



Summary

Living together in the future

A foresight study on social cohesion under the influence of demographic changes in the period until 2050



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original title

Samenleven in de toekomst

Een verkenning naar sociale cohesie bij een veranderde bevolkingssamenstelling in 2050

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Summary

S.1 A quantitative foresight study on social cohesion: why and how?

Why a foresight study on demographics in relation to social cohesion?

Social cohesion is important for a properly functioning society. It is the cement that connects people, irrespective of their backgrounds, convictions or status. A society of people who feel strongly connected is more resilient to social problems; people feel safer, less lonely, and they support each other (see e.g. Dinesen et al. 2020; Putnam 2000; Sampson 2012; Ultee et al. 2009; Uslaner 2018). If people feel involved, are connected with each other and have opportunities to take an active part in society, this will also help them achieve shared goals. Social cohesion is crucial not only to maintain the welfare state, but to create productive and safe environments where people live, work and learn, and to address societal crises – whether in the form of wars, pandemics or climate change (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023).

Individualisation, secularisation and emancipation have changed the way we live together in the Netherlands. New, online methods to meet other people have developed (Salverda et al. 2013), people's involvement with the church has decreased (De Hart et al. 2022; Schmeets and Houben 2023) and role patterns have changed (Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (CvdRM) 2023; Doorne-Huiskes et al. 2017). People also increasingly opt for alternative lifestyles and forms of cohabitation (Boderé et al. 2018; Kuyper 2018; OECD 2016). Improved access to education and changing economic demands on the working population have increased the proportion of people with higher professional or academic degrees. Digital technologies and globalisation have changed organisational structures and social relationships (Kool et al. 2021). Individual freedoms have increased and social identities have become more fluid (Van de Vijver 2015). Add to this the impact of population ageing and increasing diversity. As a result of a combination of falling birth rates and rising life expectancy, the proportion of older people in society has grown (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2024a; Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2021). Due to labour migration and asylum migration, people with different backgrounds, languages, religions and traditions have settled in the Netherlands. These developments have made Dutch society more diverse in all sorts of ways.

This raises the question of what consequences all this is having today, and is going to have in the future, for social cohesion. Social cohesion has been a source for concern ever since it became a subject of attention (De Hart et al. 2002; Miltenburg et al. 2023). If the composition of the population changes in future, due to factors such as continued population ageing and migration, this may influence social cohesion. When people are dissimilar in terms of their habits, views and interests, they may also find it more difficult to feel connected with each other (De Bakker et al. 2023).

This study is important as it seeks to explore the consequences of changing demographics for social cohesion in the future.¹ Those insights can help create timely intervention strategies aimed at promoting or protecting cohesion. This study follows up on questions that have been raised in society for a while, as expressed, for instance, in the Dijkhoff c.s. (TK 2018/2019) and Den Haan c.s. (TK 2021/2022) motions calling on the government to map out the consequences of demographic developments for Dutch society in the form of various scenarios.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to clarify the potential consequences of demographic changes for social cohesion in the period up to 2050, through different scenarios. This enables us to compare social cohesion today with that of multiple future 'versions' of the Netherlands.

¹ The complete study and all annexes can be found on www.scp.nl.

What do we mean by ‘social cohesion’?

Social cohesion is a multidimensional and comprehensive concept. In this study, we have opted for a neutral and descriptive definition. Following the example of De Bakker et al. (2023: 10), we define social cohesion as *the extent to which (groups of) people feel connected with each other and with a range of institutions and reflect this in their behaviour*. Key components of this definition are: feelings and behaviour, and connections among people and between people and institutions (De Bakker et al. 2023; Chan et al. 2006). Table S.1 shows our implementation in a two-by-two matrix.

Table S.1 A two-by-two matrix for measuring social cohesion

	subjective (views)	objective (behaviour)
horizontal dimension (cohesion among citizens)	social trust <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trust in others • how do (groups of) people think about each other • sense of connection (feeling at home in and feeling responsible for the Netherlands) 	social participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • volunteering • membership of interest groups or recreational organisations • contacts with friends and acquaintances
vertical dimension (cohesion between citizens and institutions)	trust in institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in political institutions • in implementing authorities • in private bodies 	political participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voting in parliamentary elections • conventional political activities • unconventional political activities

Source: Chan et al. (2006); adapted by the National Institute for Social Research/SCP

So the matrix recognises four aspects for measuring social cohesion. The first of these is *social trust*. One key ingredient of social trust is trust in other people or general trust, which is a precondition for a wide variety of social processes, such as entering into relationships. Another ingredient of social trust is people’s attitude towards others and the extent to which they feel at home in, and responsible for, the Netherlands. A second essential aspect of social cohesion is *social participation*. This concerns the extent to which people are involved in and take part in society, from a social perspective. This aspect does not include education or work. Participation as a citizen (other than as a professional) has a societal and a social function. It can contribute to the realisation of society’s objectives, and by taking part in social activities, people can come into contact and build relationships with others, also outside of their social bubble. Elements of social participation we analyse in this study are volunteering, membership of interest groups, recreational organisations and friends’ networks. The third aspect of social cohesion is *trust in institutions*: the House of Representatives, the civil service, the European Union (EU), judges, the police, the military, the press, the business community or the banking sector. Societies with higher levels of trust in institutions tend to be more stable. Trust in institutions is essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of those institutions and reduces the chance of social unrest and political instability. If people are convinced that institutions function as they collectively agreed they should, in accordance with shared values, and that those institutions are reliable and competent, they will be more inclined to cooperate with those institutions, respect their decisions and follow their guidelines. It is also important for citizens to feel represented at the political level, and to participate in politics. Such participation is the core of a democratic system. The fourth aspect of social cohesion that we identify in this study, therefore, is *political participation*. Examples of political participation include voting in general elections and a range of other political activities, such as approaching politicians, civil servants or the media, or participating in protests or other campaigns in the physical world or online. For a well-functioning democracy, it is important that all communities participate in the political decision-making process and that everyone feels represented. This ensures that a whole range of viewpoints and interests are represented in the political process.

Apart from being multidimensional and comprehensive, social cohesion is a normative concept. Whether people perceive the sense of connectedness and the resulting social behaviour as excessive or insufficient depends on their views of humanity and the world. In this context, ‘excessive’ could apply to closed communities that exclude others, for example, while ‘insufficient’ could refer to neighbourhoods where residents do not interact with each other.

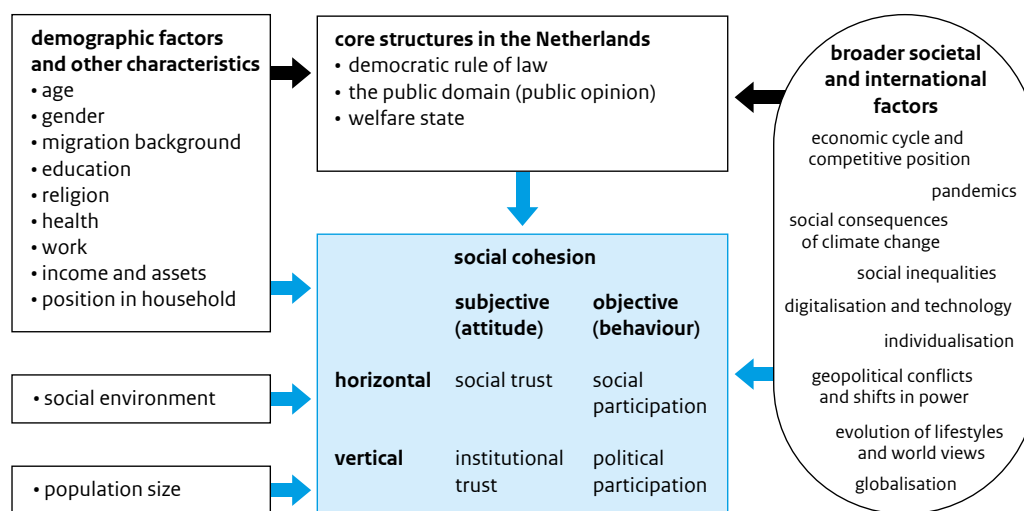
It is important, however, not to view social cohesion simply as the sum total of the various aspects identified above. If a country scores high on trust in others but low on trust in institutions, these results cannot simply be offset against each other. This is why the focus in this report is often on the separate indicators of social cohesion.

Which factors influence social cohesion?

Connections among individuals and between people and institutions do not arise in a vacuum, but are created and shaped by a wide variety of factors. Figure 5.1 presents the conceptual model of social cohesion. The influencing factors can be found in three fields:

- 1 demographic factors at the individual, neighbourhood and national level, and other individual characteristics;
- 2 core structures of institutions in the Netherlands; and
- 3 broader societal and international factors.

Figure 5.1 General conceptual model: factors that influence social cohesion



Source: Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP

All these factors may concern Dutch society as a whole as well as individual groups or regions. Many studies, including the present one, take the individual level as a basis for analysis. By combining those individual insights, we can create a picture of social cohesion in society as a whole.

Our research method

There is no single standard method for foresight studies on social cohesion. Indeed, there are various research types and techniques available. There are methods for quantitative or qualitative research. A quantitative foresight study presents future developments in figures. Quantitative models use historical data to identify trends and correlations and make forecasts. A qualitative foresight study describes or depicts the future in text and is useful as a means of presenting developments, relationships and policy alternatives in an accessible form.

This study is a quantitative foresight study that uses scenarios for demographic and societal developments in the Netherlands. We have chosen this approach because we aim to explore developments across the entire population and align with the population forecasts of NIDI and Statistics Netherlands (NIDI and Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2021). In the first quarter of 2025, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP itself will also publish a qualitative foresight study. That study will present the development of social cohesion in the light of digitalisation, individualisation and inequalities (De Bakker et al., to be published).

Carrying out a foresight study on social cohesion is a complex exercise. This is due in part to the complexity of social cohesion as a concept, with its numerous facets, but also to the fact that societies change permanently, which influences interactions between people and their sense of connection with others. Social cohesion is not a static phenomenon, nor does it only evolve on the basis of trends. It can fluctuate under the influence of unexpected events, crises or policy changes. All these aspects add to the challenge of conducting a foresight study on social cohesion.

We have explored future developments based on an approach that includes multiple components and aims to address the key issues mentioned:

- 1 development of an explicatory model for social cohesion;
- 2 sensitivity analyses of correlations;
- 3 scenarios based on demographic developments;
- 4 scenarios based on demographic developments and variation in assumed correlations;
- 5 scenarios based on demographic developments and changing influences of societal developments; and
- 6 calculations of the influence of population density through insights gained from country comparisons.

First of all, we used our conceptual model as a basis for building an explicatory model. This allowed us to estimate the correlations between social cohesion indicators and various influencing factors. We did this by using data on social cohesion, demographics and environmental characteristics for the past decade (the blue arrows in Figure S.1). We included a variety of social cohesion indicators in order to get a handle on the multidimensionality and layered nature of the concept. The majority of these estimates are based on the Statistics Netherlands data file on Social Cohesion and Welfare. This data covers 72,000 to 82,000 individuals during the period from 2012 up to and including 2022. For the social cohesion indicators not included in the data file we used Centerdata's LISS panel surveys from 2022.

The second component concerns the sensitivity analyses we carried out to gain insight into the robustness of correlations and their sensitivity to variations in input data and extremes. The sensitivity analyses enabled us to ensure transparency as regards the uncertainties and limitations of the model.

Next, in the third component, using the correlations found in the explicatory model, we performed simulations with the various demographic variants. These demographic scenarios centre around the question of how future population composition could potentially influence the social cohesion aspects identified above. In addition to changes as regards age (population ageing) and country of origin (migration), the composition of the population will also change in terms of type of education. In this phase, we based our analysis on the variants for population development by 2050 produced by NIDI and Statistics Netherlands and recently updated by Statistics Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2024a). We have used the most recent data in our analyses. The variants identified by NIDI and Statistics Netherlands differ in terms of both population size (growth and decline) and composition (high levels of labour migration and asylum migration, low migration, more ageing and more greening).

In the fourth and fifth components we extended the demographic scenarios. We did that by providing for more 'extreme' variants than those used by NIDI and Statistics Netherlands as regards the future composition of the Dutch population. In addition to demographic scenarios, we ran simulations with variations in the correlations found – both for demographics and for societal context. We did so by starting from alternative assumptions. If the increasing complexity of society in the future causes more people to fall behind, this could, for example, impact the level of people's trust in institutions. We ran several what-if scenarios to identify the possible implications of alternative assumptions. These what-if

scenarios help us establish the bandwidth of effects for a society with increasing divergence versus increasing convergence of people's views and behaviours.

The focus in the first five components is on the impact of changes in the *composition* of the population. In the final component, we also zoom in on the influence of changes in population *density* as a result of increasing population size. We do so on the basis of insights gained from country comparisons; after all, countries differ in terms of population density. Additionally, we have performed context analyses. These enable us to examine the effect of changes in population growth within a neighbourhood on one specific aspect of social cohesion: trust in other people. By providing for local environment aspects through context analyses, we also generate a picture of the effect of changes in population size on social cohesion.

While each component has its own perspective, they also provide cumulative insights. Taken together, the various scenarios explore the potential development of social cohesion aspects in the future.

S.2 What is the current state of social cohesion in the Netherlands?

Overall picture

Before discussing the expectations for the future (see the next section), we will outline the state of social cohesion today and in the past, and in comparison with other European countries. As shown in Table S.1, social cohesion can be analysed in terms of trust (social and institutional trust) and participation (social and political participation). These four aspects can be subdivided into a range of indicators. Based on the aspects and indicators identified in this report, Figure S.2 presents an overview of the state of social cohesion in the Netherlands in 2023. We will draw a comparison with 2012, where possible.

Social trust

Overall, social trust in the Netherlands is high. For example, a large proportion of the Dutch population – nearly seven out of ten people – trust other people. This proportion is also high in comparison with other European countries. Overall general trust has risen slightly in the Netherlands since 2012. When it comes to feeling connected with other people, by far the majority of respondents in the Netherlands are neutral or positive. There are some groups though that people feel less positive about. According to our data, this includes migrants from Eastern Europe and Arab or African countries, but also people who have only had primary or lower secondary vocational education.² When asked about their sense of connection with society, a very large majority of people in the Netherlands say they feel at home here. A far smaller number of people feel they have a role to play in helping to increase this connection. The people who feel responsible for the Netherlands are a minority.

Social participation

Compared with other European countries, a relatively large number of people in the Netherlands do volunteer work. There does appear to be a slight decrease in social participation in terms of membership of recreational organisations and in volunteering, although more recently, since the COVID-19 crisis, these specific forms of social participation have recovered somewhat. People often choose as friends persons who are similar to them. This points to a certain degree of segregation in society.

² In the presentation of outcomes we use the following categories for education:

- 1 primary, vmbo (= primary education, pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo), secondary vocational education 1 (mbo1), lower grades of senior general secondary (havo) and pre-university (vwo) education);
- 2 havo, vwo, mbo (= upper grades of senior general secondary (havo) and pre-university (vwo) education, secondary vocational education 2-4 (mbo2-4);
- 3 hbo, wo (= higher professional (hbo) and academic (wo) education: bachelor, master, PhD).

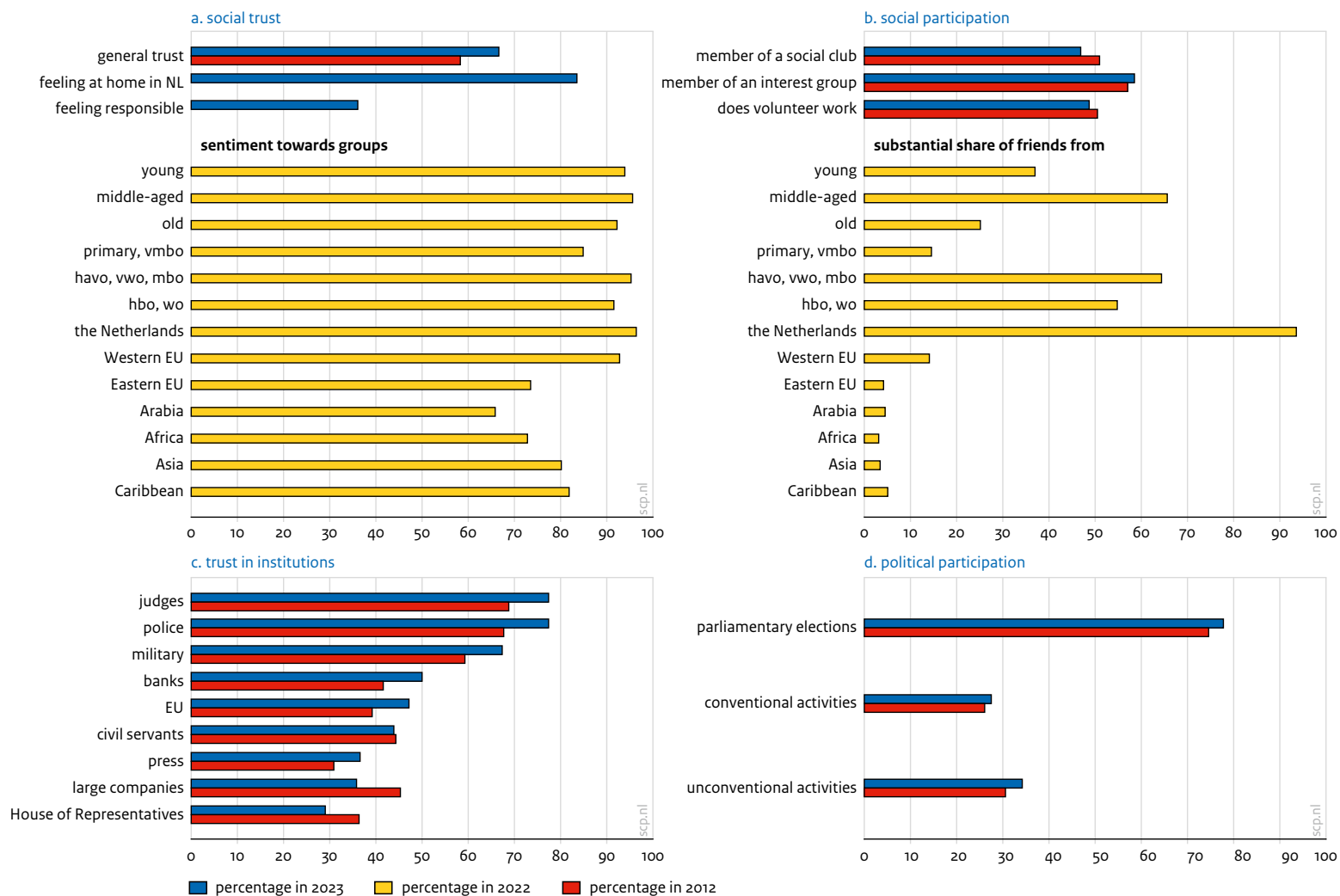
Trust in institutions

There is considerable variation in the level of trust in institutions. Trust in executive institutions – the military, judges and the police – is high, at around 70-80%. However, people have far less confidence in private institutions, such as the press, banks and large companies. Between one third and half of people trust these private players. The same applies to political institutions (civil servants, the House of Representatives and the EU). The House of Representative comes at the bottom of the list, with nearly 30% of people saying they have confidence in it. Given the considerable variation in the levels of trust in institutions, institutional trust in the Netherlands cannot be said to be unequivocally high. It is true, however, that for all components it is high compared with other European countries. Also note that in the past, up until the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in institutions increased across the board, including trust in the House of Representatives.

Political participation

Political participation in the Netherlands equals the European average. Participation in parliamentary elections is high (nearly 80% in 2023). Participation in conventional or unconventional political activities, such as engaging politicians or media or taking part in protests, is generally stable over time (between 25% and 35% of the population, approximately). Note that participation in unconventional political activities has shown a slight increase in recent years.

Figure S.2 Social cohesion per indicator, in 2012 and in 2022/2023 (in %)^{a,b,c}



a Sentiment in Figure a refers to neutral and positive feelings.

b The friends' networks in Figure b concern a substantial part of a person's friends, namely half or more.

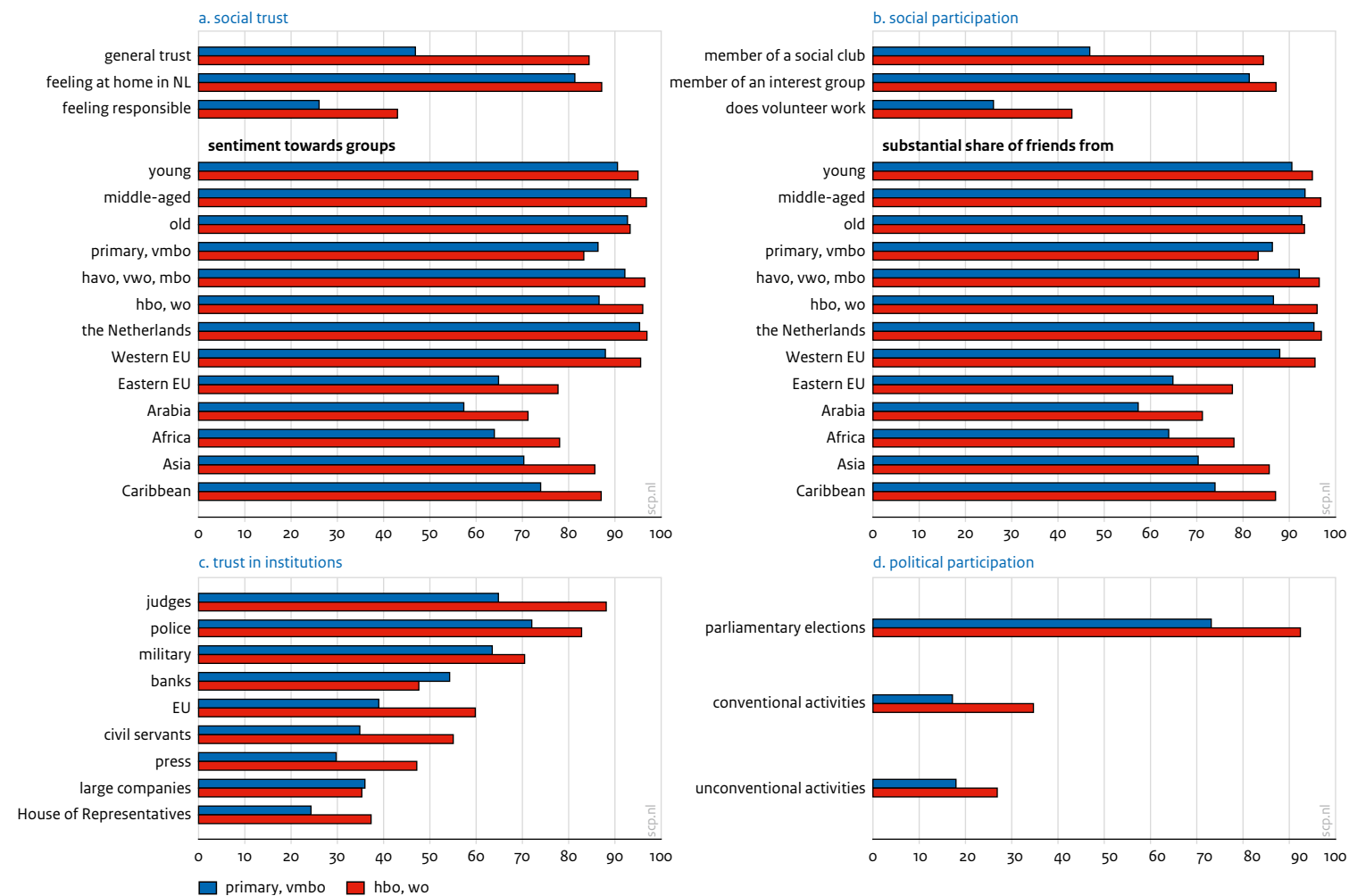
c Western EU is for people with a Western European, North American or Australian background. Arabia is for people with an Arabian or West Asian background (such as Morocco or Turkey). Africa is for people with a South-African or Central-African background (such as Somalia). Asia is for people with a South Asian or East Asian background (such as China or Indonesia). Caribbean is for people with a Caribbean or South American background (such as Aruba or Suriname).

Source: Statistics Netherlands (StatLine); Statistics Netherlands (SSW '22); LISS (SCO/SCV'22); LISS (cohesion '22); Adapted by Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP

The greatest differences are found between educational backgrounds

The overall picture conceals considerable differences between groups within the population. The greatest differences are found between people with different educational backgrounds. Those differences were found for social and institutional trust and for social and political participation (Figure 5.3). Some examples are provided below. People with primary education or lower secondary vocational education are much less likely to trust others (45% compared with 88%) and are also less positive towards people with a migration background than those with a higher professional or academic degree. Additionally, people with primary or lower secondary vocational education have less confidence in institutions than people with a higher professional or academic degree. These differences can be as much as 20 percentage points. People with primary or lower secondary vocational education also show much lower levels of political participation than people with other educational backgrounds. The scores of people with a senior general secondary, pre-university or secondary vocational diploma on all these indicators are in between the scores of people with primary or lower secondary vocational education and the scores of those with a higher professional or academic degree. In short, when it comes to aspects of social cohesion, people with different educational backgrounds also hold different views and exhibit different behaviours.

Figure S.3 Indicators of social cohesion by educational background, 2022/2023 (in %)^{a,b,c,d}



- a For the sake of readability, we decided not to include the scores of people with a senior general secondary education, pre-university or secondary vocational education diploma in the figure. These scores are in between those of people with primary or lower secondary vocational education and those with a higher professional or academic degree.
- b Sentiment in Figure a refers to neutral and positive feelings.
- c The friends' networks in Figure b concern a substantial part of a person's friends, namely half or more.
- d Western EU is for people with a Western European, North American or Australian background. Arabia is for people with an Arabian or West Asian background (such as Morocco or Turkey). Africa is for people with a South-African or Central-African background (such as Somalia). Asia is for people with a South Asian or East Asian background (such as China or Indonesia). Caribbean is for people with a Caribbean or South American background (such as Aruba or Suriname).

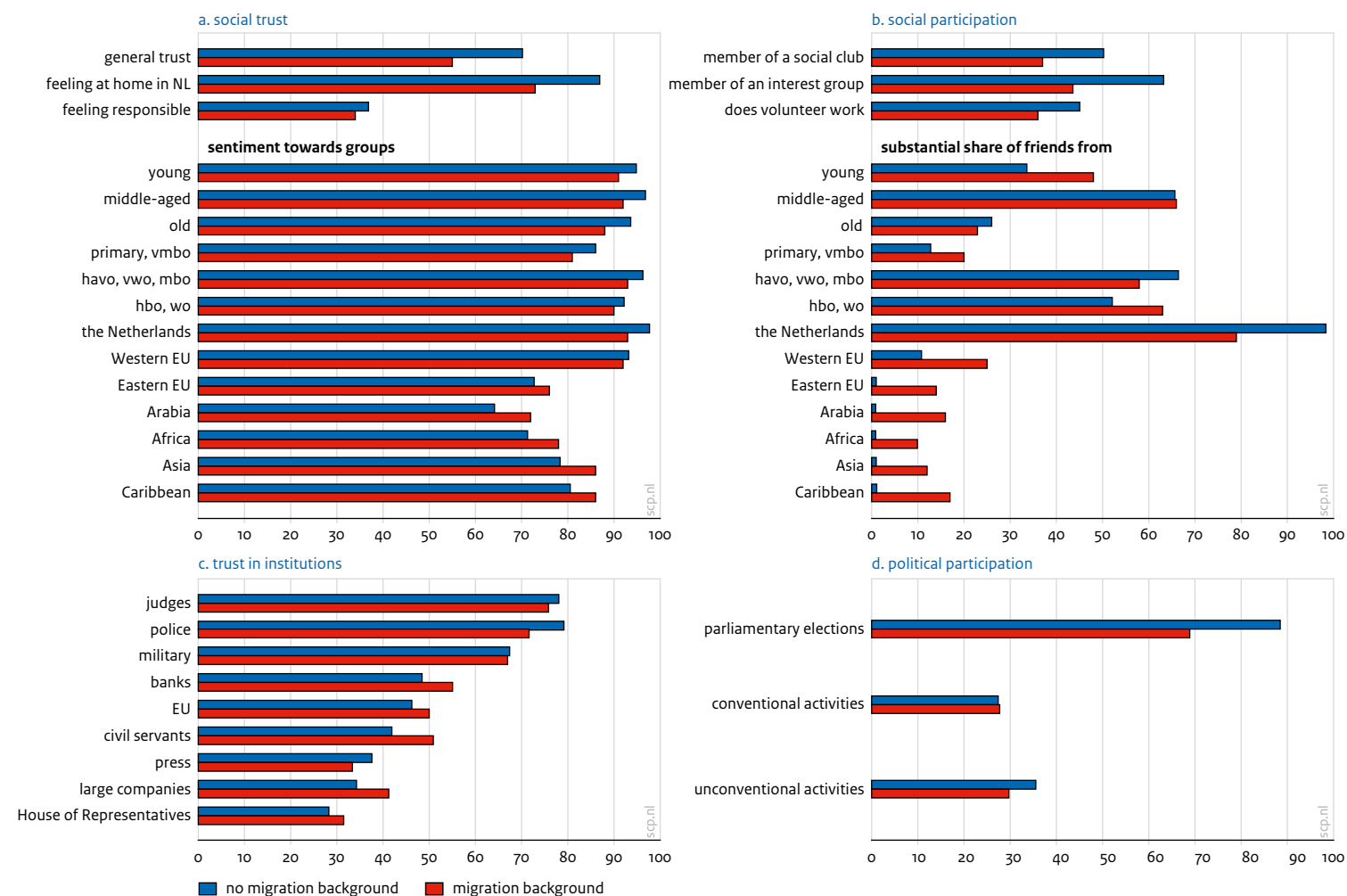
Source: Statistics Netherlands (StatLine); Statistics Netherlands (SSW '22); LISS (SCO/SCV'22); LISS (cohesion '22); Adapted by Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP

Less significant differences by country of origin and age

There are also differences in outcomes by country of origin and age, but these differences are less significant and also less clear-cut than by type of education (Figure S.4). For example, people with a migration background feel less at home in the Netherlands (just over 70%) than people without a migration background (almost 90%). People with a migration background are also less likely to participate socially and politically, although this is not the same for all migration backgrounds. Additionally, people without a migration background feel less positive about people with a migration background. They rarely meet any 'others' within their own circle of friends. People without a migration background tend to have friends who have no migration background either. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to people with a migratory background: most of their friends have a migration background as well.

No clear patterns can be discerned in the differences found between young people and older people. Young people are more likely to trust others and institutions, to be member of recreational organisations and to participate politically. However, they are less likely to feel at home in the Netherlands, to be a member of interest groups, to do volunteer work and to vote in parliamentary elections. They are also more outspoken in their attitudes towards other groups than older people. For example, young people are less positive towards older people and people with primary or lower secondary vocational education, but they are more positive about people with a migration background.

Figure S.4 Indicators of social cohesion by migration background, 2022/2023 (in %)^{a,b,c}



a Sentiment in Figure a refers to neutral and positive feelings.

b The friends' networks in Figure b concern a substantial part of a person's friends, namely half or more.

c Western EU is for people with a Western European, North American or Australian background. Arabia is for people with an Arabian or West Asian background (such as Morocco or Turkey). Africa is for people with a South-African or Central-African background (such as Somalia). Asia is for people with a South Asian or East Asian background (such as China or Indonesia). Caribbean is for people with a Caribbean or South American background (such as Aruba or Suriname).

Source: Statistics Netherlands (StatLine); Statistics Netherlands (SSW '22); LISS (SCO/SCV '22); LISS (cohesion '22); Adapted by Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP

Considerable differences between neighbourhoods in levels of trust in others

The differences between population groups show that aspects of social cohesion depend on demographic characteristics: age, educational background and migration background are important factors. Where differences in trust in others by characteristics such as education and country of origin converge at the neighbourhood level, this can translate into differences in trust in others between neighbourhoods. Indeed, this is what we have observed. In the 25% most diverse neighbourhoods in the Netherlands in terms of migration backgrounds, trust in others averages at 57%. In the 25% least diverse neighbourhoods, the level of trust in others is higher, up to an average of 64%.

In short, aspects cannot simply be added up

We now have a description of the current situation regarding the various aspects of social cohesion, but that does not answer the question of how social cohesion stands in the Netherlands. Nor is there any simple answer to this question. The concept of social cohesion is far too complex for that, and cannot simply be reduced to the sum total of its constituent aspects. On the one hand, despite annual fluctuations most indicators show a fairly stable picture. Compared with other European countries, the Netherlands achieves high scores on the various indicators for social cohesion. On the other hand, the picture presented by the various aspects of social cohesion also reveals a number of potential risks. For example, sentiment towards a number of specific groups is less than positive, there is a degree of segregation between friends' networks, and trust in the House of Representatives is currently low. When we zoom in, a number of significant differences between groups of the population emerge. Finally, it is important to remember that the use of indicators for social cohesion inevitably results in a simplification of a complex reality. As a result, there can be a gap between, on the one hand, the systematic nature of a model and, on the other, the subjective experience of social cohesion, which is constantly influenced by incidental events that inevitably arise from time to time.

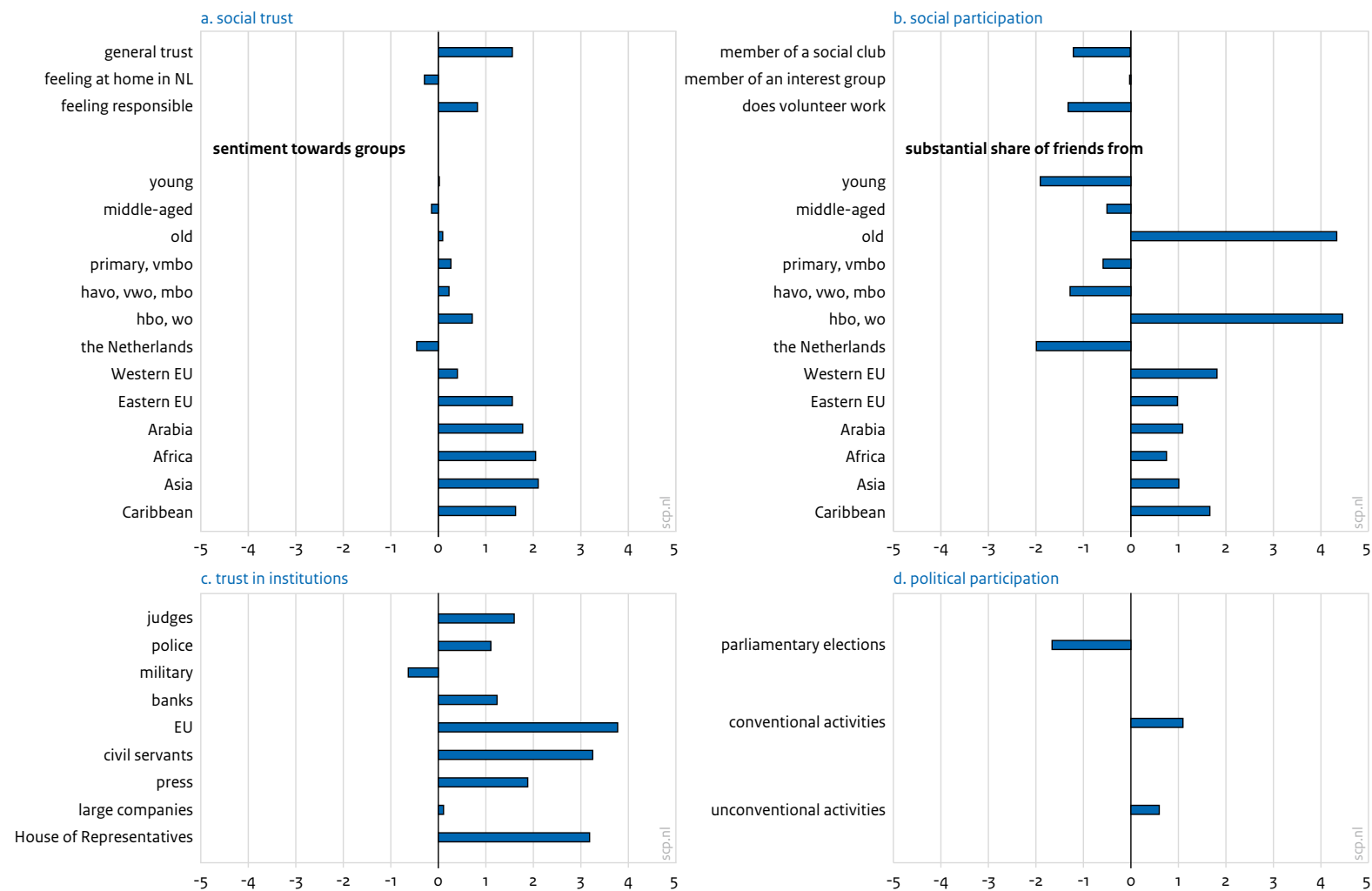
S.3 What do the scenarios based on demographic developments suggest about the future?

Scenarios derived from correlations from the explicatory model

The third component of our approach – the demographic scenarios – provides insight into ways in which social cohesion may develop according to the different population variants outlined by NIDI and Statistics Netherlands. Statistics Netherlands produces annual population forecasts based on the average trends in the number of children per woman, life expectancy and net migration. It then uses these forecasts to produce an estimate of what the population might look like by 2050. NIDI and Statistics Netherlands refer to this population variant as the middle variant. Population forecasts involve all sorts of uncertainties. For this reason, besides the demographic middle variant NIDI and Statistics Netherlands have also drawn up several alternative population variants. These provide insight into future population trends if the number of children per woman increases or decreases, if the rise in life expectancy slows down or accelerates and if net migration goes up or down. As its name suggests, compared with the other variants the middle variant tends to occupy a middle position for demographic developments.

If we take the middle variant plus the seven alternative variants as a basis for a forecast of the composition of the population by 2050 (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2024a; NIDI and Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2020), we see little change in social and institutional trust, or in social and political participation (middle scenario). For most indicators the trend is slightly positive. Figure S.5 shows the expected changes between 2023 and 2050 based on the middle scenario. The minor negative effects of population ageing and increased migration are offset by the positive effect of an increased proportion of people with a higher professional or academic degree. Our analyses also imply that, generally speaking, societal changes have a greater impact on social cohesion than demographic developments.

Figure S.5 Developments in indicators of social cohesion in the middle scenario, 2023-2050 (in percentage points)^{a,b,c}



a Sentiment in Figure a refers to neutral and positive feelings.

b The friends' networks in Figure b concern a substantial part of a person's friends, namely half or more.

c Western EU is for people with a Western European, North American or Australian background. Arabia is for people with an Arabian or West Asian background (such as Morocco or Turkey). Africa is for people with a South-African or Central-African background (such as Somalia). Asia is for people with a South Asian or East Asian background (such as China or Indonesia). Caribbean is for people with a Caribbean or South American background (such as Aruba or Suriname).

Source: Statistics Netherlands (StatLine); Statistics Netherlands (SSW '22); LISS (SCO/SCV'22); LISS (cohesion '22); Adapted by Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP

In addition to these eight demographic scenarios, we have calculated two more extreme population variants. One supplementary variant assumes a number of labour migrants by 2050 that is twice the number on which the 'high labour migration' population variant was based on. The other supplementary variant does the same for the number of asylum migrants. Both these extreme population variants yield little change in social cohesion, relative to the middle variant. The decrease for the 'feeling at home' indicator and, to a lesser extent, for social participation, is slightly greater though.

For the Netherlands as a whole, the demographic scenarios present a relatively stable picture as regards social cohesion in the future. However, that picture may be different for individual groups in the population. There are differences between groups, for example as regards turnout during parliamentary elections. Even today, people with primary or lower secondary vocational education are less likely to vote than people with a higher professional or academic degree. The demographic scenarios suggest that these differences will increase. This is because the rate of population ageing is lower, and migration figures are higher, among people with primary or lower secondary vocational education than among those with a higher professional or academic degree. In other cases, the distinction between population groups in the demographic scenarios diminishes. One example is membership of interest groups. The demographic scenarios suggest that the current backlog, in this regard, of people with a migration background compared with people without a migration background will decrease significantly.

The demographic scenarios assume that the pattern observed in people's attitudes and behaviours in the past will remain unchanged in the future. The implicit assumption is that current developments in society will not lead to any behavioural responses for social cohesion in the future. While this may seem rather improbable, the analyses in this report confirm that behavioural responses between 2012 and 2023 did not result in different correlations. If significant changes occur in society in the future, the patterns from the past could change, of course. It is impossible to predict the ways in which society is going to change in the future, nor whether and how patterns from the past will change. This is why we have conducted various what-if scenarios, based on a range of assumptions regarding potential changes in patterns and behaviours from the past. We covered eight different situations in total. We do not know whether those situations will occur, nor how likely they are. However, we could try to find out which developments would make one scenario more likely than another. The what-if scenarios serve as a thought experiment that can help to visualise the direction and magnitude of the effects on aspects of social cohesion. They help us gauge the bandwidth of effects for a society with increasing divergence versus increasing convergence of people's views and behaviours.

Scenarios based on variations in correlations

This section describes the assumptions underlying the eight what-if scenarios and how these assumptions impact aspects of social cohesion in the future.

Generational differences

This scenario is based on the assumption that the period in which people grow up influences their thoughts and actions – not just at that point in time, but also in later life (for example, see Inglehart 1977, 1997). We also assume that the circumstances during childhood are different for different generations. This assumption is based on changes in general welfare. For several years now, general welfare in the 'here and now' has proved to have a negative impact on future generations (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2024b). A further decline of general welfare is expected, due in part to the decline in the quality and quantity of nature and raw materials. Young people are being confronted with changes in other fields as well. They are more responsible for their own successes and failures (Sandel 2020). It has become difficult for them to find an affordable home, and many young people work on the basis of flexible contracts. These differences in circumstances could contribute to differences in terms of views and behaviours among young people compared with previous generations. Indications of this have been found in various studies (Van Houwelingen and De Hart 2019; Lubbers and Scheepers 2019; Muis et al. 2019; Rekker 2016; Spierings 2024). Those different views and behaviours potentially also have consequences for cohesion within society. We have created a what-if scenario to get an idea of what might happen to the indicators for social cohesion by 2050, assuming that the conditions people grow up in shape their views and behaviours in later life. In that scenario, the older generations of the future are more like today's younger

generation than today's older generation. This is the 'generational differences' scenario. This scenario shows significant consequences for social cohesion. Some indicators for social and political participation are expected to decrease sharply in this scenario. In particular, this concerns membership of interest groups and recreational organisations and going to vote in parliamentary elections. In contrast, trust in institutions is expected to increase significantly in this scenario, especially trust in the EU, in banks and in large companies.

Cultural competition

One alternative what-if scenario focuses on increasing cultural competition. Some people in society regard migration as a threat (Coenders and Dagevos 2024). They are concerned, believing that migrants take up too much space or receive favourable treatment, which they see as a threat to their own position, both economically and culturally (Miltenburg et al. 2023, 2024; Den Ridder et al. 2023). If migration increases in the future, we might see an increase in the number of people who feel they are competing with migrants. This situation could occur if ongoing migration and globalisation are accompanied by increasing inequality. The 'cultural competition' scenario shows a slightly downward trend for all aspects of social cohesion, and most notably for general trust and social participation.

Cultural convergence

This scenario assumes an increase in interaction and a growing resemblance between people with and people without a migration background, a phenomenon known as cultural convergence. This scenario aligns with the picture presented by Roeters and Van den Broek (2022) in their study *De toekomst in meervoud* (Multiple futures). In that study, the authors envisage a society in which people with different backgrounds increasingly come into contact with each other, for example by going to school together, or because they live in the same neighbourhood or meet as colleagues at work. This results in an ongoing process of inclusion centred around the average citizen. The 'cultural convergence' scenario shows a slightly downward trend for most social cohesion indicators. Exceptions to this trend include a slight increase in trust in political institutions and a slightly more positive attitude towards migrants.

Children of second-generation migrants

Several studies show that migrants face discrimination (e.g. Andriessen et al. 2020; Thijssen et al. 2019). This especially applies to migrants who have been in the Netherlands for a while or were born here (Dagevos et al. 2022). This integration paradox, in which those who are most 'rooted' experience the greatest discomfort, can be accompanied by a diminished sense of belonging and of being connected with society. If this does not change, i.e. in a situation of stagnating inclusion, the group of people suffering discrimination and exclusion might increase in the future. This 'children of second-generation migrants' scenario suggests that this will not lead to significant changes, compared with the middle scenario, for the aspects of social cohesion we have examined.

Increasing divergence between educational backgrounds

As more people in society obtain a higher professional or academic degree, the number of individuals who manage to gain a privileged position through their education may also increase. This may widen the gap between people with a higher professional or academic degree and those without. In an advanced knowledge economy where high demands are placed on individuals, it may become increasingly difficult for more people without a higher professional or academic degree to meet those high demands. The dominance of individuals with a higher professional or academic degree in the public domain will also make it harder for people with other educational backgrounds to identify with them. Combined with the potential ongoing segregation of living environments, this will further widen the gap between people with different educational backgrounds, potentially resulting in growing social inequality. This is the assumption underlying the 'increasing divergence in educational backgrounds' scenario, resulting in erosion of various aspects of social cohesion. Of all what-if scenarios, this is the one with the strongest impact on aspect of social cohesion. Figure S.6 presents the expected change in social cohesion indicators in this what-if scenario. The figure shows the crucial effect, in these scenarios, on social cohesion in the Netherlands if people, such as those with a senior general secondary, pre-university or secondary vocational education diploma, do not feel seen and valued.

Degree inflation

An increase in the proportion of individuals with higher professional and academic qualifications could also result in more people having such qualifications than the labour market actually needs. This could make it more difficult for them to stand out and benefit from the investment in their education. For example, it could reduce their access to the housing market or to private education, which, in turn, could erode the value of such higher professional or academic qualifications. In this 'diploma inflation' scenario, most indicators for social cohesion look set to decrease.

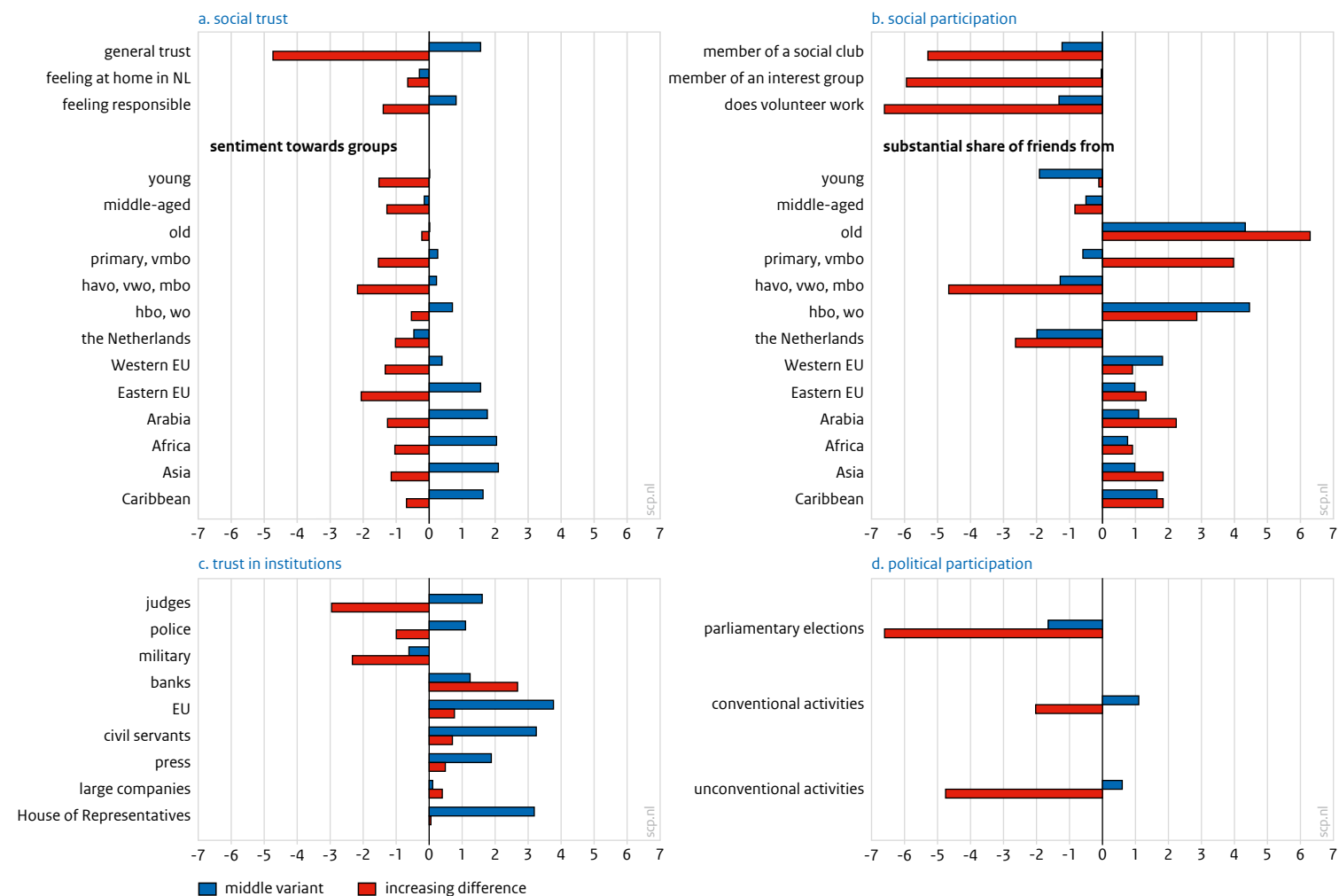
More appreciation

If there are more people with higher professional or academic qualifications than the labour market needs, an additional effect, aside from degree inflation, could be that individuals with other types of qualifications manage to distinguish themselves through their skills. After all, they will become increasingly scarce on the labour market. This may result in greater appreciation for practical professions, and better perspectives for the people concerned to rise on the social ladder. This 'greater appreciation' scenario shows a slightly positive trend, on balance, for the various aspects of social cohesion.

Uniformity

In contrast to the previous scenarios, differences between individuals with various educational backgrounds may actually diminish when it comes to attitude and behaviour. This 'uniformity' scenario is based on the assumption of increasing convergence of views and behaviours among people with various educational backgrounds, for example because children in different types of education are taught together and mutual contacts are promoted. This scenario shows little change in the various aspects of social cohesion.

Figure S.6 Developments in indicators of social cohesion in the ‘increasing difference in educational backgrounds’ scenario, 2023-2050 (in percentage points)^{a,b,c}



a Sentiment in Figure a refers to neutral and positive feelings.

b The friends' networks in Figure b concern a substantial part of a person's friends, namely half or more.

c Western EU is for people with a Western European, North American or Australian background. Arabia is for people with an Arabian or West Asian background (such as Morocco or Turkey). Africa is for people with a South-African or Central-African background (such as Somalia). Asia is for people with a South Asian or East Asian background (such as China or Indonesia). Caribbean is for people with a Caribbean or South American background (such as Aruba or Suriname).

Source: Statistics Netherlands (StatLine); Statistics Netherlands (SSW '22); LISS (SCO/SCV'22); LISS (cohesion '22); Adapted by SCP

S.4 What do all these insights mean?

The value of a quantitative foresight study on social cohesion by 2050

What we have done in our study is not to predict, but to explore how social cohesion could develop in the coming decades under the influence of demographic and societal changes. The future of social cohesion cannot be simply mapped out, as the concept of cohesion is too complex, the set of factors influencing it too varied, and the future too uncertain. For this reason, this study is based on various different scenarios. The emphasis is on the consequences of demographic changes. The strength of this foresight study lies in the breadth of its approach (four aspects of social cohesion, with over forty indicators and explicatory models), the range of scenarios (twenty future scenarios covering demographic trends, societal developments and other correlations) and the amount of data on which the calculations are based. The breadth of the scenarios helps us to compensate for the limitations of the simulation model. For example, it remains to be seen how stable the correlations between the different explicatory factors will prove to be in future, as they may be influenced by all sorts of developments. With the various what-if scenarios we aim to address this issue, even though the number of scenarios is limited and the likelihood of these occurring in the future is unknown. The potential chains of causes and effects between societal developments and the various aspects of social cohesion are also difficult to unravel. To address this issue, we conducted various additional analyses, highlighting the overall effect of societal developments. In all, the foresight study has yielded a number of insights and considerations for today and for the future.

View the present 'high trust society' without losing sight of the attending risks

Social cohesion ranks relatively high on the list of concerns among the Dutch population. People have experienced growing levels of intolerance for quite some time, as well as a lack of solidarity, anti-social behaviour in the public sphere, declining norms and values and an increasingly egocentric culture (Miltenburg et al. 2023). Ever since the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP has been measuring what people consider to be problems in society, the way people live together has ranked high on the list of major concerns (Miltenburg et al. 2023 2024). Likewise, diversity in society, migration and integration have been controversial issues, and a source of division, in the public debate for a long time (Dagevos and Vermeulen 2024). Some people with concerns on these issues feel that too many migrants are coming to the Netherlands. In their view, migration obstructs efforts to solve the problems of 'real' Dutch citizens, such as the housing shortage and the fight against poverty and rising prices (Miltenburg et al. 2024; Den Ridder et al. 2024). In contrast, individuals with a migration background are concerned about the grim tone of the political debate and the feeble response from politicians to discriminatory remarks. As a result, addressing problems and tensions in a diverse society without excluding or discriminating against certain groups has become a true balancing act (Dagevos and Vermeulen 2024).

Despite these concerns, social cohesion in the Netherlands is high compared with other countries, especially on aspects that concern contacts among citizens. Our study shows that the Netherlands is a 'high-trust society'. Social trust is high: most people feel connected with each other and feel at home in this country. Social participation is also high. While these findings are encouraging, they do not tell the whole story. First of all, they hide the fact that those high levels of social trust and social participation do not apply to everyone. Indeed, there are huge differences among individuals, strongly dependent on their educational and other background features. Those with low scores on social trust and participation are found mainly in the group of people with primary or lower general vocational education. Furthermore, there are differences in living environments: in neighbourhoods with a high diversity of migration backgrounds, people tend to have less trust in other people. In addition, sentiment towards migrants is negative among one third of the population. While relatively stable, this proportion is considerable (Gijsberts and Vervoort 2009; Miltenburg et al. 2024). This sentiment can potentially lead to discrimination, stigmatisation and social exclusion, making it more difficult for people to live together. The people who feel responsible for the Netherlands are a minority. A cohesive society requires coordination and collaboration among citizens, as well as between citizens, the government and (civil-society) organisations. This requires social responsibility: citizens, the government and organisations must all strive to contribute to the quality of society.

While trust between people is high, the same does not apply to trust in institutions. In particular, trust in the House of Representatives has been very low in recent years, although similarly low levels were observed at the beginning of the new millennium (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). Low trust in institutions can have major consequences for society. A lack of trust among citizens in their leaders and government officials gives rise to a sense of alienation and cynicism towards the political system. In turn, this can result in reduced participation in democratic processes, as reflected in low turnout figures during elections and lower involvement in social initiatives. It can also erode the effectiveness of policy measures, as they are more likely to meet with distrust and receive less support. In addition, a lack of trust can fuel social tensions and undermine stability in society, because citizens do not feel represented or protected by their own government.

Outlook for social cohesion: stable but vulnerable

What does the future hold for social cohesion in the Netherlands? We cannot answer this question with certainty. What we have done in this foresight study is develop some twenty future scenarios and calculate the consequences of each. Most of those scenarios show only minor changes in the aspects of social cohesion. We can conclude that, when it comes to changes in demographic composition and social cohesion, Dutch society appears to be fairly stable. There are various explanations for this.

First of all, there is a strong and deeply rooted community spirit and sense of solidarity in Dutch culture, which helps to maintain cohesion even in times of demographic change. Another explanation is provided by the social and political institutions, such as democratic processes and social services. These provide a framework for collaboration, also in the long term, and for solidarity between the various groups in society during times of change. However, this does not mean there are no risks to social cohesion in the Netherlands in the future. In addition to the persistence in the future of the differences between groups, a negative attitude towards migrants and the low levels of trust in institutions, several what-if scenarios also show a number of additional vulnerabilities.

One risk is the increasing segregation of people's living environments. When different groups of people live in increasingly segregated environments, they have little opportunity to interact and understand each other's experiences and perspectives (Vermeij and Thijssen 2024). This gives rise to barriers that can undermine social cohesion. After all, segregation strengthens social inequalities while reducing the possibilities to promote mutual understanding and collaboration. This makes it more difficult to achieve shared objectives and to join forces to tackle the challenges that society is facing. In a future scenario where more people struggle to meet the high demands of an advanced knowledge economy, or where more people feel undervalued, we see a substantial decline in social cohesion, particularly in terms of social and political participation and social trust. Likewise, a scenario of increasing cultural competition will cause more pressure on the aspects of social cohesion.

Another vulnerability is the level of social participation. Recreational organisations have always been meeting places for people of different ages and with different social or educational backgrounds. Volunteer work provides opportunities for people to come into contact with others. Our study shows that young people are less likely to join recreational organisations or do volunteer work. This also applies to people with a migration background, as well as to individuals with primary or lower secondary vocational education. Looking ahead, several what-if scenarios indicate decreasing levels of social participation and continuation of differences.

The various scenarios show little effect in terms of a recovery of trust in institutions, except for the 'generational differences' scenario. In that scenario, the circumstances in which individuals grow up determine their thoughts and actions. Future demographic developments are expected to give only a minor boost to help recover this trust. This is why a targeted policy effort is needed.

Intervention strategies

Protecting and promoting social cohesion in the future calls for a joint effort by the government and society at large. We have drawn up six recommendations to that end.

1 Reduce complexity, create more possibilities to gain control

The complexity of a society affects its internal cohesion. Complex systems may result in exclusion of individuals who have difficulty finding their way. Digital inequality also widens the social gap between people and can lead to social exclusion (Van Deursen 2023a, 2023b; Van der Zeeuw et al. 2023). Complex bureaucracy and a lack of transparency undermine people's trust in institutions. Fragmentation due to complexity can exacerbate tensions between groups, eroding social cohesion (Lamont et al. 2016). When developing and implementing policy, the government could strengthen its focus on the sense of control among citizens (The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) 2023). Many citizens are being confronted with all sorts of uncertainties, for example about housing or livelihoods. Citizens are capable of dealing with such uncertainties, provided they are in control of their own lives (The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) 2023). To promote that sense of control – and, by extension, the quality of society and social cohesion – it is wise to take a series of measures that support people in their daily lives. For example by providing clear and accessible information about services, rights and duties, so that people can make informed decisions. Another option is to find ways to enable people to manage their finances more effectively and cope with economic setbacks. Procedures can be simplified to give people better access to essential services and support.

2 Focus on equality

There are differences in communication and interests between people with primary or lower general vocational education and those with a higher professional or academic degree. As a result, people with primary or lower general vocational education feel that they are looked down upon by those with a higher professional or academic degree. This diminishes their trust in others and in institutions. To help society bridge this difference, the government, educational institutions and employers alike could promote appreciation for practical subjects and professions (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). What can also help is to stop viewing people with a higher professional or academic degree as the 'norm.' Obtaining an academic degree is not the only way to lead a successful life. There are other aspects that contribute to success, and they too deserve recognition.

3 Create more opportunities for encounters, with a special focus on schools and work

To promote social participation, it is important to ensure that people from different backgrounds remain in contact with each other. If people no longer communicate with 'others', prejudices will persist and there are no everyday encounters that might counterbalance the divisions in society (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). Given the value of recreational organisations and volunteer work for social encounters and togetherness, policies that encourage people to join recreational organisations or do volunteer work can help with this. Financial rewards or symbolic appreciation, such as in the *lintjesregen*, the annual ceremony in which the king awards decorations to citizens, can encourage people to take part (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). At the same time, it is important to remove obstructing factors, such as a lack of awareness of volunteering and recreational organisations, or specific organisational cultures, language barriers, inadequate skills or a lack of time and/or funds.

There should be space for people to meet others also beyond the realm of volunteer work and recreational organisations. Other areas of life and policy, such as education, housing or the labour market, also provide important opportunities for encounters. Education, and civic education in particular, aims to provide a basis for creating social cohesion. One of the key obstacles in this regard is segregation in the education system. As a result of segregation, many pupils are taught in schools with relatively homogeneous populations and have little opportunity to learn to cope with social differences (Vogels et al. 2021). This might be addressed by promoting mixed education and delaying the moment of selection in secondary education. Specific housing policies could also be used to promote encounters. However, this must be approached with care, as mixed housing can also lead to misunderstandings or tensions between old and new residents (Gijsberts et al. 2024). Encounters could be promoted through policies aimed at creating accessible and welcoming public spaces, such as parks, squares and

community centres. This could encourage social interaction and offer local residents spaces that are conducive to encounters. Policies aimed at improving safety and liveability in local neighbourhoods, for instance by tackling crime and upgrading infrastructure, could further strengthen the sense of community and connection (Gijsberts et al. 2024). A third policy area closely associated with community building is the labour market. Encounters in this area can be promoted through inclusive employment practices to ensure that employers take on, and retain, people with a variety of backgrounds and skills. Such encounters can help to promote equal opportunities and fight discrimination and prejudice. They also support three key pillars of cohesion: stimulating encounters, bridging gaps and promoting collaboration (Vermeij and Thijssen 2024).

4 Ensure government commitment to transparency and problem-solving capacities

To restore citizens' trust in institutions, it is important for them to feel that the government understands their concerns, that they are heard and that they are involved in finding solutions to societal problems (Van Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2024). The government should give people a clear idea of how it intends to solve issues. Citizens will be more likely to understand and accept the government's approach if the government explains what objectives it is trying to achieve, what it expects from citizens and how this will promote the common good. Concrete results achieved in this way can be expected to foster trust in institutions.

5 Fight discrimination

Fighting discrimination is also of fundamental importance for promoting social cohesion, especially given the negative sentiment towards migrants among a part of the population. Discrimination generates inequality, distrust and hostility between groups in society (Bovens et al. 2014). People who are discriminated against feel excluded and undervalued, which undermines their engagement with society (Dagevos et al. 2024). When people feel systematically excluded and marginalised, this may have a corroding effect on social cohesion (Otten et al. 2014). In contrast, active efforts to combat discrimination can strengthen the sense of connectedness and solidarity, as people will feel acknowledged and supported by other citizens and the government. When people have reason to trust that they are being treated fairly and equitably, they will also be more inclined to take part in societal and political processes.

6 Enhance people's trust in others through local, tailored initiatives

In neighbourhoods where migration backgrounds are diverse, trust in other people tends to be relatively low. If neighbourhoods become more dissimilar in terms of diversity levels, they may also become more different regarding trust in others. Countless initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen connections among residents. The success of those initiatives varies from one neighbourhood to another and depends on various underlying mechanisms (Gijsberts et al. 2024). Overall, trust among individuals can be strengthened through clean and safe public spaces where everyone feels comfortable. This means, among other things, a good supply of local shops, green spaces and public libraries (Cadat-Lampe et al. 2020). Initiatives that appeal to a shared, common goal also help bridge differences and create a sense of connectedness.

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