

The impact of national politics on local elections: a Tiny Ticks Theory

a paper by Peter Noordhoek for the June 2015 NKWP meeting

It is a political science cliché to say that national politics has a big impact on local elections. At the same time it is also true there is no easy one-on-one translation of national to local elections - or the other way around. In fact, the correlation in outcome between national and local elections is not a stable one. In this article the author deduces from his experiences as a campaigner under which circumstances he expects outcomes from local elections in the Netherlands will deviate from polling outcomes, and which direction this might take. Tongue-halfway-in-cheek, he calls this his 'Tiny Ticks Theory' or TTT, and hopes it will contribute to a political science that seems to be a bit stuck in the polling mud.

The essence of the Tiny Ticks Theory is, that in a situation where voters first-choice preferences have been stable for quite a while, those voters may chose to vote for second-choice parties and / or in secondary elections, when and if those parties show themselves eager to be noticed for a longer while. In that case the relatively 'tiny ticks' of those parties will be heard through the noise of the national party and media circuit. Those ticks can be successful local programmatic points, a list with attractive candidates, smart campaign actions, the right response to a local political incident, etc. No tick is in itself enough to turn a party into an alternative for a first choice party, but enough ticks may sway a voter, even or especially when the voter feels safe in its first choice.

Based on this TTT, the author made a prediction in December 2013 of the outcome of the March 19 2014 local elections in The Netherlands. In January he decided to test this little theory and translated his assumptions into a prognosis. Some recalibrations were made a week and two days before the election, with two polls by Peil.nl as benchmark. Before the election a draft for this paper was started.

My first assumption was that first choice preferences have been stable for a while. Since the local elections in 2010 polls have been relatively stable, even though the circumstances have not. The outcome of the 2012 national election must be seen as a one-off deviation from the trend.

My second assumption was that a number of parties would benefit from their ticks, most of all SP and CDA. In the case of the CDA I based this assumption on a combination of a media review that included local media and on a lot of personal observations and social media signals, mostly from the province of South-Holland, where I have been campaign leader for this party in the past and still hold functions.

The results of the election on the 19th of March do not fully vindicate the theory. National considerations still play a very large part and the first polls do not indicate that a lot of voters change preferences the way the theory predicted. Interesting enough though, the outcomes of all parties seem to differ more than was the case in 2010, and this is certainly true for the CDA.

The prognosis for the result of the CDA was spot on. In contrast to Peil.nl, which predicted 12% of the voters would CDA, and Ipsos who had an exit poll that predicted less than 11% (with a big 2% margin for error), the authors January prediction of 14% was the correct one (it was 15% in 2010).

From long time experience the author knows that CDA members are very much underrepresented in any poll. He had to lean to listen to weak signals in order to adapt the polls for the needs of his party. In the paper he makes observations on the different methods of polling based on this practice. It is his assumption that the poor performance of Ipsos could have been prevented with the right combination of statistical analysis with 'on the ground' listening to weak signals. A further assumption is that only this hybrid way of polling is good enough for polling underrepresented parties like the CDA, and that this is also the way political science should go. Statistics are not enough.

Peter Noordhoek
Northedge B.V. Oosthaven 15-16
2801PC Gouda
T 31 182 684545
M 31 6 53488078
E dpn@northedge.nl