

#EuropeElects: European Movement Ireland Dutch Elections Blog



In the run up to Wednesday 15 March, the Dutch elections were largely presented by the Irish media in the context of being a bellwether for right-wing populism in Europe. They were introduced also as the first of three crucial European elections this year, after the Brexit vote and US election of President Donald Trump in 2016. The elections tended to be seen through the prism of a battle between Prime Minister Mark Rutte, of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, and Geert Wilders, of the Party for Freedom, to return the largest number of seats to the Dutch Parliament. This narrative only intensified in the wake of the diplomatic row that broke out between the Netherlands and Turkey, with Irish media attention centring on how this incident had affected the electoral prospects of these two party leaders. Mr Wilders' attitudes to, and comments on, immigration dominated many of the headlines, with most stories concentrating foremost on these views.

A small number of articles and news pieces in Irish media did though reference the fragmented Dutch political landscape and its likely impact on government coalition building. This was noticeable particularly in the coverage of RTÉ's (Ireland's public broadcaster) main Brussels-based European correspondent, who was on the ground in Leiden on 15 March to cover the election, and delved much deeper into the factors behind both this fragmentation and rise in support for Mr Wilders' party. Also, an editorial in The Irish Times also sought to de-mythicize the story that this was an election all about Prime Minister Rutte and Mr Wilders, concentrating on how the results of the election were symptomatic more of a wider squeezing of the mainstream centre ground in Europe.

In the main though, the strong narrative that this Dutch election was all about the fight of an embattled centre against an advancing populism won out. In the Irish media, the results of a day in which Prime Minister Rutte declared "the Netherlands...said 'stop' to the wrong kind of populism" were ultimately reported as such. In the context of the results it was again Mr Wilders who grabbed the headlines, although this time due to his Party for Freedom not returning the largest number of seats.