties in Parliament, many different coalitions are theoretically possible. In practice, some are much more likely than others. We discuss the most evident options.

Continuation of the current coalition: **VVD+CDA+D66+Christenunie** would be a centre-right with Christian influence. The most difficult negotiations would probably be on moral issues. The moral differences between D66 and ChristenUnie might make a three party government of **VVD+CDA+D66** the preferred option, if the number of seats allow a majority. As this absolute majority support is currently not the case, according to the point estimates of the polls, a four party coalition seems more likely at present. **VVD+CDA+PvdA+GroenLinks** would be an alternative coalition, with both a right and left wing. This requires some concessions on social-economic and climate topics from VVD and CDA, giving the government a centre-left mark.

Most evident coalitions vary in number of polled seats and number of parties

Estimated polled number of seats for the House of Representative*



*Based on polls of I&O Research, Ipsos/EenVandaag en Kantar, taking into account variance and so called "house effects"
Source: Peilingwijzer of 28 January 2021

Lengthy formation possible

The length of the negotiation process probably depends on the number of parties involved and their differences in political stance. A VVD+CDA+D66 coalition should find it easier to agree on policies than a coalition of, for instance, a centric-left VVD+CDA+PvdA+GroenLinks. Given the larger political differences and higher number of parties, the latter will need to find more compromises and will therefore likely take more than the average 94 days to deliver a coalition agreement.

Chapter 3



Political positions of most evident coalitions

Consensus on focus of domestic fiscal policy on long-term sustainability

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No consensus on fiscal rules and solidarity, but no radical break with Europe

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3.1 Consensus on focus of domestic fiscal policy on long-term sustainability

Election manifestos show less eagerness for fiscal austerity

The (draft) election manifestos of each political party give a feel for future policymaking under a new coalition government. While in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the Dutch government - backed up with support of many political parties - rushed into fiscal austerity and economic reforms and urged others to do the same, the recent manifestos show a different approach to fiscal policy in the current period of low interest rates and Covid-19.

Focus of domestic fiscal policy on long-term sustainability

On domestic fiscal policy, both a larger and smaller version of this centre-right coalition of VVD+CDA+D66(+ChristenUnie) would opt for taking a long-term view on fiscal sustainability - focussing on the net present value of all future revenues and expenditures - and refrain from quick implementation of austerity. The absence of ChristenUnie would probably have no noticeable difference on fiscal policy. VVD, CDA, D66, and ChristenUnie have all discussed the importance of fiscal prudence, but none of the parties is explicitly arguing for austerity in the short run. In fact, VVD and ChristenUnie explicitly argue against it while D66 would allow fiscal deficits for at least a few years. CDA is most explicit about its preference for the creation of a buffer for the next crisis, but also only for the long run in line with the European Stability and Growth Pact. D66, ChristenUnie and, to a lesser extent VVD, put their main focus on ensuring sustainability of public finances, focusing on long-term debt stability.

Centre-left government will shift to austerity even less quickly, but neither prefers irresponsible fiscal policy

Post-Covid public debt reduction would be even less of a priority for the centre-left government VVD+CDA+PvdA+GroenLinks than for a centre-right coalition. PvdA and GroenLinks traditionally campaign less on fiscal policy than the more liberal parties, and hence little on this matter can be found in their manifestos. PvdA would also allow public debt to increase in the short run; GroenLinks refrained from writing about it at all. However, this doesn't mean totally unsustainable fiscal policy however: traditional parties tend to submit detailed and realistic fiscal plans at the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) which will then be subjected to public scrutiny.

Having said this, remember that as it stands, most Covid-related economic support measures will automatically expire mid-2021, which will imply a decrease of fiscal stimulus. So even if the government does not instantly go into austerity mode, this means that the fiscal retreat could be substantial, since we estimated just the discretionary net expenditures to be worth a monthly average of €4.6 billion in the first half of 2021, or almost 7% of monthly GDP.

Consensus support for public investment

Public investment is a theme that's very popular among the parties that are most likely to be relevant for coalition negotiations. The focus for investments differs from for example priority in spending €60 billion on greening the economy (GroenLinks) to investment in a broad range of subjects such as housing, infrastructure, digitalisation, innovation and sustainability (CDA).

While there is consensus to refraining from austerity, expiration of temporary support would still imply large fiscal retreat

All in all, it appears that the love of fiscal prudence has not totally left Dutch politics, but **short-term austerity is very unlikely**. In fact, a common theme among for all parties in a centre-right and centre-left coalition is **higher public investment**. The domestic focus for fiscal policy will most likely be on **long-term sustainability**.



3.2 No consensus on fiscal rules and solidarity, but no radical break with Europe

Stance on European Stability and Growth Pact depends on participation of progressive and leftist parties in coalition

While traditionally, the Netherlands was very much pro-EU, in recent years it has often attempted to slow the process towards an “ever closer union.” D66 is in favour of a more federal Europe and often campaigns on this topic, while GroenLinks and PvdA are generally (even if sometimes to a lesser extent) fonder of Europe than VVD, CDA and ChristenUnie. VVD and CDA are fiscally mostly focused on maintaining the status quo. VVD and CDA seem to be in favour of returning to the fiscal rules of the Stability and Growth Pact once the pandemic is over, while ChristenUnie and PvdA would like to modernize the rules. CDA is most explicit in its support for the pact, in that it wants to “hold on to responsible debt reduction in member states and the importance of economic reforms, in accordance with the agreements of the Stability and Growth Pact”. VVD and ChristenUnie want an independent supervisor that actually sanctions member states that violate fiscal rules. Remember that the European Commission announced it would review of the fiscal rules in the coming months.

Eagerness for increasing European fiscal solidarity limited, but higher in centre-left government

The CDA, and more so ChristenUnie, D66 and GroenLinks, are explicitly in favour of European fiscal solidarity, though the CDA and ChristenUnie are against Eurobonds, while VVD, strong proponent of the internal market, would like to prevent a transfer union. VVD and CDA want to keep the Multi-annual Financial Framework in place, while D66 wants to give EU permanent

revenues with flexible annual budgets. Both VVD and CDA are generally against more tax instruments at the EU level, while ChristenUnie, D66, GroenLinks and PvdA are open to European initiatives such as a tax on digital services, minimum corporate income tax, a Tobin tax, tax base harmonisation and/or a carbon border tax.

Concluding, the next Dutch government will probably favour **rules-based European fiscal policies**, but whether it will favour holding onto the existing Stability and Growth Pact depends on the parties involved. The absence of ChristenUnie and especially PvdA and GroenLinks from the new coalition should mean less support for European fiscal solidarity and more conservatism in the discussion on possible changes to the Stability and Growth Pact. In any case it remains likely that the Dutch government will demand **conditionality** and accompanying **sanctions** as part of European solidarity. In a centre-right government of VVD+CDA+D66 those conditions would be mostly around compliance to economic standards while in a leftist government, conditions may centre on reforms to human rights or democratic values.

No radical policy changes towards Europe expected

The election manifestos of the parties that are most likely to join the government suggest that **radical steps** away from European projects such as leaving the European Monetary Union or the European Union seem **very unlikely**. Most political parties devote parts of their manifestos to policies that they would like to change

or implement at the European level, implicitly stating that they would like to continue being part of the European Union. On the topic of staying in the European Monetary Union, it is interesting that ChristenUnie claims that as long as Germany is part of the eurozone, the Netherlands should be too, while other parties take membership of the EMU as too obvious to even discuss.

This means that the next Dutch government is likely to continue to work with existing European institutions. Perhaps not as eagerly as in the distant past, but nevertheless committed to the view that a small open country like the Netherlands will benefit from international cooperation and coordination.



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Tweede Kamer – Fracties

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