

KIESRAAD

Recent (2010) elections in the Netherlands

Introduction: Melle Bakker, the new Secretary-Director of the Netherlands Electoral Council, since February 2010. Successor of Mrs. Hanneke Schipper.

- The last years were busy elections years in the Netherlands: In June 2009 we had the elections for the European Parliament, and in March 2010 local elections were held. Because of the fall of government we had unplanned dissolution elections to the House of Representatives (the Lower House) the second week of June this year as well.
- All three elections were special for the Netherlands, because there was no more use of voting machines or internet voting from abroad. The voting was entirely 'traditional': by paper ballot and red pencil.
- In the Netherlands, elections for the municipal councils take place once every four years. This year, the elections for the municipal councils were on March 3. The Netherlands has over 400 municipalities. Municipalities are responsible for the logistical organisation of the elections, and for the determination of the official election results.
In the local elections the Netherlands Electoral Council acts mainly as an advisor on judicial and practical matters relating to elections. Preceding the local elections, the Electoral Council supported, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, a so called "Elections Information centre". This centre was installed in October 2009 and took care of almost 4.500 queries by telephone and by e-mail, mainly from citizens, municipal officials, political parties and from the media.
- This year, irregularities arose in some municipalities during polling day. Voters wanted to assist other voters, although that is not allowed, unless a voter has a physical disability to vote by himself. More than one voter stepped into the polling booth. Some voters felt influenced or even threatened by other voters, and there was a lot of agitation in some polling stations. Due to these irregularities there was a commotion concerning the result of the elections, and several objections and complaints were submitted. As just mentioned, the municipalities are responsible for the organisation and determination of the election results, and because of the problems, some municipalities (about 15 in total, amongst which the City of Rotterdam) ordered a recount. The recounts did not lead to a different result in terms of number of partyseats, but in Rotterdam two seats two other candidates were chosen because of their new number of votes. The recounts did increase the credibility of the results and helped creating political stability.

Some interesting findings:

- The counting of votes by hand by the pollingstation staff after a long day of work – in the Netherlands polling stations open at 7.30 and close at 9.00 – and the necessary paperwork after that did lead to a strong request – from the local authorities, from the organisation of Mayors in the Netherlands, from our Dutch local Government Association and from civil servants dealing with elections – to re-introduce electronic voting machines at the shortest possible term.
 - The minister for the Interior rejected this request, by stating that at the moment there are no there “safe and transparent” e-voting machines. She also mentioned that internationally more and more countries turn away from electronic voting.
 - She did say however that she will look at ways of electronic counting of votes and possibly central counting of votes in stead of counting by our 10.000 polling stations.
- 3 Months after the local elections, on June 9, elections for the 150 members of our Second Chamber, the Lower House, were held.
 - * The “Elections Information centre” was continued, and from March till June the centre answered over 2000 questions.
 - * The elections for the House are organized by the municipalities as well, but the Electoral Council is the Central Elections Committee for these elections. The Electoral Council is responsible for registration of party names, for the numbering of party lists and for determining the official election results. The Council also appoints the 150 members and advises parliament about legality of the elections.
 - * After the problems that occurred at the local elections in March, a lot of recommendations were made by the Ministry of the Interior and a lot of improvements were carried through. For instance: more and better information to the voters, more staff to count the votes, more and better education for the polling station officials.
 - * Possibly because of these improvements, the elections for the House went off smoothly. After election day, the Electoral Council checked the protocols from about 1.800 polling stations, but the noted remarks were of minor interest.
 - When the Electoral Council would have noticed counting mistakes which could (likely) influence the result, the Council should have decided to do a recount. That was not necessary. There were only negligible differences. Therefore, on Tuesday June 15 – so 6 days after the elections – the Electoral Council determined and validated the official election result and announced this result at a public session with a lot of media attention. The Lower House, with its new members, gathered two days later, on June 17.

Some interesting findings:

- Again there were quite a lot of strong voices calling for the re-introducing of electronic voting machines. One of the company's that actually built electronic voting computers came with a new prototype that was tested in a few local polling stations. A new prototype with a paper trail. The Minister rejected this by saying that, when it comes to elections and voting techniques, she does not want to be lead by the market, the private sector.
- This will not be the end of the discussions about electronic voting techniques. The Electoral Council will evaluate the two elections of this year and the use of e-voting in the process of Dutch elections will be one of the items to be discussed.

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