

## **Anti-Racist Parties and Progressive Politics in the Netherlands**

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April 23, 2021

**In the Netherlands, the growth of parties with platforms built around minority rights, diversity, and anti-racism is linked to the failure of traditional parties to be truly inclusive. To attract more voters with a migration background, parties like GroenLinks not only have to be more responsive to the experiences and wishes of their voters, they also must change their political cultures.**

“Since 1985, non-Dutch inhabitants who have lived legally in the Netherlands for five years or more have been able to vote in municipal elections. The main argument in favour of granting this group the right to vote was the expectation that it would promote integration. (...) In opposition to this plea for political participation was the fear of the ‘ethnic factor’ in politics. (...) Others feared that granting the right to vote would lead to the founding of an Islamic party and thus to a new – and potentially orthodox – religious movement.”

*(Tillie, Fennema, and van Heelsum, 2000)*

These words come from the introduction to *The Ethnic Vote*, published in 2000 by political scientist Jean Tillie. Tillie is describing the late 1970s political discussion on extending the right to vote. It is strange to read these words again today: Tillie cited the debate to show that the arguments mentioned were still valid in 2000. Now, 20 years further down the road, these words still resonate. The same alleged risks associated with the participation in politics by people with a migration background (defined by the Dutch statistics agency as anyone born abroad or with at least one foreign-born parent) are still being dredged up.

With the success of parties such as DENK, NIDA and BIJ1 in the Netherlands, the topic is back in the spotlight. All led by people with a migration background, two of them, DENK and BIJ1, won seats in the parliamentary elections of March 2021. Although they differ in programme, these parties all centre the fight against discrimination and for inclusion. DENK has its roots in the social democratic party and presents itself as a movement for migrants, combining progressive and conservative values. NIDA takes a similar stance but with an explicit Islamic inspiration. BIJ1 focuses on fighting racism and discrimination in the Netherlands while striving for “radical equality” and economic justice.

Where do we stand after 35 years? Years of research into the turnout, preferences, and party choices of voters with a migration background show that these parties’ success is related in part to the failure of traditional parties to be inclusive. In the March 2021

elections, traditional progressive parties lost significantly, whereas new parties emphasising inclusiveness and anti-racism such as BIJ1 and NIDA gained votes. The Labour Party and GroenLinks were traditionally the first choices for voters with a migration background. If they wish to win the support of people with migration backgrounds in future, established progressive parties will need to welcome their ideas, preferences, and interests.

## **Getting the vote out**

In Amsterdam, the turnout of voters from the main migrant groups – Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese – has been tracked in all municipal elections since 1994, including for the first generation, who were born abroad, and the second generation, who have at least one parent who was born abroad. The results are clear: the turnout is significantly lower than the urban average, with a few exceptions in Turkish communities. Research in other cities in 1994, 1998, and 2006 show similar results. In national elections too, voters with a migration background also head to the polls in smaller numbers.

Low turnout can undermine trust in politicians and their legitimacy, it is thus potentially corrosive to the democratic process. Moreover, it risks that the voice of certain groups is not heard. We are left with little information on the political preferences of non-voters.

Our research has found that there is a clear correlation between the composition of an area's population and municipal election turnout. In Amsterdam's poorer neighbourhoods with lower average levels of education and a greater proportion of residents with Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese backgrounds, the likelihood of voting is lower than average (following correction for socio-economic and demographic variables). This pattern matches other Western European countries where older voters, voters with higher levels of education, and voters from non-migration backgrounds vote relatively more often.

There are various indications that people with a migrant background have partially different interests, political ideas, and policy preferences that are not – or poorly – represented in the current political system. One example is their experience with institutional discrimination, which has received more attention since the death of George Floyd in the United States. The recurrence of discriminatory practices at all levels of society, including within important institutions, is now receiving greater attention, whereas for years the issue was overlooked. When voters with a migration background do not feel discriminated against and recognise themselves in politics and politicians, they are more likely to participate. On the other hand, if they feel excluded they will withdraw.

Non-voters are more likely to go to the ballot box if there is a party that represents their interests. In the 2018 municipal elections, the then-recently-formed DENK party had great appeal for low-skilled, young, and female voters of Turkish and Moroccan descent – precisely the groups from whom we might expect different political ideas from those of other politically active citizens. For example, they often combine conservative cultural values, such as restricting euthanasia and protecting the traditional family, with support for the welfare state, and they attach great importance to diversity and inclusion.

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At the same time, the new alternatives do not seem to mobilise all voters. In the 2018 local municipal elections, the turnout rose sharply only among Turkish Amsterdammers but stayed low among Moroccan and Surinamese residents. Neither DENK's party leader with a Moroccan migration background, nor new parties such as BIJ1 and Ubuntu Connected Front mobilising the Surinamese community seemed to encourage more people to vote. One explanation for DENK's success is that the party made effective use of an extensive network of organisations, such as mosques and socio-cultural associations, to access potential voters. For other parties, putting these networks into action proved more difficult.

Research since 1994 has shown that it is often important for voters with a migration background to vote for a candidate of the same origin. Amsterdammers with a migrant background were significantly more likely to vote for a candidate with the same background and to explain this choice by stating that this candidate would defend their interests. However, research also shows that no group votes more "ethnically" than people without a migration background. The vast majority of these voters voted for candidates without a migration background during the 2018 Amsterdam municipal elections.

## **Choosing a party**

Traditionally, people with a migration background had clear preferences for the Labour Party and, to a lesser extent, for GroenLinks. In the 1990s, GroenLinks enjoyed particular success among these voters mainly thanks to their MP Mohamed Rabbae. When he left the parliament, many Groenlinks voters with a migrant background went too. The success of the Labour Party among people with a migration background goes back further. There are multiple explanations: the role of Prime Minister and Labour Party politician Joop Den Uyl in the 1970s, when most migrants arrived in the Netherlands; the ties with the trade unions; but also the space that the Labour Party has given to politicians with a migration background since 1985. The 2006 municipal elections marked both a high point and a turning point in these developments. The Labour Party won strongly in those elections, especially in larger cities, gaining around 80 per cent of Amsterdam voters with a migration background. But in the following years, party choices became more varied, partly due to the more independent second generation.

In the years since, multicultural parties labelled as parties of and for migrants have become more prominent. In the 2018 municipal elections in Amsterdam, three quarters of the Turkish-Dutch voters and half of the Moroccan-Dutch voters voted for DENK. Research shows that DENK is a party that stands up for the interests of Muslims and that its roots lie in the conservative part of the Turkish-Dutch religious community. Unlike any other party, DENK has translated the frustration among Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch voters about the discriminatory and polarised political climate in the Netherlands into votes. Disappointment with existing political parties in recent years has led to a high degree of cynicism among voters with a migration background and represents fertile soil for DENK's success.

Education level is another determinant in the voting behaviour of people with a migrant background. In Amsterdam, DENK and the Labour Party were relatively popular among voters with a migrant background with lower levels of education in 2018. Voters with a

migration background and a higher level of education, on the other hand, voted for social-liberal D66 and GroenLinks relatively more often. This variation is important to stress: people with a migrant background are by no means a homogenous group with the same choices and interests. In the end, it is their individual choices that are decisive.

## **A question of political culture**

Paying attention to the preferences of voters with a migration background can run the risk of stereotyping. Nevertheless, it is important to continue to investigate the political participation of this group: how else can we draw attention to the structurally low turnout? Today, it has to be done differently from how it was done in the past.

Parties should not just put candidates from different migrant groups on the list, but demonstrate their inclusiveness. Left-wing parties in the Netherlands are already doing so at the level of political discourse, by clearly opposing discrimination and speaking out for diversity, but inclusion must go beyond discourse. Recognising and fighting institutional discrimination, also within their organisations, should be a clear and structural objective. Parties must ensure diversity at all levels, from the board to political groups and committees. It will not happen automatically and requires different methods of recruitment. There is also room for improvement in the area of political culture. It does not fit with an inclusive culture to emphasise that quality comes first, in response to questions about diversity among candidates.

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Inclusion means that the experiences and wishes of voters with a migration background are better heard within parties. It does not mean that parties should change their programmes to conform to all the wishes of these groups. Progressive parties can, however, draw more inspiration than is currently the case from the many formal and informal interest groups and organisations that reflect the diversity of society. DENK, BIJ1, and NIDA have much stronger links with such organisations, such as the Dutch version of Black Lives Matter and different Muslim interest groups. For traditional progressive parties, this effort means entering into discussions with these groups on complex and often sensitive issues, such as discrimination in the labour market and education, the exclusion of religious groups in a predominantly secular society, the vulnerable groups in migrant communities, and religious education.

The low turnout and voting behaviour of people with a migration background cannot be seen in isolation from the broader context of hardening policy and discourse. For Muslim people, the tone is potentially roughest of all. It is in this light that we must view the low turnout (a signal of withdrawal) and the choice of parties such as DENK, BIJ1, and NIDA (joining in, but with a clear dissenting voice). Left-wing parties should take the current call from people with a migrant background for the recognition of discrimination and the pursuit of inclusion to heart. The dynamics of the past 35 years can be turned around. But the worst option would be to revert to the mentality of the late

1970s: on the one hand calling for integration and on the other accusing new parties of “compartmentalisation”. The reality of the current task has little to do with either extremes. A new path must be found for inclusion.

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This article was originally published in Dutch in *De Helling*.

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Published April 23, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/anti-racist-parties-and-progressive-politics-in-the-netherlands/>

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