

THE RELATION BETWEEN CRISES AND THE RISE OF POPULISM: A STUDY ABOUT THE HOUSING CRISIS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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In this work we made use of generative artificial intelligence. Please see the appendix for the disclosure statement.

Abstract

This thesis examines the extent to which the Dutch housing crisis has contributed to a rise in populist tendencies among starters (young adults aged 18- to 34). While populist voting is often attributed to cultural backlash among older generations, this study finds that economic exclusion has been the catalysator for populism among starters. Combining textual analysis with electoral and demographic data, this study applies a mixed-methods approach within a single-country case study design.

The findings indicate that starters are disproportionately affected by the housing crisis due to lower incomes and limited access to property ownership. Although populist parties commonly frame the crisis as a consequence of mass immigration, starters remain the most accepting towards migrants. Nevertheless, a higher increase in populist voting was observed among starters compared to older generations.

These results challenge the cultural backlash thesis and suggest that economic stress – rather than cultural backlash – is a stronger motivator of populist sentiment among Dutch starters. This thesis concludes that the housing crisis functions as a catalyst for political disaffection, supporting Rodrik's (2018) theory of economic backlash.

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1. Introduction

In political science there has been a growing consensus about the fact that populist actors have become more central and important in political landscapes in Western democracies. Mudde (2016) argues that populism is “no longer a marginal phenomenon but has become a mainstream feature of contemporary politics.” This uprise of populism in Western-Europe and Northern-America brings along questions about how this changes the structures and institutions of strong democracies. According to Müller (2016), “when populists are in power, they tend to undermine democratic institutions and exclude minorities, leading to an erosion of democratic values.” Also, Jones (2017) argues that “populists weaken Europe by undermining the domestic institutions...” Scholars agree that populism may be a threat to democracies, and therefore it is necessary to get clear insights into the drivers of this political phenomenon. Algan et al., (2017) argue that populism surges because of so-called structural crises (e.g. economic, social, and political). There exists disagreement, however, on the main driver of populism. Berman (2021) and Rodrik (2018) argue that economic insecurity must be seen as the main reason for the rise of populism. More specifically, Berman (2021) states that there is “a clear connection between the divisive and destabilizing economic trends of the last decades and rising support for populism at macro-level.” Inglehart and Norris (2016) allege that the so-called cultural backlash is the main driver. There is consensus, however, about the fact that populist actors benefit from crises as they seize it as opportunities to blame sitting governments (Laclau, 2005; Jones, 2007). As it appears that we are well and truly living in the age of crises (Moffitt, 2014), more opportunities arise for populists to attract voters who lost their belief in mainstream parties. This phenomenon, where people lose their faith in the sitting government, is described by Habermas (1988). In his book, there is carefully explained how a so-called ‘legitimation crisis’ is an intermediate step between (social, economic) crises and the increase of populist tendencies. This relationship between crises, decline of legitimacy and the rise of populism is investigated in this thesis, and is utilized as the theoretical basis for the empirical results.

The empirical part of this thesis consists of the example of the Dutch housing crisis and its (political) consequences on starters (aged 18- to 34). The housing crisis entails a severe shortage of affordable rental and purchase housing, which affects starters the most and results in dissatisfaction especially among this age group (Den Draak, 2024). Therefore, it may be interesting to research whether this leads to notable differences between age groups. As this crisis affects a particular population group, it raises questions whether and how structural societal problems like the housing shortage contribute to a decline in governmental legitimacy and a rise in support for populist parties in the Netherlands. This thesis tries to combine a macro-sociological theoretical framework with the example of the housing crisis in the Netherlands to investigate whether these theories can also be applied here.

The research question is formulated as:

“To what extent did the housing crisis contribute to a shift towards populist tendencies among Dutch starters?”

As mentioned, the textual data provides the theoretical framework, and empirical results of organisations such as Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) and Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) are assessed to these theories. The results section is based on (numerical) data about housing shortages, political attitudes, and electoral trends among starters. The first sub-question is “To what extent does the housing crisis affect starters and their preferences regarding political action?” This question answers how starters experience the housing shortage and how weighty they find this topic. The second sub-question is formulated as “How do populist actors in the Netherlands frame the housing crisis?”. Here, general theory about how populists seize crises as opportunities to gain more voters, is explored. Furthermore, examples of how populist parties in the Netherlands frame the housing crisis is investigated. The third sub-question answered in this thesis is “What are the political positions and opinions of starters between 18- and 34 years old?” This sub-question will lead to a clear overview of how starters look towards Dutch government and whether this has changed significantly over the last decade. The third sub-question links the previous question with the housing crisis and assesses whether there are notable differences as result of the framing. The fourth and last sub-question is “To what extent might a decline in government legitimacy have caused a rise in populist politics in the Netherlands?”. This question explores the linkage between a possible decline in legitimacy and the rise of populism. Here, the comparison is made with existing theories about the relationship between crisis, legitimacy, and populism in the case of the Netherlands. By answering these four sub-questions, this thesis tries to provide a clear overview of existing empirical data and its comparison with the theoretical background to produce an answer to the main research question.

1.1 Social and scientific value

As mentioned, populism has become a key aspect of modern politics (Mudde, 2016). Additionally, as various scholars argue that populist politics may be a threat to democracies (Müller, 2016; Jones, 2017), deeper insights can be valuable as this may prevent the possible downfall of democratic institutions. These main justifications show the need for additional scientific research, and consequently, scientific knowledge on how populist attraction emerges. This thesis, more specifically, advances knowledge to the understanding of populism by integrating the example of the housing crisis which both contains economic and cultural aspects. Existing theories of Rodrik (2018) and Inglehart and Norris (2016) are assessed to refine or challenge these in the case of this societal and economic issue. Furthermore, underlying connections and causal mechanisms are explored and discovered.

On societal level, this paper contributes to the broader understanding on how the Dutch housing crisis may result in dissatisfaction among starters. As polarization and distrust in government are major

themes in the Netherlands, and where the housing crisis intersects of both, these insights are particularly relevant. The findings may be useful for Dutch policymakers and other public actors as this creates more insights in the (political) behaviour of starters. This research, thus, raises awareness of the housing crisis as a pressing social issue and provides additional explanations for shifts in voting behaviour resulting from it.

2. Conceptualization

2.1 (Housing) Crisis

The term ‘crisis’ is described by the Cambridge Dictionary as a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Boin et al., (2005), state that “in academic discourse, a crisis marks a phase of disorder in the development ...” They continue by arguing that crises can affect societies, people, cultures, or the whole world. Habermas (1988) associates the term crisis with the idea of “an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty.” He adds that “to conceive of a process as a crisis is tacitly to give it a normative meaning...” (Habermas, 1988). A crisis may, thus, take away a part of human autonomy and control, which may make people feel powerless and frustrated. Moffitt (2014) argues that “in contemporary usage, the way that crisis is most usually signified is through linking it to failure.” An article of Gundel (2005) distinguishes four distinct types of crises based on two criteria (predictability and influence possibilities). In this way, Gundel is able to categorize the different sorts of crises. He states that the four types of crises are: conventional, unexpected, intractable, and fundamental. For this thesis, we can define the housing crisis as an intractable crisis as the crisis was expected but it was difficult to influence the situation (Gundel, 2005). According to a report of the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency written by Schilder et al. (2020), the housing market can be seen as “a relatively predictable system.” However, for the Dutch government it is difficult to change the situation for the better as there are many conflicting interests and regulations. In a report of the Ministry of General Affairs (2023), there are noted down several reasons for the housing crisis. Population growth for instance leads to a higher demand of housing among the Dutch population. Additionally, in the Netherlands there is a limited amount of land that is available for new housing. The Netherlands is a small country and already densely populated, so it is difficult to find suitable places to build. Another cause of the housing crisis is the long procedures that need to be followed before starting a building project (Ministry of General Affairs, 2023).

The Dutch housing crisis entails a significant shortage of houses compared to the amount of people who want to rent or buy a house. According to a report of the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning (2024), the housing shortage - housing demand minus housing supply - in 2024 was 401.000. The Dutch government has as goal to have built 900.000 new houses by 2030, which has to reduce the shortage problem (Ministry of General Affairs, 2023). However, for now, the housing crisis is still extremely challenging for (mostly) starters aged 18- to 34 years old.

2.2 (Political) Legitimacy

Legitimacy refers to the normative justification of political authority (Thomassen & Van Ham, 2017). The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.-b) describes the term as ‘the quality of being legal.’ Max Weber has had a noteworthy influence on the conceptualization of legitimacy. Weber (1947, p. 328) defines the type rational-legal legitimacy as “resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).” More specifically, this legally established impersonal order “exercising the authority of office under it only by virtue of the formal legality ... and only within the scope of authority of the office is valid” (Weber, 1947). In the article of Sunshine & Tyler (2003b), legitimacy is defined as “a property of an authority or institution that leads people to feel that that authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed.” So, it is the right to authority (e.g. government) to make decisions that affect the community. Habermas (1988) distinguishes two conditions that need to be fulfilled to be seen as legitimate: “the normative order must be established positively,” and “those legally associated must believe in its legality.” This means that Habermas argues that only legality is not enough to be considered legitimate; there must also be a sense of justification. Scharpf (1999) recognizes this type of legitimacy and calls it ‘input-legitimacy’. Scharpf, however, also recognizes another source of legitimacy and describes this as ‘output-legitimacy’. Legitimacy is, here, not only about the process how an authority has become legitimate, but also about the performance and whether people are satisfied with it. The OECD (2010) also identifies these two sources of legitimacy. In a report, ‘input/process,’ and ‘output/performance’ legitimacy are mentioned (OECD, 2010). Input-legitimacy is here about the feeling of representation among people, whereas output-legitimation entails the performance-based views towards government. Important for this thesis, if the government fails to deliver decent public services (e.g. health care, housing, education), the level of legitimacy can reduce. This argument co-aligns with the ideas of Habermas (1988), where is stated that “modern states must not only deliver economic performance, but also constantly justify their authority to their citizens.” Only if these conditions about the process itself and the justification of the government’s achievements are met, people will accept the authority as legitimate.

2.3 Populism

Defining the term populism is a challenging task for scholars as it is still unclear which political actors can be seen as populist, and which are not. There are different views on how to define populism by scholars (e.g. Canovan, 1981; Laclau, 2005), and an understanding which is generally accepted is yet to be discovered. The definition of populism conceptualized by Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017), however, can contribute to this research. They define populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite.’” It may still be more convenient, however, to look at core elements of populism to recognize populist actors in the case of the Netherlands. According to Webber (2023), core elements are

“elements that are present in all populist movements and appear to be central to those movements’ populist character.”

Contemporary scholars (e.g. Webber, Müller, and Mudde) agree on aspects that may define populism. The most important feature of populism is the so-called ‘us’ vs ‘them’ politics. Populist actors try to create an anti-establishment movement where the government is seen as an elite group that does not listen to the needs and preferences of the real people (Müller, 2016). Furthermore, scholars agree that populist actors see themselves as the voices of all the people that are neglected by the sitting elite. Müller (2016) puts it as “the political actor or movement must claim that a part of the people is the people – and that only the populist authentically identifies and represents this real and true people.” So, the elite that governs the state does not represent the true needs and beliefs of the real people. Webber (2023) distinguishes two other aspects also as core elements other than the voice of the people and anti-elitism. In all populist characters there appears binary, moralizing, all-or-nothing appeals, and distrust of procedures and institutions (Webber, 2023). The moralizing core element entails the conviction of populist actors that there is only one will of the people and one truth. This can be identified as anti-pluralist because populists agree that there is only one good and valid answer (Webber, 2023) to political questions. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) also discuss this so-called ‘general will’ and state that populists vision the people as homogenous with one absolute will. The consequence mentioned here, is that populists are in favour of “a more direct relationship between the populist leader and his/her constituencies” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The fourth core element Webber (2023) discussed entails the distrust of procedures and institutions. Important institutions for democracies (e.g. separation of powers) are only seen by populists as “little more than obstacles to action” (Webber, 2023). Also, Mueller (2019) recognizes this element as he states that the direct relationships of populist discourse and actors with democratic institutions is a core feature that all populist platforms have in common. Müller (2016) recognizes this “anti-institutionalism”, and Mueller (2019) also argues that “populist government often weaken democratic control mechanisms...by attacking democratic institutions such as the independent judiciary..., the free press, scientific and academic institutions.” These core features together create an image on how political actors can be recognized. Webber (2023), lastly, identified the opposition to immigration as a feature that is often present among populists.

Lastly, political preferences are seen as irrelevant for identifying political actors as populist. There is consensus in academic literature that the right-left spectrum does not matter in the case of populism. According to Mueller (2019), this feature of populism “produces the possibility of conservative as well as progressive anti-elite positions.” This element opens up the possibility that in the Netherlands, there exist populist parties on different sides of the political spectrum.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Crisis and populism

Academic scholars agree that populist actors benefit from crises (e.g. trust, political, economic) by attracting more voters. Laclau (2005) argues that “some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism...” Laclau substantiates this by stating that “populism never emerges from an absolute outside ... but proceeds by articulating fragmented and dislocated demands around a new core” (Laclau, 2005, p. 177). The new populist movements, thus, appear from within and formulate crises the elite is facing to get more foothold in national politics. Masala (2020) agrees with this, stating that populism can be construed a symptom of the crisis of trust in politics. He continues by stating that “populism becomes the embodiment of the crisis of trust in authority” (Masala, 2020). As Moffitt (2014) states that we are living in an “age of crises”, this could be a good explanation for the rise of populism in Western democracies.

As mentioned above, legitimacy is partly based on the performance of authority (Habermas, 1988; Scharpf, 1999). According to Masala (2020), “the lower the level of trust in institutions, the greater the tendency to choose the populist political offer.” A failing government, thus, results in a lower level of trust in democratic institutions among the people which results in populist tendencies. Masala (2020) continues with stating that the reason for this, is that the populists “promise more immediate and personal benefits.” This raises the question what causes can be identified that lead to the decline of legitimacy of democratic institutions.

3.2 Economic and cultural crisis

Two main ‘demand-side’ explanations for the decline of trust and the rise of populists in Europe are agreed among scholars (e.g. Algan et al., 2017; Berman, 2021; Ibsen, 2018b). The first explanation can be found in the feeling of economic insecurity among people. Financial and economic crises can cause dissatisfaction among European citizens and can therefore also result in more populist tendencies (Rodrik, 2018). Webber (2023) agrees with this argument stating that “an acute sense of economic injustice is an important element of the populist appeal.” Webber argues that economic grievances are the main cause for populism as “in each of the societies marked by a rise in populism, a perception that the distribution of economic benefits and burdens is dramatically skewed.” Equality is here seen as a principal factor as people who feel disadvantaged are more tempted to vote for populist ideas. Webber (2023) continues by stating that the much-neglected precondition of democratic legitimacy is the maintenance of some form of equality in the distribution of economic benefits and burdens. Additionally, Rodrik (2018) argues that “economic anxiety and distributional struggles ... generate a base for populism.” This explanation, thus, acknowledges economic downturns, and specifically inequality between population groups, as the main driver of populist tendencies among Western democracies. In other words, populism “revolves around a largely economic cleavage” (Rodrik, 2018). The economic

backlash theory as driver for populism argues, thus, that differences in economic welfare is the main cause.

The second explanation is the cultural backlash which is mentioned to be a significant driver for the rise of populism. Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that this (sociocultural) explanation causes more demand for populist politics. This explanation entails the unwillingness of European citizens to adopt other cultures, values, and norms, and the fact that this fuels distrust in European politics. Inglehart and Norris (2016) state that “support for populism will be especially strong among those holding traditional values and retro norms ... left behind by progressive cultural tides.” They additionally argue that “many of the most heated conflicts are cultural,” meaning that politics is mainly a fight of culture instead of economics. Inglehart and Norris (2016) continue by stating that “results of the analysis are mixed and inconsistent across alternative measures of economic insecurity” concerning the relation with populism. Their model, thus, cannot identify with certainty the level of influence which economic insecurity has on the rise of populism. In other words, “the economic insecurity thesis is only partially supported by this model” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Also, Ignazi (1992) argues that cultural evolutions changed the political landscape and therefore gave rise to extreme right-wing/populist parties. According to Ignazi (1992), the opinions of people flow away from the mainstream middle parties into more left-wing and eventually to more extreme right-wing populist parties. This ‘silent counter-revolution’ results in more a decrease of trust with traditional parties and institutions, which causes a legitimization crisis (Ignazi, 1992). This, however, as Inglehart and Norris noticed, cultural backlash (which entails the reaction against long-term shifts in progressive and liberal social values) is mostly felt by the older generation. This so-called ‘generational cleavages’ may explain the voting behaviour of the older generation. The younger generation, however, is a more supporter of progressive values as socialization theory suggests (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). They continue by stating that “younger voters proving less likely to vote for populist parties than older generations” and “xenophobia is only one part of a much broader cultural backlash among the older generation” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Here, the main driver of populism can thus be defined as the generational cleavage where age is the key factor.

Ibsen (2018b) acknowledges the two explanations and describes this divide as the “Two Rival Explanations of Populism.” In this article, the two different explanations are mentioned as separate and not connected. This is, however, contradicted by other scholars stating that these two explanations are not separate, but interrelated (Algan et al., 2017; Berman 2021). Rodrik (2018) claims that what may look like a cultural backlash, it still “may have its roots in economic anxieties and dislocations.” Thus, also Rodrik does not neglect the involvement of cultural grievances but claims that it is the logical outcome of economic insecurity. Algan et al. (2017, p. 316) recognize economic reasons as the cause, but argue that this leads to the cultural backlash. In their report, arguments are made that “economic insecurity has a direct impact on values and beliefs.” This means that there is not one main factor that can be identified as the source populist ideas among people. Inglehart and Norris (2016) are more

convinced of the cultural backlash thesis; however, they also do claim that there is some kind of interconnectedness. In their report, it becomes clear that “growing economic insecurity and rising levels of social inequality may also reinforce cultural shifts, suggesting an interaction effect where traditional values will be found to be strongest among poorer and older sectors of the electorate” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 16). More specifically, “xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, ... tend to rise during difficult economic times” (Berman, 2021). Here, it becomes clear that several scholars agree about the linkage between economic downturns and cultural backlashes.

3.3 (Political) Legitimation crisis

As we have seen above, legitimacy is the normative justification of political authority (Thomassen & Van Ham, 2017). However, as Scharpf (1999) mentioned in his work, only input-legitimacy is an incomplete description. The authority must perform accordingly and “must be generated through performance and rational justification” (Habermas, 1988, p. 69). According to Weber (1964) people obey the national institutions (e.g. national law) as long as they trust the system. If the political system is rational, predictable, and generally applicable, citizens will trust the institutions and act accordingly. As governments are judged on their performance, this means that if it underperforms, legitimacy may decline. Habermas calls this phenomenon a ‘legitimation crisis;’ when the performance is not sufficient for all citizens or a particular population group, trust in authority reduces and legitimacy will decline. This raises the question on how this can happen and what sorts of factors contribute to this. According to Habermas (1988) four different crises can be distinguished that all strengthen the process towards a legitimation crisis: economic, rational-legitimate, motivation, and social integrative. Habermas states that the incapability of an authority (e.g. government) to solve societal problems results in social disorder. Apathy towards national politics rises which leads to a rational-legitimate crisis as the government is not able to convince its policy towards its citizens. This legitimation crisis itself results in an even larger legitimation crisis as the government is not able anymore to as the capacity of the state to implement effective policies reduces. These steps, according to Habermas (1988), strengthen each other and the process and therefore the crises keep each other in a sort of vicious circle with as result a government incapable of implementing effective policies.

Ignazi (1992) recognizes this relation between the decline of legitimacy and the rise of extreme-oriented parties. He states that “dissatisfaction towards parties, the way in which democracy works and the output of the system in relation to physical security tend inevitably to feed opposition and/or antisystem parties.” According to his article, only the ‘new politics’ parties (extreme left- and right-wing oriented) offer solutions to this dissatisfaction. This ‘restructuring’ provided political space for new parties that are able to mobilise around less structured political cleavages, such as economic insecurity and immigration (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Guiso et al., 2017). Here, the linkage becomes clear between economic and cultural crises, and political and legitimation crises. It is argued, thus, that “usually ... the

lower the satisfaction with democracy is, the more profound the political crisis is and, presumably, the more likely populist parties are to succeed” (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015).

3.4 Populist parties in the Netherlands

To categorize Dutch political parties as (non)populist, a survey by Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA), a report of Voogd et al. (2024), and the election programs of parties are decisive. The POPPA survey assessed European political parties on five core components of populism (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020). The components Manichean worldview, indivisible people, general will, people-centrism, and anti-elitism were assessed by experts in the field of populist politics. In the figure below, the results are visualized. In the original figure, Italian parties were included. However, as these parties do not contribute to this research, they have been deleted.

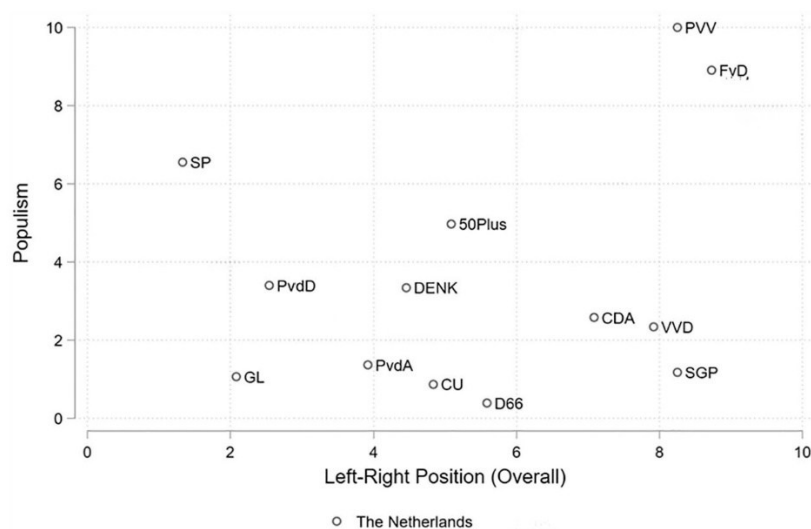


Figure 1: Populist parties in the Netherlands (Source: Meijers & Zaslove, 2020 (<https://poppa-data.eu/>))

Three parties can be identified as populist according to this survey as they score a 6 or higher (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020). The Party for Freedom (PVV), with Geert Wilders as party leader, is a clear example of a populist party. The PVV, which became the biggest party in the last elections of 2023, scores a 10 in the figure which means that on all components the party scores high in the opinion of the experts. The election program called ‘Dutch people back on 1’ contains several examples of populist features. The anti-pluralistic stance towards other cultures is a core populist feature which can be clearly identified in the election program. Especially the Muslim society should be banned from the Netherlands as they endanger the country and make life harder for the ‘real’ Dutch people (PVV, 2023). Furthermore, there is stated that the “elite is ruling” (PVV, 2023) which only consists of the highly educated in the Netherlands. Another interesting statement in the election program, is the preference of the PVV the abolish the first chamber (PVV, 2023). This is coherent to the core feature described by Webber (2023), where is stated that populists try to undermine democratic institutions. The PVV and the charismatic leader Geert Wilders are “really populist” (Müller, 2017, p. 109).

Secondly, Forum for Democracy (FvD) is identified as a populist party according to this survey. It scores on average a 9 on the criteria that has been set out. In the election program, there is stated that the FvD wants to fight the so-called political cartel (FvD, 2023). This means that according to this party, “a small group of people call the shots” which results in no opportunities for other ideas. Other examples are the abolition of certain constitutions and the reduction of the pluralistic society (FvD, 2023). Furthermore, the willingness of the FvD to implement a form of direct democracy (binding referendums) is a populist feature (FvD, 2023). According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), “populist actors usually support the implementation of direct democratic mechanisms.”

In the figure above, the Social Party (SP) is also considered populist as it scores a relatively high score on criteria of the survey. Additionally, in the election program of 2023 written by Alkaya et al. (2023), which is called ‘now the people’, statements such as “the government and many inspection services have been hollowed out...” and “the current prime minister has caused a lot of damage to our country...” can be identified as united people and anti-elitist which are core features of populism (Mudde, 2017; Canovan, 1999). Furthermore, the election program emphasizes that ‘we, the common people’ are doing very badly, and ‘they, the elite’ are doing better than ever (Alkaya et al., 2023).

Additionally, the party DENK is considered populist in this thesis, despite scoring a low number in the POPPA survey. This is because Voogd et al. (2024) state that the voters for this party can be identified as populist. The group that votes for this party can be compared to the PVV and the FvD concerning their populist attitudes (Voogd et al., 2024, p. 71). Furthermore, the political party, which mostly is about the fight for the rights of immigrants, state in their election program that politicians “act out of self-interest” and that the “government has come to regard citizens as customers” (DENK, 2023). It becomes clear from the election program that the evil government trampled the citizens, and that the same government is the enemy of all Dutch citizens (DENK, 2023). This ‘us’ versus ‘them’ politics combined with the anti-elitism, are clear examples of populism. These statements and the fact that the group of voters for DENK are (extremely) populist, ensure that this party is included in the analysis.

The Farmers Movement (BBB) is not included in the analysis of POPPA, and thus in the figure, yet. However, the BBB is also identified as a populist party in this thesis. Firstly, in the election program of the BBB (2023) the cabinet is put down as ‘white collar government’ which no longer represents the people. Additionally, there is stated that in the Netherlands there are so-called “The Hague silos” (BBB, 2023) which emphasizes the fact that policy makers are separated from the ‘real people’. Furthermore, in the election program, there is stated that “the elite has become its own bubble” (BBB, 2023). This is substantiated by arguing that “university graduates with higher incomes have their own bubble... and they form the layer that often also produces politicians, policy makers and administrators” (BBB, 2023). A last example is that in the election program, there is spoken of a silent middle (group) that gets a voice again if the BBB gets elected, which is considered a populist feature.

Lastly, JA21 also is not included into POPPA survey but still is identified as a populist party in this paper. Rooduijn (2021) finds that JA21 certainly belongs in the list of populist parties in the Netherlands. Voogd et al. (2024) agree with this by putting JA21 in their selection of parties with populist voters. Furthermore, in the election program there is mentioned that citizens are not involved and heard in political decision-making and that citizens should get more power by referendums (JA21, 2023). Additionally, party leader Joost Eerdmans has been a member of the party of Pim Fortuyn – seen as the first real populist in the Netherlands – in 2002.

4. Hypotheses

There are two main backlashes (cultural and economic) recognized as the drivers of populism (Rodrik, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Ibsen, 2018b). Some scholars argue, however, that these backlashes may also be related (Algan et al., 2017; Berman 2021). The expectation in this thesis is that the latter theory may be relevant in the case of the housing crisis. The economic downturn (housing crisis) will be framed by populists as the result of mass migration. This open-border policy results in more demand on the housing market and therefore a larger number of starters not able to enter the market. In this way, the economic and the cultural backlash are intertwined which results in a higher level of populism among the population group affected by the crisis the most: starters. As older generations normally vote more populist (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Rekker, 2017), the expectation here is that the difference (if existed) between the generations concerning populism, will diminish. In other words, this thesis expects that because of the housing crisis as economic downturn, the sentiment of starters becomes more anti-immigration and there will be an increase of votes for populists among this age group. This is a positive correlation as both the in- and dependent variables increase – if the housing crisis increases, populism among starters also increases. The expected theoretical model can be stated as:

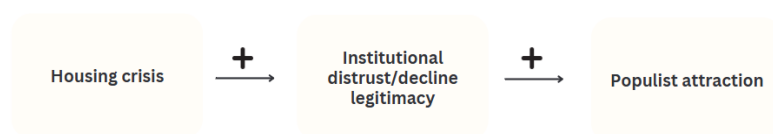


Figure 2: Hypothesis - Expected causal relationship between housing crisis and populism.

More specifically, the hypothesis can be visualized as:

1. Starters relatively more affected by housing shortage → Dissatisfaction with mainstream government → Loss of confidence in institutions (decline legitimacy) → Attraction to simple solutions → Framing populist parties housing crisis as result mass migration → More anti-immigration tendencies → Relatively higher rise of populism among starters

There is a possibility, however, that the secondary data will not result in this hypothesis. Therefore, it is important to discuss what alternative(s) can explain the outcome. This research describes one alternative that may be described by the empirical data. The alternative is a lower election turnout in the

population group of people between 18- and 34 years old. In this alternative, where institutional distrust leads to a lower election turnout, the theoretical model will look like this:

2. Starters relatively more affected by housing shortage → Dissatisfaction with mainstream government → Loss of confidence in institutions (decline legitimacy) → Lower election turnout among starters

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design

This thesis explores the relation between crises and the rise of populism. As case study, the housing crisis in the Netherlands has been selected. Therefore, the research question is formulated as:

“To what extent did the housing crisis contribute to a shift towards populist tendencies among Dutch starters?”

The analysis of this paper entails of a descriptive approach. This means that this thesis tries to explain and describe the results. However, looking at the research question, there can also be stated that this thesis includes a diagnostic approach. The empirical results not only describe what happens but also tries to identify why causal mechanisms occur (or not). This combination gives a full grasp of what happened because of the housing crisis, and also the reason for this causal relation.

The four sub-questions set out can be identified as steps of the hypothesis mentioned earlier in this research. In this way, this thesis builds up towards an answer to the research question. If a positive correlation cannot be proven, or if the contrary is claimed, the negative correlation can clearly be identified and therefore this thesis is able to assess which factors lead to the rise of populism.

5.2 Case study

According to George and Bennett (2005), exploring causal mechanisms is a core strength of case studies. They claim that this method “examines the operation of causal mechanisms in individual cases in detail...which may help identify what conditions present in a case activates this mechanism” (George & Bennet, 2005). There have been done case studies to the causal mechanisms of crises and the rise of populism. These studies entail crises that affect large parts of the world, or the entire country (Algan et al., 2017; Fetzer, 2020). Examples here are the Great Recession (2007-2008) and the Brexit (2016), where is investigated what the causal mechanisms were with populist politics. There is, however, little literature on crises within the context of a single-country case study, wherein a certain population group has been affected disproportionally. Therefore, the case study of the Dutch housing crisis has been chosen. In this way, this thesis tries to investigate any notable differences between the age groups. Besides that, the Netherlands is a country with a relatively high number of populist parties (Voogd et al., 2024), and also a sharp increase of populist votes in the last elections (NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023).

Additionally, available voting data and the Dutch language create a solid basis to produce valuable insights. Furthermore, as there are macro-sociological theories about the interrelation of economic downturns and cultural backlashes, the housing crisis may be an interesting case study instead of other social or economic crises. This is, because the housing crisis and the immigration crisis are often seen as intertwined, which can lead to interesting results.

Case studies, however, also face limitations as it can hardly be generally applied. Results of the housing crisis in the Netherlands, may be totally different if this research was conducted in another country or with another crisis.

As mentioned, the housing crisis affects population groups differently. Therefore, this thesis compares data of the population group aged 18- to 34 years old, and age groups of older generations. In this way, this paper provides in-depth sight into differences in voting behaviour, electoral trends and social and political positions and perspectives.

5.3 Data collection and analysis

This paper consists of a so-called mixed methods approach. This means that in this study, both quantitative and qualitative research methods are applied. Qualitative methods are utilized for the theoretical framework, and the results section. The quantitative methods are only applied in the results section. In this way, this study can combine a textual foundation of theory together with trends in data which may or may not co-align with the theory. The numerical data provides the opportunity for this thesis to assess the case study (housing crisis) to the macro-sociological theory.

As mentioned, for the theoretical framework, secondary textual data is utilized. Here, academic books, articles and other documents are consulted to create a foundation for the analysis. This literature review provides a general theory that can be assessed on the case of the housing crisis.

For the theoretical framework, a structured search approach has been developed to produce only reliable sources that can contribute to this paper. To come up with valuable sources which can contribute to the framework, key words such as ‘populism,’ ‘cultural crisis’, ‘economic crisis’, ‘legitimation crisis’ have been produced. Additionally, inclusion criteria (e.g. theories about Western democracies) and exclusion criteria (e.g. lacking credibility) are defined in the selection process. By inserting the key words in databases of for example Springer, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, and by assessing it through the criteria, informative and reliable sources have been selected for this thesis. Foundational theoretical insights and contextual analysis will be drawn out of this scientific literature.

Core theoretical arguments can be found in the work of Laclau (2005) and Habermas (1988). The latter described the concept legitimation crisis which is an important theory in this research. Laclau explains populism and its causes which is of high relevance for this paper. These core theories combined with other academic sources create a solid theory which can be assessed on the case of the housing crisis.

For the results, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data forms the basis. The latter source of data consists of questionnaires conducted among the Dutch population, election turnouts and voting numbers. In this way, this thesis is able to assess whether there has been a relative change in populist tendencies between different population groups. Reports of Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) and Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP), together with newspapers (e.g. NOS) and other public institutions (e.g. Ministry of General Affairs, Ipsos I&O), provide numerical information that may show electoral trends or any other numerical differences between age groups.

Also, for the quantitative data, a careful selection process is employed including in- and exclusion criteria to systematically identify relevant data. As the housing crisis has become more severe over the last years (ABF Research, 2021), and therefore the possible consequences are only visible in that period, the most recent reports have been selected. This is important, as the housing crisis – and the possible causal mechanisms – are time-sensitive. Therefore, data over the last five years are prioritized and included for the results section. The elections of 2021 and 2023 are utilized, and outdated reports which irrelevant are excluded. This ensures the highest possibility of valid results. Additionally, reports that can demonstrate differences in age groups are preferred and selected.

This is combined with qualitative aspects, as reports about opinions and preferences of starters compared to older generations may indicate differences. Public documents and reports, issued by independent research institutions provide an informative image on how certain age groups in society feel towards the government and certain societal problems. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) and Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) provide information on political preferences of Dutch people and social discontent among different population groups. Also, data of Eurobarometer, an organization which compares numerical data of European countries, is included. In this way, this thesis also excludes the possibility that there may be other international factors that can disrupt the causal relation between the housing crisis and the rise of populism.

In the table below, there is briefly visualized how this thesis will measure the key concepts which will be investigated, and which datasets will be consulted that produce the results.

Table 1

Operationalization indicators results

| Key theoretical concept | Measurable indicator | Datasets |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Housing crisis | Housing shortage, rent prices compared to income, waiting times | CBS, government reports, newspapers, ABF Research |
| Influence housing crisis on starters | Disadvantages of starters compared to other generations | CBS, academic articles |
| Populist tendency starters | Support for populist parties/ anti-establishment stance | CBS, SCP, NOS, Ipsos I&O |
| Perception crises EU countries | Perceptions starters compared to other countries | Eurobarometer, Eurostat |
| Legitimacy | Level of trust in government | CBS, SCP, Ipsos I&O |

6. Results

6.1 To what extent does the housing crisis affect starters and their preferences regarding political action?

It is difficult for starters to find a suitable home in the market. The group that wants to move, but is not able to, doubled from 13% to 26% over the last three years (CBS, 2025). The CBS argues that “this increase was strongest among young adults still living at home.” More young adults live longer with their parents unable to find a house. According to CBS (2025), “in 2024, almost half of them (i.e. starters) had a clear desire to move.” There can be identified two main reasons for the difference in housing situations between starters and older generations. Firstly, as starters do not already own a property, they do not benefit from the rising prices for houses in the Netherlands. According to Van Dongen et al. (2025), the number of young homeowners (aged 18- to 34 years) is relatively low compared to the other household groups. Starters do not profit of the rise of housing prices as a relatively low percentage owns already a house. Van Dongen et al. (2025) substantiate this by arguing that “(single) young people under 35 are considerably less likely to own the home they live in.” They continue by stating that “this development is related to the rise in house prices, which made it more difficult for young households who did not benefit from the equity in a home they owned to buy their first home.” In the figure below, there is visualized how the price index developed of owner-occupied homes over the last years. The year 2020 is here chosen as starting point. It becomes clear that the price index rose over 40% in the last five years (CBS, 2025).

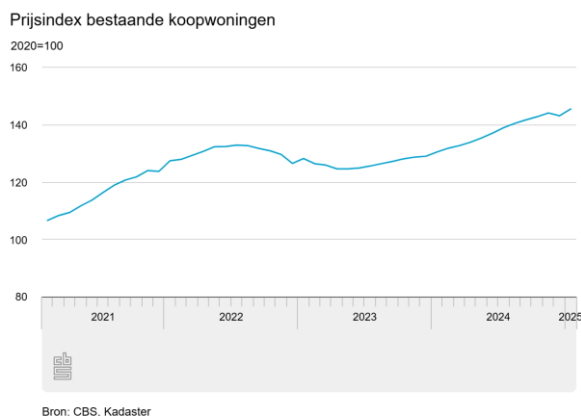


Figure 3: price index existing owner-occupied homes (Source: CBS, 2025)

The second reason is that starters often earn less compared to older population groups. According to Van Dongen et al. (2025), “starters are more likely to have a low or middle income than those moving up the property ladder.” Therefore, it becomes more difficult for them to be able to enter the market. These two reasons - no property and relatively low salary - result in difficulties for starters to buy a house for the first time. This so-called ‘contrast between newcomers and established ones’ becomes even larger as the position of outsiders has deteriorated over time (Den Draak, 2024). In this report, increasing statistical housing shortage, increased waiting times for social housing, the increasingly later departure of young people from home, and the evasive manoeuvre to private rental

properties are mentioned as causes for this deterioration. Furthermore, young people also feel not heard by the government (Miltenburg et al., 2024b). It becomes clear in this report that they are positioned relatively high as group which is not represented well by government. People agree that this population group faces a challenging time, which can be related to the housing crisis.

Van De Koppel & Kanne (2023) authored a report about the wishes regarding political action for the national elections of 2023. Here is stated what all population groups find that must be implemented first when the new government is elected, and thus what is considered most important among Dutch inhabitants. It appears that “younger Dutch people (aged 18- to 34) most often choose to invest in housing first” (Van De Koppel & Kanne, 2023). On average, 16 percent puts investing in housing as priority for the new government. This percentage, however, is larger among the two youngest population groups (aged 18- to 34). Younger people up to 24 years old put in 23% of cases the housing shortage at number 1, for the age group until 34 years this is in 16% of the cases (Van De Koppel & Kanne, 2023). It becomes clear that the younger generation, especially up to 24 years old, recognize the housing crisis as the biggest problem in society.

In the figure below, the development of households and the housing stock is visualized. The black line is the forecast of the housing shortage. The blue bar charts (increase households) are higher than the green bar charts (increase housing supply) until 2024. In this chart, it becomes clear that after 2021 (around 2023-2024), the housing shortage was on its peak. This may explain why (especially) starters recognize the housing crisis as the urgent problem in the reports mentioned above.

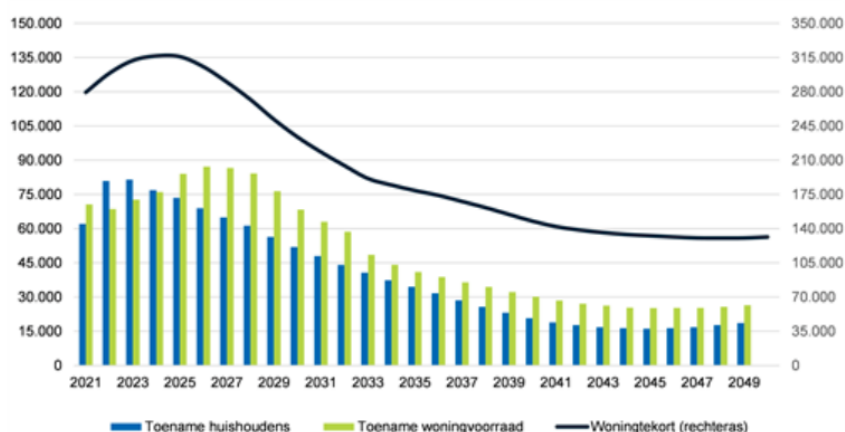


Figure 4: Development of households and housing stock (Source: ABF Research, 2021)

A European survey conducted by Eurobarometer (2025), shows that the perspectives of young Dutch people (here 16- to 30 years) co-align with the results we have seen above. In the survey, it becomes clear that the European Union should support the youngsters with ‘affordable housing and cost of living’ as most urgent subject. On average in the EU, 38% recognizes this area as the most urgent problem. However, 42% of the Dutch youngsters find the housing crisis the most urgent problem to solve by the EU (Eurobarometer, 2025). This means that on average, Dutch youngsters experience more

problems finding suitable housing and feel that their government is failing more on this than the average European youngsters. For starters, the housing crisis is mostly identified as the most prominent societal problem. The combination of difficulties entering the housing market, prioritizing the housing crisis as the most urgent problem and possible dissatisfaction can be a catalyst for populism in this population group.

6.2 How do populist actors in the Netherlands frame the housing crisis?

Some scholars agree that the economic and cultural backlashes are interrelated (Algan et al., 2017; Berman 2021). This raises the question whether this theory can also be applied on the housing crisis. Therefore, we need to look at how populists normally frame crises, and how Dutch populists frame the housing crisis. Firstly, the model described by Moffitt (2014) may clarify the way populists act and frame crises. Moffitt (2014, p. 198) created a six-step model that “populist actors use to elevate a failure to the level of crisis.” The model of the populist ‘performance’ of crisis is:

1. Identify failure.
2. Elevate to the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension.
3. Frame ‘the people’ vs. those responsible for the crisis.
4. Use media to propagate performance.
5. Present simple solutions and strong leadership.
6. Continue to propagate crisis.

In this six-step model, Moffitt tries to show how populists normally try to take advantage of the ‘failing’ government. The first thing populists try to do is eagerly identifying failures of the ‘elite’ showing that the government is not listening to the wishes of the people. Müller (2016) also recognizes this step, as he states that “populists will often eagerly frame a situation as a crisis, ... because such a crisis then serves to legitimate populist governance.” The second step, where the crisis is linked to a wider framework, co-aligns with findings of Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017), as they state that populists attach the crisis to their host ideologies, addressing other key aspects of these societal grievances. Populists, thus, try to combine crises and suggest that there is only one problem, and also one solution. This is also identified by Moffitt (2014) as the next steps are about who to blame and the simple solutions.

In the national elections of 2023, it became clear how (populist) parties framed the housing crisis; many political parties emphasized the consequences of migration on the housing market (De Bakker et al., 2023). Especially populist parties claimed that the housing crisis can be seen as a direct consequence of the abundant immigration. The framing of the PVV is a clear example, as this party argued that “it is simply impossible to build against the open border policy and the enormous population growth” (PVV, 2023). Other populist parties state that the “mass immigration” is the cause of the housing

crisis (FvD, 2023) and that the Netherlands has reached the limits of its reception capacity (BBB, 2023). Also, JA21 (2023) find that there should be put “brakes on asylum, labour, study and family migration and remigration, both from within and outside the EU, so that there is breathing space on the housing market.”

The framing of immigration as the cause of the housing crisis did work as the tight housing and immigration crisis are often seen as interrelated among Dutch citizens (Miltenburg et al., 2024). Geurkink & Den Ridder (2025) also recognize this as their research shows that many people link the housing shortage to immigration. Additionally, housing and immigration are mentioned (among others) as the most important societal problems (Geurkink & Den Ridder, 2025). According to Voogd et al. (2024), almost four out of five eligible Dutch voters (completely) agree that the presence of immigrants makes it more difficult for Dutch people to find housing. According to Coenders & Dagevos (2024), housing markets are not able to respond quickly to changes in the population composition. It is therefore plausible that the arrival of immigrants will further increase the pressure on the housing market and that this will make it more difficult for the existing population and newcomers to find a home. In 2021 however, only 6% of the available social housing went to status holders (CBS 2024a). As this percentage is relatively small, framing of populist parties is highly likely to have had an influence on citizens' perceptions.

6.3 What are the political positions and opinions of starters between 18- and 34 years old?

There has never been such a significant difference in the world between the voting choice of young people and older voters (Rekker, 2017). Globally, radical progressive parties are doing better among young voters (Rekker, 2017). Additionally, older generations are more likely to vote for populist parties (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The main reason for this divide is that “compared to older voters, young people are culturally more progressive and economically more liberal” (Rekker, 2017). Inglehart and Norris (2016) already mentioned this cultural aspect, as they named it the cultural backlash. Steenvoorden & Hartevelde (2017) claim that people with more social discontent vote more often for radical right-wing parties. Their argument is that “the nostalgic character of populist radical right ideology resonates with societal pessimism among its voters” (Steenvoorden & Hartevelde, 2017). So, people that are the most negative about society, are most likely to vote for populist parties. According to Geurkink & Miltenburg (2023), young people (aged 18- to 34 years old) experience less discomfort than older people in the Netherlands. This would suggest that older generations indeed vote in general more populist than younger generations.

The report of Voogd et al. (2024), however, shows that there can be made no distinction in populist attitudes between age groups as there is minor difference shown in the results. In this report is visualized whether and how different socio-economic characteristics influence the voting behaviour for

populists. Six ‘Populist Attitudes Items’ are measured and combined which results in five averages of different age groups. In the figure below, this average is on the vertical axis, and the age groups are presented on the horizontal axis. It becomes clear that on the category ‘age’ there is little to no difference in populist attitudes. On average, the population group 18- to 34 years old has the same populist attitudes compared to the other age groups (Voogd et al., 2024).

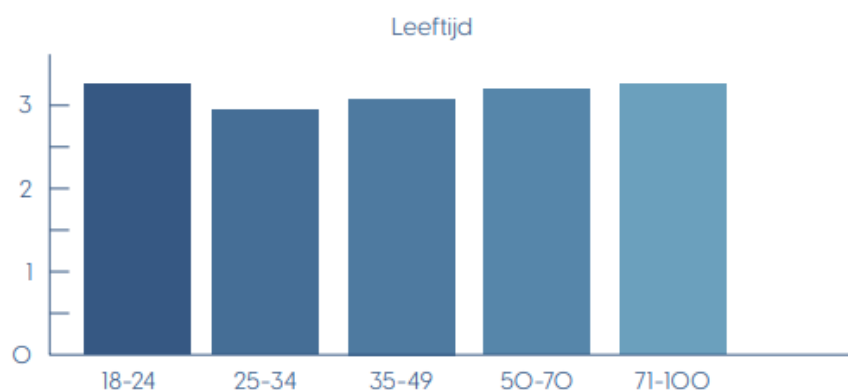


Figure 5, Socio-economic characteristics of populists: Age (Source: Voogd et al., 2024)

In figure 4, there is visualized that there was a high increase of the housing shortage as the number of households were increasing faster (ABF Research, 2021). This would suggest that the dissatisfaction also increased the most during this period among starters. Therefore, the national elections of 2021 and 2023 are investigated below to compare election results. The data of the national elections are divided into two age groups: starters (Table 2) and the overall population (Table 3). In order of the Nationale Omroep Stichting (NOS), the independent investigation bureau Ipsos I&O conducted this research (NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023). As the article of 2021 divides election data of starters into two groups: 18- to 24 years old and 25- to 34 years old, the exact numbers of seats are roughly calculated. The population groups are calculated including their turnout numbers¹ and the seats are distributed accordingly. As the number of seats, the BBB has received by starters in 2021 is unclear, this thesis therefore assumes the seats are evenly distributed.²

Table 2
Distribution seats second chamber starters

| Seats populist parties (voting group 18- to 34 years old) | National elections of 2021 | National elections of 2023 |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| PVV | 13 ³ | 41 |
| FvD | 11 | 3 |
| SP | 4 ⁴ | 2 |
| BBB | 4 ⁵ | 6 |

¹ Consult appendix A – Table 1

² Consult appendix A – Note

³ Consult appendix A – Table 2

⁴ Consult appendix A – Table 2

⁵ Consult appendix A – Table 2

| | | |
|-------|----------------|----|
| DENK | 6 ⁶ | 9 |
| JA21 | 3 | 2 |
| Total | 41 | 63 |

Source: (NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023)

Table 3
Distribution seats second chamber overall

| Seats populist parties (entire voting group) | National elections of 2021 | National elections of 2023 |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| PVV | 17 | 37 |
| FvD | 8 | 3 |
| SP | 9 | 5 |
| BBB | 1 | 7 |
| DENK | 2 | 3 |
| JA21 | 4 | 1 |
| Total | 41 | 56 |

Source: (NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023)

As becomes clear from the tables, the number of seats populist parties collected among starters is 63, whereas the number of seats in the overall population is 56. These numbers show that there is more populism among starters compared to other age groups. Furthermore, these tables demonstrate that populist votes rose from 41 to 63 in the elections of 2021 and 2023 among starters. The percentual change, therefore, is about 53,7%.⁷ In the case of the overall population, the retrieved seats went from 41 to 56. The percentual change calculated here is about 36,6%.⁸ These calculations suggest that there has been a relatively higher increase of starters voting for political parties than among older generations.

The reason for this difference, however, cannot be found in the rise of anti-immigration attitudes among starters. Kunst et al. (2025) state that on average 71% agrees that it is more difficult for Dutch people to find a house because of the presence of refugees. However, among the two youngest population groups (18- to 29 years and 30- to 44 years) the numbers are respectively 64% and 67% (Kunst et al., 2025). Algan et al. (2017) also argue that in general the younger generations suffer the most from the crisis, but their attitudes toward immigrants have not moved much, most likely because of rising cosmopolitanism and open-mindedness. This means that younger generations are less sceptical towards immigration than older ones concerning the housing crisis. The reason for the relatively sharper rise of populist tendencies among starters cannot be found in more anti-immigration attitudes.

6.4 To what extent might a decline in government legitimacy have caused a rise in populist politics in the Netherlands?

A report written by Willems & Huijnk (2025) describes the level of legitimacy towards the Dutch government. Here, legitimacy is described as “whether people recognize the government” (Willems & Huijnk, 2025). This article makes a distinction between legitimacy and the level of trust in

⁶ Consult appendix A – Table 2

⁷ Consult appendix B – Table 1

⁸ Consult appendix B – Table 1

government. This thesis recognizes this divide as the difference between the input-, and output-legitimacy described by Scharpf (1999). As institutions in the Netherlands are democratically chosen, the input-legitimacy is quite high (Willems & Huijnk, 2025). However, in the same report, the authors also explain the level of trust Dutch people have towards their government. Here, it becomes clear that this aspect is considered significantly lower than the input-legitimacy. Willems & Huijnk (2025) explain it as “the fact that legitimacy is higher than political trust means that residents of the Netherlands still recognize the democratic constitutional state as a system, even though they are critical of the way in which politics gives substance to it.” In other words, the input-legitimacy in the Netherlands is high, whereas the output-legitimacy is considered lower because of the lack of government successes. This means, thus, that Dutch people are less satisfied with the way their representatives perform than with democracy itself. Geurkink & Den Ridder (2025) recognize this statement, as they state that “confidence in politics is volatile, but remains low.” They also acknowledge the support for the input-legitimacy (democracy) as “satisfaction with democracy remains high” (Geurkink & Den Ridder, 2025). Also, Van De Koppel & Kanne (2023) claim Dutch people are not content with government. They state that almost two-thirds disagree with the statement that ‘our government always acts in the interests of citizens.

A trend analysis by Ipsos I&O, visualizes the trust in government for each age group. Here, it becomes clear that starters have relatively more trust in government than older generations. In 2021, the percentage that had a (sufficiently) amount of trust among the overall population was 42%. For starters, this percentage was a little bit higher: 48% (Ipsos I&O, n.d.). In the last years, however, a visible decrease can be recognized in the data. In 2025, the percentages decreased for the overall population and starters with respectively 31% and 36% (Ipsos I&O, n.d.). Trust in government decreased on average, however, the results cannot demonstrate that this decrease was sharper among starters. Starters have; thus, more trust in government and the housing crisis did not contribute to a sharper decrease compared to older generations.

In the previous sub-question, this thesis showed that the populist parties rose on average 36,6% between 2021 and 2023. A clear connection with the level of (output-)legitimacy can be indicated, as the decrease of trust in government was 11% the last five years (Ipsos I&O, n.d.). Rooduijn (2021) states that “voters of populist parties often have little confidence in politics.” This statement finds support in this case.

7. Conclusion

This thesis examined the extent to which the Dutch housing crisis has contributed to a rise in populist tendencies among starters (aged 18- to 34). It proposed a causal mechanism in which economic exclusion from the housing market results in dissatisfaction towards government, a decline in institutional trust, and subsequently a greater openness to populist actors and their anti-immigration stance.

The findings support this hypothesis partially. Starters, due to their lower incomes and lack of housing equity, are disproportionately affected by the housing shortage. At the same time, election data analyses show that the relative increase in populist voting among this group is higher than among older generations. Notably, this rise occurs despite younger generations being more tolerant toward immigration, as confirmed by Voogd et al. (2024). This contradicts the cultural backlash theory by Inglehart and Norris (2016), which links populism primarily to anti-immigration sentiment among older, culturally conservative voters. This thesis cannot find a relatively sharper decrease of trust among starters (Ipsos I&O, n.d.), and thus cannot demonstrate the relation between economic crisis and legitimization crisis described by Habermas (1988).

The findings resonate with Rodrik's (2018) theory of economic backlash, which argues that economic exclusion and perceived inequality can drive support for populism. As starters are disproportionately affected and find the housing crisis the most urgent problem, this thesis demonstrates that the economic downturn fuelled populist tendencies among starters.

In conclusion, this thesis finds support for the notion that economic downturn – specifically exclusion from the housing market – plays a significant role in the rise of populist tendencies among Dutch starters. While cultural factors remain relevant, they are insufficient to explain this pattern. The Dutch housing crisis can thus be seen not only as a socio-economic problem, but also as a political catalyst that contributes to shifting patterns of electoral behaviour.

8. Discussion

This thesis tries to investigate the causal relation between the housing crisis and the rise of populism, with the Netherlands as case study. The research question is:

“To what extent did the housing crisis contribute to a shift towards populist tendencies among Dutch starters?”

The hypothesis of this thesis has been drawn up with the expectation that the housing crisis results in high dissatisfaction among starters. This results a relatively higher increase of populism among this age group as they are more tempted by the simple solutions offered by populist actors. The simple solution is the widening and linking of the problem in the direction of immigration. Therefore, also a higher anti-immigration sentiment is expected. This hypothesis is based on theories of the economic and cultural backlash as main drivers of populism (Rodrik, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The expectation is that in the case of the housing crisis, these backlashes are interrelated as described by Algan et al. (2017) and Berman (2021).

One of the central findings in this thesis is that starters are disproportionately affected by the housing shortage. Two reasons can be designated for this: the absence of prior property ownership and a relatively low income. These reasons limit the market access for starters as they find it challenging

entering the market. Den Draak (2024) concludes this as “in the Netherlands, there are inequalities in (access to) housing between groups, with young adults and private tenants in particular coming out on the losing end.” The contrast here noted between the insiders and outsiders is interesting, as this is a clear example of rising inequality between generations. Rodrik (2018) and Berman (2021) argue that economic insecurity and divisive economic trends are the main drivers of populism.

The results of the latest national elections of 2023 show that among starters there has been voted more for populist parties than older generations (NOS, 2023). Starters have allocated 63 seats to populist parties, whereas for the overall population, populists received 57 seats. Additionally, there has been a relatively high increase of populism among starters (NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023). The percentual change of populism between the national elections of 2021 and 2023 among starters was 53,7%, whereas for the overall population the percentage was 36,6%.

The general theory of Inglehart and Norris (2016) of the so-called generational cleavage cannot find support in this case study. Firstly, the results of the national elections of 2021 and 2023 show that there is relatively more populism among starters. Additionally, in the report of Voogd et al. (2024) there also cannot be found evidence that there is a higher level of populist attitudes among older generations. The results of this thesis, thus, indicate that in the case of the housing crisis the theory of generational cleavage may be disproven.

Even more so, as this thesis also establishes that starters find the housing crisis the most urgent problem in the Netherlands (Van De Koppel & Kanne, 2023), we may indicate that there is a causal relationship between the housing crisis and the rise of populism. Because of the relatively elevated level of populism among starters, this thesis therefore may conclude that the theory of Rodrik (2018) – the economic backlash theory – finds support in this thesis.

As the results have showed, populist parties frame the housing crisis as a wider problem: immigration. In their election programs, the intractable (Gundel, 2005) housing crisis is blamed on mass immigration (e.g. PVV, 2023; FvD, 2023). This is also the common sentiment among Dutch people as almost 80% of the Dutch people find that immigrants make it harder to find a house in the Netherlands (Voogd et al., 2024). Results did not point out, however, that the sentiment of starters have become more anti-immigration, as this age group is still the least sceptical towards immigrants (Kunst et al., 2025). This contradicts theory of Algan et al. (2017) and Berman (2021) as this thesis cannot find evidence that there has been a relatively high increase of anti-immigrant sentiment among starters. Therefore, this paper may suggest that there is no clear relation between an economic downturn and the cultural backlash.

Lastly, the legitimization crisis described by Habermas (1988) has partially found support in this thesis. Results show that the output-legitimacy has declined due to perceived government underperformance. It becomes clear that trust in government declined among the overall population by

11% (Ipsos I&O, n.d.). As results show that Dutch citizens are not content with government (Van De Koppel & Kanne, 2023; Geurkink & Den Ridder, 2025), this thesis suggests that the failing of government has caused a decrease in trust towards government among citizens. However, a visible linkage between the housing crisis and a sharper decrease of trust towards the government among starters, cannot be proven in this thesis. Therefore, the relation between an economic crisis and a legitimization crisis cannot be evinced.

8.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study faces limitations as it relies mostly on existing datasets (e.g. election results) which do not capture deeper motivations behind voting behaviour. In other words, the individual aspect, which can be captured by interviews or surveys, is not included in this research. Furthermore, this study can only suggest that the rise in populism among starters is the result of the housing crisis. No significant proof can be stated here. This thesis, thus, can only assume that there is a possible causal relationship between the housing crisis and the rise of populism. Additionally, as this thesis is a case study of the Netherlands, it is unclear whether this can be applied in other countries and/or regions. Also, this paper conceptualized the term populism despite the absence of consensus among scholars about the concept. Therefore, the possibility exists that other political parties would have been identified as populist, and that the results would have been different, if another conceptualization were utilized. Lastly, as this thesis compares starters (18- to 34 years) to older generations, it does not state whether there are notable differences within the age group of starters. This may have excluded interesting differences that could contribute to the scientific knowledge of diverse political behaviour between age groups.

Further research is necessary to capture deeper insights on what catalysators are of populism. The first suggestion is to include in-depth qualitative interviews or other forms of individual research methods (e.g. questionnaires) to learn more about the motivations behind voting behaviour. Furthermore, case studies in different countries increase the knowledge on how populism is strengthened by crises, and whether there are differences that can be identified between states. It would be especially fruitful to conduct cross-national comparisons between countries experiencing similar housing crisis. This may isolate the possibility of the influence of other factors if the same results are indicated. Another suggestion can be that other variables – next to age – are investigated and compared (e.g. level of education). Lastly, future research could benefit from longitudinal studies. In this way, studies may give insights whether the impact of the housing crisis is a temporary reaction or part of a more durable political shift.

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10. Appendix

10.1.1 Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used [ChatGPT and Chatpdf] in order to [search for articles, summarize literature and help me understand theories]. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the work.

List all the generative AI tools that were used during the work:

- ChatGPT
- Chatpdf

10.1.2 Appendix A

Table 1 – distribution of population age group starters

Source: CBS, 2022; CBS, 2025

| Age group | Number of people |
|-------------|------------------|
| 18-25 years | 1 610 852 |
| 25-35 years | 2 282 985 |
| Total | 3 893 837 |

Turnout percentage both age groups (Source: NOS, 2021)

- 18-24 -> 80%
- 25-34 -> 85%

Number of voters 18-24 = $0,8 \times 1610852 = 1.288.681$

Number of voters 25-34 = $0,85 \times 2.282.985 = 1.940.537$

Total amount voters 18- to 34 years old = $1.288.681 + 1.940.537 = 3.229.218$

Calculations proportions

- Share of 18-24 years -> $1.288.681 / 3.229.218 \times 100\% \approx 39,9\%$
- Share of 25-35 years -> $1.940.537 / 3.229.218 \times 100\% \approx 60,1\%$

We can thus say that the ratio is 60% to 40% in favour of the group 25- to 34 years old

Note: as NOS (2021) does not provide a specific number of seats (age 25- to 34) for the BBB, this thesis assumes that is equally distributed as this was the case with group aged 18- to 24.

Table 2 – Distribution seats populist parties

Source: NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023

Seats calculated combined 18-24 and 25-34

| Political party | Seats 18-24 | Seats 25-34 | Seats adjusted to ratio population groups |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--|
| PVV | 12 | 13 | $12 \times 0,4 + 13 \times 0,6 \approx 13$ |
| SP | 2 | 6 | $2 \times 0,4 + 6 \times 0,6 \approx 4$ |
| DENK | 8 | 5 | $8 \times 0,4 + 5 \times 0,6 \approx 6$ |
| BBB | 3 | 4 | $3 \times 0,4 + 4 \times 0,6 \approx 4$ |

10.1.3 Appendix B

Table 1 - Percentual changes in populist votes.

Source: NOS, 2021; NOS, 2023, numbers Appendix A – Table 2

| Age group | Votes pop. parties 2021 | Votes pop. parties 2023 | Formula percentual change | Percentual change |
|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Starters | 41 | 63 | $(63 - 41) / 41 \times 100\%$ | 53,7% |
| Overall | 41 | 56 | $(56 - 41) / 41 \times 100\%$ | 36,6% |