

## **The Forum voor Democratie and the provincial elections of 20 March in the Netherlands**

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On 20 March 2019 provincial elections took place in the Netherlands. These provincial elections have repercussions for national politics because the provincial representatives elect the members of the Dutch upper house, the Senate.

The recent elections were won by the Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy). This newcomer grew out of a think tank established in 2015 by Thierry Baudet. A young conservative intellectual with the public image of a dandy, Baudet gained prominence as one of the initiators of the April 2016 Dutch referendum on the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine. At the time, Baudet acted in concert with several other populist initiatives of the right that shared his EU-sceptic agenda. In September 2016 Baudet together with Henk Otten turned his think tank into a political party. The party consequently obtained 1,8% of the votes (and thereby 2 seats) in the national elections of March 2017; in the March 2018 local elections it won three seats (5,7%) in the municipal council of Amsterdam (the only place where it fielded candidates). Since then, the Forum voor Democratie has seen a dramatic rise in support: in the 20 March 2019 provincial elections, the party won 14,4% percent of the votes, and gained 13 seats in the Senate (out of 75). In one sweep, the newcomer became the Senate's biggest party.<sup>1</sup> If we add the 6.9% of Geert Wilder's PVV, populist radical right parties obtained the highest vote percentage in national elections in the Netherlands ever.<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, FvD scored well in all provinces of the Netherlands, becoming the biggest party in 3 provinces, including North and South Holland, while coming in either second or third in all other provinces. The elections furthermore showed a further fragmentation of the already very divided political landscape, as well as a continued shift towards the right: as in the 2017 national elections, the victory of the greens (GroenLinks, total

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch political system is characterized by a rather large number of parties, due to the absence of an election threshold and a history of socio-religious compartmentalization. In the past two decades, traditionally bigger parties have seen their electorate shrink, party support has become more and more volatile. At present there are 13 parties in parliament. The largest party in parliament, the VVD, only obtained 21,3% of the votes (gaining 33 out of 150 seats) in the 2017 parliamentary elections.

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn and Leefbaar Nederland together obtained 18,6% of the votes on the wave of support for Pim Fortuyn. See below.

10,7%), did not compensate the losses of the Socialist Party (now 5,9%) and the social democratic PvdA (8,5%).<sup>3</sup>

### **The populist radical right in the Netherlands**

Baudet places himself in the populist tradition of Pim Fortuyn, whose Lijst Pim Fortuyn first entered the 2002 parliamentary elections to obtain 17% of the votes. Fortuyn's program altered the traditional radical right repertoire by focusing the anti-foreigner agenda specifically on Muslims, and by claiming that he represented 'the people' against the 'ideologically backward Islam' as well as against the 'multicultural elite' of the Netherlands that fostered 'foreign threats' – in particular immigration and supranational bodies (EU). The assassination of Fortuyn in the run-up to the 2002 national elections contributed to the idea of a harsh political struggle between the newcomers and the elites, and between left and right (as can be seen in the often-used phrase that 'the bullet came from the left').

Fortuyn's party, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) was the winner of the 2002 elections, but after losing its front man the LPF fell apart due to internal discord. After the 2006 elections, the party had lost all its seats in parliament. Yet by that time, new initiatives on the right had sprung up. These included Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), which positioned itself as staunchly anti-Islamic and for the 'common Dutchman'. In 2016 Baudet established his Forum voor Democratie, with an agenda characterized by populism (criticizing the 'ruling elites', their 'party cartel' and 'job carousel') and romantic nationalism. Newcomers to the parliament in the past two decades were also a party for elderly (50+), the 'party for animals', and a migrant party that is mainly focused on people of Turkish descent (DENK). With many parties that claim to represent specific groups that feel 'underrepresented', traditional ideological competition is getting less prominent in elections.

### **Thierry Baudet**

Baudet (1983) gained a doctorate in law from Leiden University (2012) with a thesis entitled 'The Attack on the Nation State', arguing that supranational institutions are incompatible with democratic rule of law. One of Baudet's PhD supervisors was professor of law Paul Cliteur, an

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<sup>3</sup> In the 2015 provincial elections, these parties obtained 5,3% (GL), 11,6 (SP) and 10,0% (PvdA) of the votes, while in the 2017 elections, they obtained 9,13% (GL), 9,09 (SP) and 5,7% (PvdA) respectively.

erstwhile liberal scholar and publicist who is the director of the FvD's scientific bureau and in March 2019 featured second on the FvD's senate list; the other was the British conservative philosopher Robert Scruton. Since then, Baudet has been active as commentator and publicist and published several books. His main theme is the downfall of European nation-states due to European integration and immigration of people from outside Europe.

### **FvD ideology**

The FvD's program is Eurosceptic, anti-immigration and climate-sceptic. The party moreover advocates reforms of the political system as a means to overthrow the current political elites. This, so the FvD, is necessary because the elites are acting against the interests of the people, referring to the 2016 referendum on the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, in which a majority of the voters declined the agreement after which it was signed with minor changes anyway.

#### *Against the 'oikophobic' elites*

The FvD claims to fight against the "party cartel" supposedly comprising 10.000 career politicians who run the Netherlands but are loyal only to their respective parties.<sup>4</sup> An 'enemy from within', these elites attack 'western society', "homeopatically dilluting" the Dutch population by "mixing it with all peoples of the world".<sup>5</sup> The elites' attack on their own society allegedly results from their 'oikophobia', a term first coined by Robert Scruton to denote 'a fear of the own'. In 2013, Baudet published a book under this title, in which he described oikophobia as an extreme form of cultural relativism, manifested through multiculturalism, the policy of open borders and European integration, as well as through modernism in European art (!). The FvD frequently uses this term to accuse 'the elites' of deliberately attempting to weaken the Dutch society.

#### *Euroscepticism*

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<sup>4</sup> See the FvD's website, [www.forumvoordemocratie.nl](http://www.forumvoordemocratie.nl)

<sup>5</sup> Baudet said this at an FvD meeting, and later defended his statement on public radio. NPO1, *Dit is de dag*, 17 March 2017.

Euroscepticism is a central issue for the FvD, as is also reflected in the origins of the party in the 2014 referendum. The process of European integration is seen as a deliberate attempt to weaken the nation state and to make democratic control over political decision-making impossible, fitting within the 'oikophobic' scheme of the elites. Only weeks ago the FvD website argued that the EU is 'unreformable', and that the party is therefore in favor of a "Nexit" – a Dutch exit from the EU. Remarkably, this statement has since been removed from the website, and on 2 April the FvD in parliament voted against a PVV motion in favor of a Nexit. The party now calls for 'sovereignty as starting point', and wants to see referendums before any further transfer of sovereignty to Brussels. This move is at odds with Baudet's personal struggle against the EU. It might be interpreted as an attempt to become a more serious coalition partner. Meanwhile FvD's current attempt to participate in the formation of provincial governments clearly involves cooperation with the much-hated 'oikophobic elites' of the 'party cartel'. Obviously, the chaos in London also makes it less easy to argue for a Nexit.

### *Anti-immigration*

Like Pim Fortuyn and the PVV, the FvD draws a horror scenario of Western society being destroyed by immigrants, in particular from Islamic countries. In 2015, Baudet accused "intellectually challenged politicians" of "selling the country to Islam".<sup>6</sup> The party calls for a restrictive immigration policy and a "Law for the defense of Dutch values" that should enforce integration by imposing high sanctions.

Party politicians moreover frequently reveal more extreme right-wing political views, such as the doomsday scenario that western civilization is on the verge of extinction, or the party's 'call to the front' to defend a Western culture against annihilation.<sup>7</sup> In 2017 Baudet had a secret meeting with the American white supremacist Jared Taylor who visited the Netherlands on the invitation of the alt-right group Erkenbrand. He later weakly defended this meeting by saying it was important to "investigate all sorts of visions".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Derk Stokmans and Wilmer Heck, "Wie is deze 'belangrijkste intellectueel van Nederland?'" In: *NRC*, 28 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See Baudet's 'victory speech' after the provincial elections on 20 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Maurits Martijn, "Waarom Thierry Baudets etentje met een racist ertoe doet." *De Correspondent*, 22 december 2017.

## *Climate skepticism*

The FvD depicts any agenda against further climate change as a scheme of the elites against the people. Thus, the party strongly opposes the Paris Accords and argues against an energy transition, which it claims will only weaken the Dutch economy. Again, this issue is linked to the supposed oikophobia of the elites. It is worth quoting Baudet's victory speech on 20 March here at some length to show how climate policies are presented as an evil plot to weaken the Netherlands not only economically, but even spiritually:

[The elites] don't believe in the Netherlands anymore, this is certain. No longer in western civilization either, in our language, that has by now been abolished at our universities. [The elites] no longer believe in our arts. In our past. In our holidays, in our heroes. In our traditional city building.

But all disbelief, this immense (...) cultural and spiritual vacuum, has been invaded by an enormous heresy almost unnoticed. A new immanent religion, a political theology. The members of the [party] cartel, they believe in nothing. But at the same time they worship an idol, named transition.

Baudet then went on to describe anti-climate change policies as "a masochistic heresy" and "a mania".

"This idolatry of sustainability not only completely ruins our economy. It is also meant to further hurt our spirit, our self-consciousness. Indeed, this climate-witchery feeds from this feeling of guilt. (...) This is pure oikophobia, pure self-hate. It is a guilt complex that apparently needs an outlet. And if you want to say something about this, if the population turns against the complete capitulation of our governments, if the people in this country protest, do you know what they do? They abolish the referendum.<sup>9</sup> That is the state of our country today."

## *Democratic renewal and Neoliberalism*

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<sup>9</sup> After the outcome of the Ukraine referendum in 2016, the current government in 2018 abolished the advisory referendum.

From this it follows that the elites need to be overthrown. And this, so the FvD, can best be reached through a process of 'democratic renewal' that brings politics closer to the people, away from party structures. Here the favorite catch words are e-democracy, open applications for public functions, digital voting in parliament and referenda. In this aspect, the party claims to have been inspired by the Five Star Movement in Italy.

The overthrow of elites through more political competition is moreover linked to a neoliberal economic and political program. Sectors like healthcare and education should be improved through 'healthy competition and decentralization',<sup>10</sup> that is, by further privatization.

For Baudet, the political and especially cultural elites of the Netherlands are 'too leftist'. And this also counts for the entire educational sector: Only days after the provincial elections, the FvD opened a "hotline" against "indoctrination in our education system", inviting pupils and students to film the acts of 'left indoctrination' that their teachers commit at schools. The idea of online denunciation was not new: in the past, Geert Wilders' PVV had opened several hotlines – including one where citizens were supposed to register inconveniences caused by East Europeans, and another to report "street terror" by youths of immigrant background. These are effective media stunts.

The party itself is centrally organized, and the party's views are determined by a small clique around the two founders Baudet and Otten. Early in 2018, several prominent members were ousted from the FvD after having openly voiced their dissatisfaction over the lack of internal democracy. The party top accused their critics of being 'job seekers'. One must assume that Baudet fears "an LPF scenario", that is, a loss of control due to meteoric growth coupled with a lack of experience from the side of the new party functionaries, which in the case of the LPF led to its extinction. However, the lack of internal democracy is in stark contrast with the party's official struggle for democratic reform and its belief in 'healthy competition'.

#### *Political and cultural renaissance – by new elites*

While Wilders poses as a common man, Baudet's attack on the established elites goes hand in hand with his own elitism; at one point he called himself "the most important intellectual of the

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<sup>10</sup> See the FvD's website.

Netherlands."<sup>11</sup> The party's attack on the 'cultural elites' of the contemporary Netherlands is furthermore sold as a defense of earlier *European* (rather than solely Dutch) culture – ideally of before the French Revolution. The party therefore sees no contradiction in advocating the return to a uniquely Dutch identity by copying examples of other western countries, including Finish education, the Swiss political system, and Australian asylum policies. Baudet claims to be an advocate of 'traditionalism', the broad spectrum of esoteric thinking from René Guenon to Alexander Dugin. Several of these strands came together in Baudet's exalted victory speech on 20 March, which is a good illustration of the rhetoric that he employs. Baudet started with a quote from the nineteenth-century philosopher Hegel:

"The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.'

... And so we stand here tonight, at the eleventh hour, literally, in the midst of the rubble of what was once the biggest and most beautiful civilization that the world has ever known. A civilization that reached to all the corners of the world, that was full of self-confidence, and that brought forth the most beautiful music and painting that has ever existed under the skies. Our country is a part of this civilizational family. But like all the other countries of our boreal world, we are being ruined by those people who should protect us.

We are being undermined by our universities, by our journalists, by the people who receive our art grants and who design our buildings. And most of all we are being undermined by our governors. A clique, a clique of jumped-up networkers (...), people who have never read a book and have no idea of the important issues on the long term. They unfortunately control the governing bodies of our country and, in a curious mixture of incompetence and cynical self-interest, time and again make the wrong choices. But not for long.

... Dear friends, we are the product of 300.000 years of evolution. We have survived multiple ice ages, we killed mammoths, we are carriers of and heirs to the greatest civilization that has ever existed. We carry a unique power, and several decades of indoctrination by the media and education will never be able to bury that. Something that

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<sup>11</sup> Stokmans and Heck, "Wie is deze 'belangrijkste intellectueel van Nederland'?"

is within us can never be taken away. And today, and you can also feel that in this hall, today we have chosen to struggle again, to dream again, to hope again, to fight again.

... We will bring about a renaissance in which our self-confidence is restored, in which we can live safely again in a familiar environment, in which the democratic rule of law is restored and the economic and cultural dynamic can return. And as you know we are glad to do so together with all other parties and movements that want to support us, because we are the flagship of the renaissance fleet. And other ships can join us. (...) Because, friends, with this party we will restore the pride of our country. On this rock we will build our pillar. We are going to restore our democracy and today, today, the first big battle has been won. Thank you."

The speech entails a rejection of the Dutch elite while at the same time inviting cooperation – under the leadership of the FvD. One of the main questions for the moment is if the FvD will be able to cooperate with other political parties – and how such cooperation will be received by FvD voters. The decline in votes for the PVV has in part been explained by Wilders rejection of taking on governing responsibility.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, participating in coalition governments inevitably means that the FvD will have to cooperate with the elites it claims to despise so much.

### **Populism, 'revolutionary' conservatism and the extreme right**

While 'cultured' in his appearance, in many statements Baudet goes further than Wilders in promoting white identity politics. On many occasions, he openly flirted with the extreme right, agreeing with standpoints and using their rhetoric. Into this category fall his anti-feminist statements and his promise of the rebirth of the nation under the leadership of a new elite. His interest in Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and other revolutionary conservative thinkers is reflected in his doomsday vision of current society, combined with the image of a decisive struggle for the continuation of western civilization. There is a fine line between this rhetoric and violence: when in December 2015 an angry mob stormed the town hall of Geldermalsen to protest against the housing of refugees in the municipality, Baudet legitimated this as the

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<sup>12</sup> From 2010-2012, the PVV supported a minority government of VVD and CDA. This government however resigned after the PVV withdrew support in disagreement over planned austerity measures, with both VVD and CDA blaming Wilders for the failure of negotiations.

people's "self-defense" against the "desktop murder" of the Dutch population by the government.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, Baudet carefully chooses his words, and his style is often half-ironic – so that he can deflect criticism of his more extreme statements by claiming these weren't serious. As an example, many observers interpreted the use of the word 'boreal' in his victory speech as a dog whistle for right extremist supporters, for whom the term 'boreal Europe' signifies a white Europe. Among the critics of Baudet's terminology were some of his European partners, including the French party Debout la France. In the midst of the commotion, Baudet tweeted that the term "just means 'northern', the northern sky, the 'Western hemisphere'. All complot theories about obscure secondary meanings are a ridiculous attempt to frame us."<sup>14</sup>

## **Voters**

Whom does this agenda attract? FvD voters are predominantly male (64%) and slightly older than average, with little trust in politics. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the party has no success with other groups: the FvD is the fastest growing political organization in the Netherlands. In January 2019, the party claimed over 30.000 members, including 4.000 members of its youth division. Although its voters are slightly lower educated than the average Dutch voters (47% of FvD voters have vocational education), the FvD has also had considerable more success in attracting voters with a higher education (29%)<sup>15</sup> than most European radical right parties, including the Dutch PVV.

In the latest elections, FvD won votes primarily from the PVV (31% of the current FvD voters had voted for the PVV in 2017), but also from governing parties, in particular the VVD of Prime Minister Rutte (15%) as well as the Christian-conservative CDA (10%).<sup>16</sup> In a nutshell, for many FvD voters the VVD is not tough enough on the EU and immigration, whereas the PVV appears too radical. Moreover, 61% of those who voted for the Forum in 2017 did so again in 2019: in the highly volatile Dutch political landscape, this is the highest number of loyal voters of all

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<sup>13</sup> Thierry Baudet in Powned, 17 December 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Thierry Baudet on twitter, 28 March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos, *PS19. Verkiezingsonderzoek Ipsos in opdracht van de NOS*. Amsterdam, 1 April 2019, p.19

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

parties.<sup>17</sup> 64% of those who voted for the FvD in the provincial elections of 2019 did so because of the party's positions on national politics; only 28% said to base their vote primarily on the FvD's provincial program.<sup>18</sup> It should be added that on election day, 18% of FvD voters (and even 33% of PVV voters) said that their vote was influenced by the events in Utrecht,<sup>19</sup> where two days earlier a Dutch man of Turkish origin shot three people and injured seven others. The incident caused a national alert and much commotion; out of respect most political leaders interrupted their election campaigns. Not so PVV and FvD: they made full use of the event in their campaign activities.

In the 2017 national elections, the most named reasons to vote for the FvD were "to break the party cartel", dissatisfaction with the existing politics and parties ('something has to change'), disappointment with the VVD and PVV; support for direct democracy; the party's anti-EU and anti-immigration agenda; the fact that the party had a 'serious party program' (the party 'program' of the PVV comprised of just one sheet of paper), the party's focus on the Netherlands instead of the EU, as well as the personality of Baudet. Research from 2017 by Eelco Harteveld (UvA) showed that male higher educated FvD voters often obtain all their information / news from internet. They support the idea of a crisis of western civilization, and believe in the necessity of a culture war against feminism, the political left and immigrants. They moreover show affinity with strong male leaders such as Putin – akin to the alt-right in the US.<sup>20</sup> Opinion polls from the 2019 elections show that PVV and FvD voters are very much alike in issues of Euroscepticism, migration and mistrust of national politics. FvD supporters on the whole are slightly higher educated, and PVV voters are more divided on issue of climate – reflecting the FvD's ownership of this issue.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between PVV and FvD was, from the onset, primarily one of style. Before establishing his own party, Baudet repeatedly stated his support for Wilders, and there were even attempts to initiate political cooperation. The overlap in political program and in voters therefore is no surprise. In contrast to the PVV, the FvD was structured as a membership party, and its

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Maarten Huygen and Rik Wassens, "Vooraf mannen kiezen voor Forum voor Democratie." In: *NRC*, 21 March 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

leader coquettishly stresses his PhD and his dandyish lifestyle. In this sense, Baudet is more a copy of the colorful Pim Fortuyn than of the dry and monodimensional Wilders. Fortuyn's former driver Hans Smolders, who has now been elected into the provincial parliament of Noord-Brabant for the FvD, claims that "Thierry finishes Pim's work."<sup>22</sup> Baudet's carefully cultivated image of an intellectual dandy has also contributed to the image of the FvD as a 'more civilized' variant of the PVV – a vision that should be put into doubt when considering the party leaders' actual statements. Unlike the PVV it is not anti-elitist per se. Instead, Baudet wants to replace the current elites with a new elite – namely, that of the party itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Jan Hoedeman, "Is Pim 2.0 nu opgestaan?" In: *Het Parool*, 23 March 2019.