

Master's thesis

From Fear to Votes: How Migration Narratives are used to shape Perceived Threats in the Netherlands



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Summary

In this thesis, I have aimed to gain insight into the shaping influence of political party narratives on migration on perceptions of threat in the Netherlands, a possibly crucial interaction in understanding the rising electoral success of far-right parties (FRPs) globally. With this research, I try to address the research gap on the interaction between voter sentiments and the FRP rhetoric as described by several studies. To avoid potential biases and get insight into various perspectives on migration in the Dutch political landscape, I did not solely focus on FRPs but compared narratives across the six largest political parties of the Netherlands (PVV, GL-PvdA, VVD, NSC, D66, BBB). Therefore, my main research question is *“How do political parties in the Netherlands use narratives on migration to shape realistic and symbolic threats amongst Dutch citizens?”*.

To frame the analysis, I have used Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), a theory used to understand intergroup bias. ITT categorises perceived threats into two dimensions: realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats describe a perceived danger to an individual's or group's physical or material well-being posed by the outgroup. In contrast, a symbolic threat refers to perceived threats to an individual's status or a group's cultural identity. These two dimensions correspond closely to the primary drivers of anti-immigration attitudes, and consequently, far-right voting as described in the literature: economic and cultural anxieties. FRPs therefore have a clear incentive to strategically exploit and shape these sentiments as it may result in electoral gains. In the Netherlands, I have only identified the Party for Freedom (PVV) as using a combination of nationalism, populism and radicalism, which is the definition I use for FRPs in this study. Regarding the methodology, I have employed a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured, in-depth interviews with politicians from diverse parties and government levels, shorter interviews with citizens, and a media analysis. The media analysis focused on the six largest political parties in the Netherlands and included the election manifestos, newspaper interviews, and television debates with their party leaders.

The first key finding of this research is that primarily the PVV employs all identified narratives on migration that use realistic and symbolic threats. The other parties only use some, often toned-down versions, of these narratives or use counternarratives that emphasize other aspects of migration. The realistic threat narratives that the PVV uses highlight issues such as housing shortages, welfare state strain and nuisance, framing immigrants as a direct threat to the primary needs of Dutch citizens. This aligns with the claim of ITT that perceived competition for resources and physical threats can drive intergroup bias. In addition, the PVV also focuses on the cultural impact of migration, portraying immigrants from Muslim-majority countries as incompatible with Dutch values and a threat to our national identity and social cohesion. Such narratives tap into symbolic threats, which, according to ITT, can increase feelings of cultural insecurity and lead to stronger anti-immigration attitudes. Compared to the FRP narratives described in the literature, the PVV does not explicitly depict the elite as corrupt and does not discuss migration in relation to the job market. The Netherlands is experiencing a labour shortage in many sectors, which is why a narrative around migrants stealing jobs does not fit within the Dutch context.

Second, I found that several perceived threats were present among citizens. However, the issues identified, which include the contribution of migration to the housing shortage, nuisance, and potential cultural clashes, were primarily attributed to asylum migration. Simultaneously, almost all interviewees agreed on the importance of labour migrants to the Dutch economy, and most did not even have an opinion about study migration. Furthermore, the proportion of asylum migration to total migration was consistently overestimated. Most respondents estimated that this proportion was between 30-60%, while the actual size is around 10%. This indicates a widespread misconception about the proportion of asylum migration relative to total migration.

Third, I found that narratives resonate when they invoke fear, are simple, and explain and provide solutions to problems people experience daily. The simplicity of a narrative is also more important than its accuracy when it comes to finding resonance because it makes the narratives easy to understand and communicate through diverse media channels. Regarding migration, narratives resonate mostly when they are about asylum migration since most issues identified through the citizen interviews were attributed to asylum migration rather than labour, study, or family migration. All factors described can be found in the narratives used by the PVV, but they also explain why left-wing parties like GL-PvdA and D66 struggle to find resonance with their story on migration. When discussing limiting migration, these parties focus on labour migration, as this group is much larger than asylum migration. However, many citizens do not see the difference between asylum and labour migrants or believe the groups are similar in size, and the issues associated with migration are centred on asylum migration. Therefore, focusing on labour migration is much less effective than focusing on asylum-seekers.

The strategies identified that are used to shape perceived threats amongst Dutch citizens include exploiting fears, simplifying problems, scapegoating, and trying to link their party to the solution of these problems. Right-wing parties often use the migrants themselves and the European Union as scapegoats, while left-wing parties tend to blame previous governments. Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Not only does the media's focus on negative news stir up fear about AZCs, but politicians also strategically use diverse media channels to share their narratives with a wider audience.

The findings of this research point to the potency of political threat narratives to shape public perceptions and political attitudes. Understanding these dynamics is vital for understanding far-right voting behaviour and the global rise of FRPs. The insights gained underscore the importance of addressing misinformation and fostering inclusive narratives to counter the potential polarising and discriminatory effects of far-right rhetoric and strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience. The research concludes with suggestions for future research on the evolving dynamics between political discourse, the media, and public opinions in the context of migration in the Netherlands and other countries in which FRPs are successful.

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1. Introduction

In the Dutch parliamentary elections in November 2023, the far-right Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders became the surprising and, for some, shocking winner, leaving its main competitors, the Labour-Green alliance Groenlinks-PvdA and the liberal VVD, far behind (Schaart et al., 2023). This victory is part of a broader trend of nationalist, Islamophobic and anti-immigration parties gaining electoral success in recent years, with other notable examples including the French Rassemblement National (RN) (formerly Front National), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Sweden Democrats (SD) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). Given that immigration is the overarching policy issue for far-right parties (FRPs) (Mols & Jetten, 2020) - the latter defined as parties that combine nationalism, populism, and radicalism - their success reflects a growing public sentiment favouring nationalist and restrictive immigration policies.

The rise of populism and nationalism in the Netherlands began already in the late 1990s. Prior to this period, anti-immigration parties failed to significantly impact elections in the Netherlands. However, the purple ('red' mixed with 'blue') coalitions of the 1990s made the conservative-liberal VVD and the social-democratic PvdA move towards the centre, creating space for new political movements on the flanks. In the wake of 9/11, this shift made the rise of Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) possible. This party, which advocated against multiculturalism, sought to restrict migration and claimed to be the voice of 'the people', made a dramatic entry into Dutch politics. In their first general elections, held just nine days after the assassination of party leader Pim Fortuyn, the LPF jumped to 26 seats (17% of the votes). However, internal conflicts led to the party's rapid decline in the following years, preventing it from establishing a lasting political party (Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

The murder of Fortuyn combined with the 9/11 attacks and the assassination of Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist catapulted the ideas of the new populist and nationalist right into the public sphere, heightening Islamophobic and anti-multiculturalist sentiments in society. In 2005, the Party of Freedom (PVV) was founded by Geert Wilders, one year after leaving the VVD. In their first parliamentary elections in 2006, the PVV directly secured 9 seats. In the following election cycle, two years after the 2008 financial crisis which brought about economic anxieties for many, the PVV jumped to 24 seats. This marked another peak in the rise of the far-right in the Netherlands and signalled the incorporation of right-wing populism as a more permanent and accepted feature of the Dutch political landscape (Oudenampsen, 2013).

Since 2010, the Netherlands has been governed by coalitions led by the VVD with their party leader Mark Rutte serving as the Prime Minister. This era came to an end with the election win of the PVV in the 2023 elections. The direct reason for these elections was the collapse of the coalition government in July, triggered by disagreements over a new policy package on asylum migration. Many parties were dissatisfied with the current asylum migration policy and therefore the coalition partners of Rutte IV (VVD, the Christen-Democratic CDA and ChristenUnie, and the social-liberal D66) had been working on a new package. The biggest issue in the negotiations was the issue of family reunification for refugees from conflict zones. The VVD wanted to restrict this, while the ChristenUnie emphasised the importance of keeping migrant families together. As a result, the four parties had to conclude that they were unable to reach an agreement (Schaart, 2023).

Because the Dutch coalition collapsed over the issue of migration, it automatically became a major campaign theme leading up to the November 2023 elections. This was mirrored among voters, with research indicating that 80% of Dutch citizens believed that the current immigration numbers were too high (Kester, 2023). In preparation for the elections, the VVD under its new leader, Dilan Yeşilgöz, made migration its central campaign theme. Yeşilgöz also took a different stance towards the PVV and did not rule them out from future collaboration in advance of the elections like Mark Rutte had done before (NOS Nieuws, 2023a). This meant that there would finally be a chance that the ideas of the PVV could be put into policy. The PVV has consistently prioritised restricting migration since its founding, which earned them issue ownership on this topic and gave them an advantage in a campaign where migration was a dominant topic. These developments have contributed to the electoral success of the PVV, securing 37 seats, while the VVD only got 24 seats (Schaart et al., 2023).

Research Objective and Questions

The substantial election victory of the PVV brings the rise of populism and nationalism in the Netherlands to new heights. As said, this development mirrors the growing popularity of FRPs in numerous other countries worldwide. Consequently, there has been a surge in research dedicated to understanding populism, nationalism, and the electoral success of the far-right in recent years. Such research has been mainly focused on the strategies FRPs employ to enhance their electoral appeal, or on factors that drive the support of FRPs. Several studies have concluded that economic and cultural anxieties related to migration mainly fuel the latter. However, they also point to the absence of research on the dynamic interaction between these sentiments and the actions and rhetoric of FRPs (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2020). Mols and Jetten (2020) have initiated efforts to analyse this interaction and describe how FRPs both ‘read’ and ‘shape’ public sentiments. They argue that FRPs not only respond to public grievances but also actively frame societal issues in ways that amplify discontent. However, they also stress the need to further integrate this approach into broader analyses of populist and nationalist movements.

In my thesis, I aim to address this knowledge gap by examining the interaction between political party narratives on migration with public perceptions in the Netherlands. To avoid potential biases in my research, I will not exclusively focus on FRPs, but instead, compare narratives across different political parties. This approach will also offer a contextual understanding of the political landscape and provide insights into different perspectives on migration issues. Moreover, it will also help to highlight the differences in rhetoric and strategies employed by different political parties.

Therefore, my main research question is:

How do political parties in the Netherlands use narratives on migration to shape realistic and symbolic threats amongst Dutch citizens?

To research this, I will use the following sub-research questions:

1. What narratives on migration are employed by political parties in the Netherlands that possibly shape realistic and symbolic threats in society?
2. What perceived realistic and symbolic threats exist amongst Dutch citizens?
3. Why do some narratives on migration employed by political parties in the Netherlands resonate with citizens, while others do not?

These questions will help in answering my main research question and gaining insight into the interplay between migration narratives employed by political parties and public sentiments. This dynamic potentially plays a significant role in the increasing electoral success of FRPs all over the world. This development worries me personally, as I see how these parties often do not respect fundamental human rights and bring about societal polarisation. By uncovering the mechanism behind these narratives, my thesis can inform efforts to counter misinformation and promote a more inclusive society that upholds democratic values and respects the rights of all individuals.

Central to my thesis will be Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), which categorises perceived threats into realistic and symbolic dimensions, which mirror the economic and cultural anxieties mentioned before. In the next chapter, I will discuss my theoretical framework, including ITT, in greater detail. Following this, I will discuss the methodology, in which I will provide insight into the research design, methods employed, the limitations of this research, and the ethical considerations and my positionality. In the subsequent chapters, I will present my results, which I will discuss further in the discussion section. The discussion will also include an exploration of the implications and limitations of my research, ending with recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Central to my research will be Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), originally developed by Stephan and Stephan (2000) and later updated by Stephan and Renfro (2002) to understand intergroup bias and prejudice. According to ITT, an intergroup threat is experienced when members of one group (the ingroup) perceive that another group (the outgroup) poses a potential harm. These perceived threats can be categorised into two groups: realistic and symbolic threats, which can both be experienced at the individual or group level. A realistic threat at the group level refers to a perceived threat to a group's power, resources, and general welfare. In contrast, an individual realistic threat concerns physical or material harm, economic loss, deprivation of valued resources, or threats to an individual's health or personal security. A symbolic threat is a perceived threat to a group's religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, or worldview, or it is a threat to an individual's face or honour, self-identity or self-esteem. ITT offers an integrated approach to understanding the mechanisms behind negative group attitudes, integrating elements from other theories like Realistic Group Conflict Theory (which aligns with the concept of realistic threat) and symbolic racism theory (similar to the symbolic threat). In addition, it is related to social identity theory, where the notion of 'status threat' involves both tangible resources like job opportunities (realistic threat) and group esteem issues such as value conflicts (symbolic threat) (Stephan et al., 2008).

ITT is the most suitable framework for this thesis as the two dimensions reflect the two primary drivers of anti-immigration attitudes, and consequently, far-right voting as identified by many authors: economic anxieties and cultural grievances (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Tolsma et al., 2021). The economic anxieties are similar to the realistic threat of ITT as described above, although the realistic threat is a broader term and can also include, for example, a perceived physical threat. Similarly, the cultural grievances mirror the symbolic threat, as the latter concerns perceived threats to one's culture. Both realistic and symbolic threats have been historically used to explain bias towards immigrant groups, long before ITT was formally developed and introduced in 2000 (Riek et al., 2006). Furthermore, ITT is concerned with perceptions of threat rather than *actual* threats (Stephan et al., 2008). This is particularly relevant in the context of migration because, after years of research, there remains no consensus in the literature about the causal relationship between the migrant influx and electoral support for the far-right (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Similarly, studies have found no definitive causal relation between deteriorating socio-economic conditions and far-right voting (Mols & Jetten, 2020), highlighting again the distinction between perceived threats and the actual situation.

Since national-level variables like migration influx and unemployment do not necessarily correlate with FRP support, other factors must influence the realistic and symbolic threats as perceived by voters. While ITT describes several antecedents of threats, it does not address how these threats can be shaped and used by certain actors. In the context of migration, this aspect is crucial. FRPs can strategically utilise these perceived realistic and symbolic threats in society, as such threats significantly contribute to the development of anti-immigration attitudes and far-right voting (Mols and Jetten 2020, Golder 2016, Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019). This implies that FRPs have a clear incentive to use specific narratives around migration to shape public sentiments as this can result in electoral gains. While many political parties politicise migration, FRPs are considered the driving force of this, and in doing so, they trigger other parties to engage with the topic as well (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022).

Realistic Threats around Migration

Realistic threats can be easily linked to migration, as citizens might perceive to compete with migrants for limited resources such as jobs and houses. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature and is often associated with the well-known “losers of globalisation” thesis. This thesis argues that neoliberal globalisation has produced economic winners and losers, with the latter translating their economic anxiety into support for populist parties (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). This reasoning can be found as well in related theories like the relative deprivation mechanism, which suggests that individuals who are less well-off in a well-performing economy might be more inclined to vote radically because they feel deprived of what they believe they deserve (Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018). These individuals often find themselves competing with immigrants, a situation that has been linked to the development of stronger anti-immigration attitudes and increased far-right voting (Golder, 2016). Similarly, Gest et al. (2018) have demonstrated that support for the radical right has less to do with economic hardship and more with a perceived drop in status. They explain this through the concept of “nostalgic deprivation”, which refers to the discrepancy between individuals’ understandings of their current status and their nostalgic perceptions of their past.

The previous explanations account for a perceived threat to the *individual’s* physical or material well-being but do not address perceived threats to a *group’s* power, resources, and general welfare (Stephan et al., 2008). In addition, research indicates that FRPs also tend to attract many middle-class voters, while other recent studies suggest that FRPs can attract both relatively deprived voters who experience economic hardship and relatively gratified voters in more favourable socio-economic circumstances simultaneously (Mols and Jetten, 2020). This suggests that perceived realistic threats at the group level rather than the individual level might influence the voting choice of middle-class voters. However, research on economic anxieties experienced at the group level instead of the individual level is lacking.

Symbolic Threats around Migration

The second main driver of anti-immigration attitudes is perceived cultural (symbolic) threats. This refers to the fear that immigrants challenge established cultural values, identity, and ways of living (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). One theory that supports the cultural backlash argument on the individual level is the transnational cleavage theory. This theory describes a divide between voters who support multiculturalism (cosmopolitans) and those who reject it (nationalists). This gap is significant because, nowadays, value orientations have become increasingly important drivers of voting behaviour compared to material factors (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The transnational cleavage is also described by Mols & Jetten (2020), who describe a rift between younger, better-educated, urban populations who support progressive causes like gender equality, action on climate change, and refugee protection, and older, less-educated, rural populations with conservative stances who feel culturally excluded. Like with economic anxieties, this rift can also be linked to globalisation, as this has led to more heterogeneous societies. These explanations in the literature seem to focus more on perceived threats at the group level, describing anxieties around a group’s religion, values, and belief system. It accounts less for potential perceived symbolic threats at the individual level, which can involve concerns about a loss of face or honour and the undermining of self-identity or self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2008).

Defining the Far-Right

Before delving into the narratives on migration used by political parties, including the far-right, I want to clarify the definition I use for far-right parties. Various terms are in use for parties with restrictive stances on migration and multiculturalism: populist, nationalist, radical-right, extreme-right, far-right, and combinations of these terms. Golder (2016) attributes this to a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the core ideology of the far-right. He identifies the key aspects of FRPs as populism and nationalism combined with either radicalism or extremism.

Both populism and nationalism divide society into two distinct groups. Populism makes a vertical distinction between “the people” and “the corrupt elite”, which typically includes established political parties, intellectuals, the economic upper class, and the media. These groups are targeted for promoting liberal values related to individualism, multiculturalism, and internationalism (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). In the Netherlands, the “elite” is not as often depicted as corrupt, but they are targeted for the same reasons. What also is dominant in Dutch populism is the claim that politics should respect popular sovereignty, i.e. the general will, at any cost. Because populism rejects pluralism - the notion that society consists of diverse groups and individuals with different visions and needs - it denies the need for compromise and as a result, it tends to simplify political issues (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Golder, 2016). Nationalism, on the other hand, makes a horizontal distinction between the in- and the out-group. It seeks to preserve the unity, autonomy, and identity of the nation (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019), using this goal to justify a broad range of policy positions. Within nationalism, a distinction can be made between ethnic and civic nationalism. Civic nationalism, the dominant nationalist narrative in the Netherlands, allows individuals to become members of the civic nation by accepting a common set of cultural values and practices. This makes the nation culturally homogenous but not necessarily ethnically homogeneous. In contrast, ethnic nationalism considers membership in the nation is hereditary, making the nation ethnically homogenous (Golder, 2016).

Both populism and nationalism are considered ‘thin ideologies’, meaning they have limited programmatic scope and can easily adapt to the sentiments and needs of different societies. Due to this, both can be attached to other ideologies and ideas (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). This flexibility allows populists and nationalists to politicise grievances relevant to their own context, explaining the many differences that exist between parties that can be categorised as populist and/or nationalist (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Extremism and radicalism can be conceptually distinguished by their relationship to liberal democracy. Extremism is considered to oppose procedural democracy, while radicalism merely questions key aspects of the constitutional order (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). When extremism is combined with calls for a national rebirth and the revolutionary overthrow of the “decadent and corrupt” liberal democratic order, it is considered fascism. In today’s world, where liberal democracy is widely accepted and revolutionary nationalism is associated with war and destruction, fascist parties have not yet found the support needed to remain successful in the Netherlands and most other European countries (Golder, 2016). Regarding the type of nationalism used in these parties, extreme-right (fascist) parties often utilise the ethnic nationalist narrative, while radical-right parties use civic nationalist narratives to promote their anti-immigrant agendas (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019).

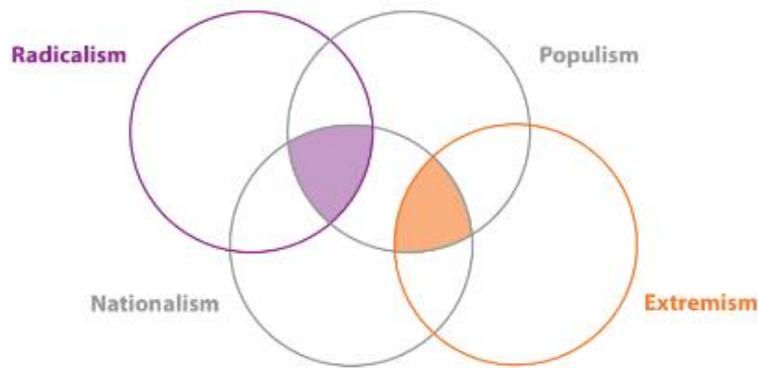


Figure 1. The circles represent the core ideological traits of the far-right. The purple area shows the combination of traits that are increasingly dominant in the contemporary far-right, while the orange region indicates the location of fascism (Golder, 2016).

As Figure 1 shows, not all FRPs share the characteristics of nationalism and populism. Anti-immigration parties are fundamentally nationalist and only secondarily populist, since populism invokes the “people as underdog”, while nationalism invokes the “people as nation”. However, successful FRPs in recent years have combined both populism and nationalism (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). There is even discussion in the literature about the extent to which these two concepts can be conceptually separated, as they are often tightly interwoven in practice. Brubaker (2020) argues that populist discourse involves both horizontal and vertical appeals to the people, and this inherent ambiguity is a defining feature of populism itself. For this reason, he advocates for an ‘impure’ definition of populism that incorporates this productive ambiguity and ambivalence, reflecting the intertwining and overlapping of populist and nationalist discourses (Brubaker, 2020). Therefore, in this thesis, I will define FRPs as parties that combine radicalism, populism, and nationalism.

FRP Migration Narratives

Before diving into which migration narratives of FRPs are described in the literature, I want to explain how I conceptualise “narratives”. Dennison (2021) defines narratives as selective depictions of reality over time that include one or more causal claims. This distinguished them from frames, which are only concerned with the present, and discourses, which are a broader ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories. In this thesis, I will use narrative analysis as a method to examine the narratives around migration. Narratives have been regularly cited by migration policymakers and communicators as some of the most significant determinants of public attitudes toward migration and a particularly powerful source of our perceptions and misperceptions. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has argued that inaccurate and dehumanising migration narratives are on the rise in many countries (Dennison, 2021). Such narratives are often employed by FRPs, which use migrants as scapegoats for complex societal problems. By doing so, migration restriction suddenly becomes the solution to a wide variety of issues (Nijs et al., 2019; Werts et al., 2013).

Studies describe various narratives around migration that reflect both the realistic and symbolic threats perceived by voters, thereby mobilising voter groups with insecurities on both fronts. On one hand, culture is presented as a value issue, portraying those who do not share ‘our’ liberal democratic values as a threat. This narrative links migration to democracy, security, and terrorism, providing ground for FRPs to find support. The alleged incompatibility of immigrant norms and values with those

of the host nation's population is highlighted, which fuels perceived symbolic threats in society (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). This narrative echoes the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, named after Samuel Huntington's book of the same title in 1996, which predicts that cultural and religious identities will be the primary sources of conflict in the post-Cold War era. On the other hand, there are the perceived realistic threats, which can be exploited by FRPs by associating immigrants and minorities with economic hardship (Golder 2016). Simultaneously, FRPs emphasize economic nationalism by advocating for the expansion of the welfare state and direct government control of the economy. By linking immigration, unemployment and (an alleged) welfare scarcity, FRPs can attract citizens who experience economic hardship. Thus, by addressing both perceived realistic and symbolic threats in these narratives and providing nationalist solutions to this, while distancing themselves from fascism, FRPs have successfully broadened their appeal to a diverse group of voters (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019).

While the narratives described above might appear primarily nationalist, they also incorporate populist elements. The 'corrupt elite' is often blamed for these problems, as they have been governing before and have an alleged alliance with outsiders. This narrative suggests that businesses benefit from immigration, while political elites supposedly seek to gain new voters from the same immigrant groups (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Immigrants and asylum-seekers are often depicted as a group enjoying protection and privileges granted by the urban leftist elite, making the "ordinary hard-working families" the real victims who bear the financial burden through taxes (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

Since nationalism and populism are considered thin ideologies that can easily attach to context-specific issues, this means that the narratives in the Netherlands are probably slightly different than those described above and adjusted to the country's unique societal problems. Political parties have a clear interest in using these context-relevant narratives, as they may resonate more effectively with citizens and thus better influence the perceived realistic and symbolic threats around migration in society. Figure 2 illustrates this feedback loop between migration narratives and perceived threats, and the role that the societal context plays in shaping these dynamics.

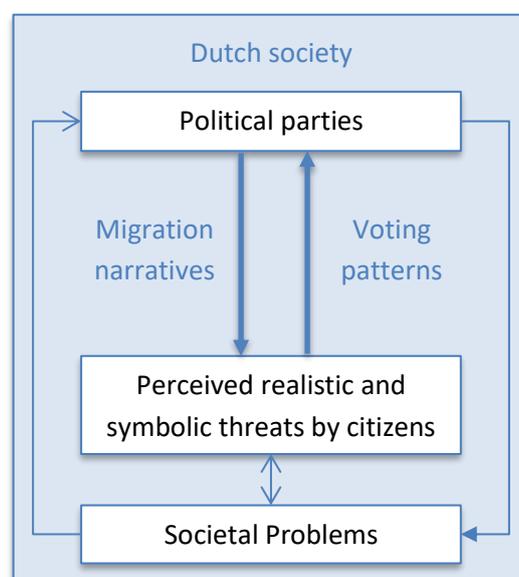


Figure 2: Analytical Framework which shows the relationship between political parties' migration narratives, perceived realistic and symbolic threats by citizens, and societal problems.

The Far-Right in the Netherlands

The Netherlands features a complex political system characterised by a parliamentary representative democracy with a low electoral threshold, requiring only 0.67% of the votes to secure a seat in parliament (Andeweg et al., 2011). This means that new political parties can easily enter parliament, resulting in now fifteen different factions represented in parliament. Many of these factions occasionally employ populist rhetoric and have nationalist stances in their party programs. However, only one party fully integrates populism, nationalism and radicalism: the PVV. This is evident in their election manifesto, which claims that the elite is governing and advocates for returning power to the Dutch people (p. 29). Apart from such populist stances, the manifesto also includes numerous nationalist statements. For example, it emphasises the importance of protecting Dutch culture from non-Western, Islamic migrants (p. 6) and *“taking back our national sovereignty”* (PVV, 2023, p. 3). Their radical side is reflected in their proposals to abolish the Senate (p. 30) and to hold a binding referendum on our membership in the European Union (PVV, 2023, p. 43).

Other parties, like the VVD, BBB (Farmer-Citizens Movement), and NSC (New Social Contract) have also advocated for restricting migration. The VVD and BBB have even used populist rhetoric to express this wish, such as criticising the current integration system by arguing that everyone in the Netherlands should speak Dutch (VVD, 2023, p. 6). Their election manifestos also contain some nationalist statements. The NSC, for example, proposes the establishment of a national history museum (NSC, 2023, p. 31). However, these parties do not oppose elements of liberal democracy, and therefore, cannot be considered radical. In addition, they are not Islamophobic or outspoken against the multicultural society (BBB, 2023; NSC, 2023; VVD, 2023). Because of this, I do not qualify them as far-right parties.

Lastly, there is Forum for Democracy. Founded in 2015, it was the big winner of the 2019 provincial elections and currently holds three seats in Parliament. While the party's election manifesto presents relatively standard critiques of “the establishment”, climate change, globalism, and the European Union (Forum voor Democratie, 2023), the party leader Thierry Baudet has expressed more extreme views in other media. In interviews, he has openly associated himself with conspiracy theories and dictators like Putin. For example, in an interview with the American website Geopolitics & Empire, he argued that the world is governed by “evil reptiles” and expressed support for Russian President Putin in the war against Ukraine (NOS Nieuws, 2022c). Additionally, during a parliamentary debate, Baudet questioned the reality of the moon landing and whether the 9/11 attacks were committed by Al Qaeda (NOS Nieuws, 2023b). Therefore, I consider this party to lean more towards extremism than radicalism.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research is conducted through an interpretive lens, as this approach assumes that there is not one objective reality, but that everyone has their own subjective reality shaped by social and cultural contexts, personal experiences, and individual perspectives. It acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity inherent in social issues like migration and therefore allows for the exploration of these complexities by delving into the interpretations and experiences of various actors involved. This will offer a nuanced understanding of how FRPs shape public perceptions of migration through their migration narratives. This research can be considered a case study design, as I use the case of the Netherlands to gain insight into the narratives used around migration and how this relates to the rising popularity of far-right parties. Since I have described trends and measured variables without influencing them, I have used a descriptive research design.

3.2 Research Methods

I have used the qualitative methods of media analysis and interviews for data collection.

Media analysis

I have used media analysis to gain further insight into the narratives on migration used by political parties in the Netherlands. This method has mainly helped in answering my first sub-research question, which formed the basis for answering the others. Media I have used for this are election manifestos, newspaper interviews and television debates in the period before the elections. Election manifestos contain a detailed description of the parties' stances on migration and related topics, but in general, they are not read by Dutch citizens. This is partly because these manifestos are large documents: the one of the PVV is the shortest with 48 pages, the VVD has 84 pages and one of D66 even counts 244 pages. This contrasts with newspaper interviews and television debates, which are meant to reach the 'ordinary' citizen. Because of this, migration might be discussed differently in different media, and therefore, I have analysed the content of all three forms.

In the media analysis, I focus on the six biggest parties of the last elections (PVV, Groenlinks-PvdA, VVD, NSC, D66 and BBB). This means that I only read their manifestos and the interviews with their party leaders, and regarding the television debates, I have only analysed the contributions done by their party leaders. I have chosen these six for a couple of reasons. First, the first four (PVV, GL-PvdA, VVD and NSC) had a clear distance from the rest when looking at the number of seats won (20-37, while the fifth party won 9). The fifth party, D66, was the second party in the elections in 2021 and has left a major mark on the policy plans of the last couple of years. Finally, the BBB (Farmer-Citizens Movement) is included because they were the biggest party in the 2023 Provincial elections in every province. Given that the provincial councils elect the Dutch Senate, the BBB also has the largest number of seats in the Senate (16 out of 75) which also gives them a significant role in the formation of a coalition in parliament. The parties that ended behind BBB in the 2023 parliamentary elections each earned five or fewer seats, which makes them very small parties and less interesting for me to include in this media analysis as their size makes them less influential on the public's opinion and perceptions of threat held in society.

Social media is not included in this media analysis, because this would generate a large amount of data and could pose challenges in establishing clear boundaries for the analysis. Moreover, given the variable popularity of political parties and individual politicians on social media, it could potentially affect the comparability of the analysis. By sticking to analysing election manifestos, newspaper interviews, and televised debates, I have been able to conduct a thorough analysis within a manageable framework. These sources still offer valuable insights into the migration narratives used during the election campaigns.

Regarding the newspaper interviews, I have looked at the interviews given by these six parties in the three months before the parliamentary elections on the 22nd of November 2023. During this period, the election campaigns are in full swing, which influences how politicians talk about topics like migration. The newspapers I have looked at are De Volkskrant, NRC, De Telegraaf, Trouw, and Algemeen Dagblad, as these are the five biggest newspapers in the Netherlands (Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia, 2023). In addition, I have analysed the interviews given at the online newspaper Nu.nl, as this website has a high reach (Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia, 2023) and has published interviews with the party leaders. In addition, I have looked at the five most-watched television debates in the weeks before the parliamentary elections. These include NOS Nederland Kiest, het Debat van Nederland produced by SBS6, the EenVandaag Verkiezingsdebat, the College Tour verkiezingsdebat and the RTL Verkiezingsdebat. These debates had viewer numbers ranging between 1.20 (RTL) and 1.95 million (NOS) and were broadcasted between the 5th of October (College Tour) and the day before the elections (NOS) (Nationaal Media Onderzoek, 2023). A list of the analysed newspaper interviews and television debates can be found in Appendix 1.

I have conducted the media analysis by searching the documents on anything related to migration and looked at how the issue of migration and the different migrant groups are described, and which societal problems are connected to migration according to the parties. I conducted the media analysis first because it helped me to be informed of the different parties' positions on migration, which was necessary going into the interviews. In addition, the narratives as identified in the media analysis were used to inform the questions asked in the interviews with both the politicians and the citizens.

Interviews

To research the mentioned connection, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with both politicians and citizens to gather information about both the politician level and the citizen level. I have interviewed a range of politicians from diverse political parties (progressive to conservative, left-to right-wing) on the national, provincial, or municipal level. They have provided me with valuable insight into the broader political landscape and the dynamics of narratives surrounding migration in the Netherlands. I have included politicians active on the provincial or municipal level as they can more easily speak about national-level migration narratives because of the distance they have from national politics. However, with the expertise they have from being a politician, they can provide valuable insights into national politics, the migration narratives used by different parties, and if and how parties strategically try to shape public opinion. In addition, it has proven to be much easier to arrange interviews with politicians on the provincial or municipal level, as politicians at the national level are much busier, especially since the formation was still ongoing during the interview period. These interviews have provided additional data for the first research question but especially helped me in answering the third and main research questions. The citizens interviewed have given me insight into

the perceived threats living in Dutch society, and into which narratives around migration resonate with citizens for what reasons. In addition, the interviews also provided information about how citizens look and think about politics in general. Therefore, it gave me data which helped me to answer the second and third sub-research questions and the main research question.

The politicians have been selected with a combination of sampling methods. First, I used convenience sampling to get into contact with politicians based on the networks of my supervisors and myself. From there, I used snowball sampling to get in contact with more politicians. Finally, I used purposive sampling to get into contact with politicians from parties that I was still missing. I have tried to get politicians from different parts of the Netherlands to prevent possible geographical differences from interfering with the results. The experts on political communication have been selected by doing online research into political communication experts who are working in the Netherlands.

The selection of citizens to interview is based on areas with significant populations of different migrant groups and in addition, one area where none of the migrant groups is significantly present. Asylum migrants were investigated in Assen, home to three reception locations for asylum-seekers of which one is amongst the largest asylum-seeker centres (AZCs) in the Netherlands, housing 1000 asylum-seekers (Benak, 2023). For labour migrants, interviews were conducted with residents of Maasdijk. Maasdijk is situated in the municipality of Westland, which is known for its high concentration of labour migrants employed in greenhouse horticulture (Nieuwsuur, 2024b). The international students were covered in Wageningen, which has a large international student population. A quarter of the citizens of Wageningen are students, and of all students studying at Wageningen University, 23.3% are from abroad (CBS, 2018; WUR, n.d.). Regarding individuals with limited exposure to migrants, my hometown Kootwijkerbroek was selected. The municipality of Barneveld, which includes Kootwijkerbroek, lacks asylum-seeker facilities and has a small presence of labour migrants. In Kootwijkerbroek, 97% of the residents have a complete Dutch background (AlleCijfers, 2023). Moreover, being situated in the conservative Christian region known as the Bible Belt, it presents a stark contrast to the progressive, left-leaning environment of Wageningen. The choice of interview locations was also influenced by practical considerations, such as personal familiarity and accessibility.

Door-to-door visits were conducted in various neighbourhoods of Wageningen and Assen to ask residents if they wanted to participate in interviews. It was emphasised that this would be anonymous and that it would take no longer than fifteen minutes. In Kootwijkerbroek, recruiting participants through door-to-door visits proved challenging. For that reason, I went to approach individuals within the network of myself and my parents. This strategy was then again used in Maasdijk to find interview participants. A total of twelve interviews with citizens were conducted, with three participants from each location. When selecting the interview sites and participants, efforts were made to ensure representation across diverse demographics, including age, educational background, and geographical location. For example, Assen was chosen over Dronten, Budel and Gilze because it is situated in the province of Drenthe which was not yet included. In addition, while the change in sample selection strategy could introduce selection bias, it helped to ensure representation of all ages. The initial door-to-door visits resulted in interviews primarily with older individuals, so after switching strategies, I approached more younger individuals to address this. Achieving a comprehensive representation of the Netherlands would require a much larger, random and stratified sample, which was not feasible within the five-month timeframe of this thesis. Nonetheless, by considering these factors, I aimed to capture various perspectives that closely reflect the concerns around migration within Dutch society.

Operationalisation of concepts

In my theoretical framework, I have explained which theories and concepts I use in this thesis. The main concepts, which are realistic threats, symbolic threats, and migration narratives, could not be asked about directly in the interviews, as this might be too complex for the interviewees. Therefore, I have used different terminology in the interviews. In Table 1 I give an overview of how I have operationalised the concepts as explained in the theoretical framework and provide some example questions to show how I asked about the concepts. These are example questions as the interviews have been conducted in Dutch.

Table 1: Operationalisation of concepts

Concept	Used terminology in interviews & example questions
Realistic threats	Economic anxieties around migration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you have concerns about migration? If so, can you describe these concerns? - Do you have concerns specifically with labour migration? If so, can you describe these concerns? - Some politicians relate migrants to the housing shortage in the Netherlands. What do you think about this?
Symbolic threats	Cultural anxieties around migration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think that migration influences the Dutch culture? If yes, how would you describe this influence? Would you consider it a positive or negative influence? - Some parties claim that there is an Islamisation of the Netherlands happening because of migration. What do you think about this?
Migration narratives	Frames and stories around migration, how migration is talked about <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your opinion about how politicians talk about migration? - Political parties sometimes have very contradicting stories around migration. What do you think about this?

3.3 Data management and analysis

Management

The interviews have been recorded with a voice recorder after the interviewee has given consent. During the interviews, I made written notes to capture my initial thoughts and ensure I was actively listening, while it also served as a backup in case the recording would be inaudible or got lost. These notes have been written out on my laptop and are together with the voice recordings stored on both my laptop's password-protected hard drive and my personal Google Drive.

To prevent long references in the results, I use codes to refer to the (newspaper) interviews, debates, and election manifestos. The following codes are used: M for election manifesto, N for newspaper interview, D for television debate, IP for interviews with politicians, and IC for citizen interviews. A complete list of all media documents analysed and interviews conducted with the codes and the corresponding numbers can be found in Appendix 1.

Analysis

The television debates and conducted interviews have been transcribed. Together with the election manifestos and newspaper interviews, they have been coded in Atlas.ti. The initial content analysis of the media documents allowed me to organise the data in categories, which helped in the formation of codes. I have structured these codes around the realistic and symbolic threats as discussed in my theoretical framework. For the politician and citizen interviews, I used the same codes as those of the media analysis and added codes more specific to the second and third research questions and the responses of the interviewees. All codes used can be found in Appendix 2. Atlas.ti helped me in the thematic analysis of the data, to identify key themes and patterns in the interviews and documents.

3.4 Limitations

One limitation of the interviews is the sensitivity of the topic. It is hard to imagine that politicians will openly discuss how they strategically try to shape public sentiments to win more votes. Even when parties do not use such strategies to deliberately shape public opinion, politicians might still give a coloured opinion, as they are possibly opposing the ideas of other parties on migration but also use certain narratives on migration themselves (which they might not want to acknowledge). To navigate this sensitivity effectively during the interviews, several strategies have been employed. First, I started the interview by explaining the purpose of this research and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. During the interviews, I listened actively and respected the participants' perspectives, also if they diverged from my own. I tried to formulate the questions in a neutral and non-confrontational manner and avoided accusatory language. Instead, I focused on the interviewee's experiences, perceptions, and rationales behind their viewpoints. By doing this, I hoped to establish trust with the interviewee, create a safe space for dialogue and facilitate open and constructive discussions. Finally, I interviewed politicians from all levels of government. It is likely that for politicians with a bit more distance from national politics and more away from the public eye, it is easier to speak more openly about this topic.

In practice, this limitation was not as significant as expected. A more considerable limitation was my inability to find more national-level politicians who agreed to participate. Members of Parliament or the Senate might have given deeper insights into the communication strategies of parties during Parliamentary elections. However, securing interviews with them proved difficult for several reasons. First, during my fieldwork, the formation of the new coalition government was ongoing, making national-level politicians, especially from the larger parties in the Netherlands, busy. For example, although a PVV politician initially agreed to an interview, his schedule was highly unpredictable, and we were ultimately unable to meet. Similarly, despite being in contact with Parliament members of GL-PvdA and NSC, we were unable to arrange meetings. This brings me to the second regarding the interviews with politicians: the absence of interviews with politicians from the PVV and NSC. This is a clear limitation as they both are part of the six largest parties on which I focus in the media analysis, and the PVV plays a central role in this whole research. As mentioned, the PVV politician's fluctuating agenda prevented an interview. For NSC, the difficulty lay in the party's newness and its sole presence in parliament and not (yet) at other government levels. Moreover, being a potential coalition partner, all its parliament members were very busy during my fieldwork period. Despite reaching out to all the NSC politicians, none were available to participate.

The citizen interviews had also their limitations. As noted in the methodology, with only 12 interviews I did not expect to have results that completely represented all citizens of the Netherlands. This would require a large, stratified random sample, which was not feasible within the time constraints of this thesis. However, it still turned out to be challenging to have a balanced representation of gender and age. Despite trying to steer towards more women and younger individuals after I changed the method of selecting interviewees, women remained more hesitant to participate compared to men. Second, there was a big limitation with the time limit. I kept all the citizen interviews between 15 and 20 minutes because otherwise, finding individuals who would want to participate would be much harder. However, this meant that there was sometimes insufficient time to thoroughly discuss every topic or ask all prepared questions. As a result, I was unable to gather each participant's viewpoint on every issue. In addition, some interviewees did not have an opinion on certain topics or admitted they lacked sufficient knowledge to comment. Moreover, one interviewee veered into conspiracy theories, claiming that politics is "*an illusion*", and that many problems are deliberately not solved as part of a larger strategy (IC1). The answers that this interviewee gave were often referring to such theories, making it challenging to use his answers when discussing perceived threats from migration. Nonetheless, I did not have to disregard the interview as some answers were useful and gave insight into the societal discontent and distrust in politics, something that came back in more interviews.

3.5 Ethics and Positionality

Ethics

For every research, it is crucial to take into account ethical considerations. Therefore, I have adhered to the Wageningen Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice throughout my study. I sought verbal informed consent from all interviewees after I had explained the purpose of this research and the nature of their participation. I emphasised that I was conducting independent research, assuring them that their information would remain anonymous and would not be used for anything other than this thesis. To thank the interviewees for the information they provided, I prepared a Dutch summary of my main findings and conclusions, which I sent to all participants.

Positionality

I am a white Dutch woman, 23 years old, and born into a well-to-do family in a small town named Kootwijkerbroek. Kootwijkerbroek is a conservative town in the middle of the Bible Belt, so most of the inhabitants are Christian. I was also raised a Christian, but I am not religious anymore. Growing up, I became increasingly bothered by how people in my town were talking about minority groups like migrants, as it was often in a very racist way. This was not only the case at work or school, but even in my family, this happened regularly. In addition, people who voted left-wing or were vegetarians/vegans were often ridiculed. In such discussions, I was always speaking up for minority groups or the progressive stances. However, when I moved to Wageningen, I experienced the exact opposite. Suddenly, I was defending those same conservative, right-wing people I had been criticising my entire life. I realised that because I lived amongst them for most of my life, I can understand many opinions and perspectives people have, however far they sometimes may seem from my own beliefs. This gives me a unique position, between the more right-wing, conservative-minded people, who are largely supporting parties like the VVD, SGP, and BBB, and the more leftwing, progressive-minded

people who are often critical of those parties. This is beneficial because I can identify with both groups and those groups with me as someone who grew up in Kootwijkerbroek but now lives in Wageningen. My background also partly inspired this research topic. The hostility between different groups that I have experienced in both Kootwijkerbroek and Wageningen has fuelled my interest in politics, and more specifically, societal polarisation and understanding voting behaviour.

While my position gives me a unique position in understanding both sides of the spectrum, it is also essential to acknowledge the potential bias stemming from my background. My own political preferences, which are close to the centre-left and progressive ideals I am used to in Wageningen, and the experiences with xenophobia and racism in my hometown might bias me to make assumptions about parties that use populist or nationalist rhetoric. Of course, I strived to remain impartial in my analysis, but I must recognise that my personal history influences my interpretation of data. To mitigate this effect, I have looked critically at the questions I prepared in my interviews to prevent leading questions, asked extra questions when necessary to prevent me from filling gaps based on my assumptions and engaged in reflexive practices during the research process to critically examine my assumptions.

Still, during the interviews with both politicians and citizens, I experienced it was hard to keep my own opinions in the background. While I emphasized to interviewees that their perspectives mattered regardless of my own views, I noticed a tendency to focus my questions on the PVV when discussing shaping public perceptions on migration. Nonetheless, even without me mentioning it, many politicians often brought up the PVV themselves, but still, it is plausible that my personal views subtly influenced the framing of the questions. For example, it is more natural for me to question right-wing stances on migration such as the feasibility of certain proposals within European legislation, rather than be critical of more left-wing arguments like the necessity of labour migrants in our economy. Furthermore, I encountered this bias issue while interpreting and analysing the data. I tended to interpret some of the data based on contextual information about, for example, the campaigns or talk show interviews, which I have seen myself but are not discussed in this thesis.

4. Migration Narratives Employed by Dutch Political Parties

I have conducted a media analysis and interviews with politicians to identify the migration narratives used by the six largest political parties in the Netherlands. Before diving into the narratives, their alignment with empirical data, and how certain narratives use realistic and symbolic threats, I will introduce the six parties and their viewpoints on migration as described in their election manifesto.

4.1 The parties and their migration stances

As explained in the theoretical framework, the PVV (37 seats) is the only party that I consider a FRP in the Netherlands. It is led by Geert Wilders, who established the party in 2005 after leaving the VVD a year earlier. The PVV is the only political party in the parliament without members, which means that Wilders has complete control over any political decision that needs to be taken. Throughout the years, the PVV has gained support for its anti-immigration positions, and these stances can again be found in this year's election manifesto titled "The Dutch Back at Number 1" (Stichting PDC, n.d.)

GL-PvdA (25 seats) is an alliance between Greenleft (Groenlinks) and the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid). The political alliance was founded during the 2021-2022 Dutch cabinet formation, whereas local alliances between the two parties had already been formed in prior years. The two parties then formed a joint group in the Senate following the 2023 Senate elections and in the House of Representatives a month before the 2023 Parliamentary elections. The alliance is led by Frans Timmermans, who before served as Executive Vice President of the European Commission for the European Green Deal and European Commissioner for Climate Action until his resignation in 2023. At the provincial and municipal levels, the two parties are often still separated (Stichting PDC, n.d.).

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie) (24 seats) is a liberal party whose former leader Mark Rutte was prime minister of the Netherlands between 2010 and 2024. After the fall of the fourth Rutte Cabinet in the summer of 2023, Dilan Yesilgoz became the new party leader of the VVD. Before, Yesilgoz served as Minister of Justice and Security in Rutte IV (2022-2024) and Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate in Rutte III (2021-2022). The VVD made migration their main campaign topic, which is also visible in their election manifesto title: "Giving space. Setting limits." (Stichting PDC, n.d.).

New Social Contract (20 seats) is a new party in the Dutch political landscape, established in August 2023 by party leader Pieter Omtzigt. Omtzigt served as a member of the House of Representatives since 2003 for the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). However, due to internal conflicts, he left the CDA in 2021 and continued as an independent. Omtzigt rose to prominence in 2019 for his role in bringing attention to the childcare benefits scandal, a political scandal concerning false allegations of fraud made by the Tax and Customs Administration. Regarding ideology, the party is close to that of the CDA but with more focus on good governance and social security (Stichting PDC, n.d.).

Democrats 66 (9 seats) is a social liberal party which positions itself in the centre of the political spectrum. The name of the party refers to its founding year, 1966. The party has been in government since 2017 and is currently led by Rob Jetten, who served as Minister for Climate and Energy Policy in Rutte IV. In the parliamentary elections of 2021, the party was the big winner as it became second with 24 seats, equalling the best result ever for D66 in parliamentary elections. In the parliamentary elections of 2023, it lost many of those seats and now nine remain (Stichting PDC, n.d.).

The Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging) (7 seats) is an agrarian and right-wing party that can also be classified as populist due to its claim to speak the language of the ‘normal people’. The party is led by former CDA member Caroline van der Plas, who founded the party in 2019 in response to the widespread farmers' protests. The BBB won the 2023 Dutch provincial elections, winning the popular vote and receiving the most seats in all twelve provinces. Given that the provincial councils elect the Dutch Senate, the BBB also holds the most seats in the Senate (Stichting PDC, n.d.).

Table 2 shows an overview of the stances of the six parties regarding asylum, labour, and study migration, and the extent to which an EU approach should be used. There are a couple of notes to make regarding the content of the table. First, I want to briefly explain the mentioned two-status system for asylum-seekers. This system creates a division between migrants who are persecuted in their own country (A status) and those who flee from war or conflict (B status). The idea is that the second group can eventually return to their own country when the war is over, and therefore they receive fewer rights than those with an A status. For example, they are less likely to have their families come over, and their residence permit is valid for a shorter period. The Netherlands used this system until the beginning of this century but moved away from it to reduce the workload on the IND and prevent many lawsuits as refugees prefer to have an A status. However, many European countries like Germany and Belgium still use the system (Slomp, 2023a).

Table 2: Proposed measures regarding migration by the different parties as found in the election manifestos (M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6; table created by the Author).

	Asylum migration	EU Asylum Policies	Labour migration	Study migration
PVV	No asylum-seekers at all. Against the distribution law.	Opt-out of EU regulations, national border control.	Limit, EU workers should need a work permit, abolish expat tax break.	Decrease amount, bachelors in Dutch.
GL-PvdA	Just and humane refugee policies, improve integration, pro distribution law.	Pro-EU approach to asylum, honour international agreements.	Tackle abuses to prevent exploitation, increase the minimum wage, abolish expat tax break.	Not mentioned in their manifesto.
VVD	Make NL less attractive, two-status system, improve integration, against the distribution law.	Opt-out of EU regulations, strengthen EU border, honour international agreements.	Tackle abuses, critically examine sectors that rely on migrant workers, keep expat tax break.	Decrease amount, bachelors in Dutch, numerous fixes for foreign students.
NSC	Two-status system, coherent migration policies, against the distribution law.	Pro-EU approach to asylum, honour international agreements.	Critically examine sectors that rely on migrant workers, curb fiscal benefits + expat tax break.	Decrease amount, bachelors in Dutch with exceptions.
D66	Just and humane refugee policies, increase capacity, improve integration, pro distribution law.	Pro-EU approach to asylum, honour international agreements.	Tackle abuses, critically examine sectors that rely on migrant workers, increase minimum wage, abolish expat tax break.	Less education in English, maximum target number for international students.
BBB	Max. of 15.000 a year, stop priority for housing, improve integration, against the distribution law.	Opt-out of EU regulations, strengthen EU border.	Build houses for migrant workers on business premises, keep expat tax break.	Limit by changing revenue model for universities.

Second, NSC uses a net migration guideline number of 50.000 but does not indicate in its manifesto how this number should be distributed over the different migrant groups. In several interviews, Pieter Omtzigt is asked how to achieve this while still complying with international policies and agreements. He repeatedly answers by saying that labour and study migration is regulable, and he emphasises that it is not a maximum but a guideline number to help steer policies in the right direction (N16, N20). Both GL-PvdA and D66 have critiqued the migration numbers of NSC and BBB, saying that such numbers give a feeling of false security and that it will be “*a recipe for disappointment*” (N5) due to international policies and agreements which limit what can be done on the national level (N5, N6, N10, N22). Lastly, before the parliamentary elections, a proposal about cuts to the current expat tax break was voted in by every party apart from the VVD. When Yesilgoz in an interview is confronted with the fact that only the VVD is against abandoning the expat regulations, Yesilgoz argues that this would be disastrous for the Dutch business climate and, when companies leave, our economy (N11). After the business community raised concerns that the cuts would deteriorate the Dutch business climate, the BBB voiced its regrets regarding its vote in favour of the cuts (De Jong & Belinfante, 2024).

Based on the analysis of the election manifestos and statements made in the newspaper interviews and television debates, I have positioned the parties on a left-to-right scale regarding their stances on migration (Figure 3). The parties' positions in this figure are indicative rather than exact measurements. The spectrum reflects the general trend where left-leaning parties generally advocate for more inclusive migration policies while right-leaning parties favour more restrictive measures. In this analysis, “inclusive policies” refer to more open and welcoming approaches towards migrants. In the Dutch context, this particularly includes policies that uphold strong protections for refugees and asylum-seekers and promote the integration of migrants into society. In addition, policies may support higher levels of immigration and provide more pathways to residency and citizenship. Conversely, “restrictive policies” are characterised by a more limited approach to migration. Policies may include reducing the number of migrations, stringent requirements for residency and citizenship, limited social services for migrants, and the prioritisation of national security and cultural cohesion over immigration. The specific rationale for each party’s position is detailed in the following text.

GL-PvdA is positioned on the left side of the spectrum as they call for more humane and inclusive migration policies that emphasize the migrants’ rights and promote their integration and social support measures. D66 also supports an inclusive stance on migration but their approach includes some restrictive proposals, namely a critical evaluation of sectors dependent on labour migrants and proposals that might limit international student numbers. NSC adopts a moderate position with proposals to address the social impacts of every type of migration. However, the proposed measures leave much room for nuance and exceptions. The BBB takes a more populist stance on migration by proposing a cap on asylum numbers and repeatedly calling for stricter immigration policies to manage and limit migration. Because the NSC incorporates more nuance in its policies whereas the BBB takes a more straightforward, restrictive approach, I have placed the BBB more towards the right.

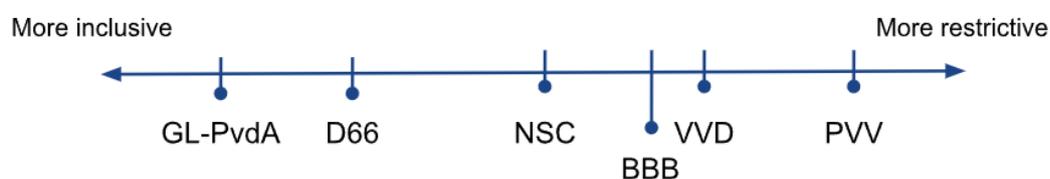


Figure 3: The six largest Dutch political parties on an inclusive-to-restrictive scale regarding their stances on migration. The positions are indicative and based on a qualitative analysis of election manifestos, newspaper interviews and television debates.

The VVD also advocates for a much more restrictive migration policy next to policies that prioritise national security and economic considerations. While advocating for tighter immigration controls and other measures on the national level, Yesilgoz argues in favour of European collaboration, arguing that completely closing the borders is impossible within European regulations and would be bad for the economy (N12, D2, D3, D5). This shows that the VVD balances restrictiveness with economic pragmatism, while the BBB's pragmatic approach is more focused on the necessity of migrant labour in sectors like greenhouse agriculture. In addition, the BBB's proposals tend to be more generic. This makes the two parties hard to compare but given the VVD's explicit restrictive stances and elaborate policy proposals, I placed them more towards the right on the spectrum. The most restrictive party of the six is the PVV, which is very outspoken anti-immigration and the goal to restrict migration numbers is presented as their top priority (M1, N2, N3, D1, D2, D3). They want no asylum-seekers at all and the reintroduction of national border controls, examples of PVV plans criticised for not being realistic given national, European, and international laws and agreements. However, in interviews Wilders insists that feasible solutions exist and he refers to Belgium, where the Secretary of State is currently refusing to shelter single men despite judicial opposition (N2, N3).

Because migration was a major campaign topic for the VVD and NSC, and it has always been a central topic for the PVV, migration was discussed in almost every newspaper interview with both parties. Parties like GL-PvdA and D66 tried to campaign more on other issues and therefore the topic of migration was much less discussed with them in the interviews and television debates. Van der Plas of BBB did discuss migration in television interviews, but because she did not get the opportunity to join the migration debates of the ones I have analysed.

4.2 Realistic threat

“The Netherlands is full”

The main migration narrative that describes a realistic threat is focused on the argument that the Netherlands is full, and therefore we do not have space for any more migrants. The literal statement is only used by the PVV. For example, its manifesto describes that because of years of mass immigration, our country is now overcrowded, and it discusses how the “asylum tsunami” thanks to our “insane open-border policy” has affected every part of our society (M1, pp. 3, 6). In several television debates, Wilders states that “the Netherlands cannot handle it”, with “it” being the migrants (D1, D2, D3). This shows already that this narrative is broader than a “full Netherlands” as it also has implications on the housing market and public social services.

Several other parties also discuss these implications. For example, the argument that migration is at least a significant factor in the housing shortage in the Netherlands is used by the PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB. Even left-wing parties GL-PvdA and D66 refer both in their election manifestos to the pressure that migrants put on the housing market. GL-PvdA refers to asylum migrants here (M2, p. 17), while D66 mentions it in relation to labour migration (pp. 42, M5). However, when Timmermans was asked about how to solve the housing shortage, he did not mention migration at all (D4). Regarding the content, there are some differences between the parties. BBB, NSC and VVD emphasise that asylum, labour, and study migration all contribute to the housing shortage (M3, M4, M6, N16, D3, D4). In contrast, the PVV primarily connects the housing shortage to asylum-seekers. This is then even called the “discrimination of the Dutch”, as recognised refugees get priority for houses over Dutch citizens

(M1, D1). A similar argument is made by the BBB, saying that *“it is inexplicable that a 30-year-old Dutch person cannot get a house, but someone who just comes here immediately gets one”* (M6, p. 93). One BBB interviewee made the same comparison and therefore concluded that *“it is a bit too much for the Netherlands”* (IP7), while another saw the connection too but said that just blaming the migrants is like looking through small glasses. He argued that one should look at the complete picture, for example how migrants contribute to the economy and the other reasons behind the housing shortage like the labour shortage and expensive materials (IP8). Omtzigt makes this argument when looking at expats when he argues that the tax break regulation means that expats earn 15 to 20% more than their Dutch colleagues, and therefore can also pay more for their house (D4).

The effect of migration on the availability and quality of public social services like education and health care is also discussed by multiple parties. Again, GL-PvdA and D66 mention once in their manifesto that migration puts pressure on social services, with GL-PvdA relating it to asylum migration and D66 to labour migration. The VVD and NSC mention it twice, each in relation to different types of migration, but Pieter Omtzigt also uses this argument in a couple of interviews. The VVD interviewee also acknowledges the pressure that children of migrants can put on schools, as teachers are already very busy and now, they have to take care of kids who do not speak Dutch yet. In addition, not all schools accept migrant kids which results in *“black and white schools”* (IP4). Once again, the PVV is emphasising this effect of migration the most in their manifesto: three times when talking about asylum-seekers, and once regarding international students. The PVV again compares migrants with *“the Dutch”* when talking about the access that migrants have to health care and education: *“Health care that has become unaffordable for many Dutch citizens, is given for free to asylum-seekers”* (p. 6). Regarding education, the PVV argues that *“our school system”* should be for *“our children”* and therefore, the number of study migrants should be limited (M1, pp. 32-33). Omtzigt makes a similar statement when he compares international students with the so-called *“bad luck generation”*. The first group gets priority with housing and can get government grants, while the latter did not get government grants at all but could only loan money. He also says that because of the reintroduced study grants, more international students are expected to study here in 2024, meaning probably fewer places at the university and fewer houses for Dutch students, and international students become very expensive for the Dutch government as well (D2, D3, D4). The BBB interviewee also criticised the paying of international students as they often leave the Netherlands after finishing their studies and therefore do not contribute to Dutch society (IP7).

The contradiction between migrants and *“the Dutch”* is only very prominent with the PVV. For example, the manifesto states that while non-Western immigrants benefit massively from our welfare state, Dutch taxpayers have to pay 24 billion euros every year for the continuous asylum influx (pp. 6-7). Similar statements can be found in the chapter about livelihood security, which argues that our welfare statement is *“being sucked dry by non-Western profiteers”* and that while the Dutch have increasing costs, billions go every year to mass immigration (p. 10). The manifesto even states that Dutch politicians have found the welfare of asylum-seekers and other migrants, sometimes referred to as *“fortune-seekers”* (p. 4), more important than the welfare and wealth of the Dutch (M1, pp. 6-7). In the television debates, Wilders makes several similar statements (D1). The costs of asylum migration are also emphasised by the BBB interviewee, but the interviewee sees this also as the result of a lack of capacity with the COA and the IND (IP7).

Migration statistics

When looking at the migration numbers of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), we can see that there has been an increase in migrant numbers over the years (Figure 4). The stark increase in 2022, when a total of 403,000 migrants came to the Netherlands, can be explained by the 108,000 refugees from Ukraine that are included (dark green in Figure 4). The aftermath of the 2015 European refugee crisis is also visible, just as the decrease in migration numbers during the Covid-crisis in 2020-2021 (CBS, 2023). Additional data from the CBS shows that two-thirds of the Dutch land is used for agriculture, while forest and other types of natural terrain such as heathland, beaches and dunes cover 15% of the land. Built-up land is only the third group with 11% and includes residential and industrial areas. The remaining 8 per cent is used for recreation, traffic and semi-built-up areas (Figure 5). This shows that the area that is used for housing in the Netherlands is relatively small (CBS, 2020; Ministerie van Landbouw & Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit, 2023).

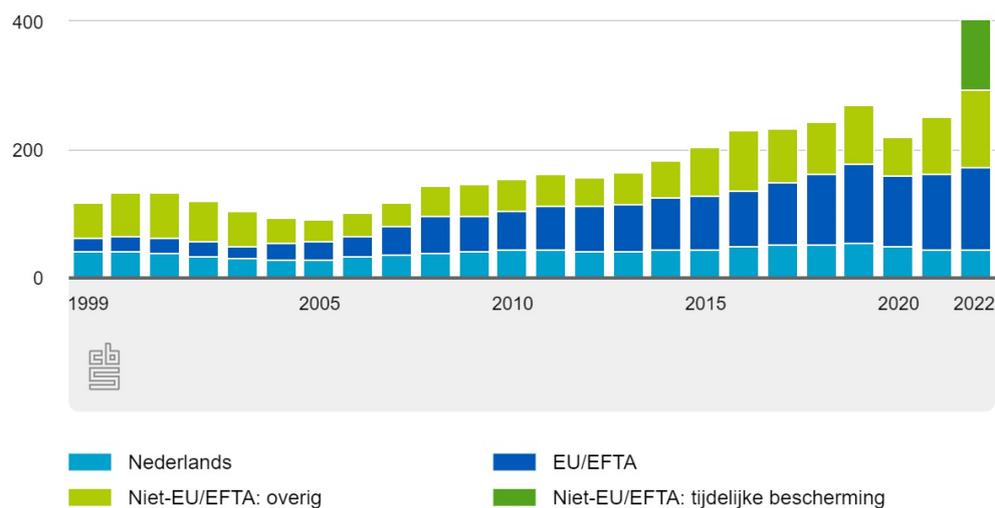


Figure 4: Immigrants towards the Netherlands over time (x 1000). EU/EFTA = European Union / European Free Trade Association (CBS, 2023)

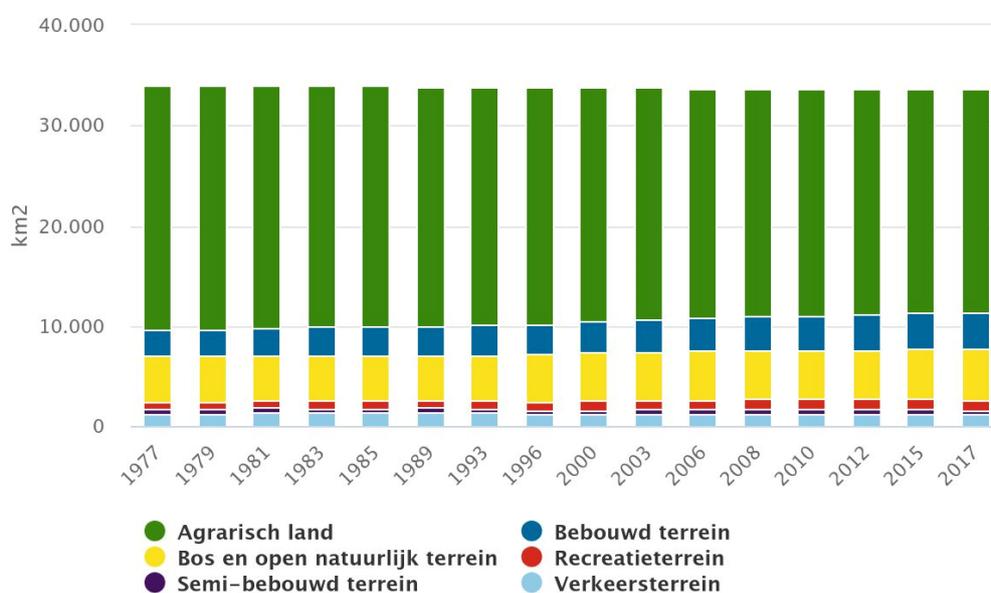


Figure 5: Land use in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Landbouw & Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit, 2023)

Nonetheless, the Netherlands has indeed been struggling with a housing shortage for a while now. In 2021 the shortage rose to 279,000, and it is expected to rise further to 317,000 this year. The government website lists six main reasons for this. First, the population growth, which is due to an ageing population and immigration. Second, family compositions are changing. This means that there is an increasing need for small and affordable homes for small families and single-person households. Third, there is limited area available for building land. Fourth, it often takes a long time before a construction project can start because of the rules and procedures that developers must adhere to. Fifth, the rising costs in the construction sector due to interest rates, inflation and the shortage of manpower and building costs. Lastly, the nitrogen crisis makes it hard for construction projects to receive a permit. These six reasons show that migration does contribute to the housing shortage, but there are many more reasons (Rijksoverheid, n.d.).

Some political parties argue that we should decrease the agricultural land to build houses there, while others emphasize the importance of the agricultural industry for the Dutch economy and the food provision. However, this discussion is controversial in the Netherlands. Plans to decrease the number of livestock farmers in the Netherlands after a ruling of the Council of State that the existing emission policy violated the European regulations on protecting nature reserves triggered massive farmer protests in October 2019. Apart from this trigger, many farmers expressed that they felt disrespected and threatened in their existence by increased government regulation on the agricultural and livestock sectors over the years, as well as the popularity of animal rights activism among the Dutch population. Different policy proposals to reduce nitrogen emissions triggered many more protests between 2020 and 2023 (Hayden, 2023; Stokstad, 2019; van der Ploeg, 2020). As said, the BBB was founded in response to these protests and achieved a major victory in the 2023 provincial elections with their campaign focused on protecting farmers (B. H. Meijer, 2023).

When examining the relationship between asylum-seekers and housing, research done by Pointer offers valuable insights. According to this platform for investigative journalism of public broadcasting company KRO-NCRV, the PVV overestimates the number of homes that go to migrants. For example, the claim that 75% of all the homes to be built in the coming years are intended for migrants (M1, p. 19) is not entirely correct. The statement originates from Minister of Internal Affairs Ollongren who wrote that a quarter of the projected increase in housing demand for the next decade would result from natural population growth, while the remaining three-quarters would stem from net migration. However, this ratio is about population growth and cannot be directly applied to household growth and the associated housing needs. As mentioned before, the housing demand is also influenced by shrinking household sizes due to factors such as an ageing population, elderly living independently for longer, and individualisation (Pointer, 2023b). In addition, the claim that recognised refugees get all the vacant houses due to priority status is also not entirely accurate. Since 2022, 12% of social housing went to recognised asylum-seekers, while before it was 8%. Therefore, waiting lists for social housing would still exist even in the absence of asylum-seekers. Moreover, privately owned homes, which are also in short supply, are not allocated to asylum-seekers at all (Pointer, 2023a).

Regarding the claimed pressure on public social services due to migration, sectors such as health care and education indeed struggle with labour shortages. In January 2024, the NOS reported that ongoing staff shortages at both primary and secondary schools are resulting in the deterioration of basic skills of kids and an increased workload for teachers, which in turn causes teachers to quit. Research indicates that the teacher shortage will remain high over the next ten years, despite extra money and

the implementation of various plans in recent years (Nieuwsuur, 2024a). In health care, a similar situation is visible. According to EenVandaag, there is currently a shortage of 43,000 workers, which is projected to increase to 190,000 within 10 years because of our ageing society, resulting in a higher proportion of elderly individuals requiring health care (van Gool & van den Heuvel, 2024). The construction sector is also experiencing significant labour shortages, and many foreign workers are already working in this sector. Cobouw, an independent Dutch publication for the construction industry, writes that the number of labour migrants in the construction sector is increasing, but not enough. Although data on the exact number of labour migrants in this sector is missing, information from Bouwpass, an online platform for construction workers, indicates that the number of foreign workers has risen from 17% in 2017 to 29% in 2021 (du Saar, 2022).

Labour shortages are a problem across many more sectors. Unemployment rates are very low, with 114 vacancies for every 100 unemployed people in the last quarter of 2023 (Figure 6). This marked the ninth subsequent quarter with more vacancies than unemployed people (CBS, 2024). Labour shortages are likely to increase in the future as the Netherlands is experiencing a demographic shift towards more elderly people. This will decrease the labour force and increase the amount of health care that needs to be provided. The Advisory Council of Migration recently published a report in which they concluded that if we want to keep the current ratio between retired people and the working-age population the same, we need until 2030 yearly 150.000 extra labour migrants, and between 2030-2040 every year almost 180,000 extra labour migrants. Without them, it is very unlikely that structural staff shortages can be prevented (Adviesraad Migratie, 2023).

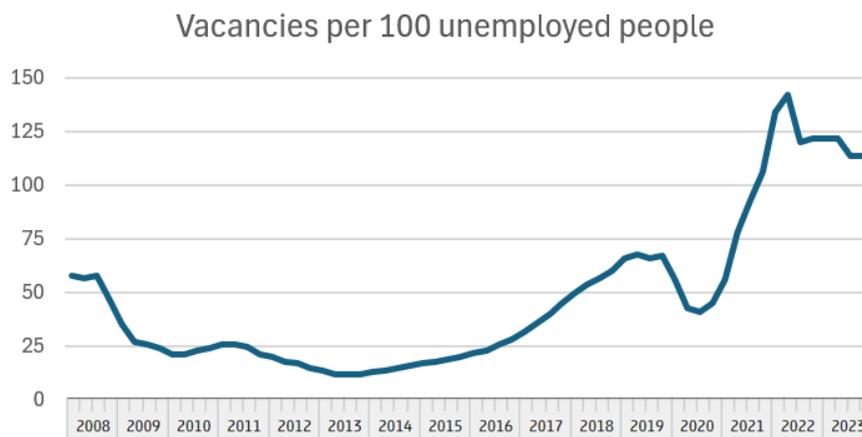


Figure 6: Tension on the labour market: number of vacancies per 100 unemployed people (CBS, 2024)

Counternarrative: migrants are needed to combat labour shortages

The labour shortages are used by primarily D66 to form a counternarrative to the “full Netherlands” narrative. Instead, D66 argues that migrants are essential for building houses, helping with the energy transition and working in health care. In addition, Jetten argues that migrants enrich our society by bringing talent and knowledge, and Dutch students can learn from and be inspired by international students (D1, D3). Jetten used this argument in both television debates he was in, but it was not used in the election manifesto or newspaper interviews. Conversely, Omtzigt argues that the influx of international students contributes to the shortage of skilled workers in the Netherlands needed for construction, health care, and the energy transition (D2, D4). The BBB mentions briefly in its chapter on Foreign Affairs that there should be possibilities for Africans to get a temporary work visa to fill

labour market gaps (M6, p. 122). Most politicians interviewed agreed on the importance of labour migrants for the Dutch economy, especially since migrants often do jobs that Dutch citizens often do not want to do anymore (IP4, IP7). However, the D66 politician saw migration simultaneously as the biggest problem of the Netherlands. They are, he argued, a much larger group compared to asylum-seekers, so their social impact is larger. In addition, they often work in greenhouse horticulture and slaughterhouses, rather than in health care and construction where workers are needed. Therefore, he advocates for a critical review of these sectors and to redirect labour migrants towards more essential sectors (IP6). This plan can also be found in the election manifesto, and Jetten also argued several times that labour migration is a much larger group than asylum-seekers. Nonetheless, the national D66 campaign was more focused on the contributions of labour migrants than on reassessing which sectors are necessary for the Netherlands.

Asylum-seekers as scapegoats

While all parties discuss migration to some extent in their manifestos, interviews and debates, some parties tend to focus on asylum migration while others specifically emphasize the different types of migration. The PVV belongs to the first group as the parts about migration and the supposed effects it has on Dutch society are mostly focused on asylum-seekers, while labour and study migration remain in the background. It even seems that the terms "(im)migration" or "migrants" are used interchangeably with "asylum migration" or "asylum-seekers". For example, in the interview with the AD, Wilders first says that they want an asylum stop, and a couple of sentences later that we need to go to zero immigrants (N1). The focus on asylum migration is also visible when we look at the word frequencies (see Appendix 3). The PVV uses the words "labour migration" or "labour migrants" only three times, while other parties use it 10 times or more (up to 45 times for GL-PvdA). The terms "asylum-seekers" or "asylum migration" are not more frequent with the PVV than other parties, but this is because the other political parties also discuss asylum migration in depth. In addition, the PVV manifesto is also relatively short compared to the manifestos from the other parties.

Other parties do specifically point to the different groups of migrants and how asylum migration is a much smaller group than labour and study migration. In particular, Omtzigt keeps doing this, for example, in his interview with Nu.nl: *"For the record. Labour- and study migration are the biggest groups of migrants. Asylum migration comes afterwards."* (N20). It is also mentioned repeatedly in their election manifesto and the television debates that we should get a grip on all forms of migration (M4, D3, D4, D5). D66 also emphasises how asylum migration is just a small part of all migrants that come towards the Netherlands (M5, p. 237), and both Jetten and Timmermans argue several times that we need to look critically at the sectors that use many labour migrants (N5, N10, N22, D1, D3). Timmermans finds the focus on asylum a diversionary manoeuvre, because *"if you want to tackle migration, you have to look at the whole picture"* (N5). Yet, study migration is not mentioned at all by GL-PvdA. The BBB and VVD also discuss a couple of times how you need to look at every type of migration to tackle problems like the housing shortage, but they do not mention the proportions of the different migrant groups (M3, M6, D2).

When looking at the connection between migration and nuisance or criminality, the distinction between the PVV and the other parties in their focus on certain migration groups is also visible. Most parties refer to the nuisance that full AZCs or bad housing for labour migrants can cause. However, the PVV is mostly referring to immigrants in general without making clear which group he is talking about. In addition, the PVV connects migrants directly to criminal behaviour, while other parties are much more hesitant regarding this connection. For example, GL-PvdA, D66, and VVD discuss measures to tackle troublesome asylum-seekers. BBB already goes a bit further and describes how people in several villages are terrorised by nuisance-causing asylum-seekers who are from countries that are considered safe (M6). One of the BBB interviewees was more nuanced about this and argued that he found the migrant-nuisance connection stigmatising, as Dutch young people can also cause nuisance (IP8). The PVV does make this connection directly when they argue neighbourhoods and cities have become unrecognisable with nuisance and criminality because of years of mass immigration (M1). In addition, the manifesto states that Syrian terrorists can enter our country without hindrance and that *“non-Western immigrants are on average three times more likely to be suspected of a crime than native Dutch people”* (M1, p. 6). In the debate on SBS6 Wilders said that in the television program *Opsporing Verzocht*, in which public assistance is sought in solving crimes by providing details of ongoing cases and encouraging viewers to share any relevant information, you can see the result of the multicultural society and its diversity (D2). In a newspaper interview, he argued that the connection between origin and criminal behaviour is not discriminating as it is a fact that non-Western immigrants are overrepresented in crime. *“They are more often suspected, more often convicted, and more often in prison. These are facts. If you point this out, it is not discriminatory.”* (N4). None of the other parties use this narrative to advocate for fewer migrants.

Migration statistics

Because the analysis of the migration motives of 2022 or 2023 is not yet available, I am using the data from 2021 to get insight into the size of the different migration groups. In that year, a total of 208,160 migrants were recorded, with family migrants being the largest group at 28.3% (see Figure 7). These are for example family members of Dutch citizens or labour migrants. The family members of asylum-seekers, the issue that led to the collapse of the Dutch government last summer, are not included in this category but are part of the group ‘asylum’, which is the smallest group (CBS, n.d.).

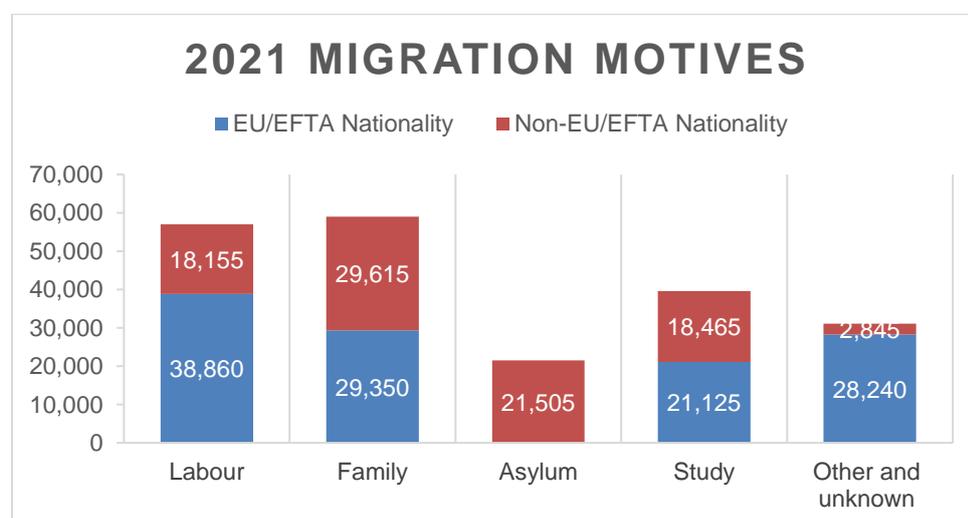


Figure 7: Immigrants and their migration motive, 2021, made with data from CBS (n.d.)

The national government acknowledges that some asylum-seekers are causing a nuisance and that this can cause feelings of unsafety for people living around or working in an AZC. In 2022, 83,000 asylum-seekers were staying for some time in a reception location. Of those, 7% were involved in an incident and 3% were suspected of a criminal act (Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum, 2023). Regarding crime and origin more generally, data from the Central Bureau of Statistics show that the share of suspects of the total population was 0.8% in 2021, while for migrants this was 1.1% and for second-generation migrants, it was 2.9%. However, data also shows that people of foreign origin are more likely to be victims of crime. Dutch people have a 16% per cent chance, while migrants have 21% and people of the second generation even 23% (CBS, 2023a).

Counternarrative: the vulnerable migrant

A counternarrative to the “asylum-seekers as scapegoats” narrative comes from the centre-left parties GL-PvdA and D66. They view refugees as highly vulnerable individuals fleeing war or persecution and emphasize the need to help them. This perspective forms the basis of their policy proposals on asylum, which include opening safe routes into Europe to decrease irregular (unsafe) migration, providing humane and just assistance to refugees in the Netherlands, and paying extra attention to the protection of kids, women and LHBTQIA+ refugees. These parties advocate for protecting asylum migrants from discrimination and prejudices during their integration in society, including in health care (M2, M5). Similar arguments are used in television debates by both Jetten and Timmermans. For example, Jetten said: *“I choose Dutch values in which we always give people who flee from war and violence safe shelter”* (D1). Analysis of word frequencies shows that this narrative is especially prominent with GL-PvdA, who use the term “refugees” 47 times, compared to a frequency between 3 and 19 by other parties (Appendix 3).

The VVD acknowledges that refugees are vulnerable, but they adapt this narrative to argue that for that very reason, we need to bring migration numbers down. According to them, high migration numbers cause the asylum system to stagnate, making it difficult to help “real refugees” anymore. Primarily the VVD distinguishes between “real” and “economic” refugees. The VVD interviewee also said that this distinction should be made because the country cannot accommodate everyone (IP4). Yesilgoz uses this argument also when she is asked about her own background. She came to the Netherlands at the age of 8 and believed she could become the VVD party leader because migration numbers were much lower then. Now, she argues, the opportunities for migrants are significantly lower due to the pressure on the asylum system and other public social services (N12, N13, N30). This narrative is exclusively used by the VVD, but Yesilgoz used it in every newspaper interview and television debate when migration was discussed to advocate for a substantial decrease in migrant influx (N11, N12, N13, N14, N15, N30, D2, D3, D5). Remarkably, Yesilgoz also criticised the “vulnerable migrant” narrative of left-wing parties like GL-PvdA, stating that she felt treated differently because of her background and that they saw her as a victim needing rescue (N15).

A similar narrative as the “vulnerable migrant narrative” is used around labour migrants, primarily by GL-PvdA and D66, emphasising their susceptibility to abuses by employment agencies. The VVD and NSC also use this narrative, albeit to a lesser extent. GL-PvdA and D66 specifically address the low wages, insecure unemployment conditions, and inadequate housing and working conditions that migrant workers face, proposing numerous measures to prevent such injustices in the future (M2, M5, D1). The VVD also mentions tackling abuses in labour migration in its election manifesto (M3, p. 14),

while Omtzigt argues the same in the RTL Election Debate (D5). However, it is clear that GL-PvdA and D66 prioritise the protection of labour migrants more prominently, as they discuss it more elaborately in their manifestos. Several politicians interviewed also expressed support for enhancing protections for labour migrants and increasing inspections (IP7).

In 2020, the report “No Second-Class Citizens” was published by the Boosting Team for the Protection of Migrant Workers. This report describes the abuses that migrant workers face in work and living and includes recommendations to tackle these. These recommendations are aimed at making migrant workers less dependent on employment agencies, which arrange work, but often also housing, and health insurance. This makes migrant workers vulnerable, as losing a job would also mean losing their home (Aanjaagteam Bescherming Arbeidsmigranten, 2020; NOS Nieuws, 2020). Trade associations were critical of the report, saying that too much is being blamed on the employment agencies. The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions also said that much more would have to change, such as a real separation of housing and work (NOS Nieuws, 2020). The Dutch Labour Inspectorate also concluded in 2022 that such dependencies are undesirable, as they encourage exploitation. For example, migrant workers cannot go elsewhere if their housing turns out to be in poor condition. And while many agencies treat their employees well, some consciously abuse their vulnerable position. The Labour Inspectorate speaks of “private benefits, public burdens”, as overcrowding can lead to nuisance, and it can lead to additional pressure on the tight housing market (NOS Nieuws, 2022d).

The Dutch government is currently working on an admission system for employment agencies, which is expected to come into effect in 2026. To qualify for admission, employment agencies must, among other things, submit a declaration of conduct (VOG), transfer a deposit of 100,000 euros and demonstrate that they pay the correct wages and pay taxes properly. Only authorized agencies may operate on the market and companies that use employment agencies, so-called hirers, may only do business with those authorized agencies. In addition, the Labour Inspectorate will be expanded to ensure whether employment agencies and hirers comply with the rules (NOS Nieuws, 2023c).

Counternarrative: not an asylum problem, but an organisational problem.

A narrative primarily used by D66 to counter the “asylum-seekers as scapegoats” narrative is that the current problems are due to the poor organisation of the asylum system in recent years. In the television debates, Jetten used the one-liner: “*It is not an asylum crisis, but a VVD crisis*” (D1, D3). According to him, it is the VVD’s fault that “*criminal asylum-seekers still are not returned quickly to their own countries, the nuisance in Budel and Ter Apel is not addressed, and refugees are stuck in overcrowded asylum-seeker centres where they learn the Dutch language too late*” (D3). Jetten also blamed the VVD for the coalition’s collapse, despite agreements on many measures to better organise asylum (N22). GL-PvdA leader Timmermans employed similar arguments, arguing that refugees are left lying outside in Ter Apel because the government reduced the capacity and failed to evenly distribute the migrants across the Netherlands (N10). Even the VVD interviewee acknowledges that cuts have been made to the COA and the IND, which decreased their capacity and now causes problems. However, the interviewee defends these cuts saying they were necessary at the time and points out that the PvdA also supported them back then. While he believes it is logical to seek efficiency in government services during periods of lower demand, he criticises the lack of preparation to scale up when needed. Simultaneously, he argues that focusing only on organisational issues is shortsighted and overlooks the social impact of high asylum numbers (IP4).

A variation of this narrative attributes societal problems to inadequate integration policies. The parties advocating this view acknowledge problems around migration in society, but they argue that these stem from insufficient integration measures. Only in November 2023, asylum-seekers have been permitted to work unrestrictedly if their asylum application is in process for at least six months, a change from the previous limit of 24 weeks a year (Hoorntje, 2023). Such measures aim to facilitate asylum-seekers to integrate earlier into society and escape the boredom at an AZC, the latter often mentioned as a cause for nuisance around those centres. This narrative is used by politicians of the PvdA, ChristenUnie, BBB, Volt and CDA in the interviews (IP2, IP3, IP7, IP9, IP1), as can be seen in the quote below. There is a difference, however, in whether the government should “help” or “force” asylum-seekers to integrate. For example, the BBB interviewee argues that *“the entire integration process should become much stricter”* and that *“we force people far too little to integrate”*. On the other hand, the politician of the pan-European social-liberal Volt said that the current integration policy takes away a person's happiness and potential which is a shame for both society and the individual's self-worth (IP1). Except for the PVV, every party discusses the need to improve Dutch integration policies to varying degrees in their election manifestos (M2, M3, M4, M5, M6). Surprisingly, only the VVD uses this argument in the television debates, saying that many migration-related issues stem from prolonged failures to integrate individuals into society (D2).

“When people don't have a house and don't have a job, then you get problems. That is why integration is so important. That they have a house and job, and that they also feel valued in society. Because otherwise, if they remain on the outside and they seek each other out, yes, then you get problems. So, we need to put more energy into integration” (IP9).

Since 1994, the reception and guidance of asylum-seekers have been managed by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum-seekers (COA), operating on behalf of the Ministry of Justice and Security. Although the Ministry is politically responsible, the COA functions as an independent administrative body. However, the COA has been struggling for a while, dealing with an overcrowded main reception location in Ter Apel and municipalities that do not want to host asylum-seekers. As a result, it has been reported numerous times that asylum-seekers had to sleep outside in Ter Apel. Already in 2022, the organisation acknowledged that it is no longer able to fulfil its legal task to receive asylum-seekers in a humanitarian manner (NOS Nieuws, 2022a, 2022b). In addition, the Immigration and Neutralisation Service (IND), responsible for handling asylum requests, is dealing with large backlogs, resulting in asylum-seekers having to stay in AZCs while awaiting decisions on their applications. In December 2023, the number of pending applications had risen to a record of more than 70.000. Furthermore, even when asylum requests are granted, refugees are sometimes unable to leave due to municipalities making fewer houses available than initially agreed on (NOS Nieuws, 2023d). The municipality of Westerwolde, which includes Ter Apel, went to court in 2023 due to the structural exceedance of the maximum of 2000 asylum-seekers at the AZC. The judge ruled in favour of the municipality, mandating that the COA must reduce the pressure on Ter Apel (NOS Nieuws, 2024a). Still, the COA was unable to limit the number of asylum-seekers, which has led to a large penalty fee that it has to pay to the municipality (NOS Nieuws, 2024d). This shows that there are indeed many organisational problems within the Dutch asylum system. The dispersion law, adopted in January 2024, is also meant to relieve the pressure from Ter Apel and organise the reception of asylum-seekers better. The law aims to distribute asylum-seekers more evenly over the Netherlands and is giving the national government more options to pressure municipalities that refuse to accept asylum-seekers (NOS Nieuws, 2024b). However, the new coalition has plans to undo the law (NOS Nieuws, 2024e).

4.3 Symbolic threat

The Islamisation of the Netherlands

A narrative that is only visible with the PVV is the emphasis on the threat that Islam poses to the “Dutch culture”. The election manifesto states that the Netherlands is not an Islamic country and that our own culture will always have priority (p. 4). It also says that *“our culture and Western way of living is threatened by the admission of large numbers of people, often from non-Western, Islamic countries”* (M1, p. 6). Therefore, the PVV warns of the *“Islamisation of the Netherlands”* (M1, p. 37), which is also considered to be a threat to our safety. This can be seen in the security chapter, which states that tens of thousands of sympathisers of the jihad are living in the Netherlands (p. 13). In doing this, they make Islam both a symbolic threat (to the Dutch culture) and a realistic threat (a danger to our safety). To limit the Islamisation of the Netherlands and the threats this poses, the PVV proposes many measures including a complete asylum stop and banning Islamic schools, Korans and Mosques in the Netherlands (M1, pp. 7-8). The danger of Islam is also briefly discussed in the interview with the AD newspaper (N1). In the television debates analysed, Wilders does not use this narrative.

As said, this narrative is only used by the PVV. This is also visible in the word frequency of the word “Islam” (M1). This is used ten times in the manifesto of the PVV, all in the context of the “Islamisation of the Netherlands”. Other parties do not mention it all or only in the context of tackling Islamophobia (M2, M5). NSC does connect migration to culture in its election manifesto where it emphasises the continuity of migration and discusses that the Netherlands is a diverse and multiform country because of persistent labour, family, and asylum migration since the 60s in combination with our colonial past and the Caribbean part of the Netherlands (M4, p. 29). The politicians interviewed all thought this narrative was exaggerated, and several of them also emphasised that the Netherlands is a *“mixture of all kinds of cultures”* (IP8) and that migration is something that has happened continuously throughout history (IP4, IP8, IP5).

Other symbolic threats related to migration are barely used by the political parties analysed. The NSC describes the tensions between culturally and religiously different migrant groups and the potential conflicts with the Dutch constitutional state in its election manifesto (M4, p. 24). The VVD discusses clashes in the classroom about, for example, equal rights for men and women (M2, p. 6). With the PVV, such narratives are more present. Their manifesto describes that *“we must reconquer the Netherlands”*, for which closing the borders for people from other cultures is necessary (M1, p. 3). More concrete threats to the Dutch norms, values and ways of living are often connected to the “Islamisation of the Netherlands” as described before. In addition, the PVV states to be proud of the Dutch culture, identity and traditions, criticises the left-wing disdain for historical heroes, and advocates for the preservation of traditions like Black Peet, Christmas and Eastern (M1, pp. 29-30).

As of 2023, only 5.6% of the Dutch population identifies as Islamic. In contrast, 31.4% identify as Christian, of which 18.2% are Catholics and 13.2% are Protestants, and 5.9% belong to other religious groups. More than half of the population (57.2%) is not religious. In 2013, Muslims made up 4.7% of the population, indicating a slight increase over the past ten years (CBS, 2023b).

4.4 Other migration narratives

The Netherlands as a magnet for asylum-seekers

A narrative employed by both the PVV and the VVD is that asylum-seekers come to the Netherlands due to its advantageous asylum policies and generous public social services (M1, M3). To prevent this from happening, Yesilgoz argued that the Netherlands needs to harmonise its policies with the countries around us. She stressed that this needs to be done while adhering to European rules and regulations (N12, N14, N30, D5), something that Wilders did not say. He claimed that refugees are drawn to the Netherlands because they hear about free housing and financial support from the government and that our approval rates of asylum permits are twice as high compared to neighbouring countries (D1, D2, D3, N3). The VVD interviewee also argued that the higher acceptance rates are extensively shared in Telegram groups of human smugglers (IP4). The NSC makes a similar argument once in their manifesto, stating that an integration system for social security may be necessary to prevent Dutch social provisions from attracting migrants (M4, p. 25). However, he uses this argument when talking about labour migrants, while the VVD and PVV focus on asylum-seekers. In addition, Omtzigt does not use this narrative in the interviews and debates analysed, nor does the BBB, although a BBB interviewee made a similar argument about organising the asylum crisis. He said that *“once you’ve solved that, the contacts between them [the refugees] and their home are quickly established”*, hinting that solving the organisational problems might attract more refugees (IP8).

Research institute Verwey-Jonker investigated the role of the Dutch asylum system on the influx of asylum-seekers in the commission of the knowledge institute of the Ministry of Justice and Security in 2023. They concluded that there is no evidence that asylum policy has an attractive effect on the influx of asylum-seekers and that safety and social networks are much larger factors in the decision-making of asylum-seekers regarding in which country they seek protection. According to this research, the question of where someone can go is more important than the question of where someone wants to go. Network, infrastructure and financial resources play a role in this. The country of destination can therefore also change during the migration process, depending on the opportunities that migrants encounter along the way. Coincidence can also play a role in where someone applies for asylum. For example, chance encounters with people who offer help or who are stopped by the police in a country without valid residence papers. They do acknowledge that certain aspects of asylum policy may have some influence on onward migration within the EU, such as criteria for granting asylum or rules for family reunification. However, these aspects only come into play once asylum-seekers are already in the EU. Moreover, the differences in asylum policy between EU countries in this area are relatively small and policy is less decisive than safety and social networks (Kahmann et al., 2023).

Compared to other EU countries, the Netherlands is scoring slightly below average regarding the number of first-time asylum applicants per thousand people. The EU average is 2.23, while the Netherlands scores 2.15. In comparison, Germany scores almost twice as high with 3.90 first-time applicants per thousand people, while Austria even scores 6.11. Therefore, it is not the case that the Netherlands is receiving an extraordinary amount of asylum applications compared to other countries (Eurostat, 2024). The European recognition rate, which reflects the percentage of asylum applications that receive decisions granting refugee status and subsidiary protection, has fluctuated around 40% over the past two years (EUAA Situational Awareness Unit, 2024). For the Netherlands, this rate is indeed twice as high with 80.8% in 2023 (Asylum Information Database, 2024).

International development to prevent future migration flows

BBB, VVD, and GL-PvdA all argue in their election manifestos that investing in and supporting international development projects will lead to smaller migration flows towards Europe. The VVD emphasises that emergency aid should focus more on preventing migration flows (M3, p. 18). BBB highlights the need for an African policy to improve food security and, consequently, the quality of life on the continent to decrease migration numbers (M6, pp. 93, 122). GL-PvdA discusses investing in development collaboration, conflict prevention, fair trade, peacebuilding, and emergency aid to help people in need and provide better future perspectives in their own countries, thereby reducing refugee numbers (M3, pp. 17, 99). The motivations for investing are slightly different among the parties: the BBB and VVD aim to decrease migration numbers, while GL-PvdA focuses on helping people in need. This narrative is not used in the newspaper interviews and television debates analysed. The PVV also addresses this topic, but their conclusion is different. Their manifesto states that the *“current tsunami of fortune-seekers”* will only grow due to the corrupt ruling classes in African countries, which leave its citizens *“doomed to poverty and war misery”* (p. 42). However, they want to stop development cooperation entirely (M1).

This narrative is not entirely accurate. There is substantial support for the aspirations-capabilities framework, which describes the relationship between development, aspirations to migrate, and the capabilities to migrate. The theory assesses individuals’ potential to migrate, which increases when they have both aspirations to migrate and the capabilities to do so (e.g., money and social networks). According to this framework, as a country’s development increases, the capabilities to migrate will also increase, leading to an initial rise in migration numbers. Therefore, investing in so-called *“underdeveloped”* countries may not reduce migration numbers but rather increase them. However, if economic development continues, migration numbers will eventually decline as the aspirations to migrate decrease (de Haas, 2021).

4.5 Conclusion

Concluding this chapter, a couple of observations stand out. First, narratives focusing on realistic threats are more prevalent and developed compared to those emphasising symbolic threats. For example, the *“Netherlands is full”* narrative links migration to the housing shortage and the perceived pressure on public social services. Similarly, asylum-seekers are often blamed for various societal problems since *“they”* get houses assigned by the government, *“they”* are criminal, and *“they”* bring the *“dangerous”* Islam to the Netherlands. This shows that the symbolic threat narrative *“Islamisation of the Netherlands”* is embedded within a broader narrative that is equally focused on the realistic threats posed by migration. Second, the identified narratives that might shape perceived realistic threats in society primarily emphasize individual-level threats, whereas the symbolic threat narrative focuses on a threat at the group level. The realistic threat narratives describe threats to the primary needs of individuals, such as housing, health and education, and safety. In contrast, the symbolic threat narrative focused on the impact of migration on the Dutch collective culture, worldviews and traditions rather than on the impact on individuals.

In Table 2, which provides an overview of the migration narratives identified and which political parties use them, we can see that the PVV uses all the threat narratives identified, which is not the case for

any party. Simultaneously, the PVV does not employ any of the counternarratives identified in this analysis, which is also not the case for any other party. When looking at the narratives used by the VVD, Table 2 shows that they share more in common with the left-wing parties GL-PvdA and D66 than the PVV. This is surprising, because the VVD primarily campaigned on migration issues, similar to the PVV, and their election manifesto proposed significantly limiting all types of migration. As discussed in Chapter 4.1 and shown in Table 1, the VVD is the second-most right-wing party regarding their stances on migration, while GL-PvdA and D66 are positioned on the left side of the spectrum.

Table 2: An overview of the migration narratives employed by political parties in the Netherlands (created by the author)

	PVV	GL-PvdA	VVD	NSC	D66	BBB
Realistic threat narratives						
The Netherlands is full	+	-	-	-	-	-
- Housing market	+	+/-	+	+	+/-	+
- Public social services	+	+/-	+/-	+	+/-	-
- Migrants vs the Dutch	+	-	-	-	-	+
Asylum-seekers as a scapegoat	+	-	+/-	-	-	+/-
- Nuisance	+	+/-	+/-	-	+/-	+
- Criminality	+	-	-	-	-	-
Symbolic threat narratives						
The Islamisation of the Netherlands	+	-	-	-	-	-
- Cultural tensions	+	-	+/-	+/-	-	-
Counternarratives						
Migrants are needed in jobs	-	+/-	-	-	+	+/-
The vulnerable asylum-seeker	-	+	-	-	+	-
- Real vs economic refugees	-	-	+	-	-	-
- Labour migrant	-	+	+/-	+/-	+	-
Not an asylum problem, but an organisational problem	-	+/-	-	-	+	-
- Poor integration policy	-	+	+	-	+	+/-
Other migration narratives						
The Netherlands as a magnet for asylum-seekers	+	-	-	+/-	-	+/-
International development to prevent future migration flows	-	+	+	-	-	+

5. Realistic and symbolic threats amongst citizens

As explained in the methodology, I have conducted interviews with citizens in Kootwijkerbroek, Assen, Maasdijk, and Wageningen. Kootwijkerbroek is a conservative Protestant village located in the Bible Belt and few migrants are living there. The conservative Calvinist Reformed Political Party (SGP) has been the most popular political party in the municipality of Barneveld for years and was also again the largest party in the elections of 2023 with 23.7%, while the PVV was the second party with 20.5%. Assen is located in the province of Drenthe and contains three asylum reception locations, of which the largest with 1000 spots is one of the biggest in the Netherlands. The largest party in the elections last year was the PVV with 20.9%, while GL-PvdA was the second party with 17.8% in the municipality of Assen. Maasdijk is part of the municipality of Westland, where many labour migrants work in greenhouse horticulture. The largest party in the 2023 elections was the PVV with 32.8%, with the VVD being the second party with 22.1%. Wageningen is a city with a large student population, which is also reflected in the election results: 36.7% voted for GL-PvdA, while the PVV was the second party with 10.5% (Mouissie, 2023). In all four places, I have interviewed citizens with questions focused on how they feel about migration. A list of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

Feelings & concerns around migration

Most interviewees agreed that there were problems around migration in the Netherlands. When identifying specific issues linked to migration, the most common concern was its contribution to the housing shortage (all but IC1 and IC2). Several interviewees expressed a sense of unfairness about recognised refugees receiving priority with houses while it is often hard for Dutch citizens Netherlands to secure a home (IC3, IC8, IC9, IC10). However, some interviewees also mentioned other reasons for the housing shortage, including the small number of houses built in the last years (IC3, IC7), the delaying policies and procedures (IC8), and the nitrogen crisis (IC2), and they were hesitant to blame migrants directly. Regarding this topic, the interviewees were mostly talking about asylum-seekers, as they get houses assigned to them once they are granted asylum. The argument that the Netherlands is full, as discussed in the previous chapter, was also used by some interviewees (IC3, IC6, IC10, IC11), but it was not used in an explicit reference to the housing shortage. Especially in Kootwijkerbroek, this view seemed to be dominant, but also in Assen one interviewee argued that many public social services like infrastructure cannot handle the number of people anymore (IC3). One interviewee discussed the effect that migration has on the education system, as it can cause “black” and “white schools, as some schools do accept migrant kids while others do not (IC8).

All interviewees agreed on the responsibility of the Netherlands to help those fleeing war or persecution. However, several interviewees made the separation between the “real” and “economic” refugees, the latter group coming from safe countries (IC1, IC2, IC7, IC9, IC11). Some connected this to nuisance, as in their opinion, economic refugees are more often causing nuisance than “real” refugees. An interviewee from Wageningen explained this by arguing that economic refugees mainly expect things from the Netherlands, while people who come here for their safety are much more thankful and less expecting (IC9). In addition, a couple of interviewees agreed with the ‘the Netherlands as a magnet for asylum-seekers’ narrative and argued that asylum-seekers come to the Netherlands because of how easy they can get permission to stay and the good public social services (IC1, IC5, IC6, IC11, IC12).

The possible symbolic threat that migration poses to the Netherlands also came up in the interviews. Effects that some interviewees saw are the possible conflicts that can occur between the different cultures (IC8, IC9, IC11, IC12) and how migration changes the Dutch culture and traditions (IC1, IC3, IC4, IC5, IC6, IC9, IC10). In this, the Islam was mentioned too (IC1, IC6, IC8). Interviewees however also pointed to the ever-changing nature of culture (IC1, IC7) and how cultural diversity allows for learning about other cultures and expanding your own culture (IC5, IC9, IC11). Regarding preventing nuisance and culture clashes, amongst other things around AZCs, extra emphasis was placed on the need to integrate and for asylum-seekers to work as soon as possible by several interviewees. Some see this as something that the government should facilitate better (IC1, IC2, IC8), while others view it as the responsibility of the migrants themselves (IC5, IC9, IC11). In addition, some interviewees argued that the reception of asylum-seekers needs to be organised better and the capacity needs to be increased (IC4, IC6, IC8, IC9). However, one interviewee from Maasdijk said: *“I think there are a lot of people who don’t listen, and you just can’t get anywhere with them. You can organise it very well, but then it still just doesn’t work out”* (IC5).

The sometimes bad living conditions of labour migrants are also seen as a cause for nuisance. Two interviewees argued that labour migrants can be vulnerable since employment agencies often arrange both work and a place to live and that this should be improved (IC2, IC9). Still, the importance of labour migrants in sectors like construction and health care, and the Dutch economy as a whole was recognised by all (except for IC11), and several interviewees mentioned that for many sectors, labour migrants have become indispensable because the Dutch do not longer want to do the work (IC3, IC4, IC5, IC6, IC8, IC9, IC10). Regarding international students, the interviewees were indifferent or positive as they were not causing hindrance and it was emphasised by (former) students that they (had) learned a lot from their international co-students (IC4, IC9, IC11). One interviewee mentioned that it could be maybe limited a bit by making more bachelors in Dutch, as they do put pressure on the availability of student houses (IC9). On the other hand, a couple of interviewees mentioned that many Dutch students also go abroad to study (IC4, IC10).

The concerns that citizens have around migration are focused on asylum migration, and not on labour or study migration. Several citizens were asked to give an estimate on the percentage of asylum-seekers out of all migrants, and all of them overestimated the proportion of asylum-seekers (IC5, IC6, IC10, IC11, IC12). Answers were ranging from 30 to 60%, while in reality, it is only 10%. In addition, almost all interviewees started discussing asylum migration when they were asked about migration, and I had to ask them specifically about labour and study migration. One interviewee shared that when asked about migration, she didn’t think about labour or study migration but only asylum migration. According to her, for many people migration is the same as asylum migration (IC5).

A recurring sentiment was a more general distrust of politicians. Several interviewees were also sceptic about what politicians say, as it is often seen to be populist to attract voters (IC4, IC5, IC9, IC11). In Kootwijkerbroek, politicians were called pocket fillers (IC10), and in Assen, one interviewee went a bit further and said that politics is “an illusion” in which everyone “plays a role”. He argued that many problems are deliberately not solved as it is part of a bigger strategy, and he called people who believe that these problems “just” occurred “naive” (IC1). When asked whether migration played a role in their voting choice, five of the twelve interviewees said it was taken into consideration next to other topics (IC5, IC6, IC8, IC11, IC12).

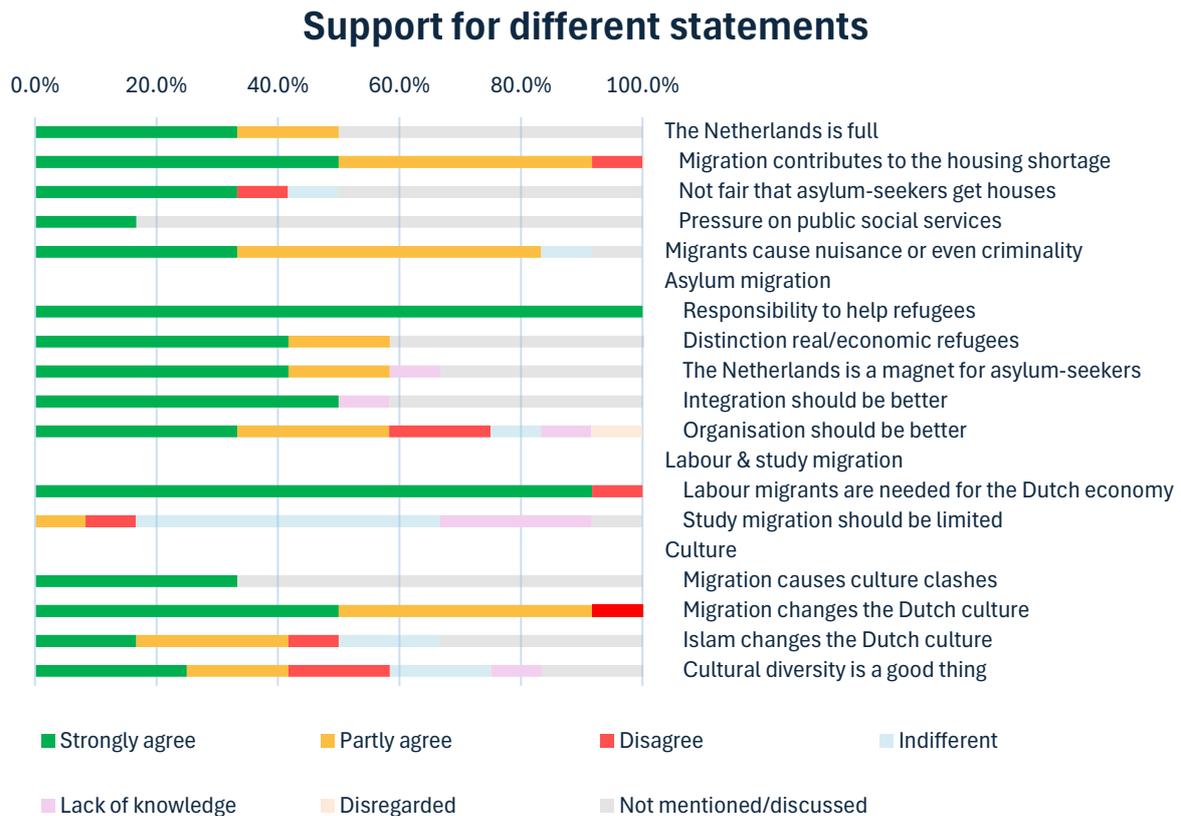


Figure 8: Support for certain statements among the Dutch citizens interviewed (created by the author)

Figure 8 provides an overview of the support for various statements and narratives discussed. Due to time constraints, not all topics could be discussed in depth. In addition, some statements in the figure were not specifically asked but were derived from responses to open questions like “Do you have concerns around migration? If so, what are they?”. When, in this case, a certain concern was not mentioned, it was also put into the category *not mentioned/discussed*, just like topics that were not discussed. Some interviewees lacked an opinion or sufficient knowledge on certain topics, and these responses are categorised as *indifferent* and *lack of knowledge*. Finally, a few responses are grouped under *disregarded*, as they veered into conspiracy theories and could not be used. It is important to note that categorising interview responses was sometimes challenging. While I tried to place each interviewee in the most fitting category for each statement, there were instances where this was not straightforward. For example, one interviewee reacted indifferently to a topic but also admitted lacking sufficient knowledge to comment. This complexity should be considered when interpreting the data presented in the figure.

Differences between locations

When examining the differences between the various locations, several observations stand out. In Kootwijkerbroek, interviewees were very critical of migration. With follow-up questions, it became clear that their criticisms were mostly directed at asylum migration, although one expressed a general criticism of all long-term migrants (IC11). Additionally, all interviewees were sceptic of Dutch politics. In Assen, opinions varied significantly, ranging from viewing politics as an illusion (IC1) to actively volunteering with asylum-seekers (IC2). Overall, the interviewees had nuanced to positive views on

migration, which is notable given the presence of many asylum-seekers in the city. In Maasdijk, two of the three interviewees had nuanced opinions about migration but noted that this is not average in Maasdijk. They argued that despite relying on labour migrants for greenhouse horticulture and other businesses, residents do not want them living nearby or interfering in their lives (IC4, IC5). The third interviewee largely agreed but argued that he is mostly opposed to asylum-seekers rather than labour migrants (IC6). In Wageningen, all interviewees had nuanced views, acknowledging migration-related problems but attributing them more to the organisation and integration of asylum-seekers and labour migration legislation rather than to the migrants themselves. Some interviewees did have concerns about the perceived unfairness in housing access and the issue of “economic refugees”.

6. Why migration narratives resonate & how political parties use this

From the interviews conducted, several reasons why certain narratives about migration resonate with citizens have been identified. The politicians interviewed provided additional insights into the shaping power of the narratives as discussed in Chapter 4. First, I will discuss the various factors that influence whether a narrative resonates with citizens, followed by an analysis of the strategies employed by the different political parties to attract voters. Lastly, I will discuss the role of the media in this dynamic.

Fear of the unknown

The most mentioned reason why certain narratives do resonate with citizens is that these narratives exploit fears (IP1, IP2, IP3, IP4, IP5, IP6, IP8, IP10), because *“fear is where primary feelings emerge”* (IP4). According to several politicians, many people are naturally scared of the unknown. The Volt politician described that especially now with the wars in Ukraine and Israël/Palestine, abroad is scary and therefore any migrant is too. A few citizens interviewed echoed these sentiments and argued that many people fear migrants and the problems they might bring (IC4, IC7). The Volt politician believed that these international conflicts significantly contributed to these sentiments, and consequently, the election results last year (IP1). Similarly, the D66 interviewee argued that some Dutch citizens fear anyone from abroad, whether they are migrant workers or asylum-seekers. He believed that many do not even see the difference, especially because for residents of rural areas of the Netherlands, Amsterdam is already intimidating (IP6). The citizen interviews revealed that most interviewees primarily associated migration with asylum-seekers. For example, one interviewee said that when asked about migration, she only thought about asylum migration (IC5). In addition, it appeared that many citizens overestimate the proportion of asylum-seekers relative to total migration numbers.

According to the interviewee from D66, this fear is not new. He described that when many Surinamese came to the Netherlands in the 1970s this was also accompanied by fear and discrimination. He argued that this fear is more prominent in communities where there is a kind of unity, such as villages where everyone goes to the same church. When there comes a group that looks and believes differently, many have trouble getting used to that. The interviewee described this sentiment, of seeing others that do not belong to your own circle as a threat, as a human characteristic (IP6). The SGP interviewee thought that resistance against new AZCs also comes from this fear of the unknown, just like the cultural concerns that live amongst some citizens (IP5). The first dynamic was also described by the CDA politician, but he also noted that every change to one’s surroundings is met with criticism (IP3).

Narratives that invoke fears or present threats to citizens are the most resonant, particularly when it is about the primary needs of people such as housing, safety, and health care, the VVD interviewee explained. He noted that migration narratives employing an us-versus-them dichotomy, in this case, citizens versus migrants, resonate strongly for that reason (IP4). In interviews with citizens, this *“inequality”* between asylum-seekers and Dutch citizens regarding housing was a frequently mentioned issue. Consequently, appealing to these sentiments is a strategy politicians can use to shape perceived threats, a tactic described by multiple politicians (IP2, IP4, IP10). The VVD interviewee elaborated on how his party tries to link issues that citizens experience to their party and their proposed solutions (IP4). The PvdA politician described this strategy as well, arguing that the communication of some parties during campaigns is primarily focused on instilling fear of migrants and conveying that their party is the solution for those who do not want migrants in the country (IP2).

Simple versus complex explanations

Several interviewees see that both left- and right-wing parties use narratives to scare people. Left-wing parties try to pose climate change as an existential threat, while right-wing parties often use migration (IP4, IP10). However, the climate change “fear” narrative does not work as well as the migration narratives. A ChristenUnie interviewee explained that many political topics are not suited to be made into a single, massive threat because they do not speak to people. He argues that issues like provisions, basic needs, and fiscal policy are much less mediagenic, and while climate change can be framed as a threat, it has not captured the zeitgeist as much as migration (IP10). Migration can easily be framed as an imminent threat, while climate change is a more remote problem, especially for Dutch citizens who are not (yet) affected by the consequences of climate change. According to the interviewee, Geert Wilders’ asylum tsunami is like a sword of Damocles hanging over society, which is why it works so well as a political media tool (IP10).

Another factor that plays a maybe more important role here is the simplification of issues, which is described by more politicians (IP1, IP2, IP6, IP10). Many societal problems are complex and have many different factors contributing to them. For example, the housing crisis in the Netherlands is the result of a high demand for houses but also a low supply of houses, which has several reasons as described in Chapter 4.2. However, the interviewee from Volt believed that when someone is experiencing discomfort, they tend to believe the most simple, logical explanation. In contrast, complex problems that require lengthy explanations are not easily understood by citizens (IP1). To make a narrative resonate, it is more effective to present a straightforward explanation with a single cause for a complex issue: a scapegoat (IP10). A very popular scapegoat for various societal problems, including the housing shortage, is migration, which is something that many interviewees discussed (IP1, IP4, IP6, IP7, IP8, IP9, IP10). This is visible in the “Netherlands is full” narrative, which only blames migrants while not discussing the other factors that play a role. Another scapegoat that is mentioned several times is the EU (IP10, IP1). The Volt politician explained that “Brussels” is often criticised for imposing policies and measures on “us” (the Netherlands). However, the decisions made in Brussels are also agreed upon by the Netherlands, as every country has veto power in the European Council (IP1). This narrative uses the “us versus them” dynamic, and in that sense, it is similar to “the Dutch versus migrants” narrative. Regarding asylum-seekers, the Netherlands does not have as many asylum-seekers compared to some neighbouring countries, as discussed in Chapter 4. However, politicians often avoid acknowledging this but instead blame asylum-seekers and the EU (IP1), because simple explanations for societal problems that invoke fears resonate more effectively with citizens.

The use of untruths & a general distrust of politicians

For a narrative to resonate, it does not matter whether the statements made are entirely accurate. The Volt interviewee explained that it can even be a political strategy to make provocative, potentially inaccurate statements and then let the conversation fade, as the idea already lingers in the minds of a part of the population. The politician argued that it is much easier to spread misinformation than to correct it later, citing Donald Trump as a prime example of this strategy. He also mentioned the “Russia strategy”, where conflicting information is spread to confuse people about what is true. According to him, this clouding strategy is used widely today. He also noted that some parties build frames based solely on sentiments rather than actual data. He believes politicians should find the right balance between appealing to voters’ emotions and presenting the problems as they are (IP1).

Some parties, like the PVV, are criticised by multiple interviewees for making inaccurate statements about migration or suggesting solutions that are not feasible within the framework of international laws and agreements. An interviewee from the BBB expressed concern that this could increase public distrust in politics, as such plans are unrealistic and therefore will not be implemented (IP7). Several politicians recognised a broader dissatisfaction in society, which is expressed on the topic of migration (IP8, IP9), and the distrust in politics was also echoed in the citizen interviews (IC1, IC4, IC5, IC9, IC10, IC11). The VVD interviewee believed that established parties such as the VVD, CDA, and GL-PvdA have not sufficiently listened to voters. He argued that many people outside the larger cities feel ignored, with all the “annoying things” like emergency reception centres, wind turbines and defence areas all placed in their regions (IP4). This sense of being unheard likely drives people towards parties who are either anti-establishment or new, as seen with Forum for Democracy’s success in 2017, the BBB’s win in the 2023 provincial elections, and the recent electoral gains of the PVV. A ChristenUnie politician criticised the “floating voters” who constantly shift their support to new parties with attractive narratives. He argues that many problems are very complex, and these new parties cannot solve them either. *“The existing politicians will surely make mistakes, but having others like Pieter Omtzigt or Geert Wilders won’t make things better. I am convinced of that. And I find it really shortsighted that people just follow them and think that things will change”* (IP9).

The shaping power of narratives used by different parties

All politicians interviewed agree that politicians and parties shape citizens' concerns around migration. The SGP interviewee explained that as a politician, you can enlarge concerns with your statements, but also reduce them and comfort people. He noted that the parties that profile themselves on migration tend to amplify rather than reduce concerns (IP5). The VVD interviewee described that political parties steer the societal debate. As an example, he used BBB and the nitrogen crisis. Only 0.5% of the Netherlands works in the agricultural sector, but still, they managed to win the provincial elections with a campaign focused on the nitrogen crisis (IP4). Several interviewees noted that parties are aware of their influence in shaping public concerns (IP4, IP5, IP6, IP10). According to the SGP politician, every politician knows that his or her statements have an impact, and therefore, politicians should be careful with their words. However, he argued that not all politicians are taking this responsibility seriously (IP5). The PvdA interviewee offered a slightly different perspective on this, arguing that parties are primarily focused on ensuring they will not get blamed when something goes wrong. Therefore, their communication is centred on “*surviving the next day*” and not losing votes rather than on the long-term impact of shaping the concerns of citizens (IP2).

Still, most interviewees agreed that some parties strategically use the potential influence that they have on voters (all except IP8). The CDA politician directly mentioned that this dynamic has had a huge influence on the election victory of the PVV in the parliamentary elections (IP3). Moreover, several interviewees expressed frustration with the national political discussion around migration, viewing it as primarily focused on image-building and perception management (IP2). When asked about citizens’ concerns around migration, a ChristenUnie politician noted that it is hard to say which are real, as migration *“is often turned into a political media and fear tool to such an extent that it does not fully represent the actual problems”*. He criticises the national debate for being overly centred on image-building and perception management with frames that do not correspond with reality and fail to address the real problems that exist around migration (IP10).

Multiple interviewees see that mostly right-wing parties are good at shaping the conversation around migration and stirring up fear (IP2, IP3, IP4), while others point directly to the PVV as they have issue ownership on the topic of migration (IP6, IP7, IP9). The D66 politician argued that the PVV understands which sentiments live amongst voters and tries to fuel these fears (IP6). Denk is also mentioned once because they profile themselves on the Israel/Palestina conflict which also influences how some people look at migration (IP4). Several interviewees were critical of the PVV for wanting things that are not possible within international laws and agreements. For example, closing the borders is not possible, and in addition, it would be very bad for our economy. A BBB interviewee believed that politicians should tell the honest story instead of just shouting things that “the people” want to hear. In this case, that would be stating that you want the borders closed, but also explaining that this is not possible in the short term and might take up to ten years (IP7, IP9). As said, a BBB interviewee thought that saying impossible things could only increase the discontent in society and distrust of politicians, as what some politicians say might never happen (IP7). In addition, the ChristenUnie politician argued that the group of “floating voters” makes politics very unstable, which is bad for the country. He noted that new parties have little experience in governing and many problems are very complex, so believing that they will be able to solve them is short-sighted (IP9).

The VVD is mentioned several times too when asked which parties are mostly shaping concerns around migration. This is because they have been the biggest party over the last thirteen years and campaigned mainly on migration before the 2023 parliamentary elections. In addition, they normalised the way of thinking of the PVV by working together with them and adopting some of their stances (IP2, IP4). Furthermore, the VVD is criticised for letting the coalition fall in the summer of 2023 over an issue that turned out to be much smaller than they argued beforehand. According to the PvdA politician, they did this very consciously and over the heads of vulnerable people (IP2). Even the VVD interviewee, active on the municipal level and candidate MEP, was critical of the course of events. He said that the coalition would otherwise probably have fallen over nitrogen, and that strategically, falling over asylum was good for the VVD. However, he found it painful that the issue on which the government collapsed turned out to be relatively small, especially since there was a nice package with measures on the table that could have helped in managing asylum migration better (IP4).

Regarding the left-wing parties, the PvdA politician explained that for too long, they have avoided the subject of migration, because they had little to gain from it politically and they could internally not agree on a strategy. However, he argued, now a party can no longer have no opinion about migration, which GL-PvdA has also realised (IP2). The VVD interviewee noted something similar when he said that many people in the region felt they were not listened to by the established parties. The people in the cities are voting for GL-PvdA, but reception centres are all placed in the region because people in Amsterdam do not want those next door (IP4). The D66 politician also used the concept of “not in my own backyard”, explaining that individuals want to help asylum-seekers in the Netherlands as long as it is not where they live (IP6). Now, GL-PvdA acknowledges that the capacity of society to host migrants is under pressure, which means that you must manage who comes in and who doesn’t (IP2). When asked whether GL-PvdA and D66 also play into sentiments of feeling sorry for refugees, the D66 interviewee denied this. He argued that they just try to present the situation as it is, namely that there are many more labour migrants than asylum-seekers, which is repeated by the PvdA interviewee (IP2, IP6)

Role of the media

One factor that has been mentioned before but, according to the politicians interviewed, is just as big an influence as the political parties and politicians in shaping the concerns of citizens is the media. On the one hand, interviewees see that media is often focused on negative news and sensation, mainly because they “need” those clicks and views to generate revenue (IP1, IP2, IP3). Regarding migration in the Netherlands, the CDA politician argued *“The more news about Ter Apel, the more fear is stirred up in municipalities”*. It has been several times in the news that there were protests against new AZCs, or that asylum-seekers had to sleep outside in Ter Apel because of the organisational problems there. One of the citizens interviewed also told me that the existing fear that citizens have is only being fuelled, for example by live broadcasts of talk shows in front of the gate of Ter Apel (IC4). Consequently, a couple of politicians noted that there is often initially much resistance when new AZCs are opened, but when a centre is opened, they tend to cause no cause problems at all (IP5, IP6). This indicates that the fears among citizens are not always “real”. As mentioned before, some interviewed citizens significantly overestimated the percentage of asylum-seekers among all migrants, which is likely partly the effect of the extensive news coverage of the failures of the Dutch asylum system.

Simultaneously, some politicians are also very handy in using the media for their own goals. The ChristenUnie politician explained that the politicians from all bigger parties have had media training, and this is something you see directly. He mentioned the VVD and their youth organisation, the JOVD. According to him, they are very focused on how to use media and grab “media moments”. They are very aware that they can also play with the media and use it to their own advantage. He criticises the media and journalists for sometimes not realising that they are being used as a political plaything. He thinks that almost every party is very aware of the importance of the media and how to use it (IP10). More politicians were critical of journalists, as they often do not ask critical follow-up questions, are not enough aware of when they are used by politicians and are too busy with the “daily hype” at the expense of in-depth and long-term reporting (IP2, IP6, IP10, IP1).

Similarly, many interviewees were critical of politicians on the national level, as they, in their opinion, do not take enough responsibility in what they say and are not enough aware of the influence they have on the public. A BBB politician criticised politicians and others in the media for pushing the edges to attract attention. He sees the influence that both actors have on the concerns of citizens, and therefore both should be more responsible with what they say. On the other hand, he argues that it can be good to present things sometimes in black and white because then you know exactly where things are going wrong. He argued that *“putting it clearly”* is a way of agenda-setting and changing something, as otherwise *“the train will continue as normal”* (IP8). In addition, many politicians do understand that some politicians use such strategies. If you do not use it, it is much harder to get visibility, and people will not vote for you (IP2). One of the ChristenUnie interviewees even argued that there is some sort of selection mechanism within political parties between politicians who are more active in the media and those who are not. Those that are only working in the background will not get a profile for the public and as a result, will be put lower on the list for the next elections (IP10).

7. Discussion

This chapter will start by discussing the key findings, how they relate to the Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) and literature on FRP narratives, and their practical implications. Afterwards, I will reflect on this research, concluding by offering ideas for future research.

Key findings

The first key finding of this research is that the threat narratives identified are all used by the PVV, while other parties only use some of them, often in a more nuanced or toned-down manner. Simultaneously, the PVV does not use any of the counternarratives, which are used to some extent by all five other parties. The realistic threat narratives that the PVV uses highlight issues such as housing shortages, welfare state strain and nuisance, framing immigrants as a direct threat to the primary needs of Dutch citizens. This aligns with the claim of ITT that perceived competition for resources and physical threats can drive intergroup bias and prejudice. In addition, the PVV also focuses on the cultural impact of migration, portraying immigrants from Muslim-majority countries as incompatible with Dutch values and a threat to our national identity and social cohesion. Such narratives tap into symbolic threats, which, according to ITT, can increase feelings of cultural insecurity and lead to stronger anti-immigration attitudes (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). The PVV's use of threat narratives can be understood as an attempt to exploit and amplify perceived realistic and symbolic threats among voters. By consistently describing migrants as both an economic and cultural threat, the PVV reinforces the ingroup's sense of vulnerability and the need for protective measures against the outgroup. This finding underscores the influence of perceived threats in shaping political attitudes and public perceptions, which I will further discuss in the next subchapter.

The dual approach of ITT can also be found in FRP narratives described in the literature, namely using threat narratives to attract voters experiencing economic difficulties and cultural anxiety (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). This is something that the PVV does as well, so their narratives align closely with those of FRP. However, there are some differences. While the PVV uses the populist rhetoric that ordinary people bear the consequences of migration and policies favouring the outgroups, it does not explicitly depict the elite as corrupt, the latter being a common element in FRP narratives (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). In addition, the PVV narratives are adjusted to the Dutch context. For example, while the literature discusses narratives around "migrants stealing jobs" (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2020), the Netherlands is experiencing a labour shortage. Parties like D66 use this shortage to argue migrants are needed to fill vacancies. In contrast, the PVV does not discuss migration in relation to the job market. They barely discuss labour migration at all, but instead focus on the negative aspects of, in particular, asylum migration. This aligns with the theoretical framework's discussion on how populism and nationalism are "thin ideologies" that can adapt to specific national contexts (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). By addressing perceived threats specific to the Netherlands, the PVV enhances its appeal and effectiveness. This context-specific adjustment demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of far-right narratives in different settings.

The second finding that I would like to discuss is related to the identified realistic and symbolic threats perceived by citizens. Nearly all issues identified, such as the contribution of migrants to the housing shortage, nuisance, and potential cultural clashes, were primarily attributed to asylum-seekers. Simultaneously, almost all interviewees agreed on the importance of labour migrants to the Dutch economy, and most did not even have an opinion about study migration. In addition, it emerged that many interviewees overestimated the proportion of asylum migration within total migration numbers. When asked about the percentage of asylum-seekers among total migrants, most respondents estimated between 30-60%, while the actual figure is around 10% (CBS, n.d.). This indicates a widespread misconception about the proportion of asylum migration relative to total migration. This is likely an effect of the presence of asylum-related issues in the media, but it also indicates the effectiveness of threat narratives employed by parties like the PVV, which use asylum-seekers as the primary scapegoat. This results in a selective perception of threat when it comes to migration.

Third, I found that narratives resonate when they tap into fears, are simple, and explain and provide solutions to the problems that citizens see around them. The first insight explains why threat narratives are so frequently used around migration and why parties like the PVV are successful with them. In addition, it directly aligns with ITT, which posits that perceived threats heighten intergroup bias and prejudices (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Simple narratives resonate better than more complex ones because elaborate explanations encompassing many factors can be overwhelming and harder to grasp. In contrast, narratives that reduce complex issues to a single cause do not require a deep understanding of issues and are therefore much more accessible. In the case of migration, migrants and the EU function as scapegoats and provide a clear target for public discontent. By providing a clear "other" to blame, these narratives unify a group against a perceived common threat. In addition, the simplicity makes the narratives easily communicable through diverse media channels, amplifying their reach and impact and enhancing their effectiveness. I even found that this simplicity is more important than the accuracy of a narrative when it comes to finding resonance. Although the literature on populist parties highlights their tendency to simplify political issues (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Golder, 2016), they do not explore why simplistic threat narratives appeal to voters.

Regarding migration, narratives resonate mostly when they are about asylum migration since most issues identified in the citizen interviews were attributed to asylum migration rather than labour or study migration. Especially the PVV often uses asylum migration as a scapegoat for societal problems, while the centre- to right-wing parties NSC, BBB and VVD are less explicit in formulating threats and tend to be more nuanced in their explanations. In contrast, left-wing parties like GL-PvdA and D66 rarely use such threats but attribute these problems primarily to the failures of previous Dutch governments in managing asylum migration, integrating migrants, housing labour migrants, and addressing the housing shortage. When discussing limiting migration, these parties focus on labour migration, as it represents a much larger group than asylum migration and therefore has a bigger social impact. However, many people do not see the difference between asylum and labour migrants or believe the groups are similar in size, and many issues that people associate with migration are centred on asylum-seekers. At the same time, few issues were attributed to labour migrants but instead, their importance to the Dutch economy was recognised. Therefore, focusing on labour migration is much less effective than focusing on asylum-seekers.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study provide empirical support for ITT, confirming the theory's claims about the impact of perceived threats on intergroup bias. Apart from the impact on intergroup bias, this study also illustrates support for the driving power of threat narratives on political attitudes. Specifically, it shows how realistic and symbolic threats are used by primarily the far-right PVV to stir up fear, driving anti-immigration attitudes. This impact is not discussed in ITT but future research into this could provide insights into the theory's applicability to real-world political dynamics and voter psychology. Second, the finding that some threat narratives are adapted to the context of the Netherlands, e.g. emphasising asylum migration over labour migration due to labour shortages, highlights the adaptability of threat narratives. This suggests that ITT and FRP literature can be extended to explore how political narratives are contextually modified to maximise their impact. Finally, the threat narratives used provide a nuanced understanding of how these threats operate at both the individual and group levels. The findings align with the literature, where realistic threats on migration are linked to individual-level insecurities (losers of globalisation thesis, relative deprivation mechanism), while symbolic threats are explained on the group level (transnational cleavage theory, clash of civilisation thesis) (Golder, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018).

The findings of this research also have some practical implications, primarily for understanding how political narratives on migration shape public perceptions and social attitudes in the Netherlands. The findings underscore the potency of political threat narratives in shaping public sentiments, indicating that they can lead to heightened fears and misconceptions about migration. In this way, such narratives potentially drive public support for stricter immigration policies and play a role in the electoral success of FRPs. Furthermore, the use of narratives that scapegoat migrants and emphasize threats can significantly hinder integration efforts and damage social cohesion. Such narratives foster an "us versus them" mentality, which can lead to discrimination and racism, further hindering the social integration of migrants and creating a vicious cycle. In addition, inaccurate or exaggerated narratives can increase societal discontent and distrust in politics and therefore pose a danger to democracy. For example, by disproportionately attributing societal issues to asylum-seekers, the public's misconceptions are reinforced, making them more susceptible to far-right rhetoric. When political success is driven by misinformation and sowing fear, it undermines informed decision-making and rational public discourse, leading to increased political and societal polarisation.

The strategic use of migration narratives by political parties to gain support may be effective in the short term, but it raises ethical questions about the responsibility of political leaders in shaping societal attitudes. Furthermore, in today's political landscape, parties that do not use simplified stories or play into fears may struggle to be successful. This shift towards marketing and selling narratives over solving real problems poses a concerning trend for the future of politics, where substance may be overshadowed by strategy. From this research, it has become clear that the role of the media in disseminating and amplifying political narratives cannot be understated. More balanced and in-depth reporting could provide a more comprehensive understanding of migration issues, but the question is how such stories can be spread across a broader audience. In addition, given the misconceptions about the scale and impact of different types of migration, there is a clear need for informational initiatives to inform the public accurately. Correcting such misunderstandings could lead to more informed public debates and policy decisions.

Reflections and Future Research Suggestions

Before conducting the research, I expected that the sensitivity of the topic would significantly influence the interviews. However, this was not the case. The politicians I interviewed were almost unanimously critical of the PVV and other parties that use narratives that contain exaggerated or inaccurate information. They all agreed that such narratives can shape public perceptions and therefore argued that politicians should be more careful with their statements. If I would have had the opportunity to interview someone from the PVV, the sensitivity might have been a bigger issue. The anonymity of each interviewee and my attempts to present myself as neutral also helped to mitigate sensitivity concerns. In contrast, sensitivity played a more significant role in the citizen interviews, particularly in selecting interviewees. Many people refused to participate, especially in areas where right-wing parties are more dominant such as Kootwijkerbroek, Assen and Maasdijk. To address this, I changed my strategy and started to approach individuals via my network, but still, some were hesitant to participate. I think this was the case because individuals with stronger positions on migration might feel threatened by a student from Wageningen University asking possibly critical questions about this. Nonetheless, switching strategies in selecting citizens helped, and I was able to find enough participants who wanted to discuss the topic openly, regardless of their or my opinions.

One study finding is that most interviewees expressed nuanced opinions about migration. Based on the election results, approximately one-third of my interviewees should have been PVV voters, and corresponding to their election manifesto, be critical of every type of migration. However, the critique was mostly focused on asylum migration and almost everyone had nuanced opinions about labour and study migration. This indicates two possibilities. First, it is possible that my interviewees poorly represented the Dutch population, given that I conducted only 12 interviews. A second, more intriguing option is that PVV voters do not necessarily have strong opinions on labour and study migration but are attracted to the party for other reasons. The interviews revealed that most people are primarily critical of asylum migration and tend to overestimate its size. In the narrative analysis, I concluded that the PVV deliberately uses the terms “asylum migration” and “migration” interchangeably, and most of their narratives focus solely on asylum migration or migration in general rather than on labour, study or family migration. Also, there are indications that many people outside of the larger cities feel unheard by established parties, making them more likely to be inclined to anti-establishment parties like the PVV. The combination of these factors – misconceptions about asylum migration and a sense of being unheard – may better explain why people vote for the PVV rather than the party’s specific stances on migration. However, more research is needed to say whether this actually is the case.

I would like to propose a couple more suggestions for future research. As explained in the introduction, the success of FRPs is not solely a Dutch phenomenon but is occurring in many more countries within and outside Europe. Therefore, it would be valuable to conduct comparative research with European countries that also grapple with migration and the rise of FRPs. Such research could explore the similarities and differences in migration narratives and strategies employed by political parties. Additionally, examining countries where FRPs are popular despite migration not being a significant issue would provide insights into the extent to which these parties still utilise migration in their narratives.

In this research, the significant role of the media in disseminating migration narratives and shaping public perceptions was highlighted. Future research should investigate how different media forms are used by political parties to convey their messages. Comparative research between countries with varying media strategies, especially in terms of providing platforms to FRPs, could give insights into how media influences the success of such parties. This could include analysing the impact of traditional media, social media, and digital platforms on the public's perception of migration and political narratives. Another recommendation has to do with the key finding that simplistic threat narratives resonate best with potential voters. There seems to be a lack of literature that explores why simplistic threat narratives appeal to voters. Further research into the psychological mechanisms behind this resonance is needed to reveal why these narratives effectively capture public attention and influence voter behaviour. Finally, this study revealed that left-wing parties often struggle to develop compelling migration narratives. Future research should focus on understanding the narratives employed by left-wing parties and why these narratives may be less effective in resonating with the public. It would be beneficial to explore how left-wing parties can craft more persuasive and impactful narratives that address migration issues while promoting social cohesion and integration.

8. Conclusion

In this study, I have aimed to gain insight into the shaping power of political party narratives on migration on public perceptions in the Netherlands. This interaction is possibly crucial in understanding the global rise of electorally successful far-right parties (FRPs). To answer my main research question *“How do political parties in the Netherlands use narratives on migration to shape realistic and symbolic threats amongst Dutch citizens?”*, I have conducted a media analysis of the six largest parties in the Netherlands and conducted interviews with politicians from different parties and government levels and citizens from various locations in the Netherlands. I used Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) to frame my analysis. Key findings include that primarily the PVV employs several narratives on migration that use both realistic and symbolic threats. All other parties, including the left-wing GL-PvdA and D66, use toned-down versions of these narratives or use counternarratives that emphasize other aspects of migration. Second, several perceived threats amongst citizens were revealed, primarily about the contribution of migrants to the housing shortage, but their contribution to nuisance and cultural clashes were also mentioned. However, many interviewees held nuanced opinions on these issues, and almost all issues identified were perceived to be related to asylum migration. Furthermore, the proportion of asylum migration to total migration was consistently overestimated. Third, I found that narratives resonate when they invoke fear, are simple, and explain and provide solutions to problems people experience daily. The strategies identified that are used to shape perceived realistic and symbolic threats amongst Dutch citizens mainly align with the elements of resonant narratives. They include exploiting fears, simplifying problems, scapegoating, and trying to link their party to solving these problems. Right-wing parties often use the migrants themselves and the European Union as scapegoats, while left-wing parties tend to blame previous governments. Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Not only does the media’s focus on negative news stir up fear about AZCs, but politicians also strategically use diverse media channels to share their narratives with a wider audience.

The findings of this research point to the potency of political threat narratives in shaping public perceptions and political attitudes. The PVV, but also other FRPs abroad successfully use such narratives to appeal to voters’ fears and insecurities, aligning with ITT and literature on FRPs. This has significant implications for understanding the drivers of far-right voting behaviour. In addition, the use of threat narratives and the scapegoating of asylum-seekers can drive the development of negative attitudes towards migrants and contribute to an “us versus them” mentality, which can hinder integration efforts and lead to increased discrimination and social exclusion, and as a result. Furthermore, such narratives can undermine rational public discourse, potentially leading to greater societal polarisation and decreased trust in political institutions. Understanding the impact of threat narratives on public perceptions and voting behaviour is vital for addressing the global rise of FRPs and ensuring the health of democratic societies. Political parties, media, and civil society should work together to promote accurate information about migration and emphasize common values to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience.

9. References

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Media analysis & interviewee list

Media Analysis

Election Manifesto				
Code	Party	Name	Pages	Year
M1	PVV	Nederlanders weer op 1 <i>The Dutch back at number 1</i>	48	2023
M2	GLN-PvdA	Samen voor een hoopvolle toekomst <i>Together for a hopeful future</i>	105	2023
M3	VVD	Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen. <i>Giving space. Defining borders.</i>	84	2023
M4	NSC	Tijd voor herstel. Vertrouwen. Zekerheid. Perspectief. <i>Time for recovery. Trust. Security. Perspective.</i>	80	2023
M5	D66	Nieuwe energie voor Nederland <i>New energy for the Netherlands</i>	224	2023
M6	BBB	Iedere dag BBBeter. Van Vertrouwenscrisis naar Noaberstaat <i>Every day BBBetter. From crisis of confidence to noaber state.</i>	128	2023

Television Debates				
Code	Name	Debate leader	Viewers	Date
D1	NOS Nederland Kiest	Trip, R.	1.953.000	21/11/23
D2	Debat van Nederland (SBS6)	Genee, W.	1.626.000	16/11/23
D3	EenVandaag Verkiezingsdebat	Hagens, P. J.	1.588.000	20/11/23
D4	CollegeTour Verkiezingsdebat	Huys, T.	1.264.000	22/10/23
D5	RTL Verkiezingsdebat	Lambie, F. & Lammers, D.	1.202.000	5/11/23

Newspaper interviews				
Code	Party	Newspaper	Interviewer(s)	Date
N1	PVV	AD	Klaassen N. & Kok, L.	27/10/23
N2	PVV	Telegraaf	Bartels, V. & Lengton, I.	15/9/23
N3	PVV	De Volkskrant	Meijer, R. & Righton, N.	15/11/23
N4	PVV	Nu.nl	Van der Groot, E.	8/11/23
N5	GL-PvdA	AD	Keultjes, H. & Hoedeman, J.	13/11/23
N6	GL-PvdA	Telegraaf	Lengton, I. & De Winther, W.	15/11/23
N7	GL-PvdA	De Volkskrant	Bhikhie, A. & Hofs, Y.	18/11/23
N8	GL-PvdA	NRC	De Koning, P. & Valk, G.	13/10/23
N9	GL-PvdA	Trouw	Kieskamp, W.	10/11/23
N10	GL-PvdA	Nu.nl	Slomp, P.	16/11/23
N11	VVD	AD	Den Hartog, T. & Kok, L.	17/11/23
N12	VVD	Telegraaf	Lengton, I. & De Winther, W.	18/11/23
N30	VVD	De Volkskrant	Reijmer, L. & Meijer, R.	19/11/23
N13	VVD	NRC	Valk, G. & De Koning, P.	24/10/23

N14	VVD	Trouw	Kieskamp, W. & Chaudron, J.	19/10/23
N15	VVD	Nu.nl	Van der Groot, E.	15/11/23
N16	NSC	AD	Klaassen, N. & Den Hartog, T.	18/11/23
N17	NSC	Telegraaf	Lengton, I. & De Winther, W.	11/11/23
N18	NSC	De Volkskrant	Hendrickx, F. & Righton, N.	17/11/23
N19	NSC	Trouw	Schmidt, C. & Kieskamp, W.	1/9/23
N20	NSC	Nu.nl	Van der Groot, E.	23/10/23
N21	D66	AD	Van Soest, H. & Timmer, E.	8/11/23
N22	D66	De Volkskrant	Righton, N. & Bhikie, A.	10/11/23
N23	D66	Trouw	Van Gestel, M.	19/9/23
N24	D66	Nu.nl	Slomp, P.	10/11/23
N25	BBB	AD	Kok, L. & Timmer, E.	11/11/23
N26	BBB	Telegraaf	Van den Brink, P. & De Winther, W.	31/10/23
N27	BBB	De Volkskrant	Hendrickx, F. & Hofs, Y.	16/11/23
N28	BBB	NRC	De Koning, P. & König, Eppo	6/10/23
N29	BBB	Nu.nl	Slomp, P.	14/11/23

Interviews

Politicians			
<i>Code</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Date</i>
IP1	Volt	Provincial	16/4/24
IP2	PvdA	Provincial	6/5/24
IP3	CDA	Provincial	22/5/24
IP4	VVD	Municipal & candidate-MEP	9/4/24
IP5	SGP	Municipal	12/4/24
IP6	D66	Municipal	13/5/24
IP7	BBB	Senate	23/4/24
IP8	BBB	Provincial	24/4/24
IP9	ChristenUnie	Municipal	25/4/24
IP10	ChristenUnie	Youth organisation	15/5/24

Citizens				
<i>Code</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Date</i>
IC1	Assen	Man	45-55	8/5/24
IC2	Assen	Woman	65+	8/5/24
IC3	Assen	Man	55-65	8/5/24
IC4	Maasdijk	Man	25-35	28/5/24
IC5	Maasdijk	Woman	25-35	4/6/24
IC6	Maasdijk	Man	25-35	4/6/24
IC7	Wageningen	Man	65+	2/5/24
IC8	Wageningen	Man	65+	2/5/24
IC9	Wageningen	Man	25-35	3/5/24
IC10	Kootwijkerbroek	Man & Woman	65+	10/5/24
IC11	Kootwijkerbroek	Man	15-25	10/5/24
IC12	Kootwijkerbroek	Man	35-45	16/5/24

Appendix 2: Codes used in Atlas

For the media analysis, the following codes have been used in Atlas.ti:

- Realistic threat
 - The Netherlands is full
 - Expensiveness of migration
 - Migrants versus the Dutch zero-sum game
 - Migration → nuisance/criminality
 - Migration → housing shortage
 - Migration → pressure on public social services
 - Study migration → shortage of experts here
- Symbolic threat
 - Migration → Islamisation of the Netherlands
 - Norms, values, traditions, and ways of living
- Emphasis on different types of migration
- Integration needs to be better
- Migrants are needed to fill in jobs
- International development projects → less migration
- Migration → pressure on asylum system → inability to help “real” refugees
- The Dutch asylum system as a magnet for asylum-seekers
- The vulnerable migrant

To code the citizen & politician interviews, the following codes have been added:

- Fear of the unknown
- Asylum-seeker / EU as a scapegoat
- Distrusting politics
- The shaping power of politicians on society
- The shaping power of the media
- Randstad versus the rest of the Netherlands
- The economic refugee
- Simple explanations
- The asylum system is too flexible

Appendix 3: Word frequencies in the election manifestos

Generated with Atlas.ti

Word	PVV	GL-PvdA	VVD	NSC	D66	BBB	Total
asielzoekers	12	32	22	5	25	11	107
arbeidsmigranten	2	29	19	7	18	8	83
migratie	3	19	13	18	12	8	73
vluchtelingen	2	40	7	3	16	1	69
asiel	5	15	5	4	6	9	44
arbeidsmigratie	0	15	6	4	17	1	43
statushouders	8	0	3	2	6	6	25
expats	1	3	0	2	0	1	7
asielmigratie	0	0	4	2	0	0	6
studiemigratie	2	0	1	3	0	0	6
gelukszoekers	3	0	0	0	0	1	4
jihad	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
studiemigranten	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
islamisering	1	0	0	0	0	0	1