



The Netherlands Institute  
for Social Research

# Summary

## Does the political system represent everyone?

A study of perceived representation, trust in institutions and political participation among people with a migration background



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## **Does the political system represent everyone?**

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### *original title*

Is de politiek er voor iedereen?

Een onderzoek naar ervaren representatie, institutioneel vertrouwen en politieke participatie bij personen met een migratieachtergrond

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## Summary

Our democracy functions optimally when everyone is able to participate, is heard, is represented and feels this to be the case. But does our political system actually represent everyone? Politically active citizens who take an interest and who are listened to are rarely representative of the population as a whole. The inequality in participation, representation and influence is selective and benefits persons and groups who are better off (Lijphart 1997). This can result in a vicious circle. The problems faced by voter groups who participate less receive less political attention. This strengthens the feeling of not being heard and seen, which in turn widens the rift people experience between themselves and politics and further decreases political attention (Lijphart 1997; Vermeulen et al. 2022). In current Dutch politics, having completed vocational education, which is linked to a certain income position (Bovens and Wille 2011; Hakverdian and Schakel 2017), and/or having a specific migration background (Mügge et al. 2019; Spierings and Vermeulen 2023) reduces political participation and perceived of political influence.

Against this background, the present study looked at perceived representation, trust in institutions and political participation among people with a migration background. We especially studied people from outside of Europe and their children (the first and second generation). The study examined 1) to what extent people with and without a migration background differ from each other; 2) which factors help explain perceived representation, institutional trust and political participation; and 3) to what extent these three issues are interlinked. We used survey data, organised focus groups and held individual interviews.

### ***Descriptive and substantive representation and the importance of politics of presence***

With regard to the representation of people with a migration background, we looked at *descriptive representation*. This is about specific characteristics of people in politics, such as their ethnic background, skin colour or religion. We also looked at *substantive representation*, which refers to the actions and positioning of politicians and political parties, and the extent to which people feel these are in line with their wishes and positions. The idea is that descriptive representation leads to better substantive representation because of a greater responsiveness to the wishes and interests of the group being represented. In the literature, this is referred to as *politics of presence*. Shared experiences and knowledge can be specific to people with certain characteristics, and addressing these in politics is to an important degree reserved to people with these characteristics. Having *shared experiences* is seen as crucial for perceived political representation.

### ***Dutch politics are not felt to be very diverse***

This study has found that many Dutch people with a migration background do not perceive politics, in particular national politics, as being very diverse. This involves not just origin, skin colour or religion, but also characteristics such as class, sex and education. For example, respondents note that most politicians have participated in higher education and are from the higher social classes, with the result that they do not and cannot represent the population well. However, many respondents place a shared migration experience at the centre of political representation. The importance of *politics of presence* is broadly affirmed. People with shared experiences are likelier to address relevant issues and will do so better. Among other aspects, the shared experience involves people's migration background (e.g. their being refugees or having the same country of origin) or their experience of being excluded because of their origin, religion or skin colour, and their resistance to this.

Respondents feel that people like themselves are not being heard in politics. Issues considered important by people like themselves are trivialised by politicians. Such experiences are indicative of *epistemic injustice*: not wanting to know and acknowledge certain experiences and types of knowledge in a political context. In connection with this, the respondents find that politicians who have a migration background or who are Muslims cannot or do not want to speak out in politics on issues around diversity and inclusion.

There is a lack of opportunity for persons as well as points of view that can do justice to the stories, needs and interests of certain religious and ethnic groups. This makes people feel less represented by the political system. It is felt to be exclusionary and contributes to the feeling that these groups are not part of the system and are not allowed to be part of it. It also reduces the credibility of the political system.

### **Differences between and within migrant groups: people with a refugee background often feel represented – the second generation the least**

Generally speaking, the more established groups feel less represented by the political system than the groups that have not been in the Netherlands for long. For example, people with a refugee background usually feel adequately represented. The *reference point* hypothesis applies here: the political system in the Netherlands is compared with that of the country of origin, which for many people was the reason to flee their country. On average, second-generation Dutch people feel least represented by the political system on issues they find important.

### **Descriptive representation is important but not decisive for substantive representation**

When evaluating political representation, people with a migration background consider both descriptive and substantive representation. This goes beyond just having politicians who look like them and who represent their interests adequately. It relates to the entire political system (descriptive) and to the actions and behaviour of individual politicians (substantive). It also relates to the opportunities people with a migration background get to draw attention to their stories, wishes and aspirations. According to respondents, politicians with shared experiences create a more responsive political system that is better able to address the problems of people who look like them. The findings suggest there is a strong need for *relational equality* (Anderson 2010; Klarenbeek 2021). Relational equality requires that members of a society acknowledge each other's moral value and share the same social status. It also assumes there are equal opportunities for participating in the political system and that all perspectives and interests are given equal weight in decision-making processes. Respondents see descriptive and substantive representation as an integral part of this, involving political acceptance of their shared experience, religious beliefs and/or migration background.

As such, the present study indicates a dynamic relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, trust in politics and institutions, and political participation. Descriptive representation of people with a migration background is an important first step towards political representation and trust. Here, we recognise the mechanism behind *politics of presence*, as theorised by the literature: it is up to people with a specific religious or migration background and with *shared experiences* to ensure political attention for stories, interests and points of view. While descriptive representation is important, this study also shows that this does not necessarily lead to substantive representation. Respondents point to a significant gap between what they find important and how this is reflected in policy, behaviour and politicians' views. Precisely those issues considered important by many people who belong to an underrepresented group (migration background, Muslims, refugees) do not feature much in politics.

### **Perceived exclusion as a cause of not feeling represented and of having little trust**

This study clearly shows the impact of the experience of exclusion and discrimination. The feeling that groups and persons do not participate and are not taken seriously contributes to the perception of being distant from the political system, both in terms of representation and in terms of political trust. Beliefs about exclusion from society go hand in hand with beliefs about exclusion from the political system. It appears that the evaluation of the political system mainly centres on the way this system deals with issues around inclusion and diversity. This involves both descriptive and substantive representation: both are inextricably linked. It follows that the problem is not automatically solved if more people with a migration background get politically active; it is also important to provide these groups with opportunities. Both are needed to give people the feeling that they have adequate political representation.

### **Low trust in institutions is linked with not voting**

The feeling of not being represented and low trust in political institutions are important reasons for not voting. On average, people with a migration background vote less often than people without a migration background. This does not apply to other types of political participation, such as attending political meetings or joining in political debates or action on the Internet. In these areas, there is no difference between people with a migration background and people without one.

## **Policy recommendations**

### **Relational equality and bridging recognition gaps**

An important conclusion of this study is that people with a migration background widely share the feeling that their voices and the voices of people like them are not heard – that these are not given their due by the political system. Essentially, it is about feeling excluded. Respondents feel they do not count fully in the political system: in their eyes, the system is not there for people like them. They are looking for relational equality (Klarenbeek 2021). As set out above, relational equality comes from two sides and requires that people fully acknowledge and accept each other's presence. It also supposes that people can then participate in politics as equals and reach decisions on an equal footing. The various perspectives should receive equal weight in this process. The outcome may well be different from (one of) the points of view of people with a migration background; in fact, this will often be the case. Things one group finds important may not be considered at all important by another group. In addition, not everything groups want is achievable. This therefore does not mean people should all just get what they want, but the shared nature and equality of the process and the development of a vision for it will likely allow more people to feel adequately represented in politics.

The need for relational equality in politics is not exclusive to people with a migration background. Studies of such issues as political trust and support for anti-establishment parties increasingly tend to explain these in terms of differences in status experienced by citizens when comparing their own world and that of politics and politicians (Noordzij 2023; Gidron and Hall 2020). Such studies often concentrate on people who have completed vocational education. The perceived differences in status are related to the perception that the worlds and lifestyles of politicians and those who have completed vocational education are far apart and that the political system does not take this into account and looks down on it. The feeling of not being recognised and not being treated equally contributes to disaffection and a distance between people and politics. Lamont (2018) has referred to this as a *recognition gap*, which she defines as inequality in *cultural membership* between groups. Cultural membership refers to the status of individuals who are defined collectively as valuable members of a community. Being seen as such means enjoying *recognition*.

It is not an easy task to achieve relational equality. We see a relationship here with inclusion and diversity policy, the goal of which is to do equal justice to differences between people and groups and to counter discrimination and racism. We know from other domains, such as the labour market, that this is a complex trajectory and that relational equality is not achieved overnight. In the political domain, it seems that important steps still need to be taken. Several respondents note that the political system and political parties lack a vision of how to bring about relational equality. We recommend making a start on this, the central question being how greater justice can be done to the increased diversity of Dutch society through descriptive and substantive representation. A first step is to increase the accessibility of politics for people from underrepresented groups. Our study shows that this step alone is not enough: it is also important that divergent perspectives and interests get a voice in politics and are weighed equally.

## **Developing a vision of diversity and inclusion**

As the present study also shows, political parties struggle with the so-called identity-to-politics link, where social identities have political relevance (Lee 2008). Matters of identity have become an important part of our political system. The social group a person identifies with can be politically relevant, although this does not apply to everyone. However, politically ignoring, trivialising or even stigmatising a migration background and related experiences, values, emotions and diverse identities is an important factor explaining the perceived deficit of political representation and lack of trust in politics among many people with a migration background. According to our respondents, the Dutch political system lacks a clear vision for our diverse society. Politicians and political parties often feel uneasy about the topic. In many cases, this is because of a degree of uncertainty about how to act, but it is also because of the anticipation of criticism from society and from a number of other political parties. However, having a diverse country also means accepting a diversity of political opinions, experiences and philosophies of life, varying from group to group as well as within groups. This requires serious consideration of ways in which underrepresented groups can gain access to all aspects of the Dutch political system, including in the event that these groups have experiences and philosophies of life that differ from the mainstream.

## **Greater attention for diversity and inclusion in political parties**

Political parties should have a more active diversity policy in order to give a larger group of people with a migration background the opportunity to contribute their views on the basis of their own experience. In its diversity policy, the political sector appears to be trailing other sectors of society. It can benefit from making greater use of these other sectors' experiences and best practices. For example, companies increasingly take the initiative – encouraged, remarkably enough, by the political sector – to break the status quo in the workplace. Their aim is to achieve greater diversity and inclusion in various parts of the organisation. So as to stimulate the intake and advancement of personnel, companies pay increased attention to creating a more open environment. This emphasises the value of cultural diversity and allows professionals to develop successfully (Van Oudenhoven-Van der Zee and Van Alphen 2019; Vermeulen and Marczyński 2021).

## **The political system is there for everyone: challenging politicians' discriminatory statements**

In essence, underrepresented groups should get access to the political system and feel part of it. Discriminatory statements by politicians go against this aim. People with a migration background are critical about politicians who make discriminatory statements. The goal of politics and political officeholders should be to include groups rather than to set them apart. Respondents criticise the latter happening. They feel a need for politicians to challenge and distance themselves from such statements. They want to feel represented by politics and politicians, which is impeded when discriminatory statements are made and are not challenged.

In the public and political debate, there is a thin line between identifying problems and tensions around the diverse society on the one hand and excluding certain population groups on the other. When politicians or public figures cast diversity as a problem, this can throw up barriers to political participation elsewhere in society, further increasing inequality. This does not mean that issues to do with a diverse society cannot be treated as a problem. Politics is and should be about what society is to be like in the future. This means tensions and conflicts must be up for discussion. It is important, however, for participants in the political and public debate to be aware of the consequences of certain opinions for how people perceive political representation among people with a migration background. Casting such a background as a problem can end up contributing to structural participatory and representative inequality in the Netherlands.

### ***'General' measures to increase representation and trust***

This study points at factors also found in other population studies. Respondents are concerned about behaviour in politics and about the lack of decisiveness. When the government malfunctions, this undermines trust in politics. The Dutch childcare benefits scandal, which especially hit people with a migration background, is often brought up as an example of this. Citizens expect a responsive government that performs well (Van Noije et al. 2023), and so do the respondents in this study. 'General' measures aiming to ensure this will help build up trust in politics among Dutch people with a migration background. Citizens (with and without a migration background) are pessimistic about the problem-solving capability of the political system. Improving this capability is an important factor affecting trust in politics. In addition, Van Noije et al. (2023) point out the importance of citizens having more equal influence on political decision-making. This theme also stands out in our study held among people with a migration background. It is important for decisions to be based on an inclusive consideration of interests. A first step to achieve this is better numerical representation of underrepresented groups. In addition, the interests and points of view of groups who have less trust in institutions should be expressly considered when making political decisions and setting policy. Further, decision-making and policy development should become more transparent in order to achieve political trust and representation. An inclusive consideration of interests will not always be visible to everyone. A better and transparent accounting for why specific decisions were made may take away the feeling that the interests of some groups count for more than those of other groups.

An inclusive consideration of interests forms part of an empathetic, resilient government (Van Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2023) that can enhance perceived representation and people's trust in politics and institutions. A characteristic of an empathetic government is that citizens, different as they are, feel sufficiently represented. Having a multiplicity of voices should be the guiding principle for policy in an increasingly diverse society. An empathetic government seeks to take the various needs, abilities and ideals of citizens into account. The present study underscores the importance of having a multiplicity of voices and highlights the view of many of our respondents that this is lacking. A migration background in a broad sense – ethnic background, religion, colour – forms an important reference framework for this: it is about shared experiences, for example regarding the migration process, group history and exclusion on the basis of origin, religion or skin colour. These are experiences that form part of the multiplicity of voices in politics and policy.

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