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General elections in the Netherlands (2025). The Resilience of Social Liberalism: Rob Jetten, D66 and the Valence Puzzle

Eleições legislativas nos Países Baixos (2025). A Resiliência do Social Liberalismo: Rob Jetten, D66 e o Puzzle da Valência

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Abstract: The 2025 Dutch legislative elections offer an analytically significant case for examining the structural dilemmas and potential resilience of centrist parties in contemporary European democracies. In a context marked by ideological polarisation, the rise of populist right-wing forces, and the erosion of traditional mainstream actors, the social-liberal party Democrats 66 (D66) emerged as the leading force in a highly fragmented proportional representation system. This outcome appears paradoxical when viewed against the broader European trend often described as the "empty centre" puzzle: although voter preferences frequently cluster around the ideological median, centrist parties struggle to translate programmatic moderation into electoral dominance.
Building on spatial theories of party competition and the literature on valence politics, in our opinion, the Dutch case is best explained not by ideological repositioning but by the strengthening of D66's valence image under the leadership of Rob Jetten. Drawing on the conceptual framework developed by Stokes and subsequent scholarship by Clark, Leiter, and Zur, the analysis highlights the centrality of non-positional attributes - competence, unity, credibility, integrity, and leadership capacity - in shaping voter choice. For centrist parties, whose strategic room for manoeuvre along the Left–Right dimension is structurally constrained, improvements in valence perception may compensate for limited ideological flexibility.
Keywords: Social liberalism; Valence politics; Dutch elections 2025; D66; European party systems.

Abstract: As eleições legislativas neerlandesas de 2025 constituem um caso analiticamente relevante para a compreensão dos dilemas estruturais e da eventual resiliência dos partidos centristas nas democracias europeias contemporâneas. Num contexto marcado pela polarização ideológica, pelo crescimento de forças populistas de direita e pelo enfraquecimento dos partidos tradicionais, o partido social-liberal Democraten 66 (D66) emergiu como a força mais votada num sistema proporcional altamente fragmentado. Este resultado revela-se paradoxal à luz da tendência europeia frequentemente descrita como o "paradoxo do centro vazio": embora as preferências eleitorais se concentrem em torno do centro ideológico, os partidos moderados enfrentam dificuldades em converter essa posição programática em supremacia eleitoral.
Partindo dos modelos espaciais de competição partidária e da literatura sobre política de valência, o presente artigo sustenta que o caso neerlandês se explica não por um reposicionamento ideológico, mas pelo reforço da imagem de valência do D66 sob a liderança de Rob Jetten. Com base no quadro conceptual desenvolvido por Stokes e aprofundado por Clark, Leiter e Zur, destaca-se a importância dos atributos não posicionais — competência, coesão, credibilidade, integridade e capacidade de liderança - na determinação do comportamento eleitoral. Para os partidos centristas, cujo espaço estratégico na dimensão Esquerda–Direita é estruturalmente limitado, a melhoria da perceção de valência pode compensar a reduzida flexibilidade ideológica.
Através de uma análise qualitativa e teoricamente fundamentada do resultado eleitoral, o artigo insere o crescimento do D66 nos debates mais amplos sobre as vulnerabilidades eleitorais dos partidos liberais

na Europa. Conclui-se que as eleições de 2025 não representam simplesmente um desvio ideológico para o centro-esquerda, mas antes demonstram que o social-liberalismo pode recuperar competitividade através do fortalecimento da liderança e da perceção de competência governativa. O caso contribui, assim, para a discussão sobre se o liberalismo centrista se encontra em declínio irreversível ou se mantém capacidade de renovação estratégica em contextos de polarização política.
Palavras-chave: Social-liberalismo; Política de valência; Eleições neerlandesas de 2025; D66; Sistemas partidários europeus.

Introduction

The Dutch general election on 29 October 2025 raises a question that goes beyond the national context: are centrist liberal parties structurally doomed to electoral marginality in an era of ideological polarisation, or can they rebuild their political viability under certain institutional and leadership conditions? The result achieved by D66, which emerged as the most voted party in an increasingly fragmented proportional system, seems to challenge the now familiar narrative of the 'empty centre' — the thesis that, although voters' preferences are concentrated on moderate positions, centrist parties systematically fail to convert this proximity into sustained electoral strength.

Rather than interpreting the Dutch outcome as an episodic deviation, this article analyses it as a critical case for competing explanations of centrist vulnerability in contemporary European democracies. Across Europe, political competition has been structured around polarising and identity-related issues — migration, European integration, climate transition, national sovereignty — that tend to reward ideological clarity and positional intensity. In this context, social-liberal formations face a structural dilemma. Situated close to the median voter, they cannot easily radicalise without compromising their core electorate; however, programmatic moderation alone does not guarantee electoral results.

That said, the Dutch case invites a closer examination of non-positional determinants of electoral choice, particularly those conceptualised in the literature as valence attributes: competence, credibility, unity, integrity, and leadership ability. Although valence theory has been widely mobilised to explain electoral performance, its implications for centrist parties operating in highly fragmented multiparty systems remain insufficiently specified. If ideological room for manoeuvre is structurally limited, reputational capital may acquire disproportionate importance.

This article puts forward a reasoned argument. It does not claim that ideology has become secondary, nor that valence neutralises structural limitations. Rather, it argues that in polarised environments, where positional differentiation reduces strategic flexibility for parties oriented towards the median voter, improvements in leadership credibility and perceptions of governing competence can partially compensate for the disadvantages inherent in centrism.

From a methodological perspective, the analysis proceeds through a qualitative interpretation informed by electoral outcome theory, situating D66's performance within broader debates on the decline and transformation of liberal parties in Europe. The aim is to avoid mechanical generalization from a particular case, but rather to clarify the conditions under which centrist social liberalism can remain electorally competitive despite systemic pressures that favour ideological polarisation. In short, the following analysis reads the Dutch elections not merely as an electoral event, but as a case study in the structural dilemmas - and potential resilience - of contemporary social liberalism.

1. Electoral Context and the Unexpected Performance of D66

In the most recent Dutch elections, the liberal party D66 obtained 16.94% of the vote, closely matching the result of Geert Wilders' party, PVV (16.66%). Rob Jetten, leader of D66, won the election, but by a narrow margin. This forced him to form a coalition, albeit a minority one, with the VVD and CDA to govern the Netherlands, keeping the populist far right out of power.[1]

In recent years, the Netherlands has had several right-wing prime ministers (Mark Rutte, Dick Schoof, and, don't forget, Geert Wilders, who won the 2023 elections but was unable to form a government), leaving many theorists amazed by the turn to the center and center-left that these elections brought.[2]

The truth is, Rob Jetten is often considered a "mini Mark Rutte." However, it is not due to his ideological positions. Substantively, Jetten's campaign was firmly rooted in progressive and socially liberal commitments.

2. Policy Agenda: Housing, Climate, and the Social Liberal Framework

Throughout the campaign, Rob Jetten has shown himself to be progressive and socially liberal,[3] as it is noted by his banners for the Netherlands: the housing crisis, including the reduction of bureaucracy associated with the blockade in the construction of green energy housing. Other issues, such as health, education, and justice, were also discussed at length by Jetten, but these are naturally less provocative in terms of political and ideological division, making it more challenging to confirm his political leanings. On all these issues, Jetten confirms his left-wing stance combined with liberalism. In terms of housing, Jetten focused on the claustrophobia triggered by bureaucracy when building new houses - an issue championed not only by him, but also by classical liberal parties.

On the other hand, it points to the construction of a "new island" as a "combination with an expansion of the Marker Wadden can thus provide a win-win situation for both nature and the housing shortage." Although it is not simple, this was corroborated by the fact that "The housing shortage cannot be solved by thinking small" and "We will not get there by expanding existing residential centers alone or further building up the inner cities."

D66's manifesto explicitly endorses state in-

1 For a more detailed analysis of the Dutch elections on 29 October 2025, see GALITO, Maria Sousa, "Eleições Legislativas nos Países Baixos (29 de outubro 2025)", *Polis*, 12(11) Julho/Dezembro 2025.

2 Regarding previous elections, see SEIA, C. A., DANIEL, J., & MIRANDA, C. (2024). "Eleições legislativas nos Países Baixos (22 de Novembro de 2023)". *Polis*, *2*(8), 147–152. https://doi.org/10.34628/S047-7M53

3 Social liberalism was created within liberalism itself: it is essentially debating the issue of equal opportunities and social justice. Social liberalism is generally linked to the center – center left political spectrum, unlike Classic Liberalism, linked to the right-wing political spectrum.

tervention where market mechanisms fail to guarantee affordability, asserting that the government must build, regulate, and ensure fairness so that the housing market functions for citizens rather than against them. This position aligns with Leonard Hobhouse's classic assertion that "Liberty without equality is a name of noble sound and squalid meaning" (HOBHOUSE, 1911), situating housing policy within the normative architecture of social liberalism.

When it comes to green energy, both Rob Jetten and the Democrats' 66 party endorse that to tackle climate change, policies should focus on green, renewable energy sourced from national soil, and prioritize the use of hydrogen. The party also advocates achieving a circular economy by the end of 2040 and becoming CO2-neutral.

Even though climate change is not a priority for any single party and all political parties include it in their political programs in some way, the truth is that left-leaning and social-liberal democracies tend to adopt more robust environmental policies than minimalist liberal models (POVITKINA & JAGERS, 2022). This tendency may be explained through Amartya Sen's conception of freedom, which frames environmental protection as integral to the substantive freedoms individuals have reason to value (SEN, 1999).

In this sense, D66's environmental agenda is not merely technocratic but normatively grounded: sustainability is conceptualised as a precondition for genuine freedom instead of a peripheral economic concern.

3. Social Liberalism Between Ideological Identity and Electoral Marginalisation

Social liberalism is a political movement situated somewhere between socialism and modern liberalism. Despite being opposites on the political spectrum, social liberalism has managed to find a middle ground and encompass both movements in one. It believes in social equality and the need for a strong welfare State, and its main banner is that "environmental protection is not just economic - it is about ensuring real freedom" (SEN, 1999).

It is believed that there was no single founder, but rather a broad line of thought developed by theorists over time. The best known is Leonard Hobhouse, known for his desire to reconcile liberalism with collectivism in the interests of social progress.

"Social liberalism is a political movement situated somewhere between socialism and modern liberalism. Despite being opposites on the political spectrum, social liberalism has managed to find a middle ground and encompass both movements in one."

This political philosophy is quite evident in Rob Jetten and, naturally, in the Democrats' 66 party. Regarding housing matters, it is common for social liberals, unlike classical liberals, to believe that "Liberty without equality is a name of noble sound and squalid meaning" (HOBHOUSE, 1911), resorting, if necessary, to the welfare state to remedy the problem, instead the market itself, as D66 states in its manifesto on affordable housing ("Everyone should be able to find a home they can afford. The Government must build, regulate, and ensure fairness, so that the housing market works for people again.")[4]

Within environmental issues, the study "Environmental commitments in different types of democracies: the role of Liberal, Social-Liberal and Deliberative Politics", a comparative study, ultimately highlighted that "social-liberal democracies tend to adopt more robust environmental policies than more minimalist of 'thin[5]' liberal approaches.", probably due to the belief that environmental preservation is seen as "among the central freedoms that people have reason to value." (SEN, 1999).

There are not many countries in Europe where these views had an impact. Social liberalism still faces widespread rejection, mainly because it brings together two opposing political currents with already well-defined audiences. Nevertheless, in Slovakia, *Progressive Slovakia*, a party politically and ideologically like D66, described as "liberal-social" and "culturally liberal", performed well in the 2023 elections.

However, the question remains: why are the mainstream parties failing, including social liberalism?[6]

4. Ideology, Valence, and the Electoral Disadvantage of Centrist Parties

According to a study in the British Journal of Political Science, made by Roi Zur in 2019[7], "voters prefer parties that move public policy toward their side of the issue (that is, voters with left-leaning preferences prefer parties on the left, and right-wing voters are biased toward right-wing parties)", which helps us explain why are the extremes increasing in the last few years. To Roi Zur, "one possible solution to the empty center puzzle is that centrist parties' vote share is sensitive to the parties' valence image. Voters, even those who are ideologically proximate to the centrist party, prefer a non-centrist party when the latter is perceived as more competent or unified. As the valence image of a centrist party decreases, the odds of voting for that party decrease as well."

Here it becomes clear that valence image is, along with charisma, one of the most key features that a politician can have. However, if they do not have it from the start, they cannot just create it artificially; in fact, it can harm them. Clark (2014) demonstrates that parties

4 For further development, DEMOCRATEN 66. (2025). *D66 election program 2025–2030*. Available at https://d66.nl

5 See POVITKINA, Marina, JAGERS, Sverker Carlsson, "Environmental commitments in different types of democracies: The role of liberal, social-liberal, and deliberative politics", *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 74, May 2022, 102523.

6 We consider social liberalism a mainstream party of the center due to its political spectrum and ideological ideas.

7 See ZUR, Roi (2021), "Stuck in the middle: Ideology, valence and the electoral failures of centrist parties", *British Journal of Political Science*, 51 (2). pp. 706-723. DOI https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123419000231

moderate their Left–Right position as their character-based valence attributes worsen. However, unlike extremist parties, centrist parties cannot compensate for a bad valence image by taking a different Left–Right position. As mentioned before, voters' preference distribution is unimodal and peaks around the center. If voters are more concentrated around the center of the scale than at the extremes, and other parties are dispersed along the Left–Right continuum, the centrist party cannot improve its position by unilaterally moving to a radical position. Moreover, it can only modestly improve its vote share by taking a position somewhere between the major-Left and-Right parties and has no electoral incentive to leapfrog these parties. The exact vote-maximizing position depends on the specifics of the voter distribution and on rival parties' positions. The collapse of the centrist party (the middle election in each panel) is associated with the collapse of its valence image.

In this study, they concluded, "the results imply that the collapse of the focal centrist party is associated with the deterioration of its valence image and not with changes in the salience of the Left–Right dimension." That said, the reason centrist parties tend to fail lately is due to their valence image, and they cannot grow much by presenting a different, more radical, ideological position to compensate for their negative valence image, which is different in non-centrist parties. By maximizing their positions on controversial issues like immigration, UE integration, or security, the centrist parties risk decreasing even further their audience. The solution is clear: improve their valence.

Stokes defines valence (1963,1992) as the attributes that voters almost unanimously approve, including a party's image with respect to competence, honesty, and leadership ability. These valence attributes have been linked to parties' electoral success (CLARK 2009; CLARK & LEITER, 2014).

In addition to that, it is also appealing when a party is clearly united, decisive, and objective. The problem is that a lot of centrist parties tend to fluctuate between the center, center-left, and center-right, ultimately ending up not having a specific audience. To make things worse, they interpret poor results as a call from voters to become more radical (either left or right), resulting in an even worse election.

While all parties can suffer from a negative valence image, centrist parties are unique in their lack of strategic positional opportunities to compensate for their non-positional image. (DENNISON & KRIESI, 2023)[8]

5. The Case of Rob Jetten: Valence as Electoral Leverage

In the case of Rob Jetten, we could not find any polls that measured his approval rating and image, probably because his election was recent and it was his first time running for prime minister. However, we can already draw some conclusions.

Although Rob Jetten was Minister of the Environment and a Member of the Parliament, the fact that in his first election as a candidate for Prime Minister and as leader of a political party, he managed to achieve such a good and decisive result for D66 shows that his valence image is certainly positive, and the real reason. Even though these are not 100% reliable barometers, the truth is that when international newspapers talk about Jetten, he is always portrayed in a positive way.[9]

Is uncommon for a new leader to grow this much - from nine seats to twenty-six seats -, especially given that little time has passed since he was elected party leader. Of course, you may already be known to people, but it is still different being known as a public and political figure and having the trust to become the future leader of a country. In a recent article published by the Guardian,[10] Sarah de Lange from the University of Leiden, said that D66 "had been boosted by a «hopeful, confident, optimistic, can-do campaign»".

Thus, we can deduce that a politician's image is decisive for their performance. It is believed that social liberals are in electoral decline due to the lack of this very relevant characteristic. Although they certainly have something to add to the political spectrum, the truth is that they have not been successful. Jetten, as a social liberal, has shown us that a shift in social liberalism is possible, using the key to success: the image of valence.

Conclusion

The Dutch case suggests that the electoral decline of social liberalism is neither inevitable nor purely ideological. Rather, it is closely linked to perceptions of leadership competence and party credibility.

Centrist and social-liberal parties are structurally constrained: their ideological positioning offers limited room for strategic repositioning, and attempts to radicalise may prove counterproductive. Consequently, valence attributes become disproportionately decisive. Where competence, unity, and integrity are perceived positively, centrist parties can overcome structural disadvantages.

Rob Jetten's performance demonstrates that a revival of social liberalism is possible when leadership credibility aligns with programmatic coherence. The Dutch elections, therefore, provide an instructive case study for understanding how image, rather than ideological repositioning, may determine the contemporary viability of the political centre.

In an increasingly polarised European landscape, the future of social liberalism may depend less on policy recalibration and more on restoring trust, competence, and coherence, the very foundations of valence politics.

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8 For further development, see DENNISON, J. & KRIESI, H. (2023) "Explaining Europe's transformed electoral landscape: structure, salience, and agendas", *European Political Science Review*, 15(4), 483–501. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000085

9 Projections put progressives ahead of the far right (and for D66 (with 21-25 seats), which has been gaining ground thanks to the positive image of its leader, Rob Jetten). See "Eleições nos Países Baixos: Projeções colocam progressistas à frente da extrema-direita". (29.11.2025). *Diário de Notícias*.

10 See "Lessons for liberals: What can Dutch progressives' victory over populism teach the world?" (n.d.). *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com

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