



The Netherlands Institute for Social Research|SCP
Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

Increasing polarization in the Netherlands: perceived or factual?

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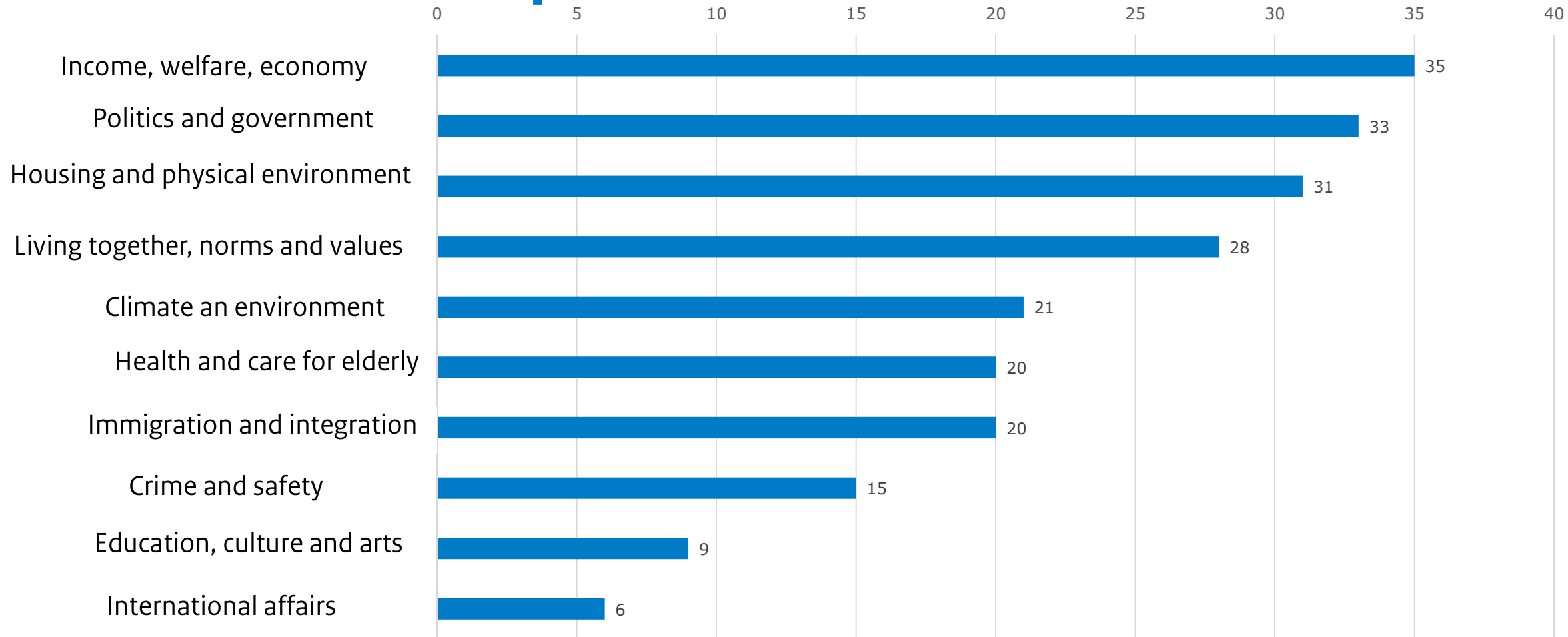
Based on Emily Miltenburg, Bram Geurkink, Simon Tunderman, Daan Beekers en Josje den Ridder

(Citizens Perspectives, 2022 - 2)





Perceived societal problems in the Netherlands

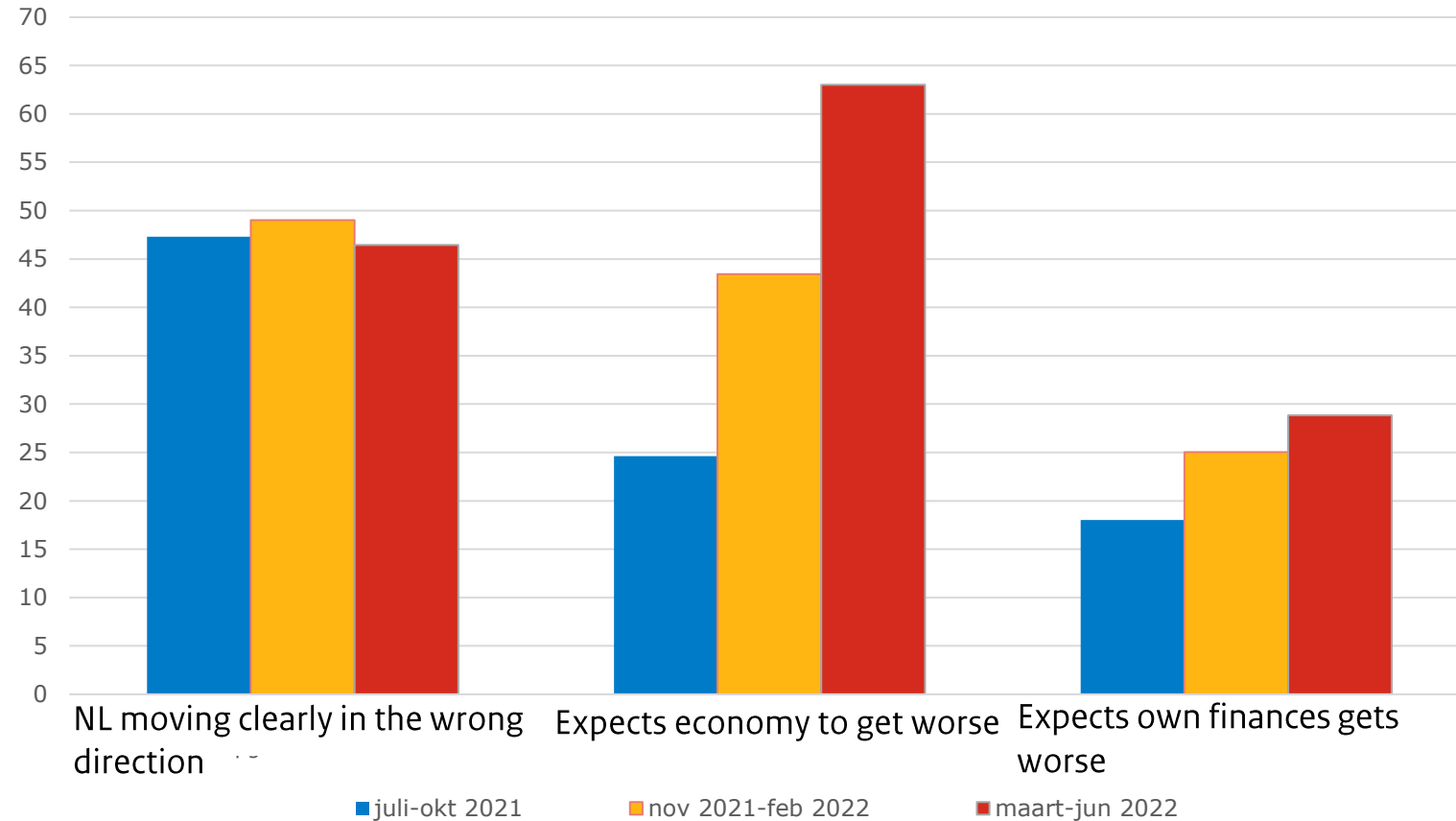


Source: Image of the Netherlands (Nederland in Beeld) march -june 2022



How is the Netherlands doing?

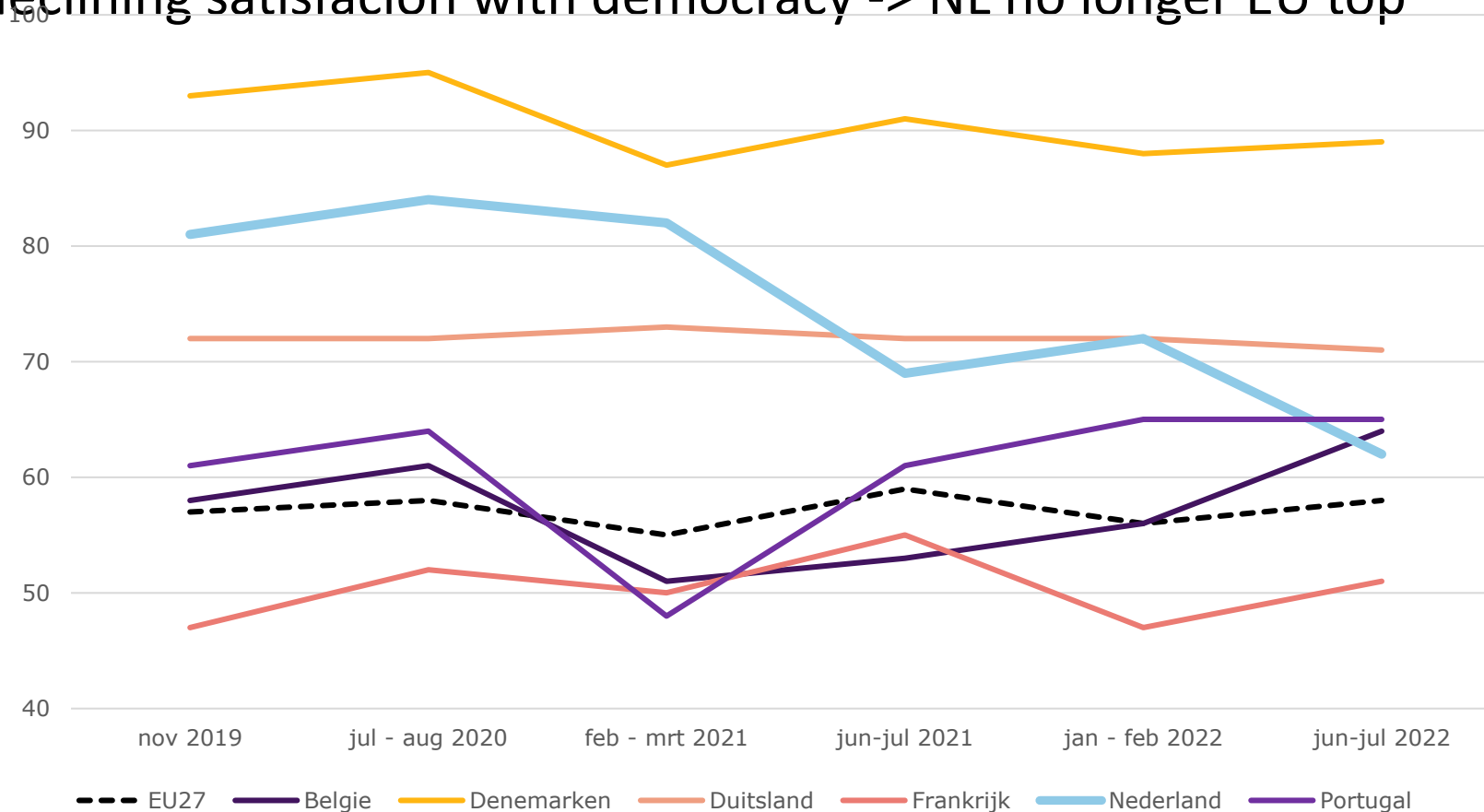
- > Mood about the direction stable, largest group pessimistic
- > Economic mood declined, worries about income and economy most mentioned societal problems
- > Slightly more worries about own financial situation





Declining satisfaction with democracy

- Trust in politics low (about half rates 6 or more – 0-10 scale)
- Slightly declining satisfaction with democracy -> NL no longer EU top





Polarization

Used definition:

Groups ('poles') with different views standing opposite to each other

- State: there are contradictions
- Proces: increasing contradictions – poles grow and 'the middle' gets smaller (Dekker 2022: 13-14).



Worries about polarization

- > A lot of the Dutch mention ‘the way we live together’ as one of the most important **societal problems**. Worries about disagreement and polarization.
- > Almost 75% think that **disagreement** about societal issues is **rising**
- > More than 60% think that **differences** between people with different political views are (very) large, leading to **conflicts**. Examples: COVID vaccination, housing, ‘black Pete’, LHBTIQ+ rights.

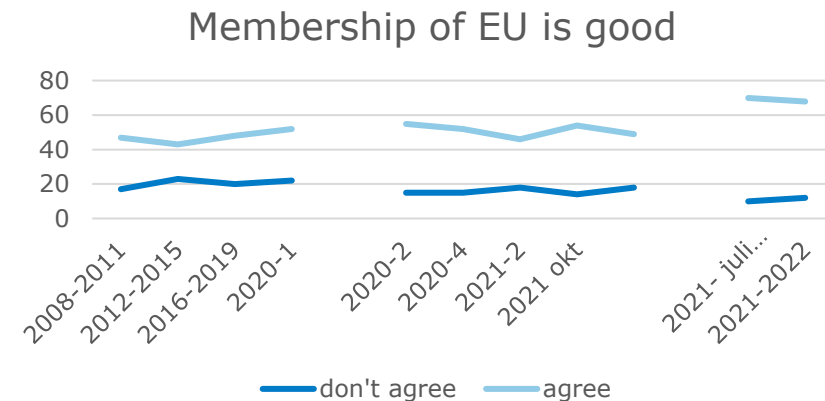
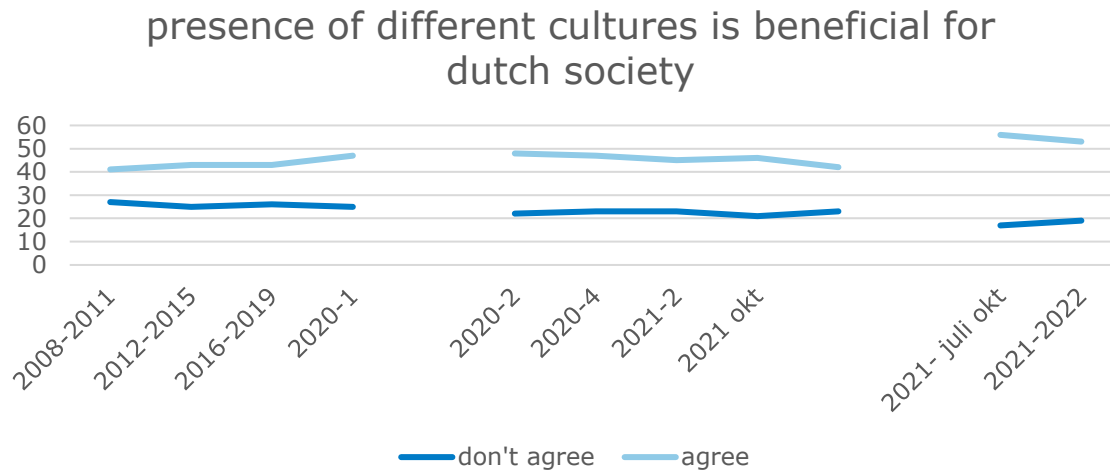
The puzzle / paradox? ...



> There are no large, comprehensive polarization trends in Dutch society

(Paul Dekker in *Political polarization in the Netherlands*):

- Disagreement among the Dutch on a lot of issues have not become larger.
- On a lot of societal issues no trend of growing of extreme opinions.
- Hostility to people with other views ('hate') slightly risen, but is not higher now than it was in the 1970's



> Where does the feeling of increasing polarization come from?

- Research based on focusgroups and explanatory questions in survey



Worries about polarazation: what and where?

- › Worries not so much about growing disagreement, but more about **worsening manners** in debates and about **hardening of the tone**
- › This is especially noticed in **media** and **politics** – with a special role for politicians (lack of respect)
- › Polarization less experienced in own, direct, environment
 - But depends: people who are effected experience polarisation
 - Exception for COVID: everybody was hit: disccussions about vaccination possible divisive issue in families



Annoyance and discomfort about harsh expressions and counter-arguments

- › Annoyance about (supposed) divergent or radical opinions: harsh expressions on controversial topics, raw protest and also extreme opinions -> rise in black and white thinking
- › Especially when these opinions are propagated actively
- › Experienced pressure to choose a side or obligation to have an opinion
- › People notice that **small groups with harsh tones** get lots of attention
 - Sometimes understandable; when the group is in a disadvantaged position
- › On the other hand: people with a different point of view feel they are not taken serious



Is polarization bad?

- Contradictions are part of **democracy** – politics need (substantive) conflict
- But the aversion or hostility against others (*affective polarization*) **can** become problematic – when
 - people with different views are being **avoided**,
 - other views are not **appreciated**,
 - **undemocratic** views of politicians are accepted
- Besides: the **idea** that society is sharply polarized can have negative consequences and strengthen polarization
- Important not to call every difference in views or opinions polarization



Some directions for 'solutions'

Political debate: pay attention to the tone, avoid hostility to opponents and emphasize the substantive differences

Media: offer more space for nuances and doubts, don't only allow extreme opinions to be heard

Society: don't be allergic to countervoices and substantive differences: they can be difficult, but could be a mirror and contribute to change



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