

## Dutch Parliament

**Overview** - The Netherlands, as well as many other European Countries and the United States, has a democratic political system. This doesn't mean however that these political systems are organized in the same way. A country's history and constitution is the basis for its political system, and therefore every country has its own variation. The Netherlands' government is made up of multiple parties and a king and a Prime-minister, where the United States has two parties and a president. The simple difference between multi-party systems compared to a biparty system has a big impact on politics. The multiparty system requires collaboration and consensus, while in the United States there are only two parties and the winner takes it all. In this case study, I will look at the organization of the Dutch parliamentary system on multiple levels, and I will point out notable similarities and differences with the US parliamentary system.

**What** - Within the Dutch Parliament, there are different layers of resources that need to be organized. Firstly, the parliament - the States General - needs to be organized into two different resources. There is 'the First Chamber', referred to as the Senate and 'the Second Chamber', also known as the House of Representatives. Together they have the responsibility to control the government, as well as approve new laws and legislations. With slightly different responsibilities, the organization of the two together enables the parliament to work well. The way they are organized, imposes a certain political organization. This political organization is important to look at, because it provides information about the political profile of the Dutch population. Lastly, this case study will go into the physical organization of the spaces these two bodies operate in. This is important because the physical layout doesn't just represent the political organization in a very visible way, it also promotes the interactions that serve the function of both bodies.

**Why** - The first question that needs to be answered is: why is the parliament organized in two different bodies. The main duties of the parliament is to control the government, as well as approve new laws and legislations. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives have a different role in this process. The members of the House of Representatives are the first ones to approve or change proposed laws, or propose new legislations themselves. Since these changes or proposals can take up to six years to actually be implemented, they need to be revised before they are officially introduced. This is the role of the Senate. Another reason it is important to have two different bodies is to make sure not all the parliamentary power is in one place. In 1848, the minister of Justice explained that "they [The members of the Senate] are not supposed to initiate

the good, but they are supposed to prevent the bad.”<sup>1</sup> The approval of the Senate is the final thing new laws and legislations need before they get officially signed off by the king and prime-minister, and it is important that they prevent questionable laws that passed in the House of Representatives will actually be introduced.

The political organization takes place during the elections. The 150 seats of the House of Representatives and the 75 seats of the Senate get organized amongst the different parties. This organization is necessary, because this is what makes it a democratic system. The seats need to represent the voice of the population. With a multiparty system, it is highly unlikely that one party will have a majority of votes, however, a majority of votes is necessary for the House of Representatives to work. Therefore, after the elections of the House of Representatives, the bigger parties come together and discuss whether they will be able to work together. To come to an agreement, parties need to come to a consensus together, and find a way to agree on a variety of political issues. This political organization is not the same in the Senate. Since the Senate serves a different function, and gives the proposed laws that pass the House of Representatives a final check, a majority of seats is not necessary. The elections of the Senate are two years after those of the House of Representatives, and therefore are likely to not match up. It is possible that the coalition has a minority in the Senate, and in this case it is harder to pass new laws. The coalition tries to come to agreements with the opposition parties on a case to case basis, and this will certainly slow down the process.

The physical spaces also require organization. There is the organization of the different seats that represent the different political views of the Dutch population. This organization is an easy way to see the political spectrum amongst the Dutch citizens. Another important implication of the physical space is the way different members are positioned regarding each other, the chair and the board, the pulpit, and the ministers. These positionings support interactions, and prevent others. An interesting observation is that the House of Representatives (on the left) and the Senate (on the right) used to be in rooms with a similar physical structure, but in 1992, the House got moved to a different room with a different approach in the physical positioning, which will be discussed later on.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.parlement.com/id/vhnnmt7ih7yi/eerste\\_kamer](https://www.parlement.com/id/vhnnmt7ih7yi/eerste_kamer)

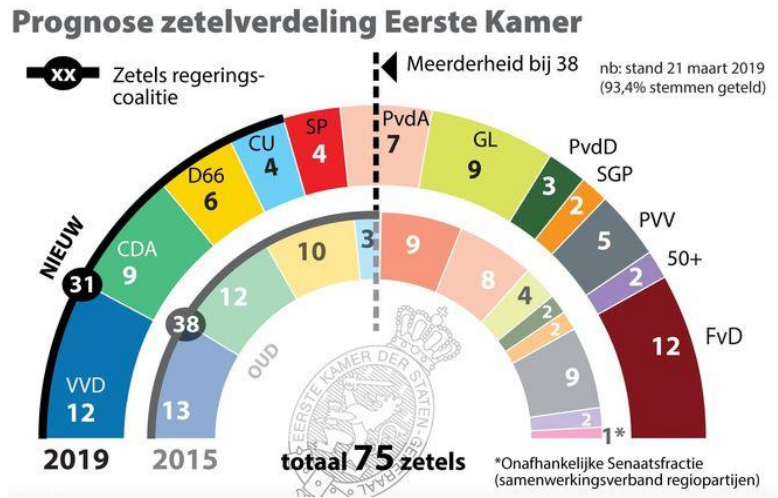


**How** - Even though the constitution does not prioritize one over the other, the House of Representatives has a more prominent role. It has 150 members that are elected by the population of the Netherlands every 4 years. The 150 members are full-time politicians, and to be a member of the House of Representatives, you need to be able to devote your whole work week to it. It has more rights and power than the Senate. Like the Senate, they have to vote about laws, but they also have the power to propose and change legislative proposals. The Senate consists of 75 members, who are considered to be 'part-time' politicians. When you think about the role of the Senate, this makes sense. The Senate members simultaneously work other jobs, which gives them a different perspective than the members of the House of Representatives. These politicians are delved into politics, and they might sometimes forget how it will affect the real world. Therefore both the House of Representatives as well as the Senate are very important.

An important difference in the political organization of both, is that the House of Representatives needs a majority of the seats to work, while the Senate doesn't. During the formation, the bigger parties will come together and try to form a coalition. The conservative-liberal party is currently the biggest with 34 out of 150 seats, and has been for the last 15 years. It forms a coalition with the social-liberal as well as two christian-democratic parties. All of these parties are considered to be somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum, which is pretty standard for a Dutch coalition. For extreme right and left wing parties, it is harder to form coalitions. They have certain extreme

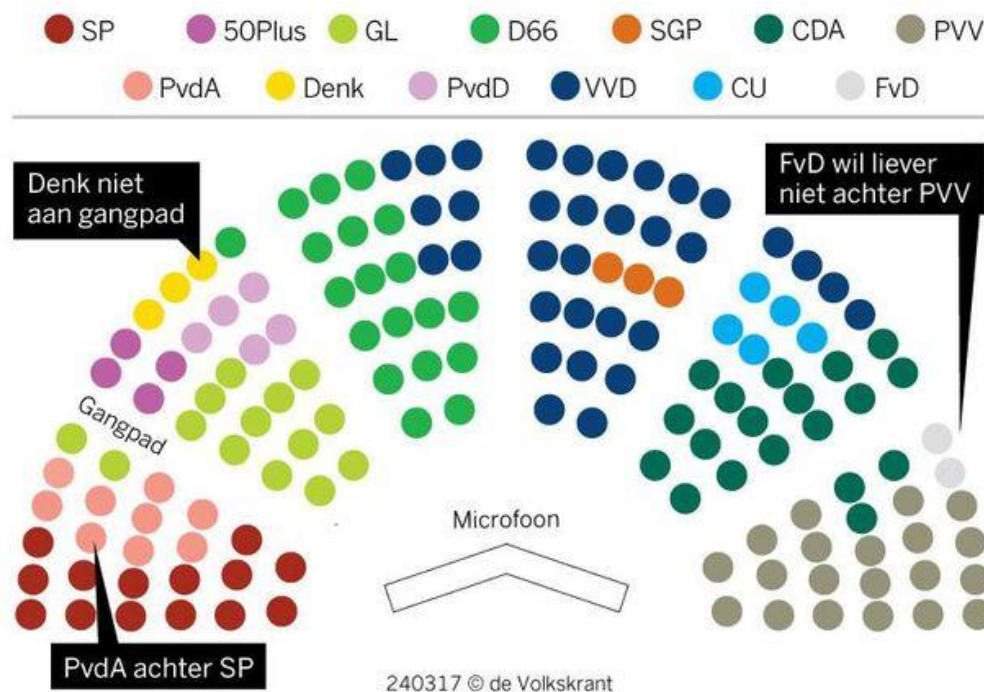
standpoints in which they won't compromise, since those standpoints define their party identity. It is very important to form a coalition because it ensures a majority in the House of Representatives, and proposed laws have certainty to be approved. As mentioned before, it is possible for the coalition to not have the majority of the votes in the Senate.

This graphic<sup>2</sup> shows the Senate that got elected in 2019. It shows that to get the majority, 38 seats are needed. The coalition, which are the navy, green, yellow, and light blue parties on the left side that have a black line on top, are missing 7 seats to a majority, and in the previous Senate, which is shown in the smaller circle, they did have the majority. This provides information about how the political views have changed in the four years between the elections.



The floor plan is an easy way to find out which parties are the biggest, which parties are left and right wing, and who work together. The architectural organization facilitates the political one. This is a map of the House of Representatives, where the navy party, the 'VVD' is the biggest, and they form a coalition with the two green and light blue parties in the middle. On the left side of the half circle you have the red and pink parties, which are very left-wing socialist, and on the right side you have the extreme right populist parties.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.ad.nl/politiek/kijk-hier-hoe-er-in-jouw-provincie-gestemd-is~a5281385/143867358/>



The architectural organization also supports the interactions both the Senate and the House of Representatives have. In the Senate, party members sit in close proximity to each other. This makes it easy to communicate when necessary. The members are facing each other, and the microphone is in the middle of the room where everyone can see it. On the right side, the ministers take place. Ministers of different departments come to the sitting when it is relevant to them, and it is unlikely that the ministers will all be there at the same time. On the left side, the board and the chair are located, They are on an elevated level. They overlook the sitting, as they are responsible that everything runs smoothly, and everyone has the opportunity to speak.



The House of Representatives was in a similar formation until 1992, when they changed things up. The Senate doesn't want to move rooms, because the room they are located in has been the Senate room since 1845, and has beautiful decorations on the ceilings. The new House of Representatives



has a similar formation similar to that of a Roman theater.<sup>3</sup> This supports the acoustics and draws attention to the 'podium' where the government as well as the chair of the House are seated. The back of the chairs are facing the audience, which should ensure that the members of the House are not 'influenced' by the audience. The seats are shaped like tulips, while the tapestry is green like grass. Even the ceiling, which has a blue gray color, represents the dark Dutch sky.



**When, by whom** - Even though the fundamental organization of both the House of Representatives and the Senate are captured in the constitution, the political organization changes every four years. The members of the House of Representatives are directly elected by the citizens of the Netherlands. Two years later, the Senate was indirectly voted for. The people vote for a party in their province, and three months later, the province representatives will vote for the representatives in the Senate. The votes of different provinces have different weights, depending on the population of the different regions.

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<sup>3</sup> Tweede Kamer, "Plenaire Zaal", [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/contact\\_en\\_bezoek/de\\_tweede\\_kamer\\_in\\_beeld/plenaire\\_zaal](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/contact_en_bezoek/de_tweede_kamer_in_beeld/plenaire_zaal), retrieved on May 1, 2023

**Other Considerations** - It is interesting to see how the initial organizing principles of the Dutch parliamentary system compared to the American one results in a different political organization. The United States has a two-party system, and therefore one party will always have the majority over the other party. This could be seen as a plus, because decisions will be made quicker and easier. On the other hand, the citizens could feel like they have less freedom to express their political views, because they have less options to pick from. Another issue that arises in the design of a two party system, is when different parties have a majority in the Senate and Congress. If the US Senate and US Congress don't have the same party that has a majority, it will get really difficult to pass new bills. The winner takes it all, but that also means that the loser loses it all. The political views of both parties stand so far away from each other that they will not be able to find consensus. Therefore, the organizing principles make it easier to pass bills when one party has the majority in both the Senate and Congress but the organizing principles make it harder to pass bills when this is not the case.