Proportional Representation Is Breaking Dutch Democracy

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The Netherlands has entered a new phase of political fragmentation. Forming the Rutte IV cabinet in 2022 required 299 days — the longest government formation in Dutch history. The 2023 election then delivered Geert Wilders' electoral breakthrough, after which another 223 days of negotiations were needed to form the Schoof I cabinet. At the time of writing, the new Jetten I cabinet governs without a parliamentary majority, again exposing how difficult it has become to translate votes into stable governing authority. No party comes close to governing alone and coalition-building has become slow and increasingly fragile. At some point the question becomes unavoidable: whether the Dutch electoral system itself is helping produce the instability it is meant to contain — and whether it is time to consider alternatives.

These outcomes are not accidental. They are shaped by the rules that convert votes into political power. Most democracies rely on two broad models. In Proportional Representation (PR) systems, parties win seats roughly in proportion to their vote share, provided they cross a minimum threshold. In First Past the Post (FPTP) systems, by contrast, each district elects a single representative and the candidate with the most votes wins, even without majority support. A third model exists that receives less attention in European debates: Single-Member Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), as used in Australia, where each constituency elects one representative who must ultimately secure near-majority support through voter preferences rather than simply finishing first.

Although FPTP can produce stable governments, it dramatically over-translates the votes of the largest party or alliance into seats. In the 2024 UK general election, for example, the Labour Party won 63.2 per cent of parliamentary seats despite receiving only 33.7 per cent of the vote. In the Dutch context, this model is rarely proposed as a serious alternative. The more difficult and uncomfortable question is whether PR, its inclusiveness notwithstanding, creates structural risks of its own. The Netherlands has one of the lowest effective PR thresholds globally, at 0.66 per cent. As a result, parties can enter parliament with minimal support. The outcome is chronic fragmentation. No single party can plausibly approach a majority, coalition formation is often prolonged and opaque, and governments become difficult to sustain.

While PR's propensity to produce fragmented parliaments is well documented, its role in incentivising political extremism is less well understood. Under PR, the most effective way for a political entrepreneur to stand out in a crowded field is often to adopt sharper, more polarising positions than all existing parties. A vote share of 10 to 20 per cent can, in a fragmented parliament, be sufficient to make such a party pivotal in coalition formation.

At times when the system is under stress for socio-economic or political reasons, a polarising party could even manage to win between 25 and 35 per cent of the vote. At that point, it would normally become indispensable in coalition arithmetic. This risk is not merely theoretical. Weimar Germany used a PR system. In the July 1932 Reichstag election, Hitler's party won 37.3 per cent of the vote, becoming the largest party while still far from a majority. Yet sustained electoral strength within a fragmented parliament made the Nazis politically central. This position of leverage proved decisive, culminating in Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933. While PR did not, by itself, cause the collapse of the Weimar Republic, it allowed the Nazis to exploit persistent political instability within a fragmented parliamentary system. Even in the past decade or so, far-right extremist parties with roughly 10–30 per cent of the vote have repeatedly become pivotal in coalition formation in several democracies—serving as kingmakers or coalition partners in governments in Italy, Israel, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, as well as in the Netherlands itself.

Even when a small polarising party does not join a government, its views can still shape public discourse. Other parties are forced to respond or differentiate themselves. Positions that were once marginal gradually become normalised. The result is not only fragmentation in parliament but a gradual acceptance of exclusionary or anti-system views as politically legitimate. PR encourages smaller parties to demonstrate

distinctiveness by moving to the extremes. Yet PR is indifferent to a crucial asymmetry: most voters who oppose a broad-based moderate party are nonetheless willing to tolerate its coming to power, whereas most voters who oppose a polarising extremist party do so viscerally. In other words, polarising parties tend to be both loved intensely by some voters and hated intensely by most others. They are rarely anyone's *second* choice.

RCV offers a different set of incentives. Voters rank candidates in order of preference, and if no one wins a majority of first-choice votes the lowest-ranked candidate is eliminated and their voters' next preferences are redistributed. The process repeats until one candidate secures near-majority support. Because candidates must appeal beyond their core base, success depends less on mobilising a narrow constituency and more on becoming broadly acceptable. Highly polarising candidates may attract strong first-choice support but often struggle to gain the second or third preferences needed to win. Political survival therefore depends on building wider coalitions of voters rather than intensifying division. RCV, alongside compulsory voting, has been identified as a key reason why Australia's political centre — relative to other established democracies — has remained stable over the past decade.

Adopting such a system would represent a major institutional change for the Netherlands, which has used proportional representation since 1918. The goal would not be to abandon the diversity of representation that the Dutch system has long valued. But democratic institutions must also translate elections into governments capable of governing. As coalition negotiations grow longer and governments increasingly fragile, it becomes reasonable to ask whether the current electoral rules still strike the right balance.

In the Netherlands, where political fragmentation and polarisation have become persistent and coalition formation increasingly difficult, reconsidering electoral design should no longer be postponed. The challenge is institutional rather than ideological: how should votes be translated into governing authority? A first step could be a parliamentary inquiry or independent commission to examine how alternative electoral systems would shape political incentives and democratic stability in the Dutch context. Single-member ranked choice voting offers one possible model that may better balance pluralism with durable governance.

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