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# Finding Space in Politics: Perceptions of Representation Among Dutch Citizens With an Immigration Background

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## Abstract

Representative democracy functions optimally when all citizens can participate, are heard, and feel represented. We know, however, that those interested and satisfied in politics rarely reflect a cross-section of the population. What's more, the influence exercised by certain groups in a democracy is unevenly distributed, and citizens with an immigration background feel on average less represented politically than citizens without one. This article explores how processes of perceived inclusion and exclusion influence the sense of political representation experienced by Dutch citizens with an immigration background. Our study aims to offer greater insight into perceptions of political representation and gain an understanding of what leads to these experiences. We draw on data from six focus group discussions with people who share the categorical trait of being deemed "different" by the majority society along various dimensions, such as ethnic and religious background, race, postcolonial background, and migration motive (e.g., asylum-seeking). Prior to our analysis, we expected these potential grounds for exclusion to have differing influences on perceived representation and how members of the groups relate to the political institutions. Our results show that descriptive representation is a critical start though not enough for adequate substantive political representation of people with an immigration background. Our respondents felt substantive representation fails in the Netherlands due to a lack of perceived representation in the form of politicians with shared experiences who know what it feels like to be excluded, opposed, and dismissed as problematic.

## Keywords

descriptive representation; exclusion; immigration; substantive representation; the Netherlands

## 1. Introduction

Representation is at the heart of our democratic system (Pitkin, 2004; Saward, 2008; Urbinati & Warren, 2008), which functions optimally when all citizens are heard and feel represented. We know, however, that those interested and satisfied in politics rarely reflect a cross-section of the population. What is more, inequality in political representation is not arbitrary; citizens who have more opportunities to participate feel more represented politically. How opportunities for political representation are organized thus affects the extent to which minorities are excluded, marginalized, unrecognized, and/or not taken seriously by the political system (Piven & Cloward, 1978). Many systems today favor citizens with higher income, greater wealth, better education, and no immigration background over citizens who lack these demographic characteristics (Lijphart, 1997; Verba et al., 1995). In turn, the underrepresentation of specific groups impacts their perceptions of fairness, voice, and influence, as well as jeopardizes the functioning of the representative democratic system.

Within this discussion, Phillips (1995) has argued that for democracy to function properly, there must be representation of and by marginalized groups. Because politicians with the same or similar demographic characteristics often share experiences, they can better articulate and represent the interests of the wider group to which they belong. This "politics of presence," as Phillips (1995) termed it, underscores the importance of group identity-based descriptive representation for addressing disadvantages, discrimination, and exclusion. However, a critical mass is needed—especially if they are members of majority groups—to successfully advance their views and convince others that the perspectives or insights are widely shared, genuinely felt, and deeply rooted within their own group (Mansbridge, 1999).

Representation is thus constituted by the actual presence of representatives originating from marginalized groups—in the form of descriptive representation—and the extent to which the political system is responsive to the interests of these groups—in the form of substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967). Scholars have often conceptualized the presence of minority representatives and the political responsiveness to minority interests as "objective" political representation (Wängnerud, 2009). However, in a well-functioning representative democracy, all citizens need to also *feel* that the political system represents their interests equally (De Mulder, 2023; Geurts et al., 2024; Holmberg, 2020; Rosset, 2023). This is why the *perceptions* of political representation among marginalized and underrepresented groups are just as crucial to consider as the seemingly objective metrics tracked by those who study or observe politics.

Explanatory factors of political representation have long been measured as degrees of descriptive representation (i.e., number of representatives with a minority background) and substantive representation (i.e., policy decisions serving marginalized groups' interests; see Pitkin, 1967) as well as the extent to which both forms of representation correlate positively (Wängnerud, 2009). Still, we know much less about how citizens perceive representation and how their perceptions develop (Akachar, 2018; De Mulder, 2023; Holmberg, 2020; Rosset, 2023; Van Oosten et al., 2023). For example, do citizens from marginalized groups feel more or better represented by political parties and individual politicians with similar demographic characteristics? If so, how might perceptions of political representation differ across groups, such as people with immigration backgrounds? Answers to these questions have real-life consequences for the political system, yet we need to analyze and work toward viable theories to better understand these phenomena before we can adequately answer these questions. In this article, we address that theoretical lacuna by

studying how Dutch citizens with an immigration background perceive political representation and how they perceive the link between descriptive and substantive representation.

In the Netherlands' current political context, having an immigration background is one of the main factors affecting the extent to which people feel politically represented. In short, those with an immigration background are less represented and feel that way (Dagevos et al., 2024; Mügge et al., 2021; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024). It has been unclear, however, how and to what extent we can apply theories and explanatory factors found for "objective" political representation (Wängnerud, 2009) to subjective and perceived political representation (De Mulder, 2023; Geurts et al., 2024; Holmberg, 2020; Rosset, 2023). Recent research has found, for instance, that although descriptive and substantive representation is theorized as distinct, the distinction does not consistently apply when analyzing *perceptions* of political representation. In fact, perceptions of descriptive and substantive representation among members of marginalized groups are often strikingly similar (Geurts et al., 2024). Furthermore, identification with politicians on the basis of their demographic characteristics and appearance—indicative of descriptive representation—seems to directly influence expectations and perceptions around substantive representation. De Jong and Mügge (2023) have posited that people with an immigration background often experience the feeling of a "linked fate" (see also Dawson, 1995) with politicians who look like them because they share experiences of social and political exclusion and racism. But it remains a question if the presence of politicians with an immigration background automatically leads to the perception that the interests of such groups are also better represented substantially.

We posit in this article that an individual's perceptions of descriptive and substantive representation depend on the extent to which politicians with shared experiences are not heard or given space within the political system—a form of political discrimination, following Oskooii's (2020) distinction—and individual experiences with exclusion outside politics—a form of societal discrimination. Understanding these dynamics is critical for learning how members of marginalized groups evaluate the political system and feel represented by it as well as how this translates into actual participation. We analyze our findings in the context of epistemic injustice (Medina, 2013), whereby inadequately acknowledging marginalized groups' lived experiences and interests causes a conflation of descriptive and substantive representation. Throughout this article, we use terms such as "marginalized," "underrepresented," and "minority" to describe Dutch citizens who do not belong to the majority group, have no immigration background, and tend to be white.

In sum, this article answers the following research questions:

1. How do Dutch citizens with an immigration background in the Netherlands perceive the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation? Specifically, do they expect more descriptive representation to lead to more substantive representation?
2. How does social and political exclusion impact the perceptions of this relationship among members of these marginalized groups?

## 2. Perceived Descriptive and Substantive Representation in the Context of Discrimination and Exclusion

Political representation (Pitkin, 1967) can be defined as the extent to which the actions of politicians match the positions, wishes, and interests of those they represent and whether representatives can fulfill this effectively. Descriptive representation concerns the specific demographic characteristics of representatives deemed relevant by citizens (Wängnerud, 2009). People may identify a politician as sharing their background and feel represented in the sense that they recognize them as "someone like them" (De Mulder, 2023). Substantive representation concerns the actions and positioning of politicians and parties and the extent to which voters experience them as being responsive to their wishes as well as whether they represent policy views and interests of individual voters and people like them (De Mulder, 2023; Holmberg, 2020). For substantive representation to be perceived as such, it is necessary for individual representatives, parties, and the entire political system to be responsive—it is, thus, all-encompassing. To this end, we are concerned with to what extent people feel that politicians act according to their interests, values, positions, and aspirations as well as how descriptive representation, both actual and perceived, contributes to their experiences.

Hopkins et al. (2020) observed that discrimination and processes of social inclusion and exclusion are key to understanding minority political representation, trust, and participation. The literature has pointed to a strong correlation between perceived social inclusion and exclusion when it comes to (a) collective action and awareness (Schildkraut, 2011), (b) party choice (Oskooii, 2020), and (c) voter turnout (Barreto, 2010). Exclusionary practices in society, including in politics, reinforce marginalized groups' identities, consciousness, and the perception of shared grievances based on collective emotions, such as anger and frustration. The effect is particularly pronounced when members of marginalized groups experience exclusion from the majority group as a direct attack on their values, norms, and practices (Oskooii, 2016; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024; Wald et al., 2005). This dynamic is primarily the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (an "us") constructs out-groups ("them") by stigmatizing a difference—real or imagined—that is presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination (Staszak, 2008).

A major underlying mechanism at work here is described in social identity theory: people strive for a positive self-image, which is partly determined by a positive image of the group one feels part of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Experienced discrimination threatens or outright damages this image, which can have various political consequences (Geurts & Van Klingeren, 2023). Several studies have shown how anti-immigrant rhetoric across social contexts leads to increased political action among marginalized groups wanting to compel change or prevent considerations or implementation of unfavorable policies (Oskooii, 2016; Vermeulen, 2018). Social exclusion causes people to feel they do not belong and, subsequently, to evaluate the political system and its processes less favorably (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024). It also signals that they have inadequate political representation (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). Although the findings differ across groups, recent quantitative studies have shown that Dutch citizens with an immigration background feel less politically represented, both descriptively and substantively, with perceived social exclusion and discrimination being a crucial explanatory factor (Dagevos et al., 2024; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024).

Studies have identified shared experiences as one of the core mechanisms enabling processes of both descriptive and substantive representation (De Jong, 2024; Mansbridge, 1999, 2020). Citizens from marginalized groups assume commonality with political parties or specific politicians if they share a

migration history (e.g., being a refugee or coming from the same origin country), historical and contemporary processes of exclusion (e.g., as a member of an ethnic, religious, or racial minority), and the experience of resistance against processes of exclusion (Sobolewska et al., 2018). To feel that the political system is fair and reasonable, people must at least perceive there to be politicians who have shared experiences (Celis & Childs, 2008). Political systems that lack this quality are perceived as unresponsive because issues important to underrepresented groups are less likely to be put on the agenda due to the underrepresentation (Celis, 2012). This leads us to our first expectation originating from many empirical studies on "objective" political representation of women and other marginalized groups: More descriptive representation leads, all other things being equal, to more substantive political representation (Wängnerud, 2009). We assume this positive correlation to apply equally when looking at *perceptions* of political representation (De Jong, 2024; Geurts et al., 2024).

Because perceived political representation among citizens with an immigration background appears strongly correlated to processes of experienced social and political exclusion (Dagevos et al., 2024; Hopkins et al., 2020; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024), we expect that the stronger the group identity of in-group members, the more differences will be perceived between groups along several social dimensions. Group subordination, in particular, plays a significant role in developing what Dawson (1995) coined "linked fate." For some groups in specific contexts, exclusionary practices reinforce group identity, minority consciousness, and perception of shared grievances based on collective emotions. This effect is particularly visible when members of minority groups experience exclusion as a direct attack on values, norms, and practices that are important to the group. Such scenarios lead to lower levels of perceived political representation and a negative evaluation of the political system (Oskooii, 2016; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024; Wald et al., 2005) as well as lower expectations of what politics can do for them. In other words, they perceive the system as dysfunctional for people like them (Dagevos et al., 2024). These observations lead us to our second expectation that high levels of perceived social and political exclusion and discrimination can jeopardize the prior presumed positive correlation between perceived descriptive and substantive political representation. Due to their overall more negative evaluation of the political system, if marginalized groups feel that they or their political representatives are socially or politically excluded, they will have lower expectations for descriptive political representation (manifested as the presence of minority politicians) to translate into substantive representation (Dagevos et al., 2024; Hopkins et al., 2020; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024).

Our study compares groups with different immigration backgrounds who may perceive social exclusion on the basis of their differing and/or multiple demographic characteristics, including religion, race, and postcolonial or asylum-seeking background. This approach allows us to see whether our expectations play out differently across groups (Bloemraad, 2013). The groups included in our analysis shared the categorical trait of being deemed "different" by the majority group along various dimensions, such as ethnic and religious background, race, postcolonial background, and migration motive (e.g., asylum-seeking). We anticipated these potential grounds for exclusion to have differing influences on the perceived relationship between descriptive and substantive representation and thus how members of these groups relate to political institutions and their expectations thereof. For this study, we classify the immigration backgrounds of immigrants and their children according to origin, religion, race, and having a postcolonial or asylum-seeking background.

## 3. Context of the Netherlands

There are worthwhile reasons to research this issue in the Netherlands. First, the group of eligible voters with an immigration background in this country has risen sharply over the years. In national elections, approximately 18% of the Dutch electorate, almost 2.5 million people, have an immigration background (either being immigrants themselves or having at least one parent who is an immigrant; Lubbers, 2021). At a local level, that percentage is much higher, especially in the big cities, but nowadays increasingly also outside them (Vermeulen, 2018). However, because this entails a large, diverse group with an immigration background—whose members are not all or equally affected by the aforementioned possible grounds for exclusion—it is useful to determine to what extent different groups relate to politics in the first place.

A second reason to study the Dutch case is that there may be a relationship between the tone of the current political debate—with multiple parties circulating anti-Islam, anti-immigrant discourses—and how much people with an immigration background experience representation and feel confidence in government (Oskooii, 2016, 2020; Vermeulen, 2018). In fact, the formation of new political parties over the last decade that largely emerged from immigrant communities and made standing up for their interests part of their platform should be foremost understood as a response to perceived exclusion (Goksu & Leerkes, 2022; Loukili, 2019; Lubbers et al., 2024; Vermeulen, 2018). These parties include DENK (named for a word meaning "think" in Dutch and "equal" or "balanced" in Turkish), NIDA (named after a concept from the Koran meaning "call" and "voice"), and BIJ1 (its name is a numeronym for "together" in Dutch). It is worth noting that, since 9/11, Islam has been a catalyst for debate in public and political discourses on immigration and integration in the Netherlands. Since 2015, asylum has become an increasingly polarizing public and political issue. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, racial divisions have also become a flashpoint in Dutch political and public debates.

Last but not least, the Netherlands is a compelling case because, compared to surrounding countries, there is a relatively high number of politicians with an immigration background in parliament—descriptive representation par excellence (Mügge et al., 2024). This is in part due to the Dutch electoral system of proportional representation and preferential voting as well as voting rights for non-Dutch nationals at the local level—all of which enables underrepresented groups to gain access relatively quickly. We see this at the national level for some groups, whereby parliamentarians with an immigration background constitute approximately the same percentage as people in the general population (Vermeulen, 2018).

## 4. Data and Methods

We conducted six focus group discussions with Dutch citizens and/or residents with an immigration background. The respondents we selected belonged to the largest immigrant communities in the Netherlands confronted with social and political exclusion. The groups differed in terms of their status in the Netherlands and their historical relationship with the country. Two focus groups consisted of people with Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds; another two were comprised of people with Surinamese or Dutch-Caribbean backgrounds, and two were made of people with a Syrian background. All respondents were Dutch citizens and possessed voting rights except in the groups with people with a Syrian background. Most respondents in these last two groups were not Dutch citizens and only some had voting rights at the local level. A research agency specialized in engaging immigrant communities recruited our respondents and

helped us organize and initiate our focus group discussions. We sought to achieve a balanced distribution with respect to gender, region, and education level—for every group, we conducted one focus group with mainly highly educated respondents and one with mainly lower educated. A total of 45 people were interviewed, with discussions held from the beginning of July to the end of September 2022. On average, the group discussions lasted 90 minutes, with a 15-minute break in between.

In service of our article's main aim, which is theory generation, we took a phenomenological approach in our focus group discussions. This means we situated the phenomena to be investigated in a context of perceived exclusion and analyzed the impact of that context using findings from our group conversations. From a phenomenological standpoint, we recognized that the distinction and relationship between subjective and objective aspects of reality were shaped by respondents' attitudes toward the world around them. Cultural and historical dimensions (e.g., migration history) played a significant role in shaping their values, ideals, and norms. As such, we sought to understand how, for example, growing up in an immigrant family shaped people's views of politics. We were not interested in reconstructing any particular reality, but rather understanding the perspectives and experiences of respondents and how the contexts in which they live influenced them. In concrete terms, this means we focused on the following topics that allow us to track effects in group conversations while also covering the aspects needed to answer our research questions (as formulated in the introduction): (a) how people in their daily lives perceive the phenomena of descriptive and substantive representation, as well as the link between the two forms of representation; (b) which contexts influence that perception (e.g., inclusion or exclusion, socioeconomic position); and (c) how this experience affects people's political behavior, institutional trust, and assessment of the political system.

In the focus groups, ample attention first went to perceived descriptive representation. Specifically, we examined whether respondents felt many people in politics were like them. And for that matter, how they would define or explain people like them. Afterward, we discussed perceived substantive representation. We asked to what extent respondents felt their interests and wishes were given attention in politics. And did they feel they were part of, or even allowed to be part of, the political system? The conversations probed how respondents viewed descriptive and substantive representation and which political issues they deemed important for representation. Finally, we discussed to what extent people were or wanted to be politically active and what their reasons were for participating or not.

Conversations were transcribed verbatim into conversation reports. These reports were analyzed both deductively and inductively; we used MAXQDA software for coding. Based on a first inductive reading of the reports, we drew up a scheme in which codes often followed the themes of the topic list, all intending to answer our research questions. A four-eyes principle was used, whereby a researcher first coded the transcript and then a second researcher viewed and completed this coding. After this phase, we used a deductive approach to analyze the codes and their interdependence (see Dagevos et al., 2024).

## 5. Results: Perceived Representation in the Context of Experienced Exclusion

In this first empirical part, we address our first research question: How do Dutch citizens with an immigration background in the Netherlands perceive the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation? Specifically, do they expect more descriptive representation to lead to more substantive representation?

Throughout our focus groups, respondents from different immigration backgrounds articulated the importance of substantive representation, seeing it as positively correlated with descriptive representation and referencing shared experiences with representatives. In the group of Syrians with a lower education level, for instance, some respondents cited the value of politicians having experienced for themselves what it is to be a refugee in the Netherlands and the problems this status can come with. Such politicians were deemed better able than politicians without such a background to raise issues relevant to their group and improve its position in society. In fact, the entire political system's perceived responsiveness increased through the presence of politicians who were like, looked like, and presumably shared significant experiences with our respondents:

> R8: [The presence of politicians with the same immigration background] can help refugees. If they have a certain background, they know the difficulties that refugees have in terms of language and integration. The most difficult thing [for refugees in the Netherlands] is the language. For example, if you want childcare or something else, it is always said that you must know the language. I stopped my education twice because of the language.

This respondent's logic was that descriptive representation could ensure that refugees' language challenges would appear higher on the political agenda and that subsequent policy be made, thereby revealing a positive correlation between descriptive and substantive representation. That said, respondents acknowledged that underrepresented groups are diverse and comprise individuals with many different characteristics—some of which have potentially political relevance, such as having a low income or being single:

> R3: I noticed that most politicians [in the Netherlands] do not represent the people [adequately]. They all have a higher level of education, and they often come from a higher social class. So in practice they do not represent the actual situation in the Netherlands….And there is no real support for women and—if I may say more about this—it is true that, for example, in the case of divorce, a woman is back to square one; she gets nothing from her husband or her partner and she returns to square one and, in doing so, she also loses, in the sense that she has not progressed in her career….Low-income Syrian women are poorly represented politically in the Netherlands [because few politicians from this group are active].

For most respondents, however, having a similar appearance to, or the same origin as, politicians symbolized the sharing of certain experiences in the form of descriptive representation; having a shared immigration background was central to this process. Ultimately, shared experiences were interpreted as a form of substantive representation, with emphasis on the experience of being marginalized as a group within Dutch society, as explained by a respondent from the same Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean group:

> R9: I think it is important that a politician of color expresses the voice of many people with a migration background who experience racism in the Netherlands. So I recognize myself in her [a particular politician of color] in that respect.

A politician having an immigration background or belonging to a minority group seemed to be sufficient for a large group of voters to feel both descriptively and substantively represented. Several respondents responded affirmatively when asked whether they expected a politician with whom they shared

demographic characteristics to have similar experiences and therefore have the same norms and values. In the following conversation in a Turkish and Moroccan group, sharing an immigration background from a Muslim-majority country was an example of descriptive representation while shared norms and values illustrated substantive representation:

> R4: Yes, I expect that someone with a migration background has walked the same path as myself.
>
> R6: Been through the same struggles you've been through.
>
> R4: Yes.
>
> R7: I would say yes.

As to whether or not an individual politician was one they felt represented by, respondents cited the importance of having a shared immigration background—to help provide, as one put it, "a sense of belonging"—for processes of political representation. However, they specified that without substantive representation, there could be no real political representation; political platforms often went together with physical characteristics—a form of descriptive representation—though not always and certainly not by default:

> Moderator: What would you look for [to see] if that person resembles you or you resemble that person? What [criteria] should that person meet?
>
> R3: Attitude, style, and stuff like that—a bit, yes. Looks, not really. But more, yes, attitude.

Later in the conversation, this respondent in a Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean group clarified that she was referring to certain political positions; "attitude" meant the way a politician conducts politics substantively (e.g., as an activist or being inclined to seek dialogue and compromise). She felt, moreover, that an individual politician would not be adequately representative of her if she could not identify with that politician's party.

In another discussion with a Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean group, respondents indicated that the extent to which they identified with and felt connected to different communities was related to a feeling of solidarity first symbolized by appearance:

> R8: For example, I feel connected to everyone who is in this room right now. More generally, the Surinamese community. What is a typical Surinamese person? Look, here he is [pointing to the people in the focus group].
>
> Moderator, also with a Surinamese immigration background: I wouldn't know how to spot a typical Surinamese person.
>
> R6: We all are.

> R8: And look, that's it. So I feel very connected to a lot of different identities. I don't really care that much what it is exactly. It's just about, like, am I at that moment?...What's the vibe like? How are the people? And then I feel connected to that.

However, descriptive representation for our respondents was not always or automatically seen as equivalent to substantive representation. Respondents in another group described how substantive elements ultimately determined whether a politician could truly represent them:

> Moderator: On what basis do you identify the politician who "represents me"?
>
> R6: Based on their ideas, what they do for the country, what they do for refugees. It's not that I'm going to vote for him because of his religion. No. It's about their election manifesto.
>
> Moderator: So you, as a refugee, think that the more he does for refugees, the better he represents you?
>
> R6: Of course….I think it is important that there is someone who defends us, who gives us our rights. But it is not a condition that he must be Syrian. Our experience with politics is that we are not really successful in politics. We have no background in politics…just like [R4] said. In our country, we do not engage in politics.
>
> R2: It is possible for an Arab person or a Syrian to represent us, but I always see opinions on Facebook as soon as someone tries to organize something for us; it is said that there is no one to represent us, and even if there were someone to represent us, he would not represent the majority. Because everyone has their own personal opinion.

A politician's appearance and background—which most respondents used to assess descriptive representation in a political system that they overall deemed unrepresentative—therefore did not automatically lead to substantive representation:

> R5: The appearance of the politician doesn't really matter to me. It really doesn't matter to me at all; what matters is what the person says.
>
> Moderator: The political platform, the person's message?
>
> R5: Yes…because I also do not go to the polling station to see: "Oh yes, he does look a bit like me, he looks a bit brown." His name might have a certain ethnic connotation, but still, I don't know anything about them.
>
> R4: Yes, I think that's right. Because everyone also expects politicians of Surinamese descent to represent us. But I already know because of their [referring to a politician with a Surinamese background] character, that this is going to be a very difficult battle. So I think: "I don't care if you're brown or white or yellow or anything; you can represent someone else; you can represent immigrants or people who come here from abroad or are second-generation with the message and the goals that

> you like, equality of opportunity and things like that." But what I just see a lot in politics, just up close, is they often do things to shut us up.

This respondent indexed two recurring themes. First, a politician with the same immigration background as a voter did not necessarily represent the voter's interests adequately and that, in principle, it should not matter what a politician's background is. At the same time, people of color like this voter were politically excluded in the current political system by being silenced. This leads to a situation in which people with an immigration background do not feel substantially represented adequately and the descriptive presence of politicians like them does not lead to more confidence in the representative quality of the political system.

Religion was yet another significant dimension along which people identified and felt excluded from the political system because the politicians they identified with were not given the space to fully share their religious experience. This reinforced the idea that more descriptive representation in the current political climate does not automatically lead to more substantive political representation. One respondent in the highly educated Turkish and Moroccan group expressed this as follows:

> R1: I recognize myself in female Muslim politicians. I look at them with pride….As a child, I had the dream of entering politics, and I once visited the town hall with my primary school….At that time, it was a totally white environment, with only older people, no one who looked like me to talk to. So I thought: "I actually have no right at all to be here; I should just let that dream go." That's the importance of being represented; when you see someone who looks like you and who speaks your language, you start to believe that you can do that too. It enriches your horizon, and you otherwise impose limitations on yourself that are not there at all. But then I regret seeing those politicians being straitjacketed and not allowed to speak out on all kinds of issues related to diversity and inclusion.

This excerpt reiterates how descriptive and substantive representation issues are indeed intertwined though do not necessarily positively correlate. The respondent found it important for politicians to look like their constituents—a form of descriptive representation—and to speak their language and have shared experiences—a form of substantive representation; in this case, that meant being a female Muslim in the Netherlands. Ultimately, however, adequately representing the interests of people like them depends on the opportunities given to such politicians.

As expected, both overall and within groups with immigration backgrounds, we found a general perception that more descriptive representation is needed in the Netherlands to increase perceived substantive representation. However, perceived exclusion—in this case, feeling too "straitjacketed" to "speak out"—from the mainstream political parties, wherein politicians can be active and speak their minds, got in the way of people's full political participation and representation. As the next section elaborates, this perception of political exclusion and lack of political space was not only widespread but also often the dominant shared experience. It also had a negative impact on their expectation that more descriptive representation would lead to more substantive representation.

## 6. Results: No Perceived Space for Substantive Political Representation

In this second part of the empirical section, we address our other research question: How do perceived forms of social and political exclusion impact the perceived positive correlation between descriptive and substantive political representation?

Respondents in all groups were overall quite cynical when commenting on whether their experience and that of the group/s they identify with were—in a measurement of the perceived level of substantive political representation—given enough space in Dutch politics. They directly linked this to their perception of what it means to 'be listened to' by politicians (as discussed in De Mulder, 2023). If that space did exist, they found it had to do with politicians from the majority group needing something from their group. Politics, rather than the underrepresented groups themselves, instrumentally determined which issues were important. This was discussed extensively in one of the Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean groups:

> R5: You won't be listened to until it's an issue they [the politicians] find interesting. As soon as it comes to the sensitive things in history [e.g., slavery] or the sensitive things that are happening now [e.g., institutional racism], people listen less carefully. Unless it is someone else, for example with a—what should I call it—a "native" [Dutch] background, who then says the same as you. Then I find that people listen to that person more quickly in politics.

Not only were underrepresented groups' claims ignored, according to this respondent, but politicians invoked these claims to further politically exclude members of these groups. This caused the respondent to either no longer participate or want to participate in Dutch politics:

> R5: And when you [or politicians like you] try to convey something, it is often seen as aggressive, even though that is not the intention. But because in many cases it is difficult to be heard, I think you will also put a little more passion into it, because you really want to achieve something. And the longer and the more you actually have to put force behind it, the more annoying it is to convince someone else of the issue. And then it can get annoying. But I actually have the feeling that people are not listening. And that as soon as you open your mouth about something, it actually gets trivialized and pushed aside, because there are more important things.

This respondent described the subtle yet hard-hitting way his experience was dismissed by labeling impassioned communication as "aggressive." Influential groups can indeed politically exclude members of underrepresented groups by explicitly calling their strategies and forms of participation "different" and therefore unacceptable (as discussed in Medina, 2013). Other respondents from the same group shared the feeling of being actively silenced by white Dutch citizens without an immigration background as soon as they raised politically important issues for themselves and people like them:

> R2: [In theory,] you are allowed to express yourself vocally. Here [in the Netherlands], we have freedom of expression on paper. But there are all these rules and procedures that keep people [like me] down: white suppression, I call it….People born here also experience this [not only first-generation migrants]. You immediately feel the pressure that is put on you as a person. No joke.

According to some respondents, the existing political system aimed to actively exclude underrepresented or claims-making groups. In the political debate, only the majority group could impose the positive value of their uniqueness—their identity—and devalue the uniqueness of others—their otherness—in order to exclude underrepresented groups in the political domain just as in other social domains (as mentioned by Staszak, 2008). The problem that many respondents experienced with Dutch politics was the lack of effective substantive representation, which led to a lack of space for them and people like them to meaningfully participate in substantively representative ways. Specifically, respondents felt that current Dutch politics actively counteracted the presence of politicians with whom they identified. Respondents indicated resistance among politicians to give substantive space to the experiences, needs, and wishes of underrepresented groups:

> R2: And I think [in the Netherlands] there is a fear among politicians to give that space [to underrepresented groups]. So [these politicians ask themselves]: "How much space is just enough [for us] to give them?" Do you understand? That's like a pardon from slavery. [The politicians also think:] "If we give them more space, then we give in." Do you understand what I mean?

This lack of perceived space—a combination of a lack of perceived descriptive and substantive representation—led to people not feeling politically represented, part of the system, and/or at home in Dutch society. Respondents expressed how in order to effect change, it was not always enough to have parties standing up for the interests of people with an immigration background—a form of substantive representation—or elect politicians with an immigration background—a form of descriptive representation. There was a general sentiment among respondents across all groups that for true societal transformation, Dutch politics needed to become more descriptively inclusive and provide more space for underrepresented groups to have their shared experiences substantively represented. Respondents were not only referring to the political domain but more broadly to how they (and people like them) perceived a world rife with discrimination and exclusion, as discussed in a Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean group:

> R7: There are many politicians in the Netherlands who don't look like me, whom I don't feel represented by. That has to do with how you see the world, and that depends on what you've been through in life. And I think that's why it's important. Because people with a migration background…experience the world in a certain way. And I think it is important that such a perspective is also taken into account. So that it [politics in the Netherlands] will become more diverse. It doesn't have to be diverse just based on migration background, but simply more diverse.

Commenting on the political opportunities for people of color, practicing Muslims, and groups with certain immigration backgrounds, respondents felt that the current Dutch political system did not provide enough opportunities to address everyday experiences of discrimination and social exclusion. This influenced the extent to which they felt represented, creating the sense of a "linked fate" in which, as members of marginalized groups in society, they and people like them were not provided the space to be heard and experience substantive representation. This specifically concerned a desire for more and better access to politics and political decision-making. Respondents in one of the Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean groups expressed this as follows:

> R9: The voice of underrepresented groups must be translated into politics, but the opportunity must also be there. Or at least it should be possible. It shouldn't be that it isn't possible at all.

> R7: I think it's a really good point she [R9] makes: getting the chance. I think it's harder for certain people to get an opportunity than for other people. You can get very far with a network. And certain types of people have more access to the network that you get given certain jobs. So I think that's a really nice and clear word you [R9] use.
>
> R4: Yes. I think campaigns indeed approach a lot of people with different backgrounds to participate in order to actually make their voices heard. I think that is not the biggest challenge for parties. The biggest challenge is inclusiveness; how are we going to increase it? I am talking about boards, about committees, to really become more inclusive there. I certainly have the feeling that in my case, it is taken seriously, that I really get that chance. But it is important to certainly show that, on such a [party] list, for example, to put people in an eligible position and not in position 30, 35, or even lower, purely to have the diversity factor in the campaign.

For different respondents in all groups except the Syrian ones, a dynamic and inclusive conception of political representation was expressed. In their eyes, this conception fits well in contemporary societies characterized by diversity; plus, they thought it could offer more political space for minorities (for a discussion on this see also Celis, 2012). They believed such space, in which topics relevant to them could be meaningfully discussed, would create opportunities to have their interests more adequately represented. That, in turn, could eventually lead to the aforementioned "sense of belonging." Such a view transcended whether a particular politician resembled them and adequately represented their interests. The view pertained to the entire political system—reflecting an expectation for descriptive representation—as well as the platform and actions of an individual politician—reflecting an expectation for substantive representation—and the opportunities given to underrepresented groups to express their experiences. Here we found differences between the groups in line with recent quantitative research. The Surinamese and Dutch-Caribbean as well as Turkish and Moroccan groups—all of whom are more established, larger, and visible groups with more political rights and with more experiences of different forms of social and political exclusion in the Netherlands—evaluated the Dutch political system more negatively (e.g., in terms of lower levels of perceived descriptive and substantive representation) than the Syrian groups with fewer political rights (Dagevos et al., 2024; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024). As a relatively small, recently arrived refugee population, the Syrians tended to compare the Dutch political system more to the political system they left behind, which they found overtly oppressive.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

Our results show that descriptive representation is a critical start though not enough for adequate substantive political representation of people with an immigration background. People need to feel that their experience matters and that their interests get equal space in politics rather than being excluded or not taken seriously. Respondents' political confidence quickly dropped when politicians who resembled them could not or did not want to adequately represent their interests. If that proved unfeasible because such politicians did not hold office and/or were not given enough space, confidence in the system, as a whole, became undermined. If a politician did not take up that role, confidence in that politician became undermined. Crucially, respondents noticed both how politicians with an immigration background were dealt with—not taken seriously, silenced, or ignored—and how other politicians conformed to the system yet did not stand up enough for the interests of people with an immigration background. As such, exclusion processes, both within and outside the political

arena, remained a major obstacle for members of marginalized groups in the Netherlands because they stood in the way of descriptive representation being translated into substantive representation. It is important to note that the Dutch electoral system of low-threshold proportional representation, considerable impact of preferential voting, and providing voting rights for non-Dutch nationals at the local level did not seem to have a significant effect on this result. This finding illustrates that a more diverse political system alone does not automatically lead to marginalized groups in society feeling more represented by that system, not even when a party largely comprising members from immigrant communities has been elected into parliament three times over eight years.

Going into this study, we expected potential grounds for exclusion to have differing influences on perceived descriptive and substantive representation and how members of the groups related to political institutions. However, we found surprisingly little difference across our focus groups and forms of political representation. We explain these results by accounting for the effects of perceived discrimination. Feeling excluded, regardless of on which ground, enhanced the perception of a "linked fate," whereby a shared experience with those representing an individual voter and people like them became most salient. In such contexts, perceived descriptive and substantive representation got conflated. Members of marginalized groups perceived the political system as exclusionary and therefore sought ways to change the status quo by having more politicians who resemble them—a form of descriptive representation for those who face exclusion—and finding more space to discuss processes of exclusion—a form of substantive representation.

Our findings are consistent with recent studies that emphasize the need to carefully translate what we understand about political representation to the perceived and actual experiences of marginalized groups (De Jong, 2024; De Mulder, 2023; Geurts et al., 2024; Holmberg, 2020). To this, we add our finding that the often presumed positive correlation between descriptive and substantive representation is indeed reflected in how minorities perceive political representation, albeit in a more layered, complicated, and highly context-dependent reality. We also offer insights into how the political context is largely defined by perceptions of social and political exclusion. The fact that political exclusion itself plays a major role in creating and informing perceptions of substantive representation is a limitation, though it also illustrates the need for conceptual clarity in future studies.

According to most of our respondents, substantive representation in the Netherlands is failing. The current political system lacks a strong link between, on the one hand, what politicians do and, on the other, what citizens want and need. Citizens also lack space in which they—or the politicians they feel substantively represent them—can share their experiences and be heard. Our respondents felt substantive representation has also failed due to a lack of descriptive representation in the form of politicians with shared experiences who know what it feels like to be excluded, opposed, and dismissed as problematic. They defined the responsiveness of the political system as being determined by the claims of elected representatives, the scope they are given to make those claims, and the acceptance that their claims are a serious, legitimate contribution to the political debate (Celis, 2012). This was in line with findings by Klarenbeek (2024), following Anderson (2010), who emphasized how relational equality emerges when power relations lead to the formation of superior and inferior positions, which generate and justify the unequal distribution of political freedoms, resources, and wealth. What our respondents said also highlighted the salience of the concept of epistemic injustice in this process: the subtle but impactful ways certain people's stories, experiences, and positions get ignored in the media, education, and politics. Socially and politically,

influential groups exclude members of underrepresented groups by explicitly labeling their strategies and forms of participation as "different," "threatening," and therefore unacceptable (Medina, 2013). To change this, knowledge and experiences specific to, and actually contributed by, certain groups must be given a place and opportunity in the political system.

Meanwhile, relational equality and the fight against epistemic injustice requires all members of society to align along multiple axes. These include: (a) recognizing each other's moral worth; (b) enjoying equal social status enjoying the same social status as moral agents; (c) having the right to an equal opportunity to participate in the political system; and (d) enabling all perspectives and interests to be equally weighted in decision-making processes. Many respondents in our focus groups seemed to be seeking relational equality in the political arena and saw descriptive and substantive representation as integral to that. In this vision, their shared experiences, religious beliefs, and immigration background would all be politically acceptable and consequential.

For our respondents, the lack of descriptive representation is highly correlated with multiple forms of exclusion processes in the Netherlands, both inside and outside of politics, for people with an immigration background. It led to a lack of politicians with shared experiences who would ensure a more responsive political system that people could trust and that was better able to solve the problems of people like themselves. And yet, it is precisely these politicians who continue to be given little space or are actively silenced by being dismissed as different, problematic, or both. This reality in turn prevents descriptive representation from being translated into the substantive representation of those who face marginalization in the first place.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

Anonymized transcripts are available in The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) repository upon request.

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