



Information sheet Local Elections in the Netherlands

On 21 march 2018, municipal council elections will be organized in 335 of the 380 municipalities in the Netherlands.¹ This information sheet has been prepared by VNG for the election observation mission of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Council of Europe) and aims to present basic facts and figures about the elections, give an overview of the changes in the municipal landscape since 2014 and inform you on the recent discussions in the Netherlands about the elections that have emerged in the media.

1 Which municipalities have local elections?

335 of the 380 municipalities in the Netherlands organize municipal council election on March 2018. The map below gives an overview of the municipalities that have municipal council elections in 2018. Municipalities that have been administratively divided per 1 January 2017 or 1 January 2018 have elected their municipal council in November 2016 or November 2017. These municipalities do not participate in the municipal elections in March 2018. Municipalities that will be administratively divided per 1 January 2019 will held municipal council elections in November 2018.

-  Municipal Elections November 2018
-  Municipal Elections March 2018
-  Municipal Elections November 2017
-  Municipal Elections 2016



¹ At the same time a consultative referendum will be held on the law intelligence and security services. This will not be part of this information sheet.

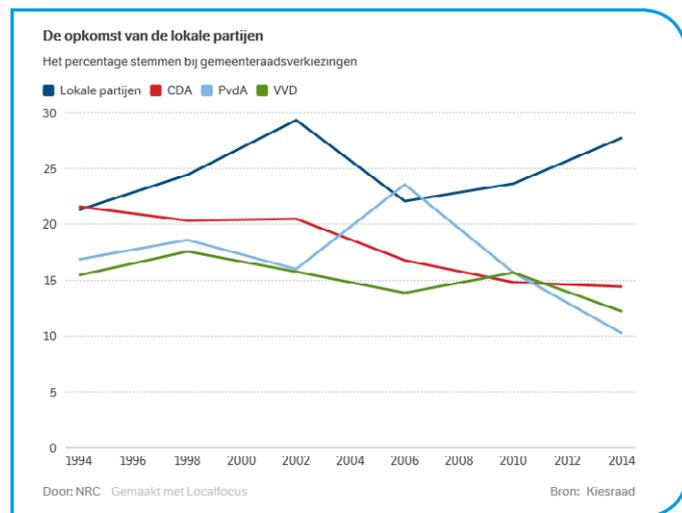
2 Municipal council elections: electoral procedures

- Possessing Dutch nationality is not a requirement to vote or to be elected in the municipal council elections. **All Dutch nationals, EU citizens and non-EU citizens who have legally resided in the Netherlands for at least five years** can vote or be elected.
- Both national and local parties and individual citizens may nominate themselves for the municipal council elections. On nomination day, all political parties submit their list of candidates to the central electoral committee of their municipality.
- An invitation letter, including voting card, will be sent to everyone who is eligible to vote during the elections no later than fourteen days prior to election day. The voting card allows the voter to cast their vote in the polling station of their choice within the municipality's borders. It is compulsory to bring identification.
- Since 1928 **proxy voting** is allowed in the Netherlands. The voter authorises the proxy using the form on the back of the polling card which the proxy presents at the polling station together with the voter's identity card.
- Everyone is allowed to observe the voting and counting process in the polling stations. The secrecy of the ballot should be guaranteed, so observation is prohibited in the actual voting booths.

3 Municipal landscape in 2014 and now: a comparison

In the Netherlands, elections of the municipal councils take place once every four years. The most recent municipal council elections were held on 19 March 2014. In the meantime there have been some changes in the municipal landscape:

- Since the 1st of January 2018 there are **380 municipalities, compared to 403 municipalities in 2014**. The number of municipalities has been declining over the years, thirty years ago the Netherlands consisted of 774 municipalities. This is due to municipal reorganisation.
- During the municipal council elections, **22 municipalities² will experiment with central vote counting** in order to find out whether the process of vote counting can be done in a more efficient, reliable and transparent manner. In comparison, in 2014 experiments took place in 5 municipalities³. On election day after the closing of the polling stations, the municipalities will first provisionally count the votes on the political parties, so that there is a provisional election result on the evening of the municipal elections. The electoral committee will subsequently count the votes on individual candidates the next day (22 March 2018). An advantage of this procedure is that the members of the polling station can work shorter shifts which reduces the risks of mistakes.
- **In 2014 a total number of 1024 political parties** participated in the elections. However, the municipal councils of the Netherlands contain at the moment **149 more political groups than immediately after the elections of 2014**. This increase is due to councillors who separate from their political party once they have a seat in the municipal council and begin their own political party.
- Over the years, there has been a significant increase in votes cast on local parties during the municipal council elections as is shown by the graph right.
- After the municipal council elections in 2014, the **participation of women in local politics** was as follows: 28% of the council members, 22% of the aldermen and 23% of the mayors are women. The equal representation of women, ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities in local politics is therefore a focus point in 2018.
- The Netherlands has recently embarked on a **considerable decentralisation of social policy**. Since the last municipal elections, municipalities have new responsibilities in the domains of youth



2 The 22 municipalities participating in the experiment in 2018 are: Assen, Borne, Deventer, Dronten, Elburg, Enschede, Harlingen, Heerlen, Hof van Twente, Hollands Kroon, Houten, Kampen, Losser, Nijmegen, Olst-Wijhe, Ouder-Amstel, Putten, Raalte, Rhenen, Rotterdam, Twenterand and Zuidplaspas.

3 The participating municipalities in 2014 were: Hardenberg, Kampen, Raalte, Sittard-Geleen en Ouder-Amstel.

care, long-term care and income support. Because of these new responsibilities, municipal elections have therefore never been as important as today.

4 Modernising the election process? The position of the VNG:

- The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands created the legislative proposal about the adaptation procedure determination of election results in which they propose some major changes in the election process. According to the VNG, this proposal does not contain regulations about the design of the ballot. Therefore they suggested that the Dutch government should **propose a more convenient ballot** and to enable the possibility to experiment with these. Counting the votes manually is very time-consuming, it demands too much of the volunteers and it increases the risk on mistakes.
- The VNG is currently **against the introduction of ballot printers** because of security risks, the expected problems regarding effectivity and the substantial costs of this system.
- The VNG considers that steps can be taken to modernise the election process (not just the process of counting). The Election Law and implementing arrangements should be thoroughly examined, among others the work processes. Regarding this matter, there needs to be a discussion on to what extent the digitalisation of processes is possible and necessary. **A costs-benefits analysis needs to be made regarding: the effectiveness, the safety and affordability of new digital techniques.** In collaboration with the NVVB (the Dutch Association for Civil Services) is, the VNG is currently working on an Election agenda 2021 in which the necessary improvements of the election process will be addressed.
- Considering the practical implementation of the election process, one of the important issues is to increase the time that municipalities have to determine the results of the elections. **The available time between the voting day and the first day of assembly of the new Municipal Council is currently eight days.** Taking the possible new obligations into consideration (related to possible changes in the voting system in the future), the VNG is advocating for a longer term than these eight days.

5 Current debates in the Netherlands regarding the local elections

In the weeks leading up to the elections, there have been several issues concerning the elections that have gained significant media attention:

Local and regional media outlets

There are concerns about the decrease in local and regional media outlets. Citizens in small municipalities in the Netherlands have four times less access to local news than the population of larger municipalities. Local and regional media is crucial for a strong local democracy. However, the quantity and quality of news coverage about the municipalities is decreasing and this issue concerns both administrators and the media sector. As a result, the social function of journalism - as critical voice that checks the local government - is under pressure.

Recruitment of council members

The recruitment of council members can be a challenging process. The workload of council members is high. According to a recent study of Raadslid.nu, the majority of council members indicates that they don't have enough time for their responsibilities. According to NRC, political parties have difficulty finding candidates for the upcoming local elections in March. However, there has been an increase in candidates compared to 2014, of 4,2% (equal to 2,269 candidates). Still in some municipalities can the lack of interest lead to a vulnerable local government, for example for criminal infiltration. Integrity is of great importance for the legitimacy of the local government. This means that measures are needed to prevent crime of undermining society and local governance.

Appeal on municipalities to be alert on information security

New technologies also create new challenges that might influence the democratic and political decision-making processes. The VNG and the Ministry of Interior ask attention for the risks of undesirable influencing processes during the elections due to insufficient information security.

The Information Security Services (IBD) have made a fact sheet on security measures in the digital domain. They have also created a Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) that is available 24/7 in case of emergency and can be reached with the following phone number: +3170 373 8011.

Transparency of campaign financing

Legislation regulations about campaign financing have changed; all parties are obliged to be transparent about their finances and larger donations. These insights can help prevent the (appearance of) conflict of interest in the political domain. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations publishes an annual overview of donations. The VNG states that besides rules about transparency also an equal, transparent and balanced subsidy scheme needs to be developed for political parties. The distinction in subsidy between local political parties and national parties is no longer relevant and the VNG wishes to see a change in the rules regarding subsidy of political parties.

6 Background information on organisations

The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG)

VNG was founded on February 28, 1912. All 380 municipalities of the Netherlands are members of the association. The VNG has about 300 employees, working in different areas of expertise and services. It is one of the oldest and most important associations around the world. In June 2015, the Mayor of Utrecht, Mr. Jan van Zanen became president of the VNG. Mrs Jantine Kriens is the Director of the association.

The association has three principal tasks: lobby and advocacy in name of the 380 municipalities (members), service delivery to the members, and facilitation of the exchange platforms between its members. The VNG has become one of the main discussion partners of central government in all political domains that affect municipalities.

Dutch Association for Council members (Raadslid.nu)

"Raadslid.nu" is the Dutch Association for Council members. The aim of the association is to create a stronger position for council members and municipal councils. It focused on enhancing the fulfillment of the role of individual council members in the local and regional political-administrative field. The VNG and Raadslid.nu collaborate on various topics, for instance on education-platforms for council members.

Dutch Association for Civil Services (NVVB)

The "Nederlandse Vereniging voor Burgerzaken" or in English the Dutch Association for Civil Services has successfully provided services regarding privacy management, identity management, elections and innovations to members of Dutch municipalities for 20 years.

The Electoral Council (Kiesraad)

The Electoral Council is a central electoral committee, an advisory body and an information centre in the field of franchise, elections and referenda. The Electoral Council consists of seven members. These members are appointed by Royal Decree for a period of four years, and can be reappointed twice. They are appointed on the basis of their expertise in giving advice on the Election Law and elections. A secretariat assists the members of the Electoral Council in their activities. The history of the Electoral Council dates back to 1917, the year in which a new electoral system - of proportional representation - was introduced in the Netherlands. The current chairman is J.G.C. Wiebenga, appointed in 2017.

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