



The 2019 provincial elections in the Netherlands: the Rise of Forum voor Democratie after a heavily nationalized campaign

Harmen Binnema & Hans Vollaard

To cite this article: Harmen Binnema & Hans Vollaard (2020): The 2019 provincial elections in the Netherlands: the Rise of Forum voor Democratie after a heavily nationalized campaign, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2020.1840365](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2020.1840365)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2020.1840365>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Nov 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 63



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

The 2019 provincial elections in the Netherlands: the Rise of Forum voor Democratie after a heavily nationalized campaign

Harmen Binnema  and Hans Vollaard

School of Governance, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands


ABSTRACT

The 2019 provincial elections marked a spectacular victory for challenger party *Forum voor Democratie* and a substantial defeat for two government parties. The Liberals, led by prime minister Rutte, which had been the largest party in many recent elections, came second in a fragmenting party-political landscape. The Greens were the other opposition winner, while two opposition parties at the ideological extremes, the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party, suffered considerable losses. Regional or non-statewide parties remained a marginal phenomenon: they attained on average three percent of the votes. Further illustrating the heavily nationalized nature of the provincial elections, the campaign mainly focused on national issues such as climate change and the possible loss of the majority for the coalition parties in the Senate, which is elected by the provincial councils. The latter clearly affected turnout, which rose to over 56%, the highest turnout in provincial elections in thirty years.

KEYWORDS Provincial elections; second-order elections; Netherlands; fragmentation; Forum voor Democratie

Introduction

Elections for the provincial assemblies of the Netherlands, the *Provinciale Staten*, were held on 20 March 2019. The Netherlands has twelve provinces and a corresponding number of assemblies, which are elected simultaneously. In addition, the members of the 21 *Waterschappen* (Water Boards) were also elected on this day, the second time these elections were combined. Turnout for the provincial elections was 56.16%, much higher than in 2015, and actually the highest turnout in the last 30 years. For the water board elections, the turnout was

CONTACT Harmen Binnema  h.a.binnema@uu.nl  School of Governance, Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, ZC 3511, Utrecht, The Netherlands

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

somewhat lower, but still a majority of the voters turned out (51.25%): a considerable increase compared to the 43.50% turnout four years earlier.

After a campaign marked by debates on climate change, Dutch traditions and a terrorist attack in Utrecht a week ahead of the elections, newcomer *Forum voor Democratie*, a radical-right populist party, became the surprise winner with 14.53% of the votes. This party was founded as recent as September 2016, and had obtained two seats in the 150-seat Lower House during the 2017 national elections. The gains of the populist Forum contrasted with the considerable losses of the radical-right populist Freedom Party and the left-wing populist Socialist Party. Led by prime minister Mark Rutte, the Liberals (*VVD*, 13.99% vote share) came in second place. The *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* had been the largest party in the previous provincial elections in 2015, in the 2017 national elections and in the 2018 municipal elections. The fact that the two largest parties attained less than 30% of the votes reflects a trend of fragmentation of the party-political landscape both at the provincial and national level.

Two other parties in the incumbent national governing coalition (since 2017) did not fare well: *D66* (social liberal) and *CDA* (christian democrats) suffered substantial defeats, down from respectively 12.5% to 7.8% and from 14.7% to 11.1%. Only the fourth, and smallest, coalition partner *ChristenUnie* (social Christian) witnessed a modest increase, from 4.0% to 4.9%. Since the provincial councillors elect the members of the Senate two months after the provincial elections, these elections results also influence the parliamentary support for the governing coalition. The majority had already been very small with one seat only, but in 2019 only 32 of a total of 75 seats remained for the coalition parties, six seats short of a majority.

The provincial elections of 2019 can be characterised as second-order, fragmented and heavily nationalized. Each of these aspects will be discussed and analysed in this election report. First, as indicated above, turnout was lower than in national elections and government parties lost, while the big winner of the elections was an opposition party. Second, between 13 and 17 parties competed in the provincial elections, many of which managed to gain seats, with an effective number of parties ranging from 8.38 to 10.81. In all of the provinces the largest party won less than 20% of the votes, and in several provinces this was even below 15%. Third, almost 97% of the votes went to statewide parties that are also represented in the national parliament. Only in a small number of provinces, regional parties were able to attract more than an modest vote share.

This election report will cover the following topics. First, it will discuss the context of the provincial elections, in particular the province as a middle layer between national and local government. Second, it will focus on the executive-legislative relations and the electoral system of the provinces. Third, it

will discuss the election results of 2019, with specific attention for turnout, the differences between provinces, and the second-order nature of these elections.

Context of Provincial Elections

The historical roots of various Dutch provinces go back long before the formation of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands at the end of the 16th century. Cities and provinces played a dominant role in this confederation. The French rule (1795–1813) introduced monarchy and a unitary state in the Netherlands, and ever since provinces have remained in a subordinate position. Belgian independence (1830) and full split of Holland into a northern and southern province (1840) resulted in eleven provinces. This picture remained unchanged until 1986, when the impoldered land became the twelfth province of Flevoland (Castenmiller and Herweijer 2015). The Netherlands have the same twelve provinces still, with only minor changes in their borders due to the amalgamation of municipalities from different provinces.

The OECD (2014) describes the administrative structure of the Netherlands with the metaphor of an hourglass: provinces are small in terms of budget and tasks in comparison to governments above (national) and below them (local). Three recent developments have further affected this position (Hulst, 2005; Binnema and Vollaard 2019). First, both the competences and the budgets of municipalities have substantially increased over the last years, with the decentralization of former national and provincial tasks in the domains of employment and social benefits, care for the elderly and youth care. Decentralization of tasks to the provinces was limited to the management and conservation of nature and landscape and a somewhat larger role in stimulating the regional economy. In international perspective, the provinces' policy autonomy is at a similar level as their counterparts in Flanders and Nord-Rhein Westphalia (Hooghe et al. 2016).

Second, the process of amalgamation of municipalities has continued at a high pace. In 2000, there were still 538 municipalities, of which 355 were left when the 2019 provincial elections took place. The enlarged municipalities have gained leverage and, consequently, are more often able to surpass the province and deal with national authorities directly. Third, a growing number of regional and intermunicipal networks have emerged, both formal and informal. Such networks sometimes take over the role of provinces in connecting municipalities with common objectives or lobbying for regional interests at the national or EU level. Provinces have not been able to regain ground with respect to this role, being by and large reliant on the cooperation of other governing bodies to act (Herweijer 2019). However, an increase in governing capacity through provincial amalgamation

tends to meet considerable resistance. A proposal by the previous government (2012–2017) to merge the western provinces into one Randstad province was effectively blocked by the provinces.

An important part of the budget of the provinces stems from the national government through the so-called *Provinciefonds*, with a total of approximately € 2.5 billion (as compared to the total national budget of more than € 300 billion). This fund increases with more investments from the national government, but it decreases when the national government applies budget cuts. In addition, provinces receive specific benefits and decentralization benefits, but these are modest in size. With regard to the own possibilities of provinces to receive income, there are two main sources (cf. De Vries 2008; OECD 2014). First, provinces can determine themselves a surcharge on the vehicle tax, with a maximum percentage that is fixed in national law. Second, there is a limited number of levies, but the income is only modest as compared to the vehicle tax surcharge and most levies are actually at the level of local government. In international perspective, their fiscal autonomy is low (Heinelt and Bertrana 2011).

In sum, the 2019 elections took place in a context with a number of challenges for provinces. This again fuelled the debate on the legitimacy of the provinces (e.g. Marijnissen 2019), although less prominent than in previous elections (Binnema and Vollaard 2019). 59% of the Dutch citizens expressed itself against abolishing provinces (I&O Research 2019a).

Governance Structure and Electoral System

The governance structure of the provinces consists of the legislative body (*Provinciale Staten*), the executive body (*Gedeputeerde Staten*) and the King's Commissioner who is the chairperson of both the provincial council and the provincial board. Only the council is directly elected by the inhabitants of the province, for a four year term. The members of the executive board are selected by the political parties that form a governing coalition and they need the approval of a council majority to be instituted. Since 2003, members of the executive board are no longer allowed to be member of the legislative. The King's Commissioner is appointed by the Crown, through a Royal Decree that is prepared by the national government. This appointment follows a recommendation by the provincial council. The tenure of the King's Commissioner is six years, which does not follow the regular electoral cycle, thus emphasizing the Commissioner's impartial and non-political role.

Depending on the size of the population, the provincial councils vary in size from 39 seats in the smallest province (Zeeland) to 55 in the largest provinces (Noord-Brabant, Gelderland, Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland). The current total number of provincial councilors is 570, following a drastic

reduction in 2007 (from 764 to 564) and a limited increase as a result of population growth.

Elections for the provincial councils are held every four years, on the same day in all twelve provinces. As prescribed in the Electoral Law, elections take place in March, usually on a Wednesday. Since 2015, provincial elections have concurred with the elections for the *Waterschappen* (water boards), but they never coincide with municipal, national or European elections. Actually, in those cases where national elections are held in the same year as provincial elections because of the early dissolution of parliament, elections for the Lower House will be postponed to May.

Eligible to vote for provincial elections are those who live in this particular province, who have reached the age of 18, have the Dutch nationality and have not been formally excluded from their right to vote. Apart from the geographical aspect, these are the same conditions that apply to the elections for the Lower House. When it was decided in the 1980s that non-Dutch inhabitants who have lived in The Netherlands for at least five years were allowed to vote in municipal elections, this was not extended to provincial elections (De Jong and Van Ostaaijen 2019). Like all other elections, the electoral system in provincial elections is open list-based proportional representation. There are no formal thresholds: in order to attain representation, a party needs to reach the electoral quota, which is the total number of votes divided by the number of seats.

2019: Heavily Nationalized, Second-order Elections

Provincial elections in The Netherlands can be characterised as second-order elections, which are considered less relevant than the most important elections, the national ones. As a consequence, vote choice in provincial elections would be derived from cues at the national level (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Liñeira 2016). In this election report, we will focus on two aspects connected to the second-order nature of provincial elections. First, turnout is expected to be lower than in elections for the Lower House, since there is less at stake. Second, opposition parties and new parties tend to win votes, while government parties lose.

Compulsory voting was abolished in 1970, and this has had a clear effect on turnout, in particular at the provincial level. At first, turnout stayed relatively stable in the 1970s, with 75.07% in 1974 and even 79.57% in 1978. In the 1980s, the gradual decrease started, arriving at 66.32% in 1987, and continued more dramatically in 1991 when turnout dropped to 52.31%. The provincial elections of 1999 marked the first time the majority of the electorate stayed at home with a turnout of 45.64%. Both in 2003 and 2007, turnout stayed below 50%, but in 2011 it was even higher than in the early 1990s (55.97%). A clear motivator was the minority government Rutte I, that at

the time had just taken office with parliamentary support from the radical-right populist Freedom Party of Geert Wilders. This applied to both those who wanted to show their opposition and discontent regarding this coalition and for those who wanted to secure a coalition majority in the Senate (in the end, the governing parties fell short of one seat). When the stakes were not that high in 2015, turnout went down to 47.76%.

Research among non-voters in provincial elections indicates that the three main factors for which do not turn out, have to do with (a) lack of knowledge about the provinces, (b) lack of interest or concern for the provinces or (c) because they did not acquaint themselves with provincial matters (De Jong and Van Ostaaijen 2019). These factors are not easily taken away by a couple of weeks of campaigning or public information about the role and tasks of the provinces. Partly due this reason, most political parties tried to mobilize voters with a reference to the elections of the Senate by the provincial councils two months after the provincial elections. As the Senate can block all legislation, parties can present provincial councils as a way to express to support or punish the incumbent coalition government. In 2019, the election poster of the Freedom Party incited voters to 'dismiss Rutte', *Forum voor Democratie* promised to bring a halt to 'climate hysteria' by voting against a climate law in the Senate, and the Socialist Party framed these elections a referendum about Rutte and his government (AD 2019).

The Dutch situation is somewhat different from second order elections in other countries, where voters can use their regional vote mainly as a signal to the incumbent government. Voters may indeed 'punish' government parties, but with regional effects only. However, Dutch provincial elections have a direct influence on the balance of power at the national level. It implies that national politicians are claiming airtime, and that the national party organization has a considerable say in determining campaign topics, which are national rather than regional. For them, there is something at stake: parliamentary support for the government.

The second-order nature of these elections and their nationalized character were also reflected in the campaign themes, which concerned first of all issues of climate change, environment, and energy (I&O Research 2019a). This included the necessity to deal with climate change, concerns about the financial implications for tax payers of climate change measures, and protest against windmills spoiling the landscape. Also, regional public transport and the overheated housing market received attention. In debates between national party leaders from the Lower House and the Senate, however, non-provincial policy issues featured dominantly, ranging from immigration and Nexit to the preservation of Dutch traditions like 'Zwarte Piet' (Blackface) and New Year's fireworks. In the last week before the elections, a terrorist attack in public transport in the city of Utrecht (leading to four deaths) overshadowed the campaign. While national themes and

leaders dominated the provincial elections as usual, *Forum voor Democratie* stood out in this respect with election programmes that were nearly similar in every province and with its provincial candidates often not campaigning at all (e.g. Omroep Zeeland 2019).

Eventually, turnout again increased to 56.16%, which was the highest percentage since 1987. About a third of the voters wanted to express their support for the national government, while a quarter aimed at punishing it (I&O Research 2019a). Three quarters of the voters yet wanted to influence provincial policies, but the significance of a majority in the Senate for the coalition government seemed to have fostered the turnout.

As would be expected in second-order elections, turnout is much lower than in national elections (Table 1). Whereas more than 80% of the electorate turned out during the elections for the Lower House in 2017, this had dropped by 25% in 2019. We can also note a number of regional differences. First, within each election, turnout is clearly above average in some provinces with a certain regional identity, such as Groningen, Friesland and Zeeland in 2015, and again Friesland and Zeeland in 2019 (I&O Research 2019b). Yet, the highest turnout in 2019 was in Utrecht, the only province which passed the 60% frontier. Utrecht is not characterised by a strong regional identity (I&O Research 2019b), but tends to have a more active electorate, with comparatively high turnout in municipal and national elections as well.

Moreover, if a certain regional identity were an important driver for turnout, Limburg and Noord-Brabant do not fit this picture, carrying the red lantern both in 2015 and 2019. Low turnout is more likely to be related to a lack of trust in politics and politicians, which is indeed the case in these southern provinces (CBS 2018). This distrust may also explain that the increase in turnout between 2015 and 2019 is smallest in Groningen, given the lack of trust and the widespread criticism on the government's response to earth quakes resulting from gas drilling there. All in all, the provincial factor is not an important

Table 1. Turnout provincial and national elections, by region.

Province	Provincial elections 2015	National elections 2017	Provincial elections 2019
Drenthe	50.97	82.39	58.81
Flevoland	45.61	79.69	53.59
Friesland	53.06	82.49	59.12
Gelderland	49.91	83.27	58.55
Groningen	53.01	81.27	56.07
Limburg	45.03	78.33	52.57
Noord-Brabant	43.64	81.27	52.40
Noord-Holland	47.22	81.88	56.34
Overijssel	49.79	83.52	59.27
Utrecht	52.59	84.80	61.57
Zeeland	52.20	81.27	59.15
Zuid-Holland	45.76	80.15	54.49
Nationwide	47.76	81.57	56.16

Source: Dutch Electoral Council, www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl.

variable for explaining differences in turnout. In 2015, the range between the lowest and the highest turnout amounted to 9.42%, in 2017 this was 6.47%, and in 2019 it was 9.17%. In other words, there is no electorate in any of the provinces that either turns out in great numbers or massively stays at home in one particular type of election.

Vote Choice and Election Results

After the national elections of 2017, the Lower House consisted of 13 parties. Ten of these parties were on the ballot in all twelve provinces during the provincial elections, creating a 'menu' for voters that was quite similar to the national elections. The *ChristenUnie* had a joint list with the *SGP* (orthodox Christian) in Noord-Brabant; the *SGP* was not on the ballot in two catholic provinces in the south of the Netherlands and in the secular provinces of Groningen and Noord-Holland. *50PLUS*, a party that advocates the interests of the elderly, was on the ballot with this label in 11 provinces and joined forces with the Party for the Elderly in Noord-Brabant.

In total, 37 political parties competed during these elections. Voters in Zuid-Holland had the largest number of parties to choose from (17), whereas the smallest number of competing parties (13) was found in Limburg and Overijssel. Out of the 37, 21 parties only partook in one province. We can distinguish three reasons for this. First, and most common, is that these are regional parties tied to a particular province, like the *Fryske Nasjonale Party* in Friesland or the *Partij voor Zeeland* in Zeeland. Second, some new parties that may have considered to operate nationwide did not (yet) have the organizational base and resources to participate in more than one province. Third, it may be the case that the candidates and the potential electorate of parties are concentrated in particular regions. Some examples might illustrate this. Code Oranje, a party focusing on democratic reform was able to find candidates in the three largest provinces Zuid-Holland, Noord-Holland and Noord-Brabant, where the founders of the party were active. Another example is the Islamic party NIDA, which participated in two provinces with a high share of inhabitants with a non-western background, Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland.

Volatility in the provincial elections was high (23.81%), which is similar to recent national elections. The provincial councils are also characterised by ongoing fragmentation, with the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) ranging from 8.38 in Noord-Holland to 10.81 in Groningen. In the latter province, 13 out of 14 participating parties gained seats, and the largest party won 12.49% of the votes. Fragmentation is also high as compared to the Lower House in 2017, which had an ENPP of 8.12.

The results of the provincial elections are in line with their second-order nature (cf. Schakel and Romanova 2018). Only one of four coalition parties, the *ChristenUnie*, managed to gain votes, the other three lost. Although the

VVD managed to confine its losses, it cannot hold onto its position of largest party, which it held in 2011 and 2015, conceding to newcomer *Forum voor Democratie*.

The two parties that appear to suffer the severest punishment for governing are the Christian-democrats (CDA) and the social-liberals (D66). Even then, the CDA remains the largest party in four provinces: Overijssel, Zeeland, Friesland, and Limburg. Yet, it also confirms that the CDA increasingly becomes the party of the countryside, losing ground in cities and suburbs. D66 has never been the largest party in any province, but at least came close in the 2015 elections, with a second place in Utrecht and Noord-Holland.

As mentioned before, not all opposition parties benefited from the losses of coalition parties. Three opposition parties performed worse than in 2015: the social democrats (PvdA), the Freedom Party and the Socialist Party. For the latter two, the absolute difference in vote share is actually larger than for government parties D66 and CDA (Table 2). In contrast, the Greens (GroenLinks) achieved one of its highest vote shares since its establishment in the early 1990s. Next, DENK, a party inspired by Islam that did not yet exist during the 2015 elections, the Animal Rights Party and 50Plus (a party for the elderly) also gained seats. However, *Forum* is the big winner among the opposition parties, becoming the largest party nationwide (i.e. in the Senate), and in three provinces in the west of the country: Flevoland, Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland.

Table 2. National results: vote share and seats provincial elections 2019.

Political party	Vote share 2019 (%)	Change from 2015 (%)	Total number of seats 2019
Forum voor Democratie	14.53	+14.53	86
VVD	13.99	-1.93	80
CDA	11.07	-3.64	72
GroenLinks	10.76	+5.41	61
PvdA	8.52	-1.56	53
D66	7.80	-4.66	41
PVV	6.94	-4.79	40
SP	5.91	-5.74	35
ChristenUnie	4.86	+0.85	31
Partij voor de Dieren	4.36	+0.90	20
50PLUS	3.20	-0.18	16
SGP	2.47	-0.34	14
DENK	1.67	+1.67	4
50PLUS/PvdO	0.44	+0.44	1
Lokaal Brabant	0.35	+0.10	1
Fryske Nasjonale Partij	0.33	-0.08	4
ChristenUnie/SGP	0.27	-0.43	1
Groninger Belang	0.25	-0.01	3
Lokaal-Limburg	0.25	+0.11	2
Partij voor Zeeland	0.15	+0.05	2
Partij voor het Noorden	0.14	+0.05	2
Sterk Lokaal	0.13	+0.01	1

Source: Dutch Electoral Council. www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl.

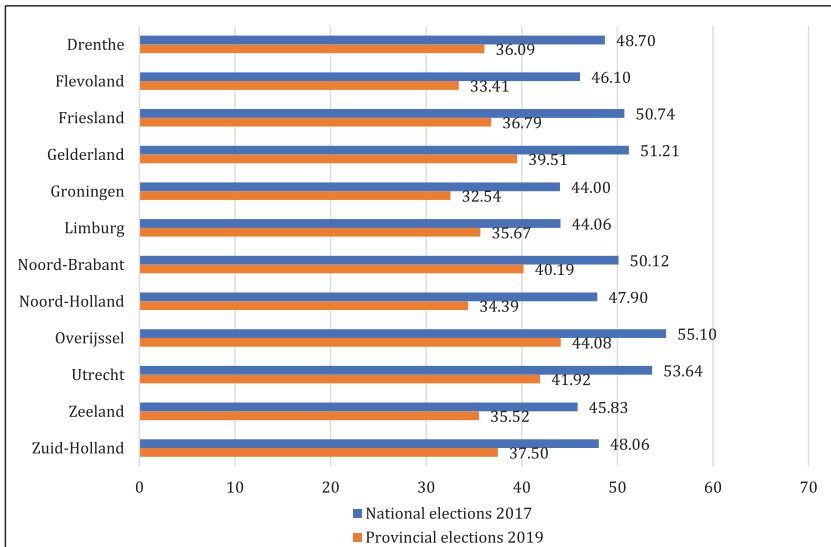


Figure 1. Vote share (%) for the national government parties in national and provincial elections, by province. *Source:* Dutch Electoral Council, www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl, calculations by the authors.

In the national elections of 2017, the coalition parties only gained a (narrow) majority in five provinces, which they did not hold on to in 2019 (Figure 1). Elsewhere, coalition parties moved from a near majority position to a clear minority position. This is demonstrated in provinces like Drenthe (48.70% to 36.09%) or Noord-Holland (47.90% to 34.39%). The steepest decline in vote share can be found in Friesland (−13.95%), which is also due to the strong position of a regional party in the provincial elections. In contrast, the difference is smallest in Limburg (−8.39%) and support for governing parties is highest in Overijssel, both during the national and the provincial elections.

It is evident that voters switched from coalition to opposition parties between 2017 and 2019, with the exception of ChristenUnie on the one hand, and SP and PVV on the other hand. Yet, when we look beyond the coalition-opposition divide, it does seem like voters stayed roughly within the same bloc – at an aggregate level, there is not much switching between left and right (or conservative and progressive). Nationwide, the three largest parties in 2017 were VVD, PVV and CDA; in 2019, it was Forum, VVD and CDA. Similar patterns can be seen at the provincial level. In 2017, the PVV was among the largest parties (1st, 2nd or 3rd place) in Drenthe, Flevoland, Friesland, Limburg, Noord-Brabant, Overijssel and Zeeland, a role that was taken over in these provinces by Forum. On the other side of the spectrum, D66 and GroenLinks changed roles between 2017 and 2019 in the provinces of Groningen, Noord-Holland, Utrecht and Zuid-Holland.

Parties of the Regions

The Dutch provinces do not have a history of strong regional parties, or 'non-statewide' parties more in general (Schakel 2013). Non-statewide parties (NSWPs) are parties that have never participated in national elections, most of which are regional parties but, as shown by the examples presented above, they are not the only type of NSWP. The presence of regional parties is restricted to those provinces with a certain regional identity, where this geographical scope of the identity and the borders of the provincial jurisdiction more or less coincide. Roughly speaking, these are the provinces in the north (e.g. Friesland) and the south (e.g. Zeeland) (I&O Research 2019b). Identities elsewhere often relate more strongly to sub regions and cities within the province (such as *West-Friesland* and Amsterdam in Noord-Holland or the *Achterhoek* in Gelderland), but such ties to a region or city are not translated into political representation at the level of the province (Table 3).

The results of the provincial elections of 2019 again show modest support for non-statewide parties. Across the country, they only received slightly over 3% of the votes, meaning that nearly 97% had been taken up by the statewide parties represented in the Lower House. This provides a strong and clear indication of the heavily nationalized nature of provincial politics in the Netherlands (cf. Schakel 2013; Cabeza, Gómez, and Alonso 2017). Still, we can observe some differences between the provinces with regard to both the presence and the vote share of non-statewide parties. At one end of the spectrum, we find the province of Overijssel, in which only statewide parties participate. In contrast, *Groninger Belang* and *the Partij voor het Noorden* together seized more than 11% of the votes in Groningen. Likewise,

Table 3. Representation of non-statewide parties in 2019 provincial elections*.

Province	Number of parties participating	Non-statewide parties participating	Vote share non-statewide parties (%)
Drenthe	16	3	6.37
Flevoland	16	2	1.42
Friesland	16	3	10.70
Gelderland	15	1	1.18
Groningen	14	2	11.39
Limburg	13	1	4.06
Noord-Brabant	16	4	4.41
Noord-Holland	15	3	3.39
Overijssel	13	0	0.00
Utrecht	14	1	1.06
Zeeland	14	1	6.21
Zuid-Holland	17	3	1.58
Netherlands	37	21	3.19

Source: Dutch Electoral Council. www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl. calculations by the authors.

* all parties which did not participate in the 2017 national elections have been labelled non-statewide.

the Friesian National Party, which was the first regional party on the ballot in the late 1960s, obtained nearly 8% of the votes in Friesland.

The Aftermath of the Elections

Forum leader Thierry Baudet attracted considerable attention at election night with a long speech on the decline of western civilization and the threats to 'our boreal world' (an expression that also has been used to denote the superiority of the Aryan race by extreme-right politicians). Despite being one of the largest parties, Forum received less attention as potential coalition parties in the twelve provincial councils. Its candidates and provincial policies were often unknown, while cooperating with a radical-right populist party proved too controversial for most parties. Eventually, Forum only got involved in a coalition government in the province of Limburg. The combination of a fragmented party-political landscape and the exclusion of one of the larger parties resulted in relatively lengthy coalition formation processes, leading to coalitions with a high number of parties and executives.

Discussion

The victory of *Forum voor Democratie* in the provincial elections of 2019 was unexpected, to say the least. Having been the largest party in three previous elections, the Liberals led by prime minister Rutte had to comply with a second place and a loss of 1.93% of the votes. However, the fragmentation of the party-political landscape was illustrated by the fact that Forum as the largest party attained just over 14% of the votes. This fragmentation also influenced the coalition formation that followed these elections: in many provinces, governing coalitions consist of four to six parties.

The second interesting aspect of these elections is their heavily nationalized nature of the election campaigns and the election results. More and more, parties put emphasis on the consequences of these elections for the majority of the governing parties in the Senate. National party leaders played an important role in the campaign, including a televised debate between them in which regional issues were only mentioned in passing. Non-statewide parties, which have never been able to attract large shares of the electorate, remained marginal with just over three percent of the votes. In various provinces, the entire council consists only of statewide parties.

The dominance of the national political arena, the losses for government parties and the votes gained by opposition and new parties, confirm the second-order nature of the 2019 provincial elections. To this we can add the turnout, which was 25% lower than during the elections for the Lower House in 2017. Yet, with the government majority in the Senate at stake,

turnout was at a level unseen since 1987. Therefore, the irony here is that more 'denational' these elections are, the lower the turnout becomes. This makes provincial politics a mere extension of national politics.

Recently, the government proposed to change the elections for the Senate to diminish the nationalized nature of provincial elections (Rijksoverheid 2019). The proposal introduces a six-years term for senators, with half of the Senate elected every three years by the provincial councils, resembling the situation before 1983. However, as long as the party-political landscape is fragmented, it remains challenging to cobble and keep majorities together in the Dutch parliament. The government's proposal would therefore not change the nature of provincial elections as reflected in 2019: second-order, nationalized and fragmented.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Several parts of this work are based on research by the authors that was funded by the Interprovinciaal Overleg, the association of the Dutch provinces.

ORCID

Harmen Binnema  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6889-8422>

References

- Algemeen Dagblad. 2019. SP-leider Marijnissen: Verkiezingen worden referendum over Rutte, 23 February.
- Binnema, H. A., and J. P. Vollaard. 2019. *Provinciale Politiek: De Provincies Democratisch Getoetst*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Cabeza, L., B. Gómez, and S. Alonso. 2017. "How National Parties Nationalize Regional Elections: The Case of Spain." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 47 (1): 77–98.
- Castenmiller, P., and M. Herweijer. 2015. "De Nederlandse Provinciën." In *Uitdagingen voor de lokale besturen 2015-2019*, edited by H. Reynaert, 87–101. Brugge: Vanden Broele.
- CBS. 2018. *Vertrouwen op de kaart. Statistische Trends*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek: Den Haag.
- De Jong, R., and J. Van Ostaijen. 2019. "De Verkiezingen van Provinciale Staten: Toen en nu." In *Provinciale Politiek. De Provincies Democratisch Getoetst*, edited by H. A. Binnema, and J. P. Vollaard, 71–90. Amsterdam: Boom.
- De Vries, M. 2008. "Falling Between Two Cracks: The Indeterminate Character of Mid-Level Government." *Public Organization Review* 8 (1): 69–87.

- Heinel, H., and X. Bertrana, eds. 2011. *The Second Tier of Local Government in Europe: Provinces, Counties, Départements and Landkreise in Comparison*. Londen: Routledge.
- Herweijer, M. 2019. "Kunnen Provincies Voorkeuren van Kiezers Omzetten in Effectief Beleid?" In *Provinciale Politiek. De Provincies Democratisch Getoetst*, edited by H. A. Binnema, and J. P. Vollaard, 159–174. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Hooghe, L., G. Marks, A. H. Schakel, S. Chapman Osterkat, S. Niedzwiecki, and S. Shair-Rosenfield. 2016. *A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance. Volume I: Measuring Regional Authority*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hulst, R. 2005. "Regional Governance in Unitary States: Lessons from the Netherlands in Comparative Perspective." *Local Government Studies* 31 (1): 99–120.
- I&O Research. 2019a. *Meningen over en kennis van de provincie*. Accessed 13 October 2020. <https://www.ioresearch.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/IO-Research-Peiling-meningen-over-en-kennis-van-de-provincie-.pdf>.
- I&O Research. 2019b. *Regio- en provinciegevoel*. Accessed 13 October 2020. https://www.ioresearch.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Rapport-lenO-NOS2-Regiogevoel-def_1.pdf.
- Liñeira, R. 2016. "Second-Order Elections: Everyone, Everywhere? Regional and National Considerations in Regional Voting." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 46 (4): 510–538.
- Marijnissen, H. 2019. Stemmen voor de provincie? "Ik zie ze niet, ik hoor ze niet en ik weet niet wat ze doen", *Trouw*. 30 January.
- OECD. 2014. *OECD Territorial Reviews: Netherlands 2014*. Accessed 15 July 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264209527-en>.
- Omroep Zeeland. 28 February 2019. Zeeuwse lijsttrekker Forum voor Democratie is vooral onzichtbaar en onbereikbaar. Accessed 13 October 2020. <https://www.omroepzeeland.nl/nieuws/111381/Zeeuwse-lijsttrekker-Forum-voor-Democratie-is-vooral-onzichtbaar-en-onbereikbaar>.
- Reif, K., and H. Schmitt. 1980. "Nine Second-Order Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results." *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1): 3–44.
- Rijksoverheid. 2019. *Kabinetsstandpunt over het advies van de staatscommissie parlementair stelsel*. Accessed 13 October 2020. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/06/26/kabinetsstandpunt-over-het-advies-van-de-staatscommissie-parlementair-stelsel>.
- Schakel, A. H. 2013. "The Netherlands: Two Forms of Nationalization of Provincial Elections." In *Regional and National Elections in Western Europe: Territoriality of the Vote in Thirteen Countries*, edited by R. Dandoy, and A. H. Schakel, 162–178. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schakel, A. H., and V. Romanova. 2018. "Towards a Scholarship on Regional Elections." *Regional & Federal Studies* 28 (3): 233–252.