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## JUST WHO VOTES FOR WILDERS AND DUTCH PARTY OF FREEDOM?

- 15.02.2017

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Deutsche Welle (14 February 2017)

Geert Wilders hails from Venlo, a city with a population of 100,000 people near the border with Germany. Matheus, a local restaurant owner, says everyone knows stories from Wilders' childhood. Apparently all the other kids used to beat him up because his mother was from Indonesia and he looked different. Matheus openly admits to supporting Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) - and is apparently one of the few people who will. He says he is attracted to Wilders' pledges to control immigration.

Robert Housmans leads the PVV in the Limburg regional parliament, where it is the second strongest party. He has good chances of entering parliament in The Hague in March.

"We want our sovereignty back," Housmans said when asked about his party's anti-EU stance. He wants the Dutch state to decide who can and cannot enter the Netherlands, which already has the strictest asylum laws in the European Union.

Housmans does not see a problem with leaving the EU. "It is easy to reach a bilateral agreement with Germany, Belgium or France," he said.

### Changing political fortunes

Just why are there so many angry people in The Netherlands, a wealthy country that is enjoying annual economic growth of 2 percent? Martijn van Helvert, a candidate for the Christian Democrats, believes that the economy has made losers out of many people, as has happened in the United States. "Prime Minister Rutte has only spread optimism," van Helvert said. "He says if you work hard, things will get better after four years. But that is not true." As the mainstream parties have lost their credibility, it has become easier for outsiders like Wilders and the PVV to grow support.

Van Helvert has attempted to expand voter outreach in his own election campaign. "I have office hours for citizens," he said, "and I try to help people solve their problems." Of course, not all issues are government-related, but there are too many people who have been let down by the authorities.

"Many people are angry and disappointed," van Helvert said as he admired life-size election posters of himself at a print shop in Echte, a town that neighbors Venlo. He said voters felt fooled by years of major-party promises that could not be kept, such as vows of tax relief or money for the elderly. It was all just empty words. Nationwide his party, which ruled for years, looks likely to only win 14 percent of the vote this time around.

With the exceptions of people who were actively voting against immigrants or the European Union, most voters surveyed informally on the streets of Wilders' home turf had little reason to support the far-right candidate.

"We have a good life here," an elderly man said. "I am not dissatisfied. And I don't like Wilders at all. He doesn't debate; he only tweets - and what he says is nuts."

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